



**DISCUSSION NOTE**

# UNRELIABLE LOVE

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## Unreliable Love

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THERE IS AN ONGOING DEBATE about whether children have a moral right to be loved. While such a right is proclaimed in a number of bills and declarations, it is a challenge to specify what, if anything, could morally justify it.<sup>1</sup> Why think that love is as important a moral good for children as to merit the status of a right in the first place? I know of two attempts to answer this question. The first comes from S. Matthew Liao (2006), arguing that children who grow up without love will come to suffer severe psychological harm. However, Liao's argument has been criticized, and to my mind convincingly so, by Mhairi Cowden (2012) for including empirical premises that are not actually supported by the data.<sup>2</sup> Without going into detail here, I will thus focus my attention exclusively on a second, more promising argument recently offered by Luara Ferracioli (2014). What I shall call the *argument from meaning* can be summarized as follows:

- (i) Children have a basic human interest in having a meaningful childhood, which requires the child's engagement in objectively valuable projects.
- (ii) Children are owed a reliable supply of the means necessary to have a meaningful childhood, where they are not yet themselves in possession of such means.
- (iii) Children usually lack the epistemic abilities necessary to recognize which projects are objectively valuable.
- (iv) This deficit can only be compensated by way of adults putting their own epistemic abilities into the child's service.
- (v) Love comes with a general disposition to care for the loved one's well-being, while loving parents reveal a tendency to conceive of their children as an irreplaceable element in their life.
- (vi) The combination of caring and irreplaceability disposition makes love the only sufficiently reliable source of epistemic care.

C Thus, children have a right to be loved (inasmuch as parental love is concerned).

I take issue with (vi), especially the assumption that love is the only sufficiently *reliable* source of the type of epistemic care needed. Admitting that there are other possible sources, Ferracioli (2014: 14) argues that the reason why she singles out love as what children have a right to "boils down

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<sup>1</sup>Examples include the Preamble of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), the Israeli Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1989), the Declaration of the Rights of Mozambican Children (1979), the United States Bill of Rights of Children in Divorce Actions (1966), as well as a recent court verdict in Brazil (cf. Liao 2006, Cowden 2012, Ferracioli 2014).

<sup>2</sup> But see Liao (2012) for a reply to Cowden, as well as Liao (2015) for a book-length defense of his position.

to the value of reliability.” This renders (vi) particularly central to her argument. However, while love’s *irreplaceability feature* is supposed to explain this reliability, it does not explain it at all. On the contrary, as I try to show, there is reason to believe that loving relationships of the kind Ferracioli envisages may be significantly less reliable than the major alternative she considers: professional caring relationships. I argue that this is precisely because of the latter’s *fungible* nature. If I am right, then the argument from meaning does not yet establish a right of children to be loved.

### 1. Love As a Source of Epistemic Care

When Ferracioli introduces the notion of a meaningful childhood, she draws on Susan Wolf’s (1997) account of meaning in life. Meaning on this account is one aspect of the person’s good, to be distinguished from another aspect – happiness. While happiness is more associated with hedonic pleasure, meaning is taken to be a matter of fitting fulfillment. It consists and arises from one’s subjective engagement in projects of objective worth. “Projects” can include such things as ideals, hobbies, valuable activities in general, as well as certain relationships.

For children it is difficult to acquire meaning, as children are “significantly constrained” in their epistemic ability to identify which projects are of objective worth (and which are not). As Ferracioli (2014: 12) puts it, it is only “as we grow up” that “we come to recognize that our loving relationship with our sibling, our attentive care of our dog and our mastering of a musical instrument conferred meaning on our childhood.” Yet, meaning, Ferracioli claims, matters to children. It is among their basic interests to have a meaningful childhood, from which she follows that children are *owed* the means to acquire meaning, where they do not yet possess such means themselves. Adults must put their epistemic abilities into the child’s service.

*Epistemic care*, as I want to call it, would be a matter of presenting children with a variety of projects over time and pointing out to them (which may include frequently reminding them of) the value of the projects. There are at least two conceivable sources of such care: people, who – typically hired by the state – care for children because it is their job, and people – normally the children’s parents – who care for their children out of love for them. This last idea gains plausibility if a dominant view about the nature of love is accepted. According to this view, if X loves Y, then X is disposed to care for Y’s good (see, e.g., Pettit 1997: 161; Helm 2009: 52; Kolodny 2003: 136; Frankfurt 2006: 37). Applied to the case at hand, it would seem that if Y is a child and X her parent, X would be disposed to care epistemically for Y, given that Y’s good partly consists in her having a meaningful childhood, the achievement of which requires such care. As it is ultimately the care that a child needs, the *source* of such care, one might think, does not really matter. But Ferracioli claims that it does.

As stated by (vi), only love is a sufficiently *reliable* source of epistemic care. The reliability of the source of a good that a person is meant to have

a right to is of course important. There is little point to a right to X if X cannot be reliably provided to the right-holder in the first place. The reliability of love is supposed to be grounded in the phenomenological aspect of loving parents conceiving of the relationship to their child as *irreplaceable*: no matter the changes in their lives, loving parents are extremely likely to continue to further their child's good because they find it inconceivable to replace the end of furthering their child's good with another end, such as caring for another person or project instead. If you find an option inconceivable, so the background assumption seems to be, it might not be feasible, or at least much more difficult, for you to act on it. The irreplaceability aspect, in combination with the initial claim that to love means to be disposed to care for the loved one (epistemic care included), makes love a sufficiently reliable source of care, and thus a plausible candidate for a right.

## 2. When Love Fails

However, premise (vi) makes assumptions about love that are far too idealized. As Iris Murdoch (2014/1970: 100) has argued, love is not conceptually tied to the loved one's good in the way Ferracioli suggests. There is no direct link from love to the advancement of the loved one's good, as love only disposes one to support what one ultimately *takes* to be the loved one's good. Despite the fact that Murdoch has put so much emphasis on the epistemic dimension of love as the art of "really looking," she was well aware of the risk of the loving person *failing* to see the loved one, which may include failing to see what is really good for her. Under these circumstances, love is still love, but it must also fail to be beneficial. As Murdoch puts it, love can even be "capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors" (2014/1970: 100).

To be sure, a loving person will also reveal a tendency to engage in an increased amount of inquiry as to what the good of the loved one consists in, but while this does not at all eliminate the logical possibility of failure, it remains an open question as to whether it can decrease the actual risk of such failure to obtain. There is evidence to the contrary. As Cowden (2011: 338) points out:

[t]he family courts are unfortunately littered with cases where horrible things are done to children in the name of love. ... Even in instances where parents may not be intentionally harming the child, actions done from a place of love in order to benefit the child may be harmful. For example, the Victorian-era father who beats his child while saying "This is going to hurt me more than you" need not be lying. Or parents who spoil their children with the sweets they never had when young, but who therefore cause the children to become diabetic. Many parents have followed bad childcare advice not through viciousness but through love, believing that what they were doing was for the good of the child.

While the question as to how to feed a child has no direct impact on whether or not the childhood is a *meaningful* one (obviously, it is directly

relevant to another type of well-being, though), there is no reason to assume that failure in terms of judging for the child which projects will ultimately confer meaning to her life is any less likely. After all, the question of what has to be done in order to make one's own life meaningful is something adults find difficult. To give just one example, it will be easy to find parents who believe that playing with guns is important to young boys, that, given their gender, such play must in some sense fulfill them and help them develop a sense of physical courage. Yet, on reflection it remains dubious how playing with guns, given the overwhelming silliness and trivialization of cruelty that it implies, can ever be a worthy project. Moreover, wondering which projects are objectively valuable cannot be sufficient to find out which project confers meaning to the life of the *particular kind of person* that my child is. Wolf emphasizes the importance of both the requirement of the project to be objectively valuable, but also the need of the person to feel subjectively attracted to it. But these aspects may come apart, psychologically but also normatively. Parents might be right in their judgment that competence at playing a musical instrument is objectively valuable, while failing bitterly with their judgment that such competence will or ought to matter to their child personally, given the type of person the child is.

## 2.1 Irreplaceability vs. Fungibility

If love only sometimes supplies children with the epistemic means needed in order to live a meaningful childhood, while occasionally resulting in advice for them to adopt what are in fact (for them) unworthy projects, what about the alleged value of irreplaceability? Irreplaceability is supposed to be what makes love ultimately reliable as a source of epistemic care by preventing care from coming to a sudden end. But where epistemic care is defective in the first place, irreplaceability constitutes an additional problem. To be subjected to a false advisor is obviously harmful with regard to the child's interest in meaning. As if this was not enough, the advisor's way of conceiving of his relationship to the child as irreplaceable makes things significantly worse. While the child is in need of an alternative source of epistemic care, irreplaceability complicates it for the child to escape her parents' bad influence. The parents, convinced of their goodness and themselves in the most powerful position of this relationship, will be committed to carry on. To point out that their care is "reliable" seems cynical and beside the point. We want it to be a reliable deliverer of an epistemic good, but here irreplaceability subjects the child to the perpetuity of an epistemic harm.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> If the relationship is thus harmful to the child, and possibly even harmful in further, non-epistemic respects, it might also be difficult to see how, as Ferracioli (2014: 12) claims, "the relationship itself confers meaning to the child's life." For what does the "itself" refer to in such cases if not also to the harmful practices that would be constitutive of the relationship? They may well render the relationship a project lacking the objective worth required for it to be a source of meaning.

Love's alternative, professional caring relationships, might fare significantly better. The reason Ferracioli rejects it is twofold. First, she very much associates such relationships with the sad reality of badly equipped orphan houses. Secondly, she takes them to be fundamentally unreliable, because professionals do *not* conceive of their project of caring for a particular child as irreplaceable. On the contrary, the nature of professional caring relationships is an ultimately *fungible* one. There is a constant risk of a professional leaving her job for another, usually more profitable job.

However, we do not even have to idealize professional care as much as Ferracioli idealizes love in order to make it look much more attractive. As to the first point, in many societies it seems to be feasible for the state to build up institutional settings in which professional caring relationships can be much more beneficial in terms of epistemic care than badly equipped orphan houses. There are certainly good schools and capable teachers already, and there could be more preschools designed to provide epistemic care for the special needs of small children as well, whether they are orphans or not. A general advantage of such settings would be that they provide the child with more opportunities to experiment with a diversity of projects that she cannot experiment with inside the narrow realm of the nuclear family. Moreover, this would potentially come with a certain equalizing side effect, as children from weaker socioeconomic backgrounds could get better access to the material conditions of pursuing a certain project, as well as receive expertise about the value of projects that their parents might be too unfamiliar with to be in a position to advise their children about.

As to the second point, it is precisely *because* of the fungibility that comes with professional relationships that they might constitute more reliable sources of epistemic care. Like people who act from love, professionals too are fallible. However, the state can respond more quickly and efficiently if professional care falls behind certain quality standards by way of providing professionals with additional training or simply by replacing them. Moreover, the quality standards that every professional has to live up to can be improved more frequently in accordance with recent findings in education science and related subjects. It is precisely this fungibility that helps avoid the perpetuity of epistemic harm where such harm occurs. Fungibility is often the way for a source of epistemic care to be repaired or reinstalled. Last but not least, the tendency that highly accomplished professionals would leave for more lucrative jobs can be countered by introducing an equal-pay system: where professional carers in a country's preschools, for instance, all earn about the same amount, they usually have little incentive to move to another job.

### 3. Conclusion

As I hope I have shown, the claim that love is a reliable source of the epistemic care a child needs in order to acquire meaning during childhood does not withstand scrutiny. There might be another argument in support of a right of children to be loved, but the argument from meaning fails to support its conclusion. If children have a basic interest in a

meaningful childhood, and if epistemic care is needed for this interest to be satisfied, the right here should more directly call for epistemic care. Anticipating the various instances of parental love that fail to provide a child with adequate epistemic care, it looks like it should be the state's duty to provide the child with the resources to protect her against love's potentially negative impact. This can be done, for instance, by making the attendance in suitable preschool arrangements compulsory. It would prevent the child from being subjected too much to her parents' advice by supplying her with the epistemic benefits of other, professional relationships, for at least parts of the day. Perhaps the right to epistemic care based on the child's interest in a meaningful childhood can be considered part of the human right to education, with the political advantage of the latter – in contrast to a right to be loved – being already widely accepted. This move, however, would require a better specification of educational methods and contents, as well as an extension of the right to early childhood education, given that the way the right is currently formulated, e.g., in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, puts its main emphasis on compulsory elementary education, beginning usually not before the child has reached an age between 5 and 7.<sup>4</sup>

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