**Special Agents:**

**Children’s Autonomy and Parental Authority**

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**I. Authority and the Parent-Child Relationship**

Virtually all reasonable people hold that children are persons, and not, for example, pets or property. Normally, we think of persons as beings who can and should run their own lives, yet children are neither expected nor allowed to run their own lives. We tell them what to eat, when to bathe, when to sleep. We make them attend school and do homework. We (try to) prevent them from hitting their siblings or pulling the dog’s tail. Moreover, we think that parents have a legitimate authority to issue commands of these sorts. We think that children have a duty to obey many if not most parental commands, and that they can be forced to comply if necessary. But if children are persons, then parental authority over them is in need of some justification to show why it is not simply yet another immoral form of tyranny. For the parent-child relationship, to which we routinely and thoughtlessly subject children, is the kind of relationship that would count as a form of paternalistic oppression if adults were subjected to it.

Parental authority, is not, of course, the only component of the parent-child relationship, though it may be the most morally problematic. A full specification of the parent-child relationship would include each of the following components:

1. Parental Duty: Parents have a duty to promote the interests and protect the rights of the child.

2. Parental Discretion: Parents have broad discretion in deciding how to carry out these duties, and so long as they are doing a reasonably decent job, they are not to be interfered with by the state or by other persons.

3. Parental Authority: At least as long as the parents are carrying out their parental duties, they have authority over the child. This authority has at least two important components:

(a) So long as the parent is not being unreasonable or abusive, the child has a duty to conform to the parent’s rules and commands, and the parent may legitimately exercise discipline and punishment if the child disobeys.

(b) A child has only limited recourse to parental discipline. Other private parties and the state may intervene in parental disciplinary decisions only if the discipline is abusive, or if the parents are no longer acting in the child’s best interests.

4. Involuntariness: A child must, up to a certain age, be under the care and authority of some parental authority. Although the child may, under certain circumstances (such as divorce or adoption) have some choice about which parental authority she will be subject to, she cannot simply opt out of the institution of parental authority so long as she is a child.

Certainly such a relationship is (often) in the best interests of both society and the child herself. However, because it is both coercive (feature three) and involuntary (feature four), why is it not simply another form of oppression? If we do assume--as I think that all thoughtful persons must--that children are indeed persons, then why is it legitimate to subject children to this relationship?

A common and promising contemporary strategy for attempting to justify the parent-child relationship holds that it is a form of fiduciary or trustee relationship. Those who favor this model hope to assimilate the morally problematic parent-child relationship to relationships that are not morally problematic. Relationships such as that of trustee or steward to owner, doctor to patient, lawyer to client, manager to stockholder seem to fit the bill nicely. For in both cases, we have a principal and an agent, and the agent is charged with looking out for the interests of the principal. So we have an analog for the Parental Duty Feature. Furthermore, both relationships provide some insulation from outside interference: Doctors, lawyers, and so on may use their discretion in carrying out their fiduciary duties (relatively) free from outside interference. So we have an analog for the Parental Discretion Feature.

The fiduciary model of the parent-child relationship also has important and attractive activist implications. For the fiduciary agent’s “discretion rights” to use her best judgement in doing her job are purely a function of her undertaking the relevant fiduciary duties. These discretion rights would terminate if the agent ceases to fulfill her fiduciary duties. For many advocates of children's rights, this is an extremely important feature of the fiduciary model. It provides parents with some (limited) rights to exercise discretion free from outside interference in family matters, but it makes the existence and continuation of these parental rights contingent upon the parent's fulfilling her obligations to promote the child's interests and protect the child's rights.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Finally, the fiduciary model seems to tie the parent-child relationship to a key difference between children and adults. The child’s lack of certain cognitive capacities normally thought necessary for rational, informed choice, makes it seem natural to assimilate the parent-child relationship to other kinds of relationships into which a person enters when she lacks some capacity that she needs in a given situation. The main reason that we have fiduciary relationships is to facilitate an agent’s borrowing the capacities of an expert in some particular endeavor.[[2]](#endnote-2) It seems natural, then, to think of the child as borrowing more widely from the capacities of the parent in order to compensate for the (many) capacities that she lacks but needs.

The fiduciary model of the parent-child relationship seems right–as far as it goes. However, it has difficulty in accounting for two crucial components of that relationship, namely parental authority and involuntariness. First, the doctor or lawyer does not have authority over the patient or client in the way that the parent is typically thought to have authority over the child. The patient has no duty to comply with the doctor's orders, though of course he may be unwise or imprudent to disregard her advice. In addition, typical fiduciary relationships are purely voluntary: The principal has unlimited powers of exit from the fiduciary relationship. A patient or client can always seek another doctor or fire her lawyer; the patient or client can exit the relationship for any reason–or none at all. However, in most cases the child is not given any choice about whether to remain in the parent-child relationship–at least as long as the parent is doing an adequate job of fulfilling her parental duties. So while the fiduciary relationship does have analogs of the Parental Duty Feature and the Parental Discretion Feature, it seems to lack any clear analog to the Parental Authority Feature and the Involuntariness Feature.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Now one might attempt to account for these “missing” features within the fiduciary model by claiming that children suffer from global cognitive incompetence which necessitates an unlimited, global fiduciary relationship, a relationship over which children lack ultimate authority because they lack sufficient cognitive capacities even to object autonomously to it. One might suggest that when cognitive incompetence is only local, the fiduciary authority over the principal is negated by the (competent) authority of the principal herself. But when incompetence is global, then we might think that the principal lacks the capacities to make any autonomous decisions, and thus she lacks the authority even to terminate the fiduciary relationship. Thus we might claim that competent principals retain authority over their agents, but that principals who suffer from global incompetence must submit to the authority of their agents. We might then attempt to account for parental authority by placing children in this latter category.

The problem with this suggestion is that while this assumption of generalized cognitive incompetence might apply to infants, for older children, it simply will not do. Older children just do not suffer from global cognitive incompetence; in fact, an older child often has quite formidable cognitive capacities. Indeed, many adolescents possess better reasoning skills, and sometimes even more knowledge, than some adults. Yet we generally think that it is legitimate for parents to continue to exercise considerable authority over adolescent children. The problem is that parental authority seems to last longer than childhood cognitive incompetence. While it is probably true that good parenting involves minimizing the resort to parental authority when dealing with adolescents, most of us think that the parents nevertheless retain that authority at least into the middle to late adolescence of their children, when the cognitive capacities of the child have progressed to the level of many adults.

This means that if cognitive incompetence were the only justification for the parent-child relationship, we would either have to extend it to many adults, or we would have to recognize that it is illegitimate for many, if not most, adolescents. What–if anything--explains and justifies the parent-child relationship for older children if it is not their global cognitive incompetence?

Because the parent-child relationship is unlike typical fiduciary relationships, if it is justifiable, then its justification will have to go much deeper than a simple borrowing of some specific capacity through a traditional fiduciary relationship. Something must be added to explain the very special features of this particular type of relationship. Presumably the missing element will involve the differences between children and adults.

Now children differ from (most) other persons in two ways. First, they normaly have not yet fully developed those cognitive capacities necessary for making and implementing informed, intelligent, and autonomous decisions. Although this fact is important, I think that we must not be lulled into thinking that it is the only significant difference between children and adults. For there is a second, and I think far more significant difference between children and adults. Children are, by definition, persons who will grow and change, often quite radically. Their personalities and their identities as social and moral agents are under construction, as it were. In this paper, I will argue that the institution of the parent-child relationship can be seen as a morally legitimate response to the fact that children are “special agents.” I will suggest that the role of parent is to provide a kind of bridge or interface between the child and the community–an interface which is necessary because the child’s special kind of agency is not sufficient for her to enter into the community in her own right. Because entry into the moral community is in the child’s vital interest, this interfacing or bridging relationship is very much in the best interests of the child. However, as we shall see, such a relationship is deeper and more radical than the relationship between an agent and principal in the traditional fiduciary relationship, for it is not the relationship between two moral equals, but rather the precondition for the child to enter into the realm of moral agents at all.

**II. Moral Agency Versus Mere Agency**

I suggest, then, that the special nature of the parent-child relationship–and what makes it different from other kinds of fiduciary relationships–is that children are special agents. Children are agents, and thus persons, but their agency is of a sort which does not enable them to participate in the moral community as independent moral agents and citizens. One way to put this is to say that while children have a basic kind of agency which makes them persons rather than mere animals, they do not have fully developed moral agency. Because of this, they need a sort of interface to bridge the gap between them and the moral community which they need but cannot yet join in their own right.

I take moral agency to include temporal extension, and something like Rawls’s “two moral powers”: a sense of justice and a capacity to develop and pursue a conception of the good. By “temporal extension” I simply mean the capacity and desire of an agent to see herself as persisting over a long period of time, to take into consideration her long-term interests and needs, and to formulate and to pursue long-range projects. The Rawlsian “sense of justice” I take to involve having a set of internalized norms of moral decency that allows one to get along with others without arousing their moral indignation. Without internalizing such norms, a person cannot be fully integrated into the moral community. The second Rawlsian “moral power” is the capacity to have a conception of the good; I take it that this involves the ability to construct a relatively stable evaluative framework that will give the agent some direction in pursing her life not only as a merely biological creature, but as a self-directing moral agent.

In what follows, I will suggest that much of the nature of the parent-child relationship can be better understood when we see the parent as a sort of moral interface between the child and the moral community, an interface which is necessary because the child has not yet fully developed temporal extension, a sense of moral decency, and an evaluative framework.

**III. Temporal Extension**

**A. TEMPORAL EXTENSION, MORAL IDENTITY, AND CORE CONCERNS**

A person displays mere agency when she sets and deliberately pursues some goal and deliberately provides for her immediate needs and interests. A person displays temporally extended agency when she has and pursues some fairly stable set of goals over time and provides for her long-term interests and needs. In order to be temporally extended agents, we must see the projects of our future selves as our projects. We must see the happiness and pain of future selves as our happiness and pain. In short, we must identify with our future selves.

An infant is more like a Parfittian collection of “time slices” or “instantaneous selves” than a being with temporally extended agency.[[4]](#endnote-4) An adult has--or at least can have--a kind of temporally extended agency that a young child typically lacks. There are two main reasons for this. First, adults typically have a fairly stable set of “core concerns.” Core concerns constitute our deepest values and what Bernard Williams calls "ground projects": those goals, attachments, and commitments that give meaning and purpose to our lives.[[5]](#endnote-5) Some of these core concerns constitute a person’s evaluative framework: In the same way that a person’s most basic beliefs--constitute a “conceptual scheme” that provides a cognitive framework for interpreting the world, so her most basic concerns provide an evaluative framework for guiding her actions and choices within it.[[6]](#endnote-6)

An adult’s core concerns tend to be relatively stable. Adults typically have a web of core concerns that changes fairly little in the short run, and which changes in a relatively orderly way in the longer run.[[7]](#endnote-7) Such changes typically occur when the adult sees that some of her core concerns are incompatible with others, or that some of them no longer are appropriate in changing circumstances. In such cases, the adult typically attempts to adjust her total set to form a more coherent evaluative framework.[[8]](#endnote-8) Over time, such gradual adjusting and changing of core concerns can add up to fairly radical transformations. However, these transformations can still be seen as the intelligible unfolding or evolution of a single locus of temporally extended agency that is temporally extended through time and which retains its identity through these incremental changes. One implication of this fairly orderly evolution is that for most adults most of the time, we can predict with reasonable accuracy that most of her core concerns will still be around at least in the medium term future. It is fairly rare for an adult's complete set of core concerns to change all at once, or to do so at random.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Very young children do not have what we could call core concerns, except, of course, for those that arise directly from biological drives and whatever pro-social impulses are acquired soon after birth. Indeed, the infant’s motivational system is better described as a set of biological drives than as a set of values or commitments or projects. As the child grows, she begins to develop a not-purely-biological identity and with it a set of not-purely-biological concerns.[[10]](#endnote-10) Eventually some of these will attain the kind of stability that qualifies them as core concerns–concerns which provide a “guiding light” for her interaction with others and with the world around her. But at least at the early stages of childhood, most of her not-purely-biological concerns are far more disorganized and unstable than those of an adult. While it is true that some of them will persist into adulthood, it is difficult to tell whether any given childhood concern will be important--or even present at all--in the adult self into which she will grow. This lack of stability among the child’s concerns makes her agency far less temporally extended than that of an adult.

In addition to the greater stability and orderliness of her core concerns, the adult has a resource that allows her to at least partially compensate for those changes that do occur in her more stable adult set of core concerns. The adult has extensive first-hand experience of radical changes to her own preferences and concerns that took place as she grew up. She has lived through the radical changes that characterize childhood, and this experience allows her to appreciate the fact that her present preferences and concerns are not fixed forever. She can reflect on the experience of not wanting now what she desperately wanted before. This experience affords her some “reflective distance” on her own current concerns, and this in turn allows her to appreciate the wisdom of at least some preference-neutral prudential planning (like keeping one’s options open, developing a wide variety of skills and capacities, and storing up “primary” [multi-purpose] goods[[11]](#endnote-11)).

So the adult is better situated for temporally extended agency because her core concerns are typically far more stable, and because her experience with her own growth gives her the reflective distance needed to deal with those (generally far less radical) changes to her concerns that may yet occur. Children are typically less temporally extended agents because their current preference structure has not yet stabilized enough to be a reliable indicator of her future core concerns, and because they have not had enough experience with their own growth to realize how radical--and how inevitable–the changes to her current concerns will be.

**B. TEMPORAL EXTENSION AND THE MORAL COMMUNITY**

The moral community--at least as it exists in Western liberal individualist cultures (whose legitimacy I cannot undertake to examine here)--assumes a significant degree of temporal extension in the agency of its members. It provides a framework for agents to devise and carry out their own plans and projects over the course of an entire lifetime, and to cooperate over time in order to bring about various goals that will be of mutual benefit. Both of these purposes presuppose temporally extended agency. The very notion of agents who pursue life-plans or projects presupposes the extension of agency over at least enough time to adopt and carry out such projects and life-plans. The moral community sees agents as beings who manage projects and goals over long periods of time, balancing the satisfaction of short-term preferences with the commitment to longer-term projects. Cooperation over time also presupposes temporally extended agency, for it rests on the assumption that an agent can see the future benefits of present cooperation as accruing to herself.

In addition, many of the details of life in liberal society presuppose that citizens are temporally extended agents. Liberal freedom assumes that individuals are capable of managing their resources over time, and liberal economic systems and social institutions provide resources that the person must manage as she sees fit. The fact that the liberal community does not dole out resources continuously--that it does not attempt to enforce an equal distribution of goods over time--suggests that it is predicated on the assumption that agents will take these goods and manage them so as to best pursue their projects. Our moral, legal, and political practices assume that the mere passage of time neither changes one person into a new person nor dissolves the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of the former self. One does not stop being the owner of her car, or lose the obligation to pay back the money she owes on her Visa card, or the responsibility for her previous crimes or misdemeanors, simply because time has passed. We count present promises and contracts as binding on future versions of the promisor and contractor. In short, in a thousand various ways, the liberal community does not treat persons as Parfittian time-slices, but as temporally extended agents.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Thus there is a mismatch: The moral community expects a degree of temporal extension that the child lacks the resources and experience to achieve. Enter the parent. One role for the parent is to provide a kind of “prudence by proxy” that can provide the temporal extension that the child lacks. Just as prudence is the guardian of the future in us, so too the parent must be the guardian of the future for the child who is not yet in a position to identify with that future. The parent is not only the advocate of the present self of the child, but of the whole temporally extended person. Thus in much the same way as she is the advocate and protector of the child's rights vis a vis society, she must also be the advocate and protector of the child's future self vis a vis the present child.

This fact is, of course, the source of one kind of normative authority for parents. This is a kind of prudential authority: the child ought to obey simply because it is in her best interest to obey the directives of a person who is manifesting prudence on her behalf. So there is a kind of prudential grounding to parental authority in the fact that the child cannot achieve the kind of temporal extension that prudence requires.

Now of course many adults are not prudent, yet few of us believe that anyone has the moral right to exercise a beneficent authority over them. Though it may be imprudent for the child to reject the parent’s authority, is there any moral justification for paternalism toward them but not for imprudent adults? I think that the answer is to be found in an important difference in the sources of childhood and adult imprudence. Adult imprudence can be seen as the result of choice in a way that childhood imprudence cannot. When an adult ignores her future interests, it is not out of an inability to identify with her future self. Rather it is from something like a choice to avoid such identification. The child--unlike the adult--is not really in a position to choose whether or not to identify with her own future self. The lack of childhood prudence is due less to any autonomous choice of the present over the future than to the fact that the child’s future self is a mysterious, unknowable stranger. The adult is imprudent because she chooses to treat her future self as though it were a stranger. The child is imprudent because her future selfreally is a stranger. Because the imprudence of childhood is so much more profound and inevitable than the imprudence of adulthood, the child--unlike the imprudent adult--really cannot help being in her presentist predicament. Thus it is not at all arbitrary to place the imprudent child under the parent-child relationship, but to leave the imprudent adult to her own devices.

Thus when the community expects a person to make a decision qua temporally extended agent, the parent may act as a proxy decision-maker for the child. Many of these decisions involve resource allocation, where resources are understood broadly enough to include such things as leisure time. Membership in the moral community presumes the ability of citizens to control a set of resources and to manage them over time so as to provide for both their present and future needs. The moral community leaves it up to the temporally extended individual to balance the interests of the future self against the desires of the present moment in decisions about how to manage these resources. Because the temporarily extended agent can see both sets of interests as her own, she is in a position to manage her resources so as to provide for both. But the child who lacks temporal extension is not in a position to do this kind of resource management. Until the child can make a choice about whether to sacrifice her own future--seeing clearly that it is her own future--for her present interests, the parent’s surrogate decisions must reflect the whole person’s interests in a way that the decisions of a temporally bound child cannot.

A second way that he parent acts as an interface between the child and the moral community of temporally extended agents is by acting as a guarantor of the child’s commitments to other members of the moral community. In such cases, the parent guarantees that the child carries out any commitments that she undertakes. Typically she does this by taking moral and legal responsibility for fulfilling the commitment if the child should fail to do so. In this way, she allows the other party to the commitment to have some assurance that she is dealing with a temporally extended agent who recognizes her former commitments as being truly her own and thus binding on her despite the passage of time.

Another way that the parent acts as an interface between the moral community which assumes temporally extended agency and the child who lacks it is by encouraging the development of the temporally extended agency necessary for the child to be integrated into the moral community in her own right. To achieve this temporal extension, the child must develop the experience, motivational stability, and deliberative skills necessary to extend her own agency into the future. The parent has a vital role in aiding the child in his development. In part this means helping the child develop certain skills such as delay of gratification techniques, the concept of primary (multi-purpose) goods, commonsense decision theory, the rudiments of probabilistic reasoning, the wisdom of keeping options open, and so on. It also requires the parent to impart (by example, no doubt) a conception of the self as temporally extended.

As the child's own temporal extension becomes solidified, the parental function is less crucial and eventually unneeded. In the transitional period the exercise of parental authority is no doubt best if it shifts from a directive to a veto role. Rather than making decisions and allocating resources for the child, a good parent allows the older child to practice doing these things for herself, but retains the authority to veto disastrously imprudent decisions made by the child.[[13]](#endnote-13) The choice of how to balance future versus present is ultimately a decision for the autonomous, temporally extended, individual. But until the child develops the temporal extension necessary to fully appreciate the fact that her future interests really are her own, but that they may be different from her present desires, she cannot make that choice for herself.

**C. PRACTICING PROXY PRUDENCE: THE PARENTAL VEIL OF IGNORANCE**

Questions about prudence are difficult enough when we are dealing with adults. For instance, it is very controversial how much--if at all--one should discount one’s future interests just because they are future, and it is controversial how much one should care now about future preferences that one may not now endorse. With children, however, the problem is even worse, for we do not know what the “future self” of the child will be like, and so it is difficult to know how best to protect its interests. So parents face a serious epistemic problem in determining how to protect and promote the interests of the future self of the child: How can we know how best to care for the as yet mysterious future self of the child we know in the present?

The situation parents face is structurally similar to the situation of the contractor in Rawls’s Original Position: Both must represent the interests of someone whose particular identity she does not know. The way to see what decisions you should make under thoseconditions is to ask what would be prudent if you were taken behind a veil of ignorance but knew that you would emerge with a determinate set of concerns; that is, if you did not know what projects, values, and commitments you would have on emerging from the veil of ignorance. Of course the sensible thing to do in a situation of this sort is to keep one’s options open as much as possible and to store up Rawlsian “primary goods” that will be of use no matter what projects, values, and commitments one turns out to have.

Because this notion of a primary good is so useful in this context, it will be worthwhile to consider it a bit further. As Rawls, explains it,

Primary goods ... are things which it is supposed that a rational man [sic!] wants whatever else he wants. Regardless of what an individual’s rational plans are in detail, it is assumed that there are various things which he would prefer more of rather than less. With more of these goods men [sic!] can generally be assured of greater success in carrying our their intentions and in advancing their ends, whatever these ends may be. The primary social goods, to give then in broad categories, are rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Now I want to borrow this concept of primary goods from Rawls, for it is an extremely useful way to help think about how to display benevolence toward someone whose identity and core concerns are mysterious to us. However, there are a couple of ways that the Rawlsian notion of primary goods needs to be modified and developed to make it suitable as a guide for parental proxy prudence.

For one thing, Rawlsian justice theory focuses mainly on goods that can be provided by social institutions to persons who already have the “two moral powers.” But these two powers are themselves goods that must be provided to persons before they become members of the moral community, before they can be candidates for receiving a share of the community’s rights, duties, and primary goods as citizens in their own right. Thus the two moral powers (and temporal extension as well) seem to be in a category more basic than primary goods, for they are the very preconditions for membership in society. These “pre-primary” goods are initially absent in children but necessary for the child’s integration into the moral community.

Second, I think we also need to add the idea of a "secondary good" to Rawls’s account. Let us call a secondary good one which does not harm anyone to whom it is provided, but which may not be useful to everyone to whom it is provided, though it will be useful to a wide variety of people with a wide variety of conceptions of the good, life-plans, and world-views. Thus divers groups of people will find a given secondary good extremely useful . However, even those who do not find a given secondary good useful will not have their position worsened by gaining access to it. Such a good is one that would be useful or valuable from the point of view of a wide enough variety of evaluative frameworks that providing access to it would be genuinely benevolent for many people. I am inclined to think that such things as some sort of continuity with biological kin, an ancestral homeland, and the trappings of a particular ongoing cultural and religious identity might be goods of this sort: Some of us think these things matter very little, but a great many world‑views and evaluative frameworks count them as very important components of a good life.[[15]](#endnote-15) Because this is so, and because it harms no one merely to have access to such goods, it seems to me that genuinely benevolent proxy decision makers should attempt to secure, when practical these secondary goods for the principals in whose interests they act. However, the fact that they are secondary goods suggests that their provision is less morally significant than the provision of more basic goods. This is because it is nearly impossible to live a good life without a proper share of the primary goods, and impossible to be a member of the moral community without the pre-primary goods, but it is quite possible to live a good life without access to any given secondary good. So primary and pre-primary goods take precedence over secondary goods, which should be provided when possible.

**IV. The Sense of Moral Decency**

**A. THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL DECENCY**

Let’s turn now to the second component of moral agency: the sense of moral decency. Membership in the moral community requires and presupposes a willingness to give and accept moral considerations as reasons for action. The moral community requires that its members understand, value, and have at least some motivation to act upon, norms of moral decency. Parents, of course, play a crucial role in the development of this pre-primary good.

The details of how this happens depend on empirical facts about child psychology, many of which remain controversial and poorly understood. However, I think that we are fairly safe in telling the following very schematic story about its development. Infants and very young children begin in an “egocentric predicament.” Their concern is focused on their own immediate interests. From this initial stage of straightforward, naive, and immediate egoism, the child progresses to a stage of more enlightened--though still quite direct--egoism. In this stage, punishment and reward operate to make morally decent behavior pay off in a purely short-term, self-serving way.

Over time, as the rewards and punishments accumulate and shape both the child’s behavior and his attitudes, the child typically progresses to a stage of enlightened indirect egoism. This stage is reached when moral norms are followed even when there is no direct, overt reward for doing so or punishment for failing to do so. Instead, the moral norms have now become directly motivating. The correct description of the transition to this second stage remains rather controversial. It may consist of internalizing parental norms through some sort of identification with the parent. It may consist of developing dispositions to avoid morally indecent behavior because of their prudential value. Or it may consist of acquiring a deep-seated (and perhaps not always consciously articulated) conviction that morally indecent behavior is typically imprudent, and that the costs of detecting exceptions to this general rule outweigh the benefits of capitalizing on them. In any case, by this point, the child has acquired a direct motivation to act on moral considerations.

Many people hold that there is a further step to what one might--somewhat tendentiously--call a morality of genuine altruism or pure duty, in which the person acts on moral considerations without any regard for even indirect prudential considerations. Whether such a disposition is necessary for genuine morality, or whether enlightened indirect egoism is sufficient for membership in the moral community is a controversial issue that I will avoid here. For enlightened indirect egoism seems to suffice for a working moral citizenship in which one is open to persuasion and reasoning based on moral considerations without the need for any “external sanctions.” Whether or not a person who has internalized and endorses the disposition to respond to moral considerations out of prudential concerns really counts as a fully moral agent is a deep psychological and metaphysical issue that has little practical bearing on interpersonal relations. What we need to know in dealing with others is whether or not they are open to moral considerations. We do not need to know--and (if Kant is right) probably cannot ever really know--whether their openness to such considerations is itself motivated by prudential concerns. For our very practical purposes, the answer to this question does not matter.

Understanding how the child gets to this second stage, the stage of internalized norms of moral decency, suffices to demonstrate the vital role of the parent in the development of moral decency, and the dire consequences if it fails to develop. For it is primarily parental discipline which ensures that the child is rewarded for morally decent behavior and penalized or corrected for morally indecent behavior. Over time, being raised in such an environment will cause the child to internalize the norms of moral decency, so that she comes to think of moral decency as being in her own interest, and moral indecency as something which is against her own interest.

**B. WHEN KIDS GO BAD: MORAL DECENCY AND THE COMMUNITY**

If moral decency does not develop, then we are faced with a child who is a kind of “moral psychopath.” Such a child poses a dilemma for society. On the one hand, he is not a fit member of the moral community, and our obligations to others favor excluding him because of the dangers he poses to them. Yet if the person is a moral psychopath because of things that happened—or failed to happen--before he developed sufficiently to be responsible for his own character, then excluding him from the moral community and is vital benefits seems patently unfair. He never had a chance, and to penalize him further seems to be punishing a victim for something over which he had no control.

But while there is an air of paradox about society punishing someone for having been raised a psychopath, there is nothing paradoxical about placing upon children the obligation--as a precondition for entrance into the moral community--to submit to the authority of a parent who is charged with the task of raising a morally decent child. Thus part of parental authority comes arises from a sort of “retroactive obligation” to develop morally decent character. We cannot discharge this obligation retroactively, for at some point the very ability to comply with the obligation to develop a moral character depends on one’s already having a moral character. Since this duty can generally not be carried out by someone who has already developed a morally defective character, we must impose upon children the obligation to obey parents who are in turn obligated to raise them to have a morally decent character.

Now one might be tempted to think that the interest of society in producing morally decent children is opposed to the purely selfish interests of the child herself, and that therefore the parent violates her fiduciary duty toward the child by instilling a morally decent character in the child. However, while conflicts between morality and self-interest are all too stark in adults, they are less so for children. For an adult, there is the very real possibility of already being a person for whom morality is a bad deal. For if one is already committed to some sort of amoral guiding ideal or life-plan, then conflicts between morality and self-interest are likely. Those who feel the demands of moral decency to be a cage are those who are already committed to projects or values that are in conflict with those demands.

However, the fact that we may not be able to justify moral decency to someone who is already a committed egoist does not show that a commitment to egoism is the most beneficial one to instill in a child. The role of the parent here is to ensure that the child will not see the demands of moral decency as a cage in the first place. Because children have not yet developed characters devoted to morally indecent values, parents are in a position to do exactly that, that is, to guide the child’s development in such a way that being morally decent is in her interest.

This means that our duty to look out for the interests of a child and the our duty to make the child a morally decent person can be harmonized into the duty to raise the child so that moral decency will be in her own interest.[[16]](#endnote-16) We do this by imparting values of fairness and benevolence that will encourage her to see moral decency as a part of or a requirement for her own happiness. Given that a person is much better off within society than outside of or at odds with it, parental steering of the development o f the child’s character in a morally decent direction is itself in the interest of the child. Whatever you think of Hobbes, he was surely right about at least one thing: The state of nature is a bad place, and certainly no place for children. But since the moral community requires moral decency, it is in the child’s own interest to develop a morally decent character that will allow her to fit into that community.

The role of the parent, then, is to bridge this gap, to form a sort of interface between the moral community that the child so desperately needs but is not yet in a position to join in her own right. In this way, parents are both advocates of the child to society and agents of society who see to it that the candidates for entrance into society are fit. The parent must, as a member of society, act as a sort of screening agent for the moral community to ensure that entrants into it are morally decent. Yet as an advocate of the child, she will also do everything in her power to see to it that her child passes the test, so to speak, and develops a morally decent character. Thus she functions like a good teacher, one who enforces high standards but does whatever she can to help her students meet those standards.

**V. Family Values**

**A. EVALUATIVE FRAMEWORKS AS PRE- PRIMARY GOOD**S

We turn now to the third component of moral agency: the conception of the good or what I will call an evaluative framework.

It is widely recognized that any coherent rational choice presupposes some evaluative criteria to judge some option to be choice-worthy. An agent without any evaluative criteria would be a lost soul indeed. In order to progress from a merely biological identity and simple biological agency, and to develop a genuinely human social identity and moral agency, the child must develop an evaluative framework that encompasses more than just biological drives.

Where is the child to get this evaluative framework? One is tempted to say that the person herself should create her own evaluative framework. But while our liberal society does make the individual the ultimate arbiter of the content of her evaluative framework, an evaluative framework that is created out of thin air can only be arbitrary. Non-arbitrary choices can only be made by presupposing some initial set of values. This is even true of choices to modify, adjust, or give up some of one’s values. This being the case, one cannot be a choosing agent unless one has some set of values as an initial “given.” This does not detract from one’s autonomy; rather it is a precondition for any choice at all. For even the choice to modify or reject some part of one’s own conception of the good requires some values–if nothing more than the values of consistency and coherence--that will supply reasons on which to base that choice.

When we see that even the choice of whether to keep, reject, or modify one’s evaluative framework already presupposes some set of values, and when we see that choice cannot be both self-generated and non-arbitrary “all the way down,” there seems nothing illiberal about giving parents at least prima facie permission to instill their own evaluative framework as an initial “default” position: Since there is no getting around the need for some initial set of values, we might just as well let the parents instill theirs, at least within certain limits which I will discuss below.

There are several additional considerations that favor giving parents a limited permission to pass on their conceptions of the good to their children. First, as we have noted, the child needs some such framework if she is to make any non-arbitrary choices as a genuine moral agent and thus join the moral community as a being with her own evaluative framework. Second, the most practical and efficient way of ensuring this is to have parents instill their own evaluative frameworks. In a free pluralistic society it would be morally problematic–and probably wildy ineffective--to force parents to teach and advocate world-views and value systems to which they themselves do not subscribe. Also, many evaluative frameworks and world-views value continuity with the past, and so there is some prima facie reason to facilitate the passing down of evaluative frameworks through generations. Inter-generational continuity of such frameworks is thus a secondary good--one that is important for many though perhaps not all reasonable outlooks. Finally, there is (what I would regard as a weak) prima facie interest on the part of parents to perpetuate their own evaluative frameworks by offering them to the next generation.

**B. INHERITANCE LIMITS**

All of these considerations make a strong case for the practice of allowing parents to pass on their evaluative frameworks without making the assumption that parents have anything like property rights over children or a free-standing unconditional right to perpetuate her own evaluative framework into the next generation. Thus these reasons do not justify a parental right to instil unreasonable, intolerant, and morally indecent evaluative frameworks in their children. Having an evaluative framework of that sort hinders one's participation in the moral community of a diverse, pluralistic society: from the point of view of the child’s own interests, it is best not to have that kind of evaluative framework. Rather, we see the parent again as an interface to provide the child with what she needs to enter into the moral community, namely a provisional (morally decent) conception of the good which she can then, as a free and equal autonomous being, keep, modify, or discard as she sees fit.

Nothing in this justification gives the parent a right to prevent the child from altering her evaluative framework later on. Parents have only a limited permission to impart their evaluative framework, way of life, religion, and world-views to their children. For they only have this permission because a child must have some evaluative framework, world-view, and so on, and it is for several reasons best to permit parents to impart theirs. But this does not give the parent the right to make the child close minded with regard to other frameworks or unable to reflect upon her own evaluative framework.

We may not be able (morally and practically) to force a close-minded parent to raise an open-minded child, but conceding this does not force us to concede that the parent has a right to raise a close minded child. In particular, we need not--and I think should not--accord the parent a right to keep the child from moderating influences of other social institutions (such as school) just because they will foster an open-mindedness that the parent frowns upon.

Nor does the parent’s limited permission to pass on her evaluative framework does give her any right to deny the child access to the intellectual skills of critical thought and reflective reason. These constitute important skills that are useful to people of very different ideologies.[[17]](#endnote-17) Merely learning these skills does not close off any options, for nothing forces one to use them in any particular way, or even at all. Instead, having these skills opens up possibilities. Those who have them are still free to choose blind faith and unreflective adherence to tradition even though they have the skills necessary to make other choices. We can offer the skills of critical thinking and reflective reason as resources that one might choose to use a lot, or that one might only need once in a while, if at all.

Even children brought up in faith-based or anti-rational communities and world views are entitled to the ability to reason about and reflect upon her commitments, values, community, and attachments should this become necessary. Even people who decide not to question the initial “default” evaluative framework inherited from their parents may find themselves in a position in which it is necessary to reflect upon and even question their values, convictions, commitments, or way of life. One reason for this is that communities and relationships, and the people involved in them, are not static entities; they evolve. As much as a person might value her current attachments, she may need to sever or renegotiate that attachment if it should evolve in a way that becomes pathological or that betrays the values that she drew from it. And it may happen that opportunities will arise for making new commitments or joining new communities or forming relationships with new people. Thus, she would be wise to retain the skills necessary to sever or renegotiate her place in her own relationships, community, and so on, even if she hopes never to need them.

This does not mean that the state must require a person to reflect on her values, commitments, community, or attachments, or that it must promulgate an ideal of the good life that includes such reflection. Nor does it mean that the state should not count a person autonomous unless she has exercised these abilities. All it requires is that the state provide--and the parent not interfere with this provision–the child with the resources they need to evaluate their commitments, relationships, values, and communities should she ever need or want to do so.

We cannot keep our hands completely off of the development of the child’s evaluative framework; otherwise the child will not be able to progress from a merely biological creature into a fully human being with human aspirations and plans that are not merely biological. Yet we surely cannot allow a family to program the child to blindly follow a dogmatic, close-minded way of life. For if we assume that a child really is an agent–even a special agent—then we must empower the child herself to decide how to live. While parents can and should offer their children an initial evaluative lens, they must not force them to keep it forever. For to do so is to usurp the child’s right to self-determination. It is to deprive her of the full benefits of membership in the moral community, a membership that it is the parent’s duty to help her secure.

**VI. Conclusion**

At long last we can answer the question of how to account for parental authority in the context of the fiduciary model of the parent-child relationship. Parental authority, I claim, arises from the fact that the parent is not only the agent of the child, but also the agent of the moral community. While some of the parent’s commands no doubt derive a kind of “prudential authority” directly from the child’s own interests, the parent’s moral authority derives from the status of the parent as an agent of the moral community. As such, the parent acts as an instrument through which the demands and requirements of membership into the moral community operate.

It should be clear that my intention has not been to reject the fiduciary model of the parent-child relationship, but rather to develop it so as to discover how the differences between the child’s situation and our own require a fiduciary relationship that is very special indeed. Children, I have argued, are agents, but they are special agents. The kind of agency they have is different from the kind of agency most adults have, and which is necessary for membership in the moral community. The role of the parent, then, is to bridge this gap, to form a sort of interface between the moral community that the child so desperately needs but is not yet in a position to join in her own right. In this way, parents are both advocates of the child to society and agents of society who see to it that the candidates for entrance into society are fit.

It may seem as though I have shifted the focus from the rights of the child to the interests of society. And indeed I have, for I believe that the parent must act both as an agent of the moral community and as an advocate of the child. Yet the role the parent plays on behalf of the moral community is a role that is in the vital interest of the child as well as the community. For it is only by the parent’s provision of the tools to achieve full moral agency that the child can hope to enter into the moral community in her own right, and to thrive in it once she has done so. Although the parent, as a member of the moral community, must enforcing its demands that members fulfil the requirements of moral agency, as an advocate of the child, she will also do everything in her power to see to it that her child meets those requirements. Thus she acts as both enforcer of the demand that members of the moral community have temporally extended agency, a sense of moral decency, and an evaluative framework, and as the provider of these vital goods. The moral authority of the parent, then, comes from the first of these roles. Indeed, it comes from her status as an agent of the moral community itself.

The term “agent” has a dual meaning in this context. In the terms in which the fiduciary relationship is laid out, an “agent” is the representative who works on behalf of the client. There is also the more basic notion of an agent (roughly) as a rational pursuer of goals. It has been my goal here to explain how the parent-child relationship can be seen as a response to the fact that the child has a special kind of agency in the second sense of the word. However, we can also now see how the parent herself is, in the other sense of the word “agency,” a very special agent as well.

**NOTES**

1. See Samantha Brennan and Robert Noggle, “The Moral Status of Children” Social Theory and Practice 23(1997): 1-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Howard Cohen, Equal Rights for Children (Totawa, NJ: Littlefield Adams, 1980), 56-61 for a line of thought along these lines. (The relevant passage is reprinted as “Children’s Rights and Borrowed Capacities” in Laurence Houlgate, ed., Morals Marriage, and Parenthood (Belmont Calif.: Wadsworth 1998), 217-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Of course one possible response to this problem would be to argue that the parent-child relationship should be reformed to make it more like morally unproblematic fiduciary relationships by shoring it of these three additional features. This may be an attractive option for some child liberationists, but I do not subscribe to that particular position. My reasons for rejecting such radical child liberationism are not sufficiently novel to be worth rehearsing here; they are spelled out a bit in “The Moral Status of Children.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Derek Parfit, in various articles and his book Reasons and Persons*,* has argued that personal identity over time is something of an illusion, and that because the various temporal stages of a person’s life are not held together by some sort of enduring soul, we are more like collections of more or less similar selves-at-a-time (or “time-slices”) than like the temporally enduring persons we take ourselves to be. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality" as well as "A Critique of Utilitarianism" (in J.J.C Smart and Williams, Utilitarianism: For and Against, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 108-118. See also, Harry Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About.” Compare Norvin Richards, "A Conception of Personality" (Behaviorism14 [1986]: 147-57). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The core concerns are not always explicit: often one can only find out what one’s own core concerns are by a lengthy process of self-discovery that may resemble Freudian analysis. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Thus the temporally extended agent focuses her agency on future goals and projects in the same way that one might focus one’s attention on something. The temporally extended agent makes and follows plans not only about what she does now, but about what she will do in the future. A more adequate treatment of this idea is found in Marya Schechtman’s The Constitution of Selves. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This process may not be wholly conscious–it may take place, for example, largely via processes such as the unconscious reduction of cognitive dissonance. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. I have developed the ideas sketched here in a bit more detail in “Kantian Respect and Particular Persons” (Canadian Journal of Philosophy XX [1999]: XXX-XXX) and in “Integrity, the Self, and Desire-Based Theories of the Good (Philosophical Studies XX [1999]: XXX-XXX.) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. I say “not merely biological” here and elsewhere so as not to prejudge difficult questions about the extent and nature of the biological underpinnings of human motivation and cognition. By “not merely biological” I simply mean not produced directly by biological drives or instincts, without the mediation of human social or cognitive processes. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The term comes from the work of John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Harvard University Press, 1971). I will discuss it at greater length below. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. I cannot attempt to defend this practice here, though I seriously doubt that a more Parfittian practice would be intellectually defensible or workable. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The tricky thing about adolescence, it seems to me, is that the child has gained a number of competencies, but not always the competence of temporal extension. So the child is able to do many things, but often she still lives in the present. Since the parent is charged with the duty of temporally extending the child, she is in the best place to determine when this artificial extension is no longer needed. Often her judgement about this will differ from that of the child, but this is to be expected especially when the child is still living in the present. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Rawls, 192. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Thinking of relationships with biological kin as a secondary good might be a promising way to give some weight to biology in custody disputes without having to posit some sort of absolute right to a relationship with biological kin, and without having to postulate anything like parental ownership of children. In addition, by claiming that access to relationships with biological kin is a secondary good, we are not necessarily committed to the claim that it is something that the child has an absolute right to. Thus there is room for the claim (though it is certainly not implied by anything I have said here) that a biological parent’s privacy rights may take precedence over the child’s interest in knowing the identity of a biological parent who has given her up for adoption (though they would not override the child’s right, say, to medical information about the parent). Also, the definition of a secondary good is meant to allow for the possibility that in some cases actually exercising the option to have a relationship with one’s biological kin might be harmful (e.g., if they are abusive). The claim here is only that having at least some option of pursuing such a relationship does not harm the child, even if certain exercises of that option might be harmful to herself or to the biological parent. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Paul Churchill, “The Obligation of Parents to Raise Their Children as Altruists” in Houlgate, ed., 251-55. While I agree withe the spirit of Churchill’s suggestion, I don’t want to tie myself here to any specific conception of what exactly “moral decency” requires. Rather, for my present purposes, I prefer to leave it as a placeholder for whatever level of moral concern is reasonable to expect of members of society. As readers of recent debates in ethical theory will know, the question of exactly how strong “reasonable” moral demands are is a very difficult question. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Such skills are, at the very least, secondary goods, and one could plausibly argue that they are primary or pre-primary goods. The line of thought I pursue here is developed somewhat more fully in “The Public Conception of Autonomy” (Southern Journal of Philosophy XX [199X]: XXX-XXX). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)