

Giving as well as Receiving: Love, Children, and Parents

AMY MULLIN, *University of Toronto*

Loving relationships between parents and young children are undeniably important to many, perhaps most, people, and yet they are not subject to much philosophical analysis. Most often when love is analyzed, it is love between adults (especially friendship and romantic love) that is considered.¹ Relationships between parents and young children (children young enough to need ongoing extensive care) tend to be understood, both in occasional philosophical discussion and in contemporary popular culture,² as relationships in which loving parents strive, or ought to strive, to meet children's needs, and in which loving children appreciate, or ought to appreciate, having their needs met.³ This understanding is one in which relationships between young children and their parents are seen as dominantly or exclusively vertical (with parents operating at a level above and quite distinct from that of their children, because of their power and authority, on the one hand, and children's dependency and vulnerability on the other hand). Children are thought to receive, rather than also sharing and giving, and parents to give, rather than also sharing and receiving.⁴

It is my contention that this understanding is inaccurate as a description of loving relationships between parents and children. To support my claim, I look briefly at some empirical research in psychology which emphasizes the existence of horizontal aspects to many such relationships, and also appeal to readers to make and recall their own observations, if they are able to free themselves from the dominant paradigm which emphasizes verticality. Second, I will argue that to the extent that ideals rather than descriptions of such relationships are involved, the ideals are incomplete and one-sided in that they do not respect children's need and ability to give love and care, and parents need to receive them from their children. They also ignore elements of mutuality and sharing which are and should be another important horizontal aspect of such relationships.

I take relationships between parents and young children seriously enough to try to provide a philosophical analysis of them, rather than taking them for granted. Within feminist theory, care ethics has taken caring relationships seriously, and there has also been important work done on mothering (Collins, DiQuinzio, Held, Ruddick, the 2006 *Hypatia* special issue on Maternal Bodies, among others), but much of this research has emphasized the perspective of the parent or caregiver. I

seek to supplement this work by thinking about these relationships also from the point of view of the child.

Dominantly vertical models of loving relationships between parents and young children make it difficult to understand what love in this context is supposed to mean, since the love of children for parents and the love of parents for children are taken to be such very different phenomena that it is difficult to understand why we might think of both as instances of some wider genus. I therefore begin by seeking to identify a particular kind of loving relationship which involves contributions from both parents and children. I situate this in the context of a broader account of love, including love for things other than people.

The first part of my essay is devoted to conceptual analysis, description, and evidence. I proceed in the second part to discuss normative aspects of this understanding of relationships between parents and young children. I indicate four criteria which should be used to evaluate these kinds of relationships. The evaluations might be undertaken by people within such relationships, by outsiders looking in, or by people considering what types of relationship should be encouraged or discouraged by a variety of means. The four criteria involve (1) issues about the impact of the relationship on children, a frequent focus of care ethics accounts, as well as of mainstream sociological and psychological interest in the relationships (Bronfenbrenner); (2) concerns about the impact of the relationship on the parents, concerns raised sometimes as criticisms of care ethics, (Davion), and sometimes within care ethics; (3) questions about the moral value of the relationship for both parties (rather than questions about the benefits or burdens received as a result of it); and (4) questions about the impact of the relationship on other parties. We get a clearer account of these four criteria when we have a clearer account of the nature of the phenomena at stake, loving relationships between children and parents. I turn now to this task.

Loving Relationships between Parents and Children: Conceptual Analysis and Description

In order to understand loving relationships between parents and children, we first need to reach an understanding of the phenomena of love more broadly speaking. Inspired by Frankfurt's later work, I understand love to be neither an emotion (contra Brown and Halwani) nor a desire (contra Hahn) or attitude (contra Velleman), but a feature of our volitional nature—a matter of what is important to us, or what we care about, with love being what we care about deeply. That we stably

choose something when it is offered to us is enough to indicate that we desire it, but is not enough to indicate that we care about it. We can care deeply about things because we hate or dislike them or we can care deeply about things because we like or love them. What distinguishes the two is whether our attitude towards the object is positive or negative (we wish it to do well or to do badly). When I speak in the remainder of this essay about caring deeply about something, I will do so as shorthand for caring deeply in this positive way.

When we love, we are willing to suppress other inclinations in the service of love—although not all other inclinations, for we may (and ideally will) love several different things and people. When we love we may not always succeed in suppressing more immediate and conflicting impulses, but repeated failure to suppress conflicting impulses is a mark that love is not present. Whether something is a stable feature of our will is not always easily detectable, by ourselves or by others, without the opportunity to make observations over a considerable period of time.

What we love will be manifested in what we notice (things relevant to what we love tend to be salient), what we attend to once we notice it (we are able to continue to attend to things that concern what we love), what we do (we take action to benefit or avoid harming what we love), what we plan, and what we feel. Loving will affect our emotions, because our emotions register what is important to us (Nussbaum, among others), but it is not itself an emotion, either occurrent or dispositional. Loving will manifest itself in many different emotions, depending on what we believe or think (without having a belief we would endorse) about the object of our love. Thinking or believing that all is going well with it will register in contentment, that it is in threat will register in fear, that we have lost it will register in grief or despair, that something might be about to go very well with it will register in hope, that we have harmed it will manifest in guilt, that things are going extremely well or even better than expected with it, will lead us to feel joy.

We can love things that are not people (such as causes, ideals, activities, and objects), but in this essay I am concerned with love for people. We can also love a person in a way that does not reflect the fact that she is a person; we may love her simply for her beauty or because we find her entertaining. If we love a person as a person, then we love her as someone who has interests, a point of view, and a personality. We can also love a person, as a person, without being in a relationship with her. A fan may love someone famous, a shy person may love someone at a distance without interacting with the beloved, a biological parent may love a child given up for adoption, even if he has promised not to

interact with or contact the child. However, in all of these cases we should not consider the love to be for a person as a person, unless there is some knowledge of and attachment to the interests, point of view, and personality of the beloved.

I am interested in a particular species of love between people, and that is love in which, first, both parties love one another, second, they repeatedly and intimately interact with one another, and third, their relationship reveals that each responds to the other as a person with interests and a point of view (rather than viewing the other as an object to be admired or a replaceable means of achieving satisfaction). As I have argued elsewhere,⁵ in order to be able to respond to a person as a person, we need not have the concept of a person or be able to articulate what the other's interests and point of view involve. Therefore even quite young children, if they are able to respond emotionally to the other party in a relationship with them, and to show that they care about what the other wants and how the other interprets situations, are able to relate to the person as a person.

Love between parents and young children can therefore include children as young as two or three (depending on the abilities of the child). But who counts as a parent, for the purposes of my interest in relationships between parents and children? A parent is someone who (a) has repeated interactions over a long time horizon with a child, (b) takes him- or herself and is taken by others to have some significant responsibility for the care of the child, and (c) whose interactions with the child are aimed at least in part at the ongoing care and development of the child. Obviously many biological parents, both those who never interact with a child and those who interact rarely or even frequently but without any responsibility for the child's welfare, do not have the kind of parent-child relationship I am interested in investigating. Someone who meets a child once a month to have ice cream, even if she loves the child as a person, is not in the kind of relationship I wish to identify and evaluate. Perhaps less obviously, someone who is paid to care for a child, but who has significant responsibility for the child's well being, repeatedly interacts with her, and is in a relationship expected to be long-term, could well be in the kind of relationship with which I am concerned.

Similarly, people identified by Bailey and Collins as "othermothers" (sometimes biological kin to the child, sometimes not, but people who take on some ongoing shared responsibility as caregivers) could also be in the kind of parent-child relationship that interests me. This would be the case if both the child and the caregiver (whether the caregiver is

paid or not, biologically related or not, given the status of parent by the law or not) care for each other as persons for a significant period of time, long enough to have and care about having close knowledge of and repeated intimate interactions with one another. In the kind of loving relationship that is at stake in this essay, both the caregiver and the child take one another's interests seriously (where this need not mean in all cases taking one another's expressed desires seriously, depending on when the desires are taken to clash with the interests). In what remains of this essay, I shall use "parent" in the way stipulated here.

Typically, relationships between parents and children involve provision on the part of parents of physical care for the child. However, as I have argued elsewhere,⁶ experiences of parents with significant physical disabilities show that this is only typical and not essential to the kind of relationship that interests me. There are different ways in which we can take on long-term responsibility for the well being of a child. So long as those ways include repeated intimate interactions with the child, aimed in part at the child's care and development, undertaken by someone who cares both for and about the child, then the caregiver would be a parent, and be a candidate for the kind of relationship discussed here.

What determines whether such a relationship had been achieved would be in addition the nature of the activity of the child in relationship to the caregiver. In order for any relationship to count as a loving relationship between parent and child, the child must be an active participant. Both the child and the adult must care about the other person as a person, and take some interest in the well being of the one loved. In order to do this, both must trust one another enough to disclose their interests and their perspective (again, this need not be done verbally, and very often is not). Both must have close knowledge of one another (this need not always be entirely accurate, but when it is widely inaccurate, no loving relationship exists). Each must find the other's interests, and the relationship that they share, to be important (and the interests must usually be given positive weight, as opposed to regularly being seen as something to frustrate or oppose).

Do we have evidence that relationships such as those I have described above actually exist between young children and their long-term caregivers? Laible and Thompson (2000) present evidence of conscience in young children, typically directed at their intimate caregivers, as well as shared positive affect between mothers and very young children. Crockenberg and Litman (1990) argue that many parents show respect for a two year old child's autonomy and individuality and that this encourages competent behavior from their toddlers (970). Kuczynski and

Kochanska (1995) show that many parents support their children's efforts to regulate their behavior to accord with their own goals (rather than parent's goals) when the children are from one and a half to three and half years old and that these children are more socially and personally competent at age five than peers who were not so supported. Hastings and Grusec (1998) argue that parents who maintain a positive parent-child relationship are willing to accept partial compliance with the parent's wishes, rather than maintaining a strictly vertical relationship. Zahn-Waxler et al. (1992) show that children demonstrate cooperative behavior, empathy, and seek to make amends when they have wronged others, particularly their mothers, when they are in the second year of life. Thompson finds evidence that "even infants and toddlers are neither indifferent to the emotional experiences of others nor incapable of understanding them" (135). He continues to note that some styles of child-rearing are more likely to nurture pro-social and empathic responses from young children than others. Kochanska demonstrates that children aged two to four and a half can control or inhibit impulses and that this ability is linked to children's participation in mutually responsive relationships with their parents, characterized by give and take, taking one another's perspective, and commitment to the relationship (very close to the way I have defined love).

In addition to this brief survey of relatively recent work in psychology, I ask readers to seek to free themselves from the effects of the dominantly vertical paradigm of relationships between parents and young children, and seek to observe or recall the presence of horizontal aspects of such relationships. As Sally Haslanger has pointed out (2005), social categories tend to operate with paradigms, and these paradigms (such as the paradigm of a vertical relationship between parents and young children) tend to prevent us from recognizing the appearance of features which do not conform to them. However, critical reflection has the ability to get us to become aware of this tendency, and to look for and recall aspects of reality which lie outside the paradigm. While many of us might no longer remember relationships we had with others when we were young children, far more of us are in a position to reflect on and attend to relationships we have now, or have had recently, and to look for horizontal aspects of such relationships, including aspects of sharing and mutuality, as well as instances of young children giving to their parents and other long-term caregivers.

Evaluating Loving Relationships between Parents and Children

When such relationships exist, how should we think about their worth, and who should be doing this kind of thinking? Should we encourage people in such relationships to evaluate them? Frankfurt argues that the love of parents for their children is an example of what he calls unconditional love, meaning that "the beloved is loved for its own sake rather than for its utility or for the sake of any other of its characteristics," and adds that this is a matter of "loving without reasons" (Frankfurt 2005, 220). His view of love is "not necessarily linked to any judgment or appreciation of its object" (219), and I think he is right that we can love without making any such judgment.

Here it may be useful to draw a distinction between two ways in which we might be said to value something: we can say that we value it as a way of saying that we find it very important, or care about it, and we can say that we value it as a way of saying that we find it to be objectively or comparatively worthwhile. The two can certainly come apart, in that we may care about what we deem to have little objective worth, and we can fail to care about what we deem to have great comparative worth. While we certainly can love without being able to give the reasons why we love, our love will be more stable when there are reasons for it, for instance when our loving meets important needs that we have, and even more stable when there are in addition no compelling reasons not to love (as there would be when our love jeopardizes our health and happiness, or has other bad consequences). Therefore it can be a support to love's continuance if there are reasons why our love is not only personally valuable to us, but also can be said to be comparatively worthwhile.

While Frankfurt argues that love is not based on reasons, he says nothing opposed to our evaluating our own loves in times of crisis, or evaluating other people's loves in order to decide whether we should support them. Edyvane, by contrast, argues that love not only permits but actually requires justification. He suggests that when we love another person we owe it to him or her to justify our love, by developing a reasoned appreciation of the worth of the beloved. He claims that it is important that we justify our loves in order to avoid wasting our lives on beloveds who are not worthy (69) and because when we are loved "we want to know that there exist reasons that can render this person's love for us intelligible to others." (70) He continues: "I submit that most of us would like to think that when a person declares her love for us, she is also implicitly declaring her sincere belief that it would in principle be

possible to provide some account of why we are worthy of that love" (72). It is an "act of loving devotion" to seek to give an objective account of the worth of our beloved (73).

Although, as suggested above, I do not think that love is necessarily inimical to evaluation, neither explicit nor implicit evaluation is required when all is going well, and the love does not frustrate or clash with other things or people who are loved. Moreover, Edyvane is mistaken when he urges us to give reasons for our love based on features of the beloved alone. When we are talking about the value of a loving relationship we can evaluate the relationship itself, what it accomplishes, and how both parties contribute to it, rather than solely attempting to justify the relationship based on the objective worth of the beloved.

If we are to evaluate a loving relationship between parent and child, how should we attempt to do so? We must go beyond the typical emphasis on the value of the relationship to the child. We must in addition assess the value of the relationship to the parent, and recognize that the love of a parent for a child can involve both horizontal and vertical aspects. When we evaluate, we should focus on factors that involve the effects of the relationship on each party, and on factors that concern the value of the relationship to each. Finally, we need to think about its impact on people and things outside it.

When we consider the impact of loving relationships on children we should attend to the value to children not only of their being loved and cared for, but also the value to them of their love for their parents, something that helps to shape their selves, and to give their activities meaning. Activities are meaningful—as opposed to pleasurable or painful—when any of us, including young children, care about some things deeply and relatively stably. Since love for parents is a common source of stable commitments in young children's lives, the opportunity to give to those parents, and to contribute to their happiness, either through mutual play or through the child giving to the parent, is an important source of the capacity to find activities to be meaningful. Of course we should consider potential problems that can arise from horizontal aspects of the loving relationship—when children love someone who is destructive or self-destructive, when they love someone who expects more than they can or should reasonably give, when they love someone whose suffering they share, and when they love someone whose interests clash with other things or people the child loves.

When we consider the impact of loving relationships on parents, we should consider not only the value of developing virtues associated with loving others and providing care, but also the value of being loved by

children, and the value of having children contribute to meeting their needs. It is important for all of us to recognize that even when we are at our most powerful and independent, we still need care, and should not see our value lying only in our ability to give care. This can be particularly important if we are, or become, more dependent and vulnerable, due either to disability or to age. Many people (especially women) who have considered their worth to lie primarily in their ability to give love and care find it particularly difficult to be on the receiving end of care. Moreover, those who provide care for more dependent and vulnerable people, if they see relationships of care as either ones involving mutuality and equality or ones involving the provision of care to a more dependent and vulnerable party, will find it difficult to acknowledge their care recipient's ability to and need to give as well as receive care.

There are a number of reasons why it is important that parents's needs and desires are met, and that their children should contribute to meeting some of them. One reason concerns the instrumental value to children of having parents who are rested, well nourished, and not deeply unhappy, since such parents will find it easier to care for their children. However there is also a significant value to children of seeing their parents flourish—simply because they love their parents, and also an additional value to children of being able to contribute to the well being of people they love, and of being able to achieve outcomes which are meaningful to them. It is furthermore valuable for children's moral development and their development as citizens that they take an interest in contributing to a good other than their own. Therefore for reasons of the public good, it is important that horizontal aspects of loving relationships between young children and their parents be nurtured and encouraged.

When children care for a parent, especially when they provide care for a parent with significant disabilities, they are termed "young carers." The existence of young carers is typically treated as evidence of a social problem.⁷ However I argue that young carers are only a problem if they are expected to give beyond their capacities, or in a way that prevents them from developing other capacities. It is good for children to engage in mutual relationships for reasons discussed above. In addition, this prepares them to partake in other relationships characterized by mutuality, as opposed to relationships in which others (especially women) are expected to give without receiving much in return.

When we consider problems that can arise for parents in loving relationships with children, we should consider how vulnerability is increased when they care for children, and how time and energy devoted to loving their children can divert time and energy away from other

things that are important to them, including their health and their commitments to others. Receiving is important and appropriate for parents; we all have needs and should be neither encouraged nor expected to deny or suppress them. Of course children should not be the only or primary way for parents to have their needs met. Relationships between parents and children should be only one avenue of support available for parents and children. Otherwise many children will fail to have their needs met and most parents will be expected to give to a point beyond their ability. However, relationships with children should contribute to meeting parents's needs as well as children's needs, and parents, especially mothers, should be encouraged to see their own needs as legitimate, and assess which needs children might be able to help meet.

In addition to considering the value to both children and parents of loving and being loved, and the social value of such relationships, we should consider the moral value of being in a relationship which involves simultaneously giving and receiving love and care, and the value of mutuality, degrees of reciprocity, and trust within intimate relationships. In such relationships each party is treated as a person with particular interests and a point of view, and treats the other in that way. They can be profoundly morally valuable for this reason, and can sometimes (albeit not invariably) lead to an enhanced appreciation of the personhood of others.

Unfortunately such relationships can have the opposite effect on the parties involved in them, as everyone outside the relationship is viewed as insignificant in comparison to the parties involved. These damaging effects are an important reason to evaluate such relationships. Damage may also be done to the parties within them as other things and people that each did care about may be sacrificed to the demands of love.

In conclusion, by now we should have developed a clearer appreciation of a widespread and relatively philosophically neglected phenomenon: love between parents and children. We have seen that both parties can appropriately be expected to give, in a way that reflects their different abilities and resources, and that both parties can appropriately be expected to receive. Love between parents and children should be viewed as involving ideally a melding of vertical and horizontal aspects, not only over time as children mature, but even when they are quite young. Given that understanding, we can think more seriously about how such relationships should be evaluated, when they should be evaluated, and by whom. When we do so, we should attend to all four criteria I have outlined, rather than focusing narrowly on how children are served by being given love and care.

amy.mullin@utoronto.ca

Works Cited

- Bailey, Alison. 1994. "Mothering, Diversity, and Peace Politics." *Hypatia* 9.
- Bronfenbrenner, Urie. 1990. "Discovering What Families Do." In *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family*, eds. David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme, and Jean Bethke Elshtain. Milwaukee: Family Service America.
- Brown, Robert. 1987. *Analyzing Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1994. "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood". In *Representations of Motherhood*, eds. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Davion, Victoria. 1993. "Autonomy, Integrity and Care." *Social Theory and Practice* 19.
- DiQuinzio, Patrice. 1999. *The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism, and the Problem of Mothering*. New York: Routledge.
- Edyvane, Derek. 2003. "Against Unconditional Love". *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20, no. 1.
- Frankfurt, Harry G. 2005. "Response to Songsuk Hahn." In *Adoption Matters: Philosophical and Feminist Essays*, eds. Sally Haslanger and Charlotte Witt. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . 1999a. *Necessity, Volition and Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1999b. "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love" in *Necessity, Volition and Love*.
- . 1999c. "On Caring" in *Necessity, Volition and Love*.
- Friedman, Marilyn. 1989. "Friendship and Moral Growth." *Journal of Value Inquiry*.
- Hahn, Songsuk. 2005. "Accidents and Contingencies of Love." In *Adoption Matters: Philosophical and Feminist Essays*, eds. Sally Haslanger and Charlotte Witt. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Halwani, Raja. 2003. *Virtuous Liaisons: Care, Love, Sex and Virtue Ethics*. Chicago: Open Court Press.
- Haslanger, Sally. 2005. "What are We Talking About? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds." *Hypatia* 20, no. 4.
- Hastings, P. and Joan E. Grusec. 1998. "Parenting Goals as Organizers of Responses to Parent-Child Disagreement." *Developmental Psychology* 34.

- Hays, Sharon. 1996. *Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Held, Virginia. 1993. *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society and Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Helm, Bennett. 2005. "Love." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Summer 2005 Edition. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2005/entries/love/>>.
- Kochanska, Grazyna. 1997. "Mutually Responsive Orientation between Mothers and Their Young Children: Implications for Early Socialization" *Child Development* 68, no. 1.
- Kuczynski, Leon and Grazyna Kochanska. 1995. "Function and Content of Maternal Demands: Developmental Significance of Early Demands for Competent Action." *Child Development* 66, no. 3.
- Ladd Taylor, Molly. 2004. "Mother-Worship/Mother-Blame: Politics and Welfare in an Uncertain Age." *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 6.
- Laible, Deborah J. and Ross A. Thompson. 2000. "Mother-Child Discourse, Attachment Security, Shared Positive Affect, and Early Conscience Development." *Child Development* 71, no. 5.
- Mullin, Amy. 2006. "Parents and Children: An Alternative to Selfless and Unconditional Love." *Hypatia* 21, no. 1.
- . 2005. *Reconceiving Pregnancy and Childcare: Ethics, Experience and Reproductive Labor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Noddings, Nel. 1984. *Caring: A Feminist Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 1986. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ruddick, Sara. 1989. *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Soble, Alan (ed). 1989. *Eros, Agape, and Philia: Readings in the Philosophy of Love*. New York: Paragon House.
- Thompson, Ross. 1987. "Empathy and Emotional Understanding: The Early Development of Empathy." In *Empathy and its Development*, ed. Nancy Eisenberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Velleman, J. David. 1999. "Love as a Moral Emotion." *Ethics* 109, no. 2.
- Zahn-Waxler, Carolyn, Marian Radke-Yarrow and Elizabeth Wagner. 1992. "Development of Concern for Others." *Developmental Psychology* 28, no. 1.

Notes

1. See Brown 1987, Helm 2005, Soble 1989.

2. Images of parental love in popular culture tend to idealize self-sacrifice, especially from mothers. These images have been extensively discussed by feminists interested in mothering. See, for example, Molly Ladd Taylor's analysis of mothering in popular culture, which concludes that "good" mothers are presented as having no interests that matter nearly so much as their husband and children (2004). See also sociologist Sharon Hays's work (1996).

3. See, for instance, Nel Noddings, who writes that a young child may be considered to contribute to a caring relationship by noticing that the adult is providing care, or simply by flourishing in the adult's care (1984, 74).

4. See, for instance, Marilyn Friedman who writes that "Relationships vary considerably. We can relate to others in ways which approach equality and mutuality, or in ways which involve forms of dependency or hierarchies of power and authority" (1989, 3). She goes on to make it clear that relationships between parents and young children are relationships of the latter type, rather than considering the possibility that they can and should involve both vertical and horizontal features.

5. Mullin 2006.

6. Mullin 2006.

7. See Mullin 2005 for a discussion of "young carers" and how they have been perceived, especially pages 178–84.