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THE ETHICS OF PARENTING

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Introduction

Ethical parenting, above all, is responsible caregiving, requiring of parents enduring investment and commitment throughout their children's long period of dependency. The effort people put forth to be responsible parents, as in other areas of their lives, is a function of their self-attributions concerning the relation between their effort and outcome. As Bugental, Blue, and Cruzcosa (1989) have shown, parents who attribute a child's dysfunctional behavior primarily to the child's disposition or to peer influences rather than to their own practices are less likely to attempt to alter their disciplinary style when it is ineffective or developmentally unapt, or to attempt to alter their child's behavior when it is changeworthy. Greenberger and Goldberg (1989) found that high-investment parents, as part of their identity, believed that *they* could meet their children's needs better than other adults, and therefore willingly sacrificed other personal pleasures to be with their children. Such parents (whom the authors identified as authoritative) had higher maturity expectations, were notably responsive, and viewed their children more positively than did less invested parents.

The ethics of parenting begins, therefore, with the assumption of responsibility for children. This chapter is concerned with unfolding the nature of that responsibility in the context of the reciprocal obligations of parents and offspring, and the responsibility of the state to support ethical parenting. The moral obligations of parents to their children, and of the state to the family, have been long-standing concerns of philosophy, the law, and psychology dating back to ancient times. This short chapter does not attempt to comprehensively review this interesting history, nor to offer guidelines to contemporary parents about specific ethical dilemmas (e.g., should a parent ever lie to a child?). Instead, we outline a theory of the ethics of parenting, rooted in traditional and modern views in moral and political philosophy, that describes the needs and rights of children and the roles and responsibilities of parents and the state for children's welfare. We argue, in brief, that children's rights are complementary and reciprocal (but not equal) to those of parents, that parental responsibilities to offspring arise from a developmental orientation to children's needs and capabilities, that the state has an important role in supporting parents but not assuming parental responsibilities, and that developmental scientists have an obligation to contribute to public understanding of parenting and its influences. Such a theory can, we hope, offer guidance for the specific dilemmas that parents often face and provide a comprehensive, thoughtful perspective on what parenting is for, and why, in relation to the needs of children.

The first part of the chapter concerns the ethical obligations of parents, with special attention to the rights of children, the moral justification of parental authority, and the contrasting views of

protectionist, liberationist, and developmentalist approaches to understanding children's best interests. This section closes with a profile of parents' developmental responsibilities to children, especially in relation to the growth of character and competence. The second part of the chapter focuses on the relations among parents, children, and the state. In this section, we describe the state's interest in the well-being of children and the conditions justifying the state's intervention into family life to promote children's well-being. In doing so, we also seek to profile what the state does well, and poorly, in its efforts to assist its youngest citizens. In the concluding section, we briefly consider the responsibilities of developmental scientists for fostering ethical parenting.

The Ethical Obligations of Parents

The Rights of Children

Discussions of parenting often begin with the rights of children. But what are children's rights, and how are they justified? We propose that the moral norms of reciprocity and complementarity offer a new way of regarding children's rights not as absolute entitlements to self-determination and autonomy, but rather as rights that develop in concert with children's growing capacities to exercise mature judgment.

In 1989 the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) codified children's entitlements in a document that was adopted by the UN General Assembly and subsequently endorsed by more than 100 countries, but not by the United States. The survival, protection, development, and self-determination of dependent children are among the children's rights identified by the Convention. It was the inclusion of self-determination rights that accounts, in part, for the reluctance of U.S. legislators to endorse the document. According to the Convention, children have the right to express their views (Article 11); to have freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 14); to associate freely (Article 15); to privacy (Article 16); and to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence (Article 19). The Committee on the Rights of the Child, the organization charged with monitoring and implementing the provisions of the Convention, interpreted Article 19, as well as Article 37 (which protects children against any form of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment), as prohibiting all physical punishment.

In the United States, the debate over the ratification of the Convention sharpened fundamental differences between liberals and conservatives concerning the desirable degree of interference by the state in family life (the less, the better to conservatives) and the freedom with which a child should be legally endowed (the more, the better to liberals). Liberals have urged ratification but criticized the Convention for failing to explicitly proscribe physical punishment. Conservatives have strongly and successfully opposed ratification, arguing that the document contains unwarranted restrictions on the historical right of parents to regulate the physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural development of their children. This liberal versus conservative polarity reflects a broader division in views of the family that contrasts a hierarchical, paternalistic, authoritarian model that places obedience at the cornerstone in the foundation of character (Dobson, 1992) with a children's rights position that demands for children the same civil rights as are possessed by adults (Cohen, 1980).

As the debate over the Convention in the United States illustrates, beginning with the rights of children (or of parents) sharpens the perceived conflict between the rights of each within the family and, inappropriately in our view, impedes thoughtful reflection on ethical parenting by polarizing discussion according to whether children's rights or parents' rights should be preeminent. The Convention neither acknowledges nor resolves the conflict created by its approach. We argue that it is much more useful to consider children's rights and needs within a developmental perspective and within the context of the mutual obligations of parents and children, based on moral norms of reciprocity and complementarity.

The Moral Norms of Reciprocity and Complementarity

Instantiated by different value hierarchies in different cultures, a cornerstone of all ethical systems is the moral norm of reciprocity, represented in Christian religion by the Golden Rule, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” and in Buddhist thinking as karma or the sum of the ethical consequences of one’s actions (Baumrind, 1980). *Reciprocity* refers to the balance in an interactive system such that each party has both rights and duties, and the subordinate norm of *complementarity* states that one’s rights are the other’s obligations. The norm of complementarity implies that if children have a right to be nurtured (and not merely to seek nurturance), then there must be adult caregivers with a complementary obligation to nurture. Children also incur obligations reciprocal to that right, such as returning love and complying with parental directives, that motivate and enable caregivers to nurture and guide them satisfactorily. Application of the principle of reciprocity requires, therefore, mutuality of obligation and gratification and governs relationships within all stable social systems, including the family. Thus, parents and children have reciprocal, not equal, rights. The view that the rights and obligations of youthful status are reciprocal rather than identical to those of their caregivers acknowledges reciprocity as a generalizable moral norm based on the mutually contingent exchange of resources and gratification whose application is likely to produce the greatest good for the greatest number.

Consistent with the principle that children’s rights and responsibilities are complementary, not identical, to those of their parents is the view that parents incur a duty to commit themselves to the welfare of their dependent children, who in turn have a duty to conform to parental standards (Baumrind, 1978b). Because of their dependent status, unemancipated youth may claim from adults the protection and support necessary for their growth and development, but may not claim the full rights to self-determination appropriate to an emancipated, independent person. In practice this means that parents may choose their children’s education, religion, and abode and, at least until adolescence, censor their reading, media exposure, friends, and attire. As children approach adolescence, however, their developing capabilities permit greater self-determination, and they also begin to relinquish the privileges of childhood as they assume the responsibilities and entitlements of adulthood. The remaining restrictions on their freedom provide adolescents with an essential impetus to becoming self-supporting and thus self-determining. Exploitation or indulgence of the child by the parent interferes with the child’s internalization of the norm of reciprocity and the child’s acknowledgment that her or his actions have consequences for self and others. A marked imbalance between what is given gratuitously and what is required of the child disequilibrates the social system of the family. Whereas unconditional commitment to the child’s welfare and responsiveness to the child’s wishes motivate young children to comply with their parents’ demands for maturity and obedience (Kochanska, 2002; Parpal and Maccoby, 1985), noncontingent acquiescence to children’s demands is likely to encourage dependency rather than to reward responsible self-sufficiency.

The reciprocal relations between the rights and obligations of parents and children have enduring philosophical roots and constitute the basis of Rousseau’s (1767/1952, p. 387) social contract:

The most ancient of all societies, and the only one that is natural, is the family: and even so the children remain attached to the father only as long as they need him for their preservation. As soon as this need ceases, the natural bond is dissolved. The children, released from the obedience they owed to the father, and the father, released from the care he owed his children, return equally to independence.

Radical proponents of liberating rights for children (Cohen, 1980; Holt, 1974; Kohn, 2005) negate the principle of reciprocity by claiming simultaneously that because of their temporary dependence children are entitled to beneficent protection, and yet because of their inherent status as autonomous persons children should exercise equal self-determination as do adults.

The Moral Case for and Against Equal Rights for Children

The case for equal rights for children appeals largely to deontological universalist premises, which maintain that *what is morally right and obligatory is based on principles (such as justice) that have prima facie validity, independent of whether they promote the common good.* If children (like adults) are persons of unconditional value and persons have the right to equal justice in all situations, then children's and adults' rights are equally meriting respect. By contrast, the case for reciprocal rights for children appeals largely to rule-utilitarian consequentialist premises intended to maximize welfare (i.e., the welfare of the community and the family as well as of the child) at a given historical time and place (see Frankena, 1973, for a succinct discussion of these and other contrasting theories of ethics).

The justification for children's equal rights is commonly grounded in the universalist theory of justice of Rawls (1971), who believed that to prove the validity of ethical principles of just treatment, these principles must be selected in the hypothetical "original position" behind "a veil of ignorance" in which individuals are ignorant of their own specific interests, circumstances, and abilities and cannot be biased by them. The "original position" assumes the priority of equal liberty as the fundamental terms of association of all rational persons. Maximizing liberty in equal distribution is a universal, objective end of human nature. This universalist view is the foundation for Rawls's theory of justice, but giving priority to the ideal of the free, autonomous individual is also a uniquely Western notion that is at variance with the Eastern ideals of collective harmony and individual duty (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Schweder, 1990; Triandis, 1990). A focus on individual rights is not equipped to address conflict between the rights of persons and the rights of the collective (Baumrind, 2004).

The children's rights movement, which rose to prominence in the 1970s (Holt, 1974; Kohn, 2005; Worsfold, 1974), claimed for children all the rights of adult persons, including the rights associated with self-determination. In this view, children's rights are entitlements and as such impose ethical obligations on parents and the state. As interpreted by Worsfold (1974), Rawls's universalist theory claims that "in their fundamental rights children and adults are the same" (p. 33) and indeed that children "have a right to do what they prefer when it conflicts with what their parents and society prefer" (p. 35–36). This view of children's rights is consistent with, and indeed derives from, the foundational deontological principle of maximizing individual liberty of Rawls's theory. Worsfold supports his case for equal rights for children with two empirical claims and two moral principles. The two empirical claims are (1) the first motive of everyone is to preserve her or his own personal liberty, and (2) children have the same capacity as adults to know what they want and are capable of weighing alternatives and acting on their decisions. The two moral principles are (3) all inequalities of primary goods such as liberty must be justified by relevant differences between the people concerned, and (4) people are not to enjoy a special advantage as a result of age, natural ability, or social status. If the empirical claims (1) and (2) were both true, it might be appropriate to conclude, with Worsfold, that children have the same self-determination rights as do adults—but a developmental analysis raises significant doubts about their validity.

Concerning (1): It is doubtful that most people of any age value absolute liberty above all other fundamental values. For example, there is an abundance of evidence that children of all ages, although they would like to do as they please, accept parental authority as legitimate even when it is punitive as well as firm and deprives them of liberty (Barber, Stolz, and Olsen, 2005; Catron and Masters, 1993; Siegal and Barclay, 1985). Other interests are more important. Concerning (2): Immense differences in knowledge, experience, and power make it impossible to conclude that children have the same capacity as adults to know what they want and to weigh alternatives and act on their choices. Thus, restrictions on children's liberty rights based on their natural, developmental incapacities to exercise those rights cannot be regarded as inequitable in the moral sense of being unjust.

Worsfold states that the two moral principles that justify equal rights for children [(3) and (4)] are based on Rawls's "original position" and "veil of ignorance," and so they are. To be logically

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secured, the equal rights for children position requires the “veil of ignorance”: Age cannot be taken into account, and neither adults nor children may claim any special advantages even if their relevant capacities are shown to differ greatly. But with regard to age distinctions, Rawls himself (1971) made the argument for temporary restrictions on children’s liberty from paternalism, as did the major philosophers before him (Locke, Hegel, Mill, Rousseau), emphasizing the priority of liberty as an ultimate goal. In summary, then, the case for equal rights for children as set forth by Worsfold is not convincing.

By contrast with deontological theorists, rule-utilitarian theories claim that the right, the obligatory, and the morally good are a function of what is nonmorally good. On the assumption that morality was made for humankind rather than humankind for morality, rule-utilitarians are *primarily concerned with the long-range consequences for humankind of acting on the ethical guidelines they espouse*. Rule-utilitarians (unlike rule-deontologists) claim that the rules that are right are determined by their long-range consequences. An act is right if, and only if, it would maximize welfare (Brandt, 1998). What is judged to be right in principle is based, not on a short-range cost-benefit analysis of individual acts, but rather on the long-range consequences of applying the rule generally. The institutions of liberty are valued highly, for example, because they assure rational pursuit of the progressive interests of humankind. The right of parents to restrict the liberty of their dependent children is justified because application of this right typically advances the best interests of the child and the common good of the family and the state.

Unlike act-utilitarians, rule-utilitarians do not claim that each situation is different and unique, but instead claim that general (but not necessarily universalizable) rules and guidelines must be formulated in making moral claims. However, based on particular welfare considerations, a moral code may vary from subgroup to subgroup within society. The principle of utility enters in determining what the rules will be in like contexts, rather than what concrete action should be performed in a given instance, as in situation ethics or other variations of act-utilitarianism. So in deciding whether one should lie or tell the truth, the long-range consequences of lying in general must be considered, not merely whether telling the truth or a lie in this particular instance is more beneficent in its effect. Unlike the deontological injunction against lying in all circumstances, for instance, rule-utilitarians would claim that to prevent a greater evil or to achieve a greater good in the long run, it would be right to lie. The example often given is that one ought to lie to secure the safe haven of a potential Holocaust victim.

Frankena (1973, p. 52) developed a “mixed deontological theory of obligation” that takes as basic both the principle of beneficence (to do good and prevent or avoid harm) and the principle of justice (equal treatment), but appears to give precedence to the principle of justice. By contrast, rule-utilitarians incorporate the principle of social and distributive justice within the principle of utility (or beneficence) by claiming that what satisfies the principle of utility or beneficence in the long run must also satisfy the requirements of justice. For example, an unequal but equitable distribution of resources can maximize total welfare (“to each according to his or her needs”), even within the family. In formulating ethical guidelines for parenting, we adopt a modified rule-utilitarian stance, not dissimilar to that which Frankena (1973) proposed, in that it emphasizes justice (in the sense of equitable, not equal, treatment) as well as beneficence as underlying and unifying principles of morality. In our view, both principles—beneficence and justice—must be taken into account in determining what constitutes ethical parenting, but justice does not take precedence over beneficence.

Our “mixed rule-utilitarian theory” emphasizes a welfare-maximizing principle, but in addition requires a separate justification for inequality of distribution of resources and goods. The justification for equitable rather than equal distribution of resources to children within a family must be based on age, gender, and/or sibling order differences in terms of needs, preferences, and capabilities. Justice is not conceived simplistically as guaranteeing equal treatment in the short run, but rather as demanding a justification for unequal treatment based on relevant differences between the people concerned.

Thus, with regard to the relationship between parents and children, unequal treatment as it relates to liberty is justified on the ground that it will produce greater good in the long run because it is based on relevant differences in needs and capabilities, by contrast with equal treatment that disregards these differences. Children's right to protection, support, and nurturance are greater and their right to self-determination correspondingly less than their parents. Liberty is recognized as a good but not as *the primary* good.

A Mixed Rule-Utilitarian Justification for Parental Authority and Children's Liberty

Until the 20th century, few questioned the justification for restricting children's liberty in the family. Despite his romantic view of childhood, even Rousseau argued for authoritative rule in the family on the basis that parental rule "looks more to the advantage of him who obeys than to that of him who commands" (Rousseau, 1754/1952, p. 357). The proprietary interests of parents in their children's welfare presumes an authority more benevolent than that of a disinterested third party. When parents are exploitative, cruel, or incompetent, their authority is thereby rendered illegitimate. In a similar vein more than 50 years later, Hegel (1821/1952, p. 61) wrote:

The right of the parents over the wishes of their children is determined by the object in view—discipline and education. The punishment of children does not aim at justice as such; the aim is more subjective and moral in character, that is, to deter them from exercising a freedom still in the toils of nature and to lift the universal into their consciousness and will.

Similarly, the rule-utilitarian John Stuart Mill (1859/1973) restricted the ideal of self-determination to individuals capable of assuming adult responsibilities, arguing that, although the adult generation is not perfectly wise and good with regard to the interests of the next generation, it is wiser and better in its judgments of what would benefit them than that generation is itself.

From a different philosophical perspective but with comparable relevance to parenting, Aristotelean virtue ethicists justify parental authority because of the tutelage it provides to enable children to develop the practices and the practical wisdom necessary to the growth of virtuous character. Virtue ethics regards ethical conduct not as the proper application of universalizable rules nor as deriving from a consequentialist analysis, but rather as conduct that arises from *virtuous character and practical wisdom*, and in this regard they are in agreement with most parents that character development is foundational to socialized behavior. In the Aristotelean tradition, virtuous qualities develop through habituation—the practice over time of virtuous conduct that derives, in part, from the enduring efforts of parents to make such conduct habitual in children and thus ingrained in personality—combined with the socialization of practical rationality in the application of virtuous character. Although these influences begin early (Thompson and Lavine, 2016), a sustained period under parental guidance is necessary to the development of virtuous qualities.

Parental authority, including the right to speak for their children and to discipline them, is rationally justified by children's dependent status and relative incompetence, imposing on parents the obligation to protect, nurture, and train children, and the right to reward and punish them contingent on parents' standards of desirable behavior. As parents do so, children learn to master the environment and to develop a stable sense of self. Self-determination becomes a conscious predominant value during adolescence with its constructive expression predicated on competence, an internal locus of control, and an understanding of moral reciprocity—all capacities developed through the socialization process, which includes parental limit setting. Unequal distribution of liberty is justified in the child's mind, as in the adult's mind, by recognition of the relevant age-related differences between them. Prior to the child's acquisition of the ability to think logically and symbolically, parental authority is legitimated

in the child's mind by the fact that the child is weak and the parent is strong and by the child's strong emotional attachment to the parent.

The disciplinary encounter, including the use of reward and punishment, is a necessary part of the socialization process through which parents fulfill their obligations to their children. In families with normally assertive toddlers, parental correction and management of child behavior are frequent. Conflictual interactions between young children and their parents occur from 3 to 15 times an hour and even more often when children are defiant (Dix, 1991; Klimes-Dougan, and Kopp, 1999). Because it is rare for a single disciplinary encounter to alter a child's motivated behavior permanently, periodic reinforcement and explanations are necessary. Properly handled, these recurring disciplinary encounters enable children to better understand the meaning of the request and its justification, internalize the expectation, and even learn the skills of negotiation and thus promote their future autonomy as well as immediate compliance.

Because punishment is necessarily aversive, it can be justified only when aimed at maximizing the child's long-term welfare. By preventing and reforming bad behavior and educating and encouraging good behavior, mild punishment, when indicated, is intended to advance the welfare of the family and the community, as well as of the child. Although parental use of power assertion is sometimes disparaged by developmentalists (Grolnick, 2003; Gershoff, 2002; Holden, 1997), it is important to distinguish confrontive from coercive parental power assertion and its effects on children (Baumrind, 2012). *Coercive* power assertion is arbitrary, preemptory, relies on threats and psychological control, and is the kind of power assertion that characterizes authoritarian parents. By contrast, *confrontive* power assertion is reasoned, negotiable, outcome-oriented, concerned with behavioral control, and is typical of authoritative parents. Both are demanding and forceful, but their effects on children are different. Consistent with earlier cross-sectional findings, for example, Baumrind, Larzelere, and Owens (2010) reported that the longitudinal effects of confrontive as opposed to coercive parental power assertion when children were preschoolers were beneficial: ten years later, adolescents showed greater cognitive competence and self-efficacy and fewer problem behaviors. Sorkhabi and Middaugh (2014) reported that parental use of coercive or confrontive power assertion was associated with differences in relational outcomes between adolescents and parents, with heightened affiliation when parents were confrontive but not coercive.

The distinction between confrontive and coercive power assertion is important, because although power assertion can be readily contrasted with reasoning and other forms of inductive discipline for descriptive purposes, authoritative parents use both, and the combination promotes children's constructive obedience and responsible conduct (Baumrind, 2004, 2012, 2013a). When enlisted by authoritative parents, power assertion is neither arbitrary nor harsh but marshaled to promote compliance in the context of a responsive relationship in which children's dissent is heard and respected. Exercised in this manner, power assertion is consistent with parents' ethical responsibility to socialize children's conduct and promote their responsible membership in society.

The Child's Best Interest Criterion for Determining Ethical Parenting: Protectionist, Liberationist, and Developmental Perspectives

Another way of understanding alternative constructions of children's needs and rights, and the ethical responsibilities of parents, is to consider how best to define children's "best interests." It is incontrovertible that it is in children's best interests to survive, develop fully, and be protected from harm. But advancing beyond these minima reveals significant differences in views of children's needs and the responsibilities of adults as caregivers.

Protectionists and *liberationists* view children's best interests differently, especially with respect to children's self-determination interests. Children's rights advocates (Cohen, 1980; Kohn, 2005) adopt a liberationist view and claim that it suffices for children to have a rudimentary understanding of

basic survival facts to entitle them to make their own decisions, whether or not they can do so wisely. This liberationist argument from justice, based on deontological thinking, gives primacy to the *right* to self-determination for everyone, including children, whereas the protectionist argument from a consequentialist framework encourages children's personal agency not as a moral right, but rather as a developmental need to be weighed against other developmental needs.

Wald (1979) distinguished among four categories of children's rights, two of which may be viewed as protectionist and two as liberationist. The two protectionist rights are (1) "rights against the world," which pertain to adequate nutrition, housing, medical care, and schooling, which should be assured by legislatures, not courts; and (2) "protection from inadequate care" by adults, especially parents, or what are typically regarded as abuse and neglect allegations. The two liberationist rights are (3) "adult legal status," which would relieve children of status offenses or any other form of coercion that would be unconstitutional if attempted with adults, and—the most controversial—(4) "rights against parents," which would enable unemancipated children to act independently of their parents and against parental wishes.

From a justice perspective (which requires that like cases be treated alike), age must be shown to be morally relevant in apportioning either rights or responsibilities. Wald pointed out that granting children liberation rights is a mixed blessing at best. The disadvantage for children of having greater adult-like legal status has been the increasing tendency of the legal system to treat children as adults in the courts, thus holding them (as well as their parents) responsible for their criminal actions. If distinctions based on age in the granting of liberty rights are thought to be unjustifiable, then so are age-based distinctions granting children freedom from responsibility for criminal conduct based on their developmental limitations. Conversely, if children are to be subject to status offenses, then their age may entitle them to freedom from other kinds of criminal responsibility in the courts.

There is, however, a third perspective to children's best interests that is an alternative to protectionist and liberationist views. From a *developmentalist* perspective, age is a highly relevant justification for constraining children's liberty. As is universally recognized, with increasing age children develop the cognitive capacities for perspective taking, complex reasoning, and a decentered sense of self that are relevant to the exercise of rights, including those related to autonomy. These and other cognitive skills also enable children to increasingly perceive themselves in the context of social units and society, to comprehend and willingly accept the responsibilities that come with citizenship, and to perceive their actions in terms of near- and long-term futures. With increasing age children and adolescents also acquire the capabilities necessary to function competently outside the family. Consequently, children's best interests compel changes with age in parental responsibilities related to nurturance and protection (greater when the child is younger) and restrictions on children's exercise of autonomy or self-determination rights (decreasing with children's increasing age and competence).

A developmentalist perspective is not only ethically justified and empirically sound, it is also consistent with how children themselves perceive their rights (Helwig, Ruck, and Peterson-Badali, 2014). When children ranging in age from 8 to 16 responded to a series of hypothetical stories in which parents (or other authorities) threatened to contravene a child's nurturance or self-determination rights, at all ages children endorsed the story character's nurturance rights (e.g., continued access to food and clothing), which were deemed parental responsibilities. By contrast, there were significant increases with age in children's endorsement of self-determination rights for the story character (e.g., keeping a diary private), with children increasingly referring to that person's rights as justification (Ruck, Abramovitch, and Keating, 1998). When mothers were interviewed about nurturance and self-determination vignettes, the results were similar, although mothers were also attentive to the maturity or capabilities of the story character to exercise self-determination rights (Ruck, Peterson-Badali, and Day, 2002).

Children also endorse a developmentalist perspective in their everyday behavior. The imposition of authority, even against the child's will, is perceived by most children (as well as by their parents) as

age-appropriate during the first six years. This is especially so if disciplinary practices are consistent with what children perceive to be normative for their culture and social group (Lansford, Chang, Dodge, Malone, et al., 2005). During the preschool years, adult constraint—expressed as consistent contingent reinforcement and regularity—helps to promote the child’s sense of security and her or his belief that the world can be a safe, predictable place. Toddler compliance is most effective when the adult briefly explains the rule and provides a consequence if the child persists in disobeying, reserving longer explanations for when punishment is over (Blum, Williams, Friman, and Christophersen, 1995). Preschool children in middle-class American families broadly accept punishment as suitable across behavioral domains (moral, conventional, prudential), whereas by middle childhood children are more discriminating, viewing punishment for violations of moral and safety concerns as acceptable but for conventional transgressions as unacceptable (Catron and Masters, 1993). The importance of using reason to justify caregivers’ directives increases with age. By early adolescence, children are more likely to endorse parents who use reason rather than force or psychological control to justify their decisions and demands, even in cultures with normative use of psychological control (Helwig, To, Wang, Liu, and Yang, 2014).

With increasing maturity, children distinguish between personal issues (such as what clothes to wear) and moral (such as bullying weaker children) or conventional issues (such as table manners), and by adolescence tend to regard parental directives pertaining to moral issues as legitimate, conventional or prudential issues (such as dietary injunctions) as somewhat less legitimate, and personal issues (such as dress) as not legitimate domains in which parents may assert their authority (Nucci, 1981; Smetana, 1988, 2019). As children approach adolescence their growing need for independence, as well as their capacities to think through their own best interests and to empathize with the needs of others, entitle them to a vote as well as a voice in matters that intimately affect them in the personal domain, such as custody disputes.

In summary, a developmentalist perspective argues that what constitutes children’s best interests varies with the child’s age. The protectionist perspective emphasizes children’s need for nurturance and protection from danger, including parental and societal neglect and abuse, at all ages. The liberationist perspective emphasizes the child’s inherent right to self-determination, with liberty regarded as the primary “good” to which children and adults are equally entitled. From the developmental perspective that we endorse, however, the child’s age is a highly relevant justification both for restraining children’s liberty and for determining their rights to protection and nurturance. Justice, according to natural law, must take into account real differences in ability and need in determining the apportionment of privileges, responsibilities, and rewards. At each childhood stage the duties and rights of parents and children differ, finally approximating the balance that characterizes a mature adult–adult relationship. During the adolescent period the child gradually relinquishes the privileges and limitations of childhood and assumes the responsibilities of adulthood, and is rewarded with self-determination.

Parents’ Developmental Responsibilities: Shaping Children’s Character and Competence

We have sought in this discussion to clarify the nature of children’s rights and parental responsibilities and, in particular, to provide an ethical justification for parental authority that is consistent with a mixed rule–utilitarian perspective and developmental science. But what are the purposes for which parental authority is exercised? What, in other words, are parents’ developmental responsibilities to offspring?

The power to shape children’s character and competence is an awesome responsibility requiring conscious sustained and systematic commitment by dedicated caregivers. Parents are responsible for contributing substantially to the development of ethical character and competence in their children

through their socialization efforts (Baumrind, 1998). Socialization is an adult-initiated process by which young persons through education, training, and imitation acquire their culture, as well as the habits and values congruent with adaptation to that culture. Children's perspectives shape their understanding of parents' socialization efforts, but their perspectives are strongly influenced by their parents' perspectives, which are grounded in particular cultural contexts and instantiated in adult behavior. In this section, we focus particularly on the development of the dual essentials of socialization—character and competence—and then consider briefly the importance of culture in defining these essentials.

Character

The abilities to know right from wrong and to regulate one's own actions led Waddington (1960) to refer to human beings as "the ethical animal." When its moral component is made explicit, character may be thought of as personality evaluated. Character constitutes the ethical estimate of an individual and refers to that aspect of personality that engenders accountability. These qualities of character have traditionally been deemed virtues. Character is responsible for persistence in the face of obstacles and inhibits immediate impulses in the service of some more remote or other-oriented goal. Character provides the structure of internal law that governs inner thoughts and volitions subject to the agent's control under the jurisdiction of conscience. Within limits imposed by their competencies (cognitive, affective, and physical), circumstances, and cultures, ethical agents are able to plan their actions and implement their plans; to examine and choose among options; to eschew certain actions in favor of others; and to structure their lives by adopting congenial habits, attitudes, and rules of conduct.

How may parents contribute to the development of a virtuous character in their children? Wilson (1993) contended that children are born with the moral sentiments of fairness, duty, sympathy, and self-control (see also Haidt, 2012). However, they also require cultivation of their moral sentiments by socializing agents. The child's moral sentiments are cultivated most effectively by caregivers who have a clear sense of purpose; enforce their directives; and convey their messages simply, firmly, and consistently. Through the disciplinary encounter and other means, caregivers attempt to induce children to behave in accord with parental standards of proper conduct and to become aware that they have an obligation to comply with legitimate authority and to respect the rights of others. The short-range objective of the exercise of parental authority is to maintain order in the family, but this short-range objective is subordinated to parents' ultimate objective, which is to further children's development from a dependent infant into a self-determining, socially responsible, and moral adult. Becoming a moral agent is not simply conforming unreflectively to internalized expectations of authority but also constructing personal moral standards to guide conduct even when one is free from external inducements or surveillance, and which form the basis for self-conscious moral reflection.

For parents who want their children to become autonomous moral adults, dispositional compliance—uncritical internalization of society's norms—is thus not the preeminent long-range childrearing objective (Baumrind, 2013b). Rather, the objective is behavioral compliance combined with a capacity for responsible dissent: to question authority, negotiate, resist injustice, and make thoughtful, autonomous moral choices (Baumrind, 2004; Sorkhabi and Baumrind, 2009). Responsible dissent, a constructive form of noncompliance, can be contrasted with persistent oppositional defiance, which is unconstructive and unfocused general resistance and has negative consequences for children and the family (Eyberg, Nelson, and Boggs, 2008; Morrissey and Gondoli, 2012). Parents encourage the development of ethical agency in children by distinguishing between unconstructive and constructive noncompliance strategies, and by encouraging the latter by negotiating with a child who mounts a rational objection to a negotiable parental directive (Goodnow, 1994; Kuczynski and Kochanska, 1990). Provided that firm parental control has been exercised in childhood, far fewer rules will be required in adolescence, and family power can be distributed more symmetrically (Baumrind, 1983, 1987; Baumrind and Moselle, 1985; Kandel and Lesser, 1969; Perry and Perry, 1983).

Disciplinary encounters are not the only—or even the primary—means by which parents influence the character development of their children. Of paramount importance is the manner in which caregivers live their own lives by acting in accord with their beliefs, modeling compassion and courage, engaging in physically and mentally healthy behaviors, and creating the family as a just institution (Okin, 1989). As Okin, following in the footsteps of John Stuart Mill (1869/1988) argued, the family is the first and most influential source of moral development. Justice in the family is modeled by attending carefully to everyone's point of view, distributing resources and tasks equitably by taking into account preference, need, and ability, and establishing gender equity. If home responsibilities are inequitably distributed or distributed on the basis of gender without consideration of personal preferences and abilities, children learn injustice and gender-based inequality in power and access to resources.

The mark of virtuous character differs somewhat in Eastern and Western thought. Personal integrity marks exemplary character in Western thought. Integrity implies both wholeness and honesty. Wholeness means that a person's precepts and practices are consistent, that the same standards are applied to means and ends, and that the dichotomy between self and other is transcended in understanding true self-interest. Honesty preserves trust in human relationships. Rule-utilitarians place a high premium on truth telling and trust, although unlike Kantian deontologists, they do not claim that truth-telling is an unconditional duty that holds in all circumstances, even if a life is forfeited (Kant, 1797/1964). From a consequentialist perspective promise keeping and truth telling are, however, of sufficient utility in promoting the greatest good for the greatest number to justify an initial presumption against lying. Truth telling is such a difficult discipline to acquire, however, and the principle of veracity has such utility in social life, that parents need to act as models, especially when it is awkward or uncomfortable to tell their child the truth. (For a differentiated treatment of the subject of lying, see Bok, 1979; for a discussion of rule-utilitarian objections to deception research, see Baumrind, 1971b, 1972b, 1979, 1985, 1992, 2013c).

The Eastern perspective on integrity differs from Western thought because the self is construed as context dependent so that its identity is allowed to change with circumstances and relationships. *Jen*, a cardinal Chinese virtue, is the ability to interact in a polite, decent, and sympathetic fashion and to flexibly change one's behavior in accord with the requirements of a relationship (Hsu, 1985). Therefore, authenticity that requires people to focus their attention on their own inner feelings and convictions rather than on the reactions of others is not considered as important as not hurting others psychologically or disrupting harmonious interactions with them. In Eastern thought trust is based on goodwill rather than on telling the whole truth because it is understood that how one acts is a negotiated and shared social enterprise.

Ethical personality evolves by successive forms of reciprocity in which the capacity develops for treating the other as someone like oneself rather than alien from oneself. From a young child's dawning awareness of psychological states in others (i.e., theory of mind) emerges the earliest moral sensibility in a preschooler's sensitivity to the feelings, beliefs, and goals of others (Thompson, 2012, 2015). By middle childhood, the child recognizes that stable social relationships, including those within the family, are based on the reciprocal maintenance of expectations by social partners as well as on appropriate feelings of gratitude or grievance. Consequently, children actively solicit approval from adults as well as peers and can understand the reasons for parental directives. Perceiving their peers as like themselves in status and nature, they can better extend toward them genuine concern and comprehend their antithetical position in an altercation (Allen and Loeb, 2015). By early adolescence, youth acknowledge reciprocity in their relationships with adults and adopt a considered view of existential obligations that embraces an understanding of one's obligations to others (Matsuba, Murzyn, and Hart, 2014). By acts of compassionate regard and respect for the rights of others, one invites reciprocal acts of goodwill in time of need.

As children develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally, their character becomes shaped by parental practices that include (1) the "scaffolding" of shared activity with the child that leads offspring

to new patterns of behavior and thought (Damon and Colby, 1987; Pratt, Kerig, Cowan, and Cowan, 1988); (2) inclusion in family habits of hospitality, compassion, and generosity that are extended to the larger community (McIntosh, Hart, and Youniss, 2007); (3) direct training in role taking, sometimes through parent–child conversation about helping (Thompson and Winer, 2014); (4) parental use of induction and reasoning in preference to power; and (5) the child’s opportunities to observe loved adults acting consistently with their expressed moral beliefs (Colby and Damon, 1992; Oliner and Oliner, 1988). As a consequence, children become ethically sound by internalizing adult values of kindness, fairness, and respect; experiencing empathy and sympathy for others; developing habits of fair and considerate treatment of others; and forming personal standards of right and wrong that result in a sense of obligation to others. Perhaps most important, parental practices focused on the principle of compassionate regard for children will foster in children the ability to make inferences about how others feel and respect for those feelings (Thompson, 2014).

Competence

Competence is effective human functioning in the attainment of desired and valued goals. The goals that are valued in a culture are those that enable individuals to pursue their personal objectives within the constraints imposed by the common good and by their social networks. The presence of virtuous character, intelligence, creativity, and determination enable many people to make substantial contributions to society.

It takes virtuous character to will the good, and competence to do good well. Optimum competence as well as good character in Western society require both highly developed communal and agentic (self-assertive) attributes and skills, the two orthogonal dimensions of instrumental competence (see Baumrind, 1970, 1973; Baumrind and Black, 1967). In Western psychological literature (Bakan, 1966; Ryan and Deci, 2017), agency refers to the drive for independence, individuality, and self-aggrandizement, whereas communion refers to receptivity, empathy, interdependency, and the need to be of service and engaged with others. The social dimensions of status (dominance, power) and love (solidarity, affiliation), which emerge as the two orthogonal axes from many factor analyses of Western personality characteristics (Baumrind and Black, 1967; Lonner, 1980; Wiggins, 1979), are manifestations of agency and communion. Optimum competence requires a balance of highly developed agentic and communal qualities, and thus this is also a prized goal of childrearing. In practice, the integration of the two modalities is represented by actions that resolve social conflicts in a manner that is both just and compassionate and that promotes the interests of both one’s self and one’s community (Baumrind, 1982).

The young child’s development of competence is the product of increasingly complex interactions of the developing child with socializing adults—primarily parents—who during the child’s early years have the power to control these interactions. How parents socialize their children through disciplinary encounters, conversational discourse, the examples provided by their own conduct, and other means predicts crucial aspects of children’s positive and negative interpersonal behavior and socioemotional and cognitive development. In the past, most socialization researchers implicitly assumed that internalization of society’s rules, represented by parental values, was the primary objective of childrearing. However, today fewer parents and educators make that assumption. Internalization by one generation of the rules of the preceding generation represents the conservative force in society, whereas the impetus to social change comes about by the challenges each generation presents to the accepted values, rules, and habits of the previous generation. Behavioral compliance and internalization of parental standards are necessary but not sufficient childrearing objectives. In addition, the development of moral autonomy and its constituents—including the ability to make reasoned, independent moral choices, to understand the justification for moral expectations, to identify oneself as a moral being, and to engage in responsible dissent—is also important.

We do not attempt here to review the literature on socialization effects as these contribute to the development of competence of children (see the bibliographic references to Baumrind, 1966, 1968, 1996b, 1997a, 2013b; Maccoby and Martin, 1983). Instead, we describe the authoritative model, which has to date proven to be the most effective childrearing style in generating high levels of both agency and communion in European-American children. Authoritative parenting balances warm involvement and psychological autonomy with firm, consistent behavioral control and developmentally high expectations for social maturity and cognitive achievement. In contrast to authoritarian parents who are highly demanding (enlisting coercive power assertion) but not responsive, permissive parents who are responsive but not demanding, and unengaged parents who are neither demanding nor responsive, authoritative parents are both highly demanding and highly responsive. On the one hand, they provide firm control and high maturity demands, and on the other hand, they offer warmth, responsiveness, and encouragement of autonomy (Baumrind, 1966, 1975, 1978a, 1980). Authoritative parents emphasize the importance of well-timed parental interventions. They minimize intrusions on a toddler's autonomy by proactive caregiving, such as childproofing, quality time-in, an abundance of positive attention and active listening; clear instructions; and progressive expectations for self-help. Authoritative parents are receptive to the child's views but take responsibility for firmly guiding the child's actions by emphasizing reasoning, communication, and rational discussion in interactions that are friendly as well as tutorial and disciplinary.

The balanced perspective of authoritative parents is neither exclusively child-centered nor exclusively parent-centered, but instead seeks to integrate the needs of the child with those of other family members, treating the rights and responsibilities of children and those of parents as reciprocal and complementary rather than as identical. Authoritative parents endorse the judicious use of aversive consequences when needed in the context of a warm, engaged, and rational parent-child relationship. Because children have their own agendas that include testing the limits of their parents' authority, disciplinary encounters are frequent, even in authoritative homes. At such times direct, confrontive power assertion that is just sufficient to control the child's behavior and is preceded by an explanation most effectively reinforces parental authority concerning the standards that the child must meet.

Studies that focus on the mechanisms that characterize the authoritative parent show *how* authoritative parents encourage moral internalization, self-assertion, prosocial behavior, and high cognitive performance. Their strategies include (1) scaffolding of children's competence, including children's social competence, through shared activity and conversations (Pratt et al., 1988; Tomasello, 2016); (2) reliance on person-centered persuasion rather than on coercion (Applegate, Burke, Burlinson, Delia, and Kline, 1985; Thompson, Laible, and Ontai, 2003); (3) monitoring of offspring and the use of contingent reinforcement; (4) consistency with the "minimum sufficiency principle" (Lepper, 1983) of using just enough pressure to enlist child compliance; (5) instantiation of the ethical principle of reciprocity (Kochanska, 2002; Parpal and Maccoby, 1985); and (6) involved and engaged participation in the child's life (Pomerantz, Ng, Cheung, and Qu, 2014; Rogoff, Moore, Correa-Chávez, and Dexter, 2015).

Cultural Considerations

Converging findings support relations between the authoritative style of childrearing and instrumental competence in European-American middle-class children (Baumrind, 1971a, 1972a, 1983, 1989, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1993, 1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2013b). Although alternative candidates for optimal parenting may exist in diverse cultural contexts, no study has shown authoritative parenting to be more harmful or less effective than any of the alternative parenting styles in promoting children's competence and character. The literature suggests that optimal parenting in any culture is likely to have certain features that characterize authoritative parents—deep and abiding commitment to the parenting role, intimate knowledge of their child and her or his developmental needs, respect

for the child's individuality and desires, provision of structure and regimen appropriate to the child's developmental level, readiness to establish and enforce behavioral guidelines, cognitive stimulation, and effective communication and use of reasoning to ensure children's understanding of parents' goals and disciplinary strategies.

Just what combination of behavioral control, warmth, and psychological autonomy is optimal in advancing children's competence and character, and how each of these outcomes should be operationally defined, is likely to be moderated by social context (Lansford et al., 2005). Cultures differ in their emphasis on the rights of individuals or their responsibilities to the polity (Whiting and Whiting, 1975). The ideals of equality and liberty inherent in the Anglo-American Western tradition and of social harmony, purity, and collectivity in hierarchical collectivist cultures such as India or Japan affect the parental attitudes and practices that are deemed desirable and the childrearing goals that parents set forth for themselves and their children. The emphasis on children's rights to self-determination is predominantly a Western ideal. The Eastern sensibility of nonintrusive and harmonious social relationships contrasts markedly with rights-oriented competitive societies such as the United States.

In the context, therefore, of cultural diversity in conceptions of human needs, rights and responsibilities, the roles of parents, and the goals of childrearing, a developmental orientation to parental responsibilities—especially with respect to the development of character and competence—leads to the conclusion that significant hallmarks of authoritative parenting are contributors to child competence. As a consequence, “the ethics of parenting” embraces both broadly generalizable (consistent with a rule-utilitarian framework) and culturally specific considerations. It could not be otherwise, respecting as we must the constructions of children's needs and parenting responsibilities that characterize cultures and cultural groups. Moreover, the importance of culture increases as we broaden our discussion from parents and children to considerations of parents, children, and the state.

Parents, Children, and the State

Although the emphasis of moral philosophy is on the reciprocal responsibilities of parents and children, the community also assumes a significant role in childrearing. Communities provide resources that can assist adults in ethically responsible parenting. Material resources include income support, affordable and high-quality childcare, and workplace practices that enable workers to be responsible parents. Human resources include access to networks of social support, whether in formal contexts (such as social services, parent support groups, or religious institutions) or the informal social support systems characterizing many extended families and neighborhoods (Thompson, 1995). Communities also advance ethical parenting by informally supervising and regulating parental practices to conform them to cultural norms and to ensure child well-being.

That “it takes a village to raise a child” reflects the view that parenting is interpreted, supported, and monitored by others beyond the family, which raises significant questions about the relations between ethically responsible parenting and an ethically responsible society in which parenting occurs. These questions are the concern of this section. What is the role of society in promoting ethical parenting? Can the state ensure that parents fulfill their positive obligations toward offspring, or can it only sanction them when they do wrong? What can the state do to ensure that parents act in an ethically responsible manner? What are the justifications for the community's intervention into family life? In what other ways can the state support ethical parenting? By addressing these questions, we may help to explain the complex and often troubled relationships between parents, children, and the state. Although parents bear ultimate responsibility for the care and treatment of their children, how the community treats families can make the responsibilities of ethical parenting either easier or more difficult for adults to fulfill.

The State and the Family

The state—defined as national, state, and local governing bodies and associated institutions—has considerable interest in the well-being of children. After all, children are citizens, as are their parents. But children are citizens with different qualities. Children’s developmentally limited capacities for thinking, judgment, and reasoning described earlier mean that children have different needs, capabilities, and circumstances compared with other citizens. This means, consistent with the foregoing arguments, that they require special protections and constraints on their liberty that are not offered other citizens, such as laws governing their economic support; restrictions on child labor, drinking, and driving; protections from sexual exploitation, abandonment, and corrupting influences; and alternative judicial procedures for the treatment of juvenile offenders. Developmental limitations in decision-making and reasoning also mean that, by comparison with adults as “persons” before the law, children have limited autonomy and self-determination, and many decisions (such as consenting to medical treatment and experimentation, and financial decisions) are made on their behalf (Cavanaugh and Cauffman, 2019). Many of these limits on autonomy are developmentally graded, as earlier noted, such that adolescents are legally entitled to exercise greater self-determination (e.g., privileges such as driving; independent judgments in certain circumstances related to medical care; opportunities to work) than are young children.

The state adopts an attitude of *beneficent paternalism* toward its youngest citizens. Such an attitude neither demeans, disadvantages, nor exploits children (as is sometimes claimed by those adopting a liberationist view of children) but instead, by treating children as a “special” citizen group, affords special protections and restrictions suited to children’s unique characteristics and needs. The state’s approach is consistent with the mixed rule-utilitarian perspective we described earlier with respect to the ethical responsibilities of parents because each is based on a developmental orientation to the exercise of external authority in relation to children’s capabilities and needs.

The state’s attitude of beneficent paternalism is deeply rooted in Western philosophical and legal traditions, including the distinction by Hegel (1821/1952) between the obligations of family membership and state citizenship. From these traditions has arisen the doctrine of the state as *parens patriae*—literally, “the state as parent.” Originally intended to protect the state’s interests in the property interests of dependent children, the doctrine indicates that the state may act *in loco parentis* (“in place of the parent”) to protect citizens who are unable to defend their own interests. The *parens patriae* doctrine has become well established in Western law, and is invoked particularly in situations when parents are unwilling, or unable, to protect the interests of offspring (Areen, 1975). In these circumstances and others, the *parens patriae* doctrine can justify removing children from the family and warrant other interventions into family life.

The state has other reasons to be interested in the well-being of its youngest citizens besides their dependency needs. In particular, the maintenance of the community depends on children’s internalization of values that are consistent with public goals and values. These values may derive from the ideals of individualism, equality, competition, and liberty characteristic of the European-American Western tradition, or the ideals of social harmony, collectivism, deference to authority, and cooperation more characteristic of certain Eastern traditions. Children are expected to accept the values, customs, and responsibilities of community life and to acquire the skills necessary to contribute meaningfully to the community. These adaptive skills vary significantly according to historical time and location, but whether they concern mastery of agricultural skills, literary and numeracy skills, or technological competence, they constitute some of the essential capabilities valued for citizenship. Because of the state’s interest in these facets of early socialization, educational institutions outside of the family have become an almost universal feature of childhood (Crosnoe and Ressler, 2019).

The state thus has significant interests in the well-being of its children-citizens and promotes these interests in a variety of ways that intrude on parents’ autonomy to rear children as they wish. In light

of these important state interests, indeed, are families necessary? This is not a casual or unimportant question (Aiken and LaFollette, 1980; Houlgate, 1988). The ideal civic life envisioned in Plato's (1979) *Republic* divorced procreation from childrearing to ensure that children reared communally would internalize the collective values and ideals necessary for social welfare and promote solidarity of interests among those responsible for collective well-being. Advocacy of collective childrearing has been found in various places, from the institutional childcare centers of the old Soviet Union to traditional Israeli *kibbutzim*, and from the Marxist critique of the bourgeois family (Engels, 1884/1962) to B. F. Skinner's (1948) utopian vision of the community of *Walden Two*.

If we claim that families are necessary for children's well-being, however, then describing *why* they are necessary can help to define the unique features of family life that the state should, above all, be hesitant to violate or usurp. In moral philosophy as well as developmental science, three justifications for the family are typically offered (McCarthy, 1988; Wald, 1975).

First, children thrive psychologically in the context of the intimate, unique, and enduring relationships they create with specific caregivers, and these relationships can best be found in family life. This view is a cornerstone of classical psychological theories of early personality development and is supported by a substantial empirical literature (Cummings and Warmuth, 2019; Thompson, 2006). Although families are often rent by separation and divorce, and family intimacy is threatened by stresses of various kinds, it is rare that collective care is capable of providing children with the kinds of warm, specific, reliable relationships with adults who know the child well that are typical in most families (Sagi, van IJzendoorn, Aviezer, Donnell, and Mayseless, 1994). In institutional contexts, turnover of caregivers and high staff caseloads typically militate against children developing enduring, secure attachments to those who care for them.

Second, most parents are highly motivated by the love they naturally feel for offspring to advance children's well-being. Children are precious to them because parents regard offspring as extensions of themselves biologically, socially, and personally, and thus parental nurturance is deeply rooted in species evolution (Trivers, 1985). Although caregivers outside of the family can be motivated by strong affectional ties to the children they care for, their motivational bases for childcare are nevertheless different from those of parents and may not be as compelling.

Third, although they are all cultural members, parents rear their offspring with different values and preferences, which ensures considerable social diversity in childrearing goals and outcomes. One parent seeks to rear her or his child to be conscientious and responsible; another values creativity and imagination; a third seeks to foster individuality and leadership. Within the broad boundaries of acceptable parental conduct, these diverse parental practices ensure plurality in the attributes and characteristics of children that is essential to a democratic society that values and benefits from the diversity of its members. This is what John Stuart Mill (1859/1973, p. 202) called a "plurality of paths":

What has made the European family of nations an improving, instead of a stationary portion of mankind? Not any superior excellence in them, which, when it exists, exists as the effect not as the cause; but their remarkable diversity of character and culture. Individuals, classes, nations, have been extremely unlike one another: they have struck out a great variety of paths, each leading to something valuable.

By contrast with the consistency in practices and goals that would necessarily characterize collective forms of childrearing, families afford societal pluralism in child outcomes that is a desirable feature of a creative, dynamic culture.

These arguments from moral philosophy, supported by the findings of developmental science, confirm the unique contributions that parent-child relationships offer to children and, furthermore, justify special provisions to protect these relationships from outside interference. They underscore that respect for family privacy and parental autonomy in childrearing decisions should be protected

by the same state that has considerable interest in children's well-being and their appropriate socialization. This is because the unique qualities of family life—intimate relationships, individuality, and self-disclosure, a plurality of developmental paths—are violated by undue outside intrusions on the family. As Blustein (1982, p. 214) expressed it, “privacy is a precondition of intimacy.” Stated differently, the state's interest in children's well-being is advanced partly by its protection of family life against unnecessary intrusions from the outside, including intrusions from state authorities who may be motivated by the needs of children. There is thus a delicate balancing between the state's interest in child welfare and the state's interest in family privacy.

This view is the basis for the long-standing legal deference to the preferences of parents in child-rearing decisions. In U.S. Supreme Court decisions beginning nearly a century ago (see *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 1923; *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 1925), the Court has been clear that:

[i]t is cardinal with us that the custody, care and nurture of the child reside first in the parents, whose primary function and freedom include preparation for obligations the state can neither supply nor hinder. . . . And it is in recognition of this that these decisions have respected the private realm of family life which the state cannot enter.

(*Prince v. Massachusetts*, 1944, p. 166)

Absent a compelling state interest, therefore, family life and parental decision-making concerning the care of offspring are protected from the state's intervention. Although this legal tradition and its philosophical foundations are commonly interpreted within a deontological universalist framework of parental rights (often contrasted with children's rights and the “rights” of the state), a more constructive reading focuses on the long-range consequences for human welfare of consequentialist ethical rules protecting family integrity compared to rules permitting substantial intervention by outside authorities. From this mixed rule-utilitarian perspective, children are far more likely to thrive psychologically in families in which parents are permitted significant latitude in their child-rearing practices and goals compared to alternative forms of collective care, and society in general (at least a society embracing democratic values) is also likely to be stronger when family privacy is safeguarded.

Such an analysis does not ensure that all outcomes arising from this ethical perspective will necessarily be easy or satisfactory. The U.S. Supreme Court has, for example, struggled with the implications of its decisions concerning parental autonomy, affirming in one case (*Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 1972) the rights of Amish families to deny secondary school education to their children based on the adults' religious beliefs and community norms, despite a stirring dissent emphasizing the needs of the children for secondary education. Nevertheless, we argue that an ethical rule protecting family integrity and parental autonomy provides the greatest benefits, in the long run, to children, parents, and the society in which they live.

Public and Private Ordering of “the Best Interests of the Child”

Earlier in this chapter, we compared philosophically protectionist, liberationist, and developmentalist perspectives to determining children's best interests in the exercise of parental authority. The state must also make judgments concerning “the best interests of the child,” but for many reasons it is less capable than parents of making the kinds of complex, individualized, multidimensional predictive judgments entailed in assessing children's interests. This is why deference to parental decisions in these situations is also warranted.

The state's judgment concerning a child's best interests is required in many legal decisions. Most commonly, these concern child custody when parents divorce, but grandparent visitation decisions (Thompson, Scalora, Castrianno, and Limber, 1992; Thompson, Tinsley, Scalora, and Parke, 1989) and other situations affecting children also require judgments of the child's best interests. These judgments

differ significantly from the kinds of judgments that judges and other authorities are well trained to provide. Most legal disputes, for example, focus on the documentation of facts. By contrast, judgments concerning children's best interests entail less explicit and more subjective determinations of the relative quality and significance of relationships, the nature of parental care, the impact of different living circumstances, and related concerns. Statutory law, administrative policy, and judicial precedent usually provide significant guidance for legal and policy problems, but none of these is helpful for the individualized decisions required in determining a child's best interests. The latter are person oriented rather than act oriented, are based on knowledge of the individual child's characteristics and the circumstances of particular families, and require complex predictive rather than retrospective judgments involving future well-being rather than past actions. Finally, but perhaps most important, state decision-making in a democratic society typically involves the representation of all relevant parties and opportunities for each to express their views. By contrast, judgments concerning a child's best interests entail the inferred but seldom directly expressed interests of the most important party to the case: the child.

In short, the judgments required in determining a child's best interests are different from those which administrative, judicial, or regulatory authorities of the state are well prepared to provide. Thus, it is unsurprising that most judges report that child custody disputes—in which judgments of children's best interests most commonly occur—are among the most difficult cases to resolve (Whobrey, Sales, and Lou, 1987).

As a consequence, when parents cannot agree on the postdivorce custody of their offspring and turn to the court for a resolution, judges often rely on their own value preferences and intuitive judgments of the determinants of a child's future well-being (Mnookin, 1975, 2014). For example, some judges simply adhere to the traditional maternal presumption that had previously guided custody decisions—especially with younger children—despite the intended gender neutrality of the best-interests standard (Lowery, 1981; Thompson and Wyatt, 1999). Others may use different criteria, such as judgments of each parent's disciplinary style, warmth, or personality characteristics, as well as their relative earning power, residence, and future plans as the basis for their judgment, which means that the same family circumstances evaluated by two different judges may result in different outcomes (Chambers, 1984; Mnookin, 1975, 2014). This is contrary to justice principles, and in a society that accords parents considerable latitude in their styles of care and discipline, these criteria may inappropriately penalize parents when child custody decisions are made. Moreover, Mnookin (1974, 1975) and other scholars (Emery, Otto, and O'Donohue, 2005) have claimed that the expert testimony of forensic psychologists or developmental scientists rarely adds clarity to child custody decisions, given how difficult it is to make precise predictions of individual development. Perhaps this is why expert witnesses can typically be found on both sides of a custody dispute.

Even when statutory language more explicitly defines the basis for determining a child's best interests, significant problems remain in the application of these standards. For example, a legal presumption long advocated by legal scholars and social scientists is to award custody to a fit parent who is the child's "primary caretaker" (Chambers, 1984; Maccoby, 1995, 1999). By ensuring the child's continuing contact with the parent who has assumed the predominant role in parenting, it is argued, courts can reliably advance a child's best interests. Although this approach has the appeal of providing a straightforward, valid, and readily evaluated means of distinguishing parenting roles, it is nevertheless often difficult to define the varied responsibilities of parenting and their evolving relevance to children's changing developmental needs to determine who is the "primary caretaker" (Thompson, 1986, 1994). Physical care, play, instruction, gender socialization, academic encouragement, role modeling, and other responsibilities of parenting vary in their significance as children mature. Furthermore, determining who is the child's "primary caretaker" is a retrospective approach to a prospective determination: The parent who assumed a predominant role in childrearing in the intact, predivorce family when children were younger may or may not be the best caregiver as a single parent as children mature (Thompson and Wyatt, 1999).

Indeed, because postdivorce family life changes over time, it is unclear how well a custody judgment made by a court when parents divorce can ensure the future well-being of offspring. After parents divorce, children often change residence as parental circumstances change (including changing jobs and remarriage) and as children's needs evolve, and these often provoke other changes in visitation and child support arrangements (Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992). Increasingly families find that courtroom decisions made at the time of a divorce settlement do not accommodate the rapidly changing life circumstances of all family members in postdivorce life.

Parents are, of course, accustomed to making judgments of their children's best interests. They know their children well and are experienced with the kinds of complex considerations involved in planning for the child's future. Perhaps, therefore, the best role for the state in child custody disputes is to provide opportunities, incentives, and structure to foster parents' own decisions about postdivorce parenting responsibilities and their continued responsibility for children's well-being (Emery and Emery, 2014). Even if parents appeal to the state to decide a custody dispute that they have been unable to resolve, the judicial system may nevertheless insist on the private ordering of a decision that parents, not the state, are best capable of making. This judicial insistence can occur through mandatory mediation with a skilled counselor who can lead parents through the decision-making needed to thoughtfully plan postdivorce life for themselves and their children (Emery, 2011). It can also consist of the requirement that adults negotiate a parenting plan that identifies the responsibilities of each parent for maintaining a meaningful relationship with children, providing financial support, and renegotiating other aspects of postdivorce life with the former spouse as family circumstances change (Warshak, 2014).

At the same time, the state can also create new ways to guide divorcing parents' thinking about custody issues to help parents more thoughtfully "bargain in the shadow of the law" as they jointly plan postdivorce family life (Mnookin and Kornhauser, 1979). "Bargaining in the shadow of the law" recognizes that legal regulations are important in defining the options and opportunities within which family members negotiate, even if they never bring their dispute to a courtroom. Legal guidelines provide parameters for parental negotiations because each parent can estimate his or her chances of success if the dispute goes to court. The increase in joint legal custody and joint physical custody awards by the courts in the United States, for example, has given parents more to consider besides the "winner take all" orientation of past custody decisions in which one becomes the custodial parent and the other enters into a visiting relationship with the child. Joint legal and/or physical custody provide a better structure for both parents to anticipate meaningful roles in the child's life (Thompson and Wyatt, 1999), and provisions for joint custody are nearly universal in the United States. As a second illustration, the American Law Institute (2002) proposed custody guidelines by which parents would each have postdivorce custody of the child in rough approximation to the portion of time each parent spent in caregiving activities with the child before separation (based on an earlier proposal by Scott, 1992), and this recommendation has also influenced custody decisions in many states (Bartlett, 2014). This approach enables each parent to assume a custodial role, and advocates in psychology and law have argued that it is clearer and more precise than the best-interests standard (Bartlett, 2014; Emery et al., 2005), whereas others believe that it is likely to provide misleading guidance to judges and parents (Riggs, 2005; Warshak, 2007). Finally, a third example of how changing legal standards alter parents' "bargaining in the shadow of the law" is the increase in child support enforcement, beginning in the 1990s, that significantly improved many fathers' postdivorce financial support of their children (Meyer, 1999). These provisions collectively remind parents that although divorce may end a marriage, it doesn't end their responsibilities to children.

This discussion of the public and private ordering of "the best interests of the child" illustrates the formal and informal ways that the state, through legal rules and regulations, can strive to enhance ethical parenting, even when parents are stressed by the end of their marriage. Legislatures and courts have introduced new provisions that explicitly encourage both parents to remain committed to their

children's well-being after divorce through meaningful care, financial support, and other ordering of postdivorce life with procedures that require them to negotiate and plan for the future. These changes in family law also illustrate the need for periodic revision in legal rules and continued flexibility in their application to accommodate changes in family life, particularly related to the changes that have occurred in recent years in parental roles and parent-child relationships (Lansford, 2009). Finally, this discussion also illustrates the influence of developmental science on the knowledge that legal authorities use when creating new standards and their application. In view of how typical modes of legal analysis are unhelpful to the individualized, complex, predictive judgments involved in a custody decision, developmental science can help frame these judgments in ways that are empirical rather than intuitive and take into account evidence of family processes and children's development and the consequences of alternative custody arrangements. We shall later return to this theme.

State Intervention into Family Life

Our discussion thus far has focused on ethical rules governing the relations between the state and parents that best foster children's well-being. Our conclusion underscores an irony in public policy. The state has strong interests in ensuring the character development, competence, and well-being of its youngest citizens, but in doing so it must respect the boundaries of family privacy and parental autonomy that constitute the cornerstones of the child's psychological development. Consequently, the state's coercive power over the family must be secondary to the support, incentives, and structure it provides to enable parents to make wise choices on behalf of children while accepting the risk that, so long as parental decisions do not exceed clear thresholds of child harm, those choices may not always be optimal for the child's interests. Nevertheless, in recognizing that family privacy and integrity ultimately create the greatest benefits for children, parents, and society, the state's efforts to promote ethical parenting in family life are primarily a matter of enablement, not coercion.

Family privacy and parental autonomy are not, of course, ends in themselves. They are means to the ultimate objective of advancing children's well-being. As John Locke (1690/1965, Treatise 2, sec. 58) argued,

the Power . . . that Parents have over their Children, arises from that Duty which is incumbent on them, to take care of their Offspring, during the imperfect state of Childhood.

Because parental rights arise from the performance of parental duties to children, parental rights erode when parents fail to fulfill their legitimate obligations toward offspring (see Blustein, 1982). No parents who are manifestly abusive or neglectful, for example, can expect that the boundaries of family privacy will remain respected by a community that is concerned about children's well-being. The same Supreme Court that has long deferred to parental preferences in childrearing decisions has also declared that parents are not "free . . . to make martyrs of their children" (*Prince v. Massachusetts*, 1944, p. 170). Although our discussion has focused on defining the boundaries beyond which the state cannot normally intrude into family life, there are circumstances in which the state *must* intervene. This section of our discussion is devoted to considering the nature of those conditions and their relevance to ethical parenting.

There are several circumstances in which the state can legitimately intervene into family life (Wald, 1985). One is when the family itself is disrupted, such as by separation, divorce, or other circumstances that make it impossible for preexisting family relationships to be maintained. In these situations, the state must ensure that the renegotiation of family resources and relationships ensures fairness to all family members, especially to children. Even when state authorities strongly encourage the private ordering of these arrangements, parental decisions are regulated in light of laws in whose shadow parents conduct their negotiations, and in light of the judicial judgments required to ratify parents' decisions.

Another circumstance warranting the state's intervention into family life is when there are threats to the health, safety, or well-being of children, which is the state's most important commitment to ensuring ethical parenting. This is both a negative obligation—ensuring that children are not harmed—and a positive obligation—ensuring that children receive adequate care and training to become productive members of society. The state may intervene in these circumstances to protect children and remediate their harm, correct parental misconduct, and/or express the consensual value preferences of the community through punitive action. Thus, the ethical obligations of the state's intervention into family life are both specific (e.g., ending a child's physical abuse and preventing its recurrence) and broad (e.g., prosecuting child sexual exploitation as inappropriate adult conduct, regardless of its specific harms to children).

How should the state define the conditions warranting its coercive intervention into family life? The tasks of defining in specific terms the assurance that children are “not harmed” and that they “receive adequate care and training” are challenging because of the varieties of harms that children can experience, the varieties of care that they require, and the need to balance the risks and benefits that children derive when state authorities intervene into family life to protect them. The latter is a particularly important consideration from a utilitarian analysis. When authorities intervene into the family because of a report of suspected child maltreatment, for example, there is an upheaval in the child's life that can have long-term consequences (Thompson, 1993). At the most extreme, children who are rescued from physically or sexually abusive homes are placed in a temporary foster home for an indefinite period, with periodic transitions to other temporary arrangements if a permanent placement is unavailable or cannot be negotiated, or if family reunification cannot be achieved (Mnookin, 1974). Even if the child remains in the home as social services are provided to address family problems, the child has become the locus of family disruption that alters family relationships significantly.

Thus, the costs as well as the potential benefits to children of state intervention into family life are important to consider. An additional consideration is research raising considerable doubt that foster care, social services, or the other interventions typically provided by child protection agencies can effectively alter the family problems that led to maltreatment or can ensure the child's future well-being, especially given the limited resources of social service agencies in the face of growing numbers of reports of child abuse or neglect (Huntington, 2014; U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1990). Indeed, for children who are left for years in temporary foster care placements or who remain in severely troubled families that receive inadequate services, the important question is whether they are helped or hindered by the intervention of state authorities. The troubling ethical problem governing state intervention into family life for purposes of child protection, therefore, is defining the forms of child harm that are sufficiently severe that, on balance, the actions of state authorities are likely to yield greater benefit than harm to children.

Moreover, principles of justice require further that the standards for state intervention in family life are sufficiently clear and explicit such that there is no doubt about the parental conduct warranting intrusion into family life. This ensures that parents have fair warning of legally prohibited behavior and guards against subjective, potentially arbitrary legal judgments about what conduct is abusive or not. Consequently, a rule-utilitarian analysis favors narrowly conceived, explicit standards governing state intervention into family life, with an emphasis on evidence of child harm resulting from parental practices. Doing so ensures that a high threshold for intervention is maintained and, consistent with the costs and benefits that must be considered in permitting state intervention into family life, focuses on the consequences to the child. One such standard was proposed by Wald (1982, p. 11):

[C]oercive intervention should be permissible only when a child has suffered or is likely to suffer serious physical injury as a result of abuse or inadequate care; when a child is suffering from severe emotional damage and his or her parents are unwilling to deal with the problems without coercive intervention; when a child has been sexually abused; when a child is

suffering from a serious medical condition and his or her parents are unwilling to provide him with suitable medical treatment; or when a child is committing delinquent acts at the urging or with the help of his or her parents.

Although Wald's standard may be unduly narrow in some respects (for example, it excludes neglect due to inadequate nutrition, clothing, shelter, or supervision), it reflects the emphasis on narrowly defined, clear, and child-centered standards that we believe are supported by the mixed rule-utilitarian analysis of this discussion.

Are there other forms of parental misconduct warranting concern by state authorities? Parents may be psychologically abusive to offspring, for example, by their threats, denigration, isolation, or exploitation of their children. Some have argued that state authorities should intervene into such families to protect children's emotional well-being (Hart, Germain, and Brassard, 1987; McGee and Wolfe, 1991). Consideration of the risks and benefits of doing so, however, reveals several difficulties (Melton and Thompson, 1987; Thompson and Jacobs, 1991). The first concerns the lack of clarity of the standard for intervention with terms like "exploiting" and "isolating" children. Can a parent who requires children to help with farm chores expect to be accused of "exploiting" the child? Is homeschooling an example of "isolating" a child? In these and other situations, there is insufficient clarity concerning what constitutes psychological maltreatment to ensure that judges will be guided by well-defined legal guidelines. Second, by contrast with other standards of child maltreatment that focus on child harms, most standards of psychological maltreatment focus on parental behavior rather than child outcomes. But doing so is the wrong focus because the complex effects of parental conduct on children are moderated by the child's temperament, the behavior of the other parent, and other family processes. Finally, because the intervention of state authorities into family life is itself psychologically threatening to children, it is important to weigh these potential costs to children against the expected benefits achieved by actions intended to combat psychological maltreatment. For many children, the costs of intervention are unlikely to outweigh its benefits.

The troubling ethical dilemma for state intervention for child protection is defining the forms of child harm that are sufficiently severe that the actions of state authorities are likely to yield greater benefits than harm to children. Narrow definitions of child harm curb the risk of excessive or arbitrary intrusions into family life, but they also reflect limitations in the state's capacity to provide benefits for children in difficulty so that interventions are focused on the children in greatest peril. As we note in the following section, there are many ways that the state is capable of providing non-coercive family assistance, even to the most troubled families (Baumrind, 1995), and intervention science continues to generate a larger variety of evidence-based programs for parents who need help (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). But the resources of child protection agencies are typically so meager that effective interventions to provide family support cannot readily be mobilized on behalf of children (Huntington, 2014). Viewed in this light, the capacity of the state to support ethical parenting is contingent on the state devoting the resources and generating the will to act ethically on behalf of the dependent children who are also its citizens by providing the resources necessary to its *parens patriae* responsibilities. Adequate resources devoted to the maintenance of an effective, child-focused foster care system, and the implementation of evidence-based programs to improve the parenting skills of troubled adults, would seem to be at the core of the state's ethical responsibility. At present, those conditions do not exist in most jurisdictions of the United States..

Family Assistance

One conclusion arising from the preceding analysis is that although the state has a significant responsibility to support ethical parenting, the authority of the state is a very blunt instrument for doing so. There are, however, other ways the state influences family life apart from its coercive or punitive

power. The state orders relationships within the family (and assists when these relationships must be reordered, such as in divorce), regulates the institutions affecting family members, provides enablements that support parents in their caregiving functions, creates institutions (such as schools and public health programs) that directly support children, and constructs out-of-home and in-home forms of assistance when families are troubled. The state also has an expressive function by which, through formal and informal avenues, it conveys beliefs and expectations about children and families that both reflect and instantiate changing social values. In many respects, the most important ways the state promotes ethical parenting is through these supportive, provisioning, enabling functions, even though they are often the least recognized forms of state intervention.

Legal and regulatory authorities help to order family life, for example, by defining the roles and responsibilities of family members, such as in statutes governing marriage, parenting, procreation, adoption, child custody, and defining the obligations (including financial responsibilities) of spouses and parents. These statutes help to ensure that the reciprocal obligations of adults are clearly understood as they enter into family relationships and that their responsibilities to children are fulfilled. As in the case of parental divorce, moreover, the state is mandated to intervene to help family members reorder their relationships and responsibilities when the family is disrupted, especially to ensure that children's needs are safeguarded. In addition, state regulation of institutions affecting children, such as pediatric practices and childcare programs, help to ensure the safety and health of those who attend. Perhaps the most important indication of how the state benefits children and families is public education. Indeed, mandatory education requirements are perhaps the most coercive state regulation on family life because parents are compelled to attend to the education of their children—most often to comply with compulsory school attendance—for a sustained period throughout childhood and adolescence. Yet the inherent coerciveness of this regulation is not apparent to most families because public education has become institutionalized in national culture and worldwide, and because of the clear benefits of school attendance for most children.

There are other noncoercive avenues by which the state assists families. The state provides enablements that make it easier for parents to fulfill their responsibilities to children. Many enablements in the United States, for example, are direct financial subsidies, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), the Child Tax Credit, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Some are nutritional supports, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), and the national school lunch program. The Affordable Care Act significantly expanded the range of health care supports available to children and families, and was preceded by the Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Housing programs also provide vouchers and other kinds of assistance. Finally, a range of educational enablements, beginning with the family-based Early Head Start and Head Start programs, are either targeted to the most needy children and families or (as in public education programs) are universally available. This list only focuses on programs of the U.S. federal government, and many states and localities in the United States supplement these with other forms of family support. In addition, through the financial incentives it offers businesses, the state can encourage the development of workplace practices (such as family leave) that make it easier for adults to be better parents, and it can provide economic assistance to childcare programs that are willing to invest significantly in improved facilities, teacher training, and developmentally appropriate programs. In these and many other ways, the state strengthens the support and resources that parents can enlist as they provide nurturing environments for children.

This portrayal of a broad range of supportive forms of family assistance starkly contrasts with the limited coercive latitude of the state for regulating family life. It suggests that although the state can do little to compel parents to do good for their children, and the grounds for state intervention are narrowly tailored to address only the most serious forms of child harm, there are many avenues by which the state can enable and provision parents to do better for their children. These forms of state

“intervention” into family life are often overlooked because they are incorporated into the fabric of family life and are noncoercive, so they are readily accepted. But these may be the most significant avenues by which the state supports ethical parenting.

In the end, moreover, the hortatory power of the state should not be overlooked. The values that are explicitly recognized in the formal and informal regulations influencing family life, and which the state implements in its provisions for the family, speak volumes. This is because legal, administrative, and regulatory reforms not only reflect the changes that occur in family life and help to express and institutionalize those changes. The expressive function of laws affecting families (Bartlett, 1988) is reflected, for example, in divorce and custody statutory reform that implicitly encourages parents to recognize that although they may end a marriage, they can never end their responsibilities as parents. The law’s expressive function is reflected in changes in child protection laws that are increasingly and explicitly child-focused in their assessments of the harms of parental conduct and the remedies the state can implement. The expressive function of the law is most broadly revealed in the extent to which the state either regards children as a liability and a burden or as a social resource of shared responsibility.

Conclusions

The ethics of parenting begin, we have argued, with the assumption of responsibility for children by parents. Although parents do not alone have responsibility for the welfare of children—the state, as we have seen, also has important obligations to children—parental responsibilities are first and foremost. Within our mixed rule-utilitarian, developmentalist framework, children and adults have complementary, not equal, rights that arise from their very different capabilities and the mutual obligations they share within the family. A child’s right to self-determination is limited, for example, by the exercise of parental authority that functions legitimately to promote the healthy development of offspring. We have described the parental responsibilities that legitimize the exercise of parental authority, particularly the adult practices that shape the development of character and competence in children. As children mature and acquire more mature capacities for reasoning, judgment, and self-control, their autonomy increases and parenting responsibilities subside, consistent with a developmental orientation to understanding children’s best interests. We argue that a developmental orientation is preferable to either liberationist or protectionist approaches because it recognizes the changing mutual obligations shared by parents and children with the growth of children’s competencies and judgment.

Our theory of ethical parenting underscores that responsible parenting is not solely a family obligation but a responsibility shared by the community. The community’s values, resources, and social supports make it easier (or more difficult) for parents to fulfill their responsibilities to offspring, and we have focused on the role of the state, and of public policy, in fostering ethical parenting. Our analysis has highlighted that the state has significant interests in the well-being of its youngest citizens, but that in most cases it promotes children’s welfare best by respecting family privacy and parental autonomy in childrearing decisions. From a consequentialist perspective, respect for parental autonomy protects the features of family life that contribute to children’s well-being and minimizes unnecessary intrusions into family life that can undermine children, even when motivated to advance their best interests. Consequently, we have advocated limited, clear standards warranting the state’s coercive intervention into the family to protect children’s physical and emotional well-being and emphasized the value of the support, resources, and structure the state can provide parents to make their own wise decisions on behalf of offspring. This is because coercive public policy is a very blunt instrument for altering family life, and thus the state can most effectively assist children through incentives rather than coercion.

Our analysis of the ethics of parenting has drawn on classic and modern ideas within moral and political philosophy, ethical theory, and developmental science. We close with additional comments about the latter, because we are each developmental scientists. The integration of developmental research into arguments drawn from ethics and moral philosophy shows that scientists, whether

applied or not, have an important contribution to offer in supporting ethical parenting. Fallible and necessarily limited as our knowledge is, we believe that developmental scientists should and do contribute to the resolution of ethically saturated disputes about what constitutes a child's best interests by providing relevant information about the probable psychological and social consequences of contrasting social policies. In doing so, however, the information provided must be unbiased and based on firm empirical evidence. Scientists have a responsibility not only to contribute to public discourse in their professional roles but also to base their recommendations on scientifically derived knowledge.

Scientific knowledge is distinguished from ordinary knowledge by the systematic use of procedures that protect against bias due to personal values, conformity to received wisdom, or misleading surplus meaning in the measurement of theoretical constructs. The scientific method is intended to provide information that is systematic, public, and replicable. Critical thinking instilled by scientific training consists of asking the right questions and asking them in the right way. Consensual rules of objectivity, exemplified by the double-blind experiment, were formulated to protect against subliminal as well as intentional confirmatory biases. Hypotheses make explicit investigators' partiality or research biases so that they may then attempt to probe, not prove, their hypotheses. When policymakers consult with social scientists in an effort to better inform their legislative or judicial efforts to address social problems, they assume that the social scientists whom they consult are objective, impartial reporters of their own and others' findings rather than intentionally biased advocates, motivated by self-interest or a political cause.

Robert Merton (1973) articulated four norms of science that are widely accepted by scientists (Koehler, 1993) and laypersons. Merton's norms require scientific information to be (1) publicly shared; (2) judged by objective rather than personal criteria; (3) unbiased by personal values or interests; and (4) available to the scientific community to scrutinize through established procedures of peer review, replication, and challenges by rival hypotheses. Unlike lawyers or politicians, research scientists may not ethically suppress disconfirming data and must acknowledge the existence of alternative hypotheses and explanations of their findings, as well as the degree of certainty that should be attached to their findings. However well intentioned, biased interpretation of research results by social scientists undermines public trust in our perceived objectivity and impartiality, and thus our capacity to contribute to ethical parenting (MacCoun, 1998; Thompson and Nelson, 2001).

Public debates about the nature and consequences of parenting, and policymaking affecting families, require the thoughtful and informed contributions of scientific experts. Because of their unique expertise, developmental scientists are well qualified to transform scientific knowledge into "usable knowledge" that is thoughtfully and responsibly relevant to the public questions under discussion, including those discussed here related to ethical parenting (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979; Thompson, 1993).

Ethical parenting is the responsibility of parents and the state, and of developmental scientists who seek to understand family life. By appreciating the unique roles and responsibilities of each partner for advancing children's well-being, adults offer children the best opportunities to develop the character and competence that lead to successful adult life.

Note

- 1 Diana Baumrind's passing as this chapter was being completed brought to an end a rich collaboration that I valued, and in which many elements of Diana's lifetime contributions were brought together: a generative program of research on parenting, a deep commitment to the highest ethical values, especially in research and its applications, and a view of families in cultural, community, and policy contexts. She will be missed.

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