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

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How Parenthood is Modelled in Different Informal Contexts

• When a child appears – ”who’s is it?”

• When a child is cared for – ”who is the primary caretaker?”

• Situating children in social settings: pre-school, birthday parties, large gatherings, extended family, local meetings.

• When deciding who has authority re. the child in informal contexts (e.g. internal family power struggles)

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

Parenthood status/role assigned intuitively, with lax requirements on systematicity, room for flexibility and exceptions from common rules
How Parenthood is Modelled in Formally Institutional Contexts

- When a child appears – "who's is it? – legally"

- When a child is cared for – "who is (legally) responsible and accountable"

- Determining **access and rights** to/re children in/to social settings: pre-school, birthday parties, school, organised social activities/pasttimes (e.g. sports clubs)

- Deciding who has **legal authority** over the child **generally** (within set boundaries)

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

**Accessible only through meeting basic conditions** set out by the state: e.g. requirements re. numbers, gender mix, age, intellectual function
The Politico-normative Model of Parenthood

FIRST: Performance Assessment Standards

• A formally regulated primary social role determining ....

• Special rights and responsibilities re. the caring of children

• Indirectly: access to goods available through the exercise of these rights and responsibilities

• Official view of ”good parenting”

SECOND: Eligibility Criteria

• Determines basic right of access to this primary social role

• Not about what good parenting is, but what sort of people who are to be given the chance of exercising parenting in the first place (good or bad)

• This is a "reproductive caring unit":

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

The Link Between the Politico-normative and Informal Models

- Politico-normative parenthood concepts are easily (and often) unsystematically impregnated / influenced by informal parenthood models

- But these informal, intuitive conceptions of what a parent may be and who may be a parent carry scant justificatory power as such

- Example 1: Rawls’ intuitive assumption of ”the family” as a social configuration that should be granted lots of autonomy to mind its internal affairs

- Example 2: Typical responses to ideas on a licensing scheme for granting parenthood, à la LaFollette (default: if you’re a parent you can keep your child, unless....)

- Example 3: The primacy of the genetic / biological link (many instances)

These examples all regard the first ”performance assessment” portion of the politico-normative parenthood model. Many interesting issues regarding what determines plausible criteria for good parenting in a society.
The Issue of Reproductive Caring Units

- Has received much less attention by moral philosophers / ethicists than the former

- Unreflectedly addressed by "rainbow" and ART positive/optimist activists

- It is often said: "there is no right to have children", but what does that mean?? Apparently not that no social configurations may qualify as RCUs

- Apparently, the common notion is that there are some legitimate RCUs

- So the question is: **what is a good argument for / against** that a social configuration should be allowed as an RCU by a state?

- We have so far only considered the best interests of children, assuming that this is one relevant consideration (Munthe & Hartvigsson 2012)
Some Initial Considerations and Candidates 1

• What’s the role of **the good of parenthood** in a good society?

• Caring well for children should be one, obviously – but beyond that?

• To what extent is state authority and responsibility fitting for allocating this good at all?

• **One idea**: the state shouldn’t meddle in what social configurations may be RCU’s, merely take actions when RCU’s misbehave

• Likely result: "semi-ordered anarchy" – a merge of the RCU concept and informal concepts of parenthood, with lots of local, cultural variability
• Alternatively: parenthood is a central public good, akin to peace and security, that motivates ambitious state action – maybe even positive rights

• What’s the point for a state of having its population procreate? This should be decided on the basis of capacity to deliver all kinds of public goods!

• The reproductive public health perspective: the issue of what procreative patterns are beneficial for public health and other goods should govern the assignment of RCUs

• For instance: future strains due to environmental and migration pressures may motivate strict allotment of RCU-status – but not given who should get it!

• Question to ponder: is preservation (or cautious protection) of established cultures re. what is to be RCUs a legitimate concern? – social cohesion, etc.?

• Might provide some indirect reason for keeping to a primacy of biology/genetics, at least for some time of cautious transformation.

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