



A politico-normative model of parenthood and the concept of reproductive caring units



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How Parenthood is Modelled in Different Informal Contexts

- When a child appears – “who’s is it?”
- When a child is cared for – “who is the primary caretaker?”
- Situating children in social settings: pre-school, birthday parties, large gatherings, extended family, local meetings.
- When deciding who has authority re. the child in informal contexts (e.g. internal family power struggles)

Everyday situations, culturally variable, embedded in a thick weave of other informal social practices + preconceptions / prejudices

Parenthood status/role assigned intuitively, with lax requirements on systematicity, room for flexibility and exceptions from common rules

How Parenthood is Modelled in Formally Institutional Contexts

- When a child appears – “who’s is it? – **legally**”
- When a child is cared for – “who is (legally) **responsible and accountable**”
- Determining **access and rights** to/re children in/to social settings: pre-school, birthday parties, school, organised social activities/pasttimes (e.g. sports clubs)
- Deciding who has **legal authority** over the child **generally** (within set boundaries)

Highly formalised and regulated state (or equivalent) practices, enforced by courts, etc.
Linked to accountability procedures and structures, general responsibility allocation, etc.

Accessible only through meeting basic conditions set out by the state: e.g. requirements re. numbers, gender mix, age, intellectual function

The Politico-normative Model of Parenthood

FIRST: Performance Assessment Standards

- A formally regulated **primary social role** determining
- **Special rights and responsibilities** re. the caring of children
- Indirectly: **access to goods** available through the exercise of these rights and responsibilities
- Official view of "good parenting"

SECOND: Eligibility Criteria

- Determines **basic right of access** to this primary social role
- **Not about what good parenting is**, but what sort of people who are to be given the chance of exercising parenting in the first place (good or bad)
- This is a "**reproductive caring unit**":

"... a social configuration such that society's default institutional arrangements allows it to have (including sexual and artificial reproduction, adoption, and combinations of these two), care for and/or guard children – the approved RCUs thereby being the basic "menu" of what families there may be in this society."

Munthe, C & Hartvigsson, T (2012). The Best Interest of Children and The Basis of Family Policy: The Issue of Reproductive Caring Units. In: Cutas D & Chan S (eds.). *Families: Beyond the Nuclear ideal* London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic.



The Link Between the Politico-normative and Informal Models

- Politico-normative parenthood concepts are easily (and often) unsystematically impregnated / influenced by informal parenthood models
- But these informal, intuitive conceptions of what a parent may be and who may be a parent carry scant justificatory power as such
- Example 1: Rawls' intuitive assumption of "the family" as a social configuration that should be granted lots of autonomy to mind its internal affairs
- Example 2: Typical responses to ideas on a licensing scheme for granting parenthood, à la LaFollette (default: if you're a parent you can keep your child, unless....)
- Example 3: The primacy of the genetic / biological link (many instances)

These examples all regard the first "performance assessment" portion of the politico-normative parenthood model. Many interesting issues regarding **what determines plausible criteria for good parenting** in a society.

The Issue of Reproductive Caring Units

- Has received much less attention by moral philosophers / ethicists than the former
- Unreflectedly addressed by "rainbow" and ART positive/optimist activists
- It is often said: "there is no right to have children", but what does that mean?? Apparently not that **no** social configurations may qualify as RCUs
- Apparently, the common notion is that there are some legitimate RCUs
- So the question is: **what is a good argument for / against** that a social configuration should be allowed as an RCU by a state?
- We have so far only considered the best interests of children, assuming that this is one relevant consideration (Munthe & Hartvigsson 2012)



Some Initial Considerations and Candidates 1

- What's the role of **the good of parenthood** in a good society?
- Caring well for children should be one , obviously – but beyond that?
- To what extent is state authority and responsibility fitting for allocating this good at all?
- **One idea:** the state shouldn't meddle in what social configurations may be RCUs, merely take actions when RCUs misbehave
- Likely result: "semi-ordered anarchy" – a merge of the RCU concept and informal concepts of parenthood, with lots of local, cultural variability



Some Initial Considerations and Candidates 2

- Alternatively: parenthood is **a central public good**, akin to peace and security, that motivates ambitious state action – maybe even positive rights
- What's the point for a state of having its population procreate? This should be decided on the basis of capacity to deliver **all kinds of public goods!**
- **The reproductive public health perspective:** the issue of what procreative patterns are beneficial for public health and other goods should govern the assignment of RCUs
- For instance: future strains due to environmental and migration pressures may motivate strict allotment of RCU-status – but not given who should get it!
- Question to ponder: is **preservation (or cautious protection) of established cultures** re. what is to be RCUs a legitimate concern? – social cohesion, etc.?
- Might provide some indirect reason for keeping to a primacy of biology/genetics, at least for some time of cautious transformation.

In any case: how to assign RCU-status is more a question of political/societal ideals for allocating power over and access to central goods, than about the ethics of parenting or families.