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DISCUSSION NOTE

Why Treat One's Children as Equals?

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Abstract
In "Parental Love and Filial Equality," Giacomo Floris and Riccardo Spotorno offer an explanation for why parents should treat their children as equals. The authors argue that this moral obligation is grounded in parents' duty to love their children in an attitudinal, though not necessarily emotional, sense. This duty, they contend, requires them to disregard variations in their children's status-conferring properties, as long as those properties meet a minimum threshold. This article argues that this account of filial equal treatment has serious shortcomings. In its place, it proposes a more outcome-oriented or consequentialist account.

Keywords: children; siblings; parents; moral equality; moral status; families; love

1. The Parental Love Account

While it is commonly accepted that parents should treat their children as equals, even if many parents do not live up to this, the philosophical grounding for this belief has not been thoroughly examined. In their article "Parental Love and Filial Equality" (Floris & Spotorno, 2023), Giacomo Floris and Riccardo Spotorno fill this gap by proposing that the nature of parental love offers a normative basis for such equal treatment.

Their account is based on two key premises. The first is that it is morally incumbent on parents to love their children in an attitudinal but not necessarily an emotional sense (p.264). The second premise is that loving one's children requires disregarding differences in morally relevant properties that would otherwise confer different normative statuses, so long as children possess them to a sufficient degree (p. 265). In their words, "loving one's child […] consists of being blind to the variations above the minimum threshold when deliberating about how they should be considered and treated," meaning that how much concern a parent A shows to a child of theirs B should "not depend on the degree to which [say] B is intelligent or empathic, provided that B is intelligent and empathic to a sufficient level" (p.265). By ignoring such variations, which also apply to differences in relational properties like emotional closeness that might otherwise warrant unequal treatment of individuals, it follows that to discharge their moral duty to love their children (in an attitudinal sense), parents should treat their children as equals.

This article critiques Floris and Spotorno's parental love account of filial equal treatment (henceforth the Parental Love Account or PLA). It argues that the PLA has significant weaknesses that should lead us to accept a rival account, which, to the best of my knowledge, has yet to be defended. This alternative account, I call it the Child Welfare Account (CWA), grounds the moral imperative of equal treatment in the empirical harms caused by parental favoritism, both to disfavored and favored children. Specifically, CWA holds that parents should provide their children with an adequate, that is, good enough, upbringing and that in most cases, this will require treating them as equals.

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The remainder of this contribution is structured as follows. Section 2 identifies several important problems with PLA. Section 3 explains how CWA avoids these issues. Finally, Section 4 addresses and responds to various objections to CWA.

2. Objections to the Parental Love Account

As mentioned, although Floris and Spotorno have given us a highly sophisticated justification of filial equal treatment (which is certainly the most promising one available today), I believe it is bedevilled by problems that, if not individually than collectively, should lead us to reject it in favor of an alternative account. One problem with their Parental Love Account or PLA is that it seems underinclusive. For we might ask: Given that it is generally thought to be acceptable for people to apportion their level of concern for their friends and romantic partners to degrees in relevant properties, such as the extent to which these individuals are empathetic and emotionally close to them, why is it not the same true in parent–child relationships?

As it happens, Floris and Spotorno anticipate this objection, writing that:

> One may think that how much someone romantically loves another person depends on the degree to which the latter possesses a set of significant properties. A loves B because and to the extent that B holds some valuable properties; hence, A would love B more (or less) if B were more (or less) intelligent or more (or less) empathic. However, whatever the merits of this view of romantic love, it is hard to see how this can be true of parental love. A loving parent refuses to measure the degree to which their child holds a status-conferring property (or properties) above a minimum threshold and to consider that information as relevant when reasoning about the appropriate consideration and treatment of them (p.265).

As far as I can see, this response begs the question. What we want is an explanation for *why* considering status-conferring properties is permissible in the case of friendships and romantic relationships but not in the case of parental relationships. Simply saying that it is "hard to see how it can be appropriate for parents to apportion their love for their children based on the latter's status-conferring properties above a given threshold" does not constitute such an explanation. (A little earlier in the article, Floris and Spotorno do mention that "when we love someone, we refuse to take 'perfection' as an appropriate standard for our love" (p.265); however, even if they are right that loving someone is incompatible with making one's concern for the beloved conditional on them being perfect, this does not rule out tailoring one's level of concern based on how well the beloved meets morally relevant criteria.)

Another shortcoming of PLA is that it does not tell us *why parental favoritism appears to be more problematic in some contexts than others.* Consider the following two cases.

> *Different households:* Bert has two daughters from previous marriages, Betty and Christina, who live with their respective mothers. Betty and Christina live in different countries, have never met each other, and are unlikely to ever do so—suppose Christiana was adopted, such that she and Betty do not have any biological ties that might instil in them a desire to meet. When Bert is visiting Betty, he shows more affection to her than he does to Christina when visiting Christina.

Even if Bert's unequal displays of affection are problematic, which some might doubt, they seem much less concerning than if Betty and Christina were siblings who were living with each other, assuming all else to be equal.

> *Adulthood inequality:* Wang has two adult twins, Li and Zhao. Because he recognizes more of his own personality in Li, he tends to feel somewhat greater love for Li than for Zhao. This is reflected him being somewhat more affectionate towards Li.

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Assuming everything else to be equal, it looks like *even if* Wang's favoritism is problematic, it is much less problematic than if Wang showed greater affection to Li than to Zhao during the latter's childhood.

What is pertinent for present purposes is that while Floris and Spotorno might accept these intuitions, their account of why children should be treated as equals by their parents—unlike the one I will propose shortly—*does not explain them.* All PLA tells us is that whenever children meet the threshold for meriting love from their parents, as they generally seem to on this account, it would be wrong for their parents to show them unequal concern.

A final weakness of PLA is that it seems to require parents to *fix their absolute level of concern for their children* from when, and as long as, their children meet the threshold for meriting love. To appreciate this, notice that if, as Floris and Spotorno argue, how much a parent A loves a child of theirs B in an attitudinal sense should "not depend on the degree to which [say] B is intelligent or empathic, provided that B is intelligent and empathic to a sufficient level" (p.265), then *even if* B were to become significantly more emphatic over the course of their life, it would be impermissible for A to start displaying more concern toward B, at least insofar they already show sufficient concern for B. (To avoid confusion, showing equal concern for a child over time does not necessarily mean that parents should invest equal amounts of resources—such as time, energy, or money—throughout the child's life. A more plausible interpretation is that a given level of concern involves adjusting investments based on factors such as the changing magnitude of a child's needs, meaning that young children typically require greater investment than older children, and older underage children more than adult children. On this view, demonstrating a concern level of, say, 6 out of 10 might require a parent to invest 15 units of resources during early infancy, 8 units during adolescence, and 2 units in adulthood, whereas showing a 9 out of 10 level of concern might require investing 23 units in early infancy, 12 units during adolescence, and 3 units in adulthood, all else being equal.)[1]

There are at least two problems with expecting parents to maintain a fixed absolute level of concern for their children. First, if parents already show sufficient concern for their children, it is unclear why it would be objectionable for them to increase that concern when their children demonstrate improvements in morally relevant dimensions, such as empathy. Even if one believes that this should be avoided to prevent unequal distributions of parental concern among siblings, many parents have only one child, and even those with multiple children could increase their concern for all while maintaining equality. Second, sustaining the same absolute level of love for one's children throughout their lives—whatever that level should be (a question left unaddressed by Floris and Spotorno)—seems highly demanding. This is because parents will need to continually ensure that the resources they devote to their children remain aligned with the (sufficient) level of concern they initially demonstrated at the beginning of their children's lives, meaning that they may not go below or above a specific, predetermined life stage-adjusted level of investment.

3. The Child Welfare Account

My next aim is to put forward an alternative, and I believe overall more plausible, account of filial equal treatment that does not fall prey to PLA's shortcomings. This account, the Child Welfare Account or CWA, is more outcome-oriented in that it locates the problem with parental favoritism in the *consequences of such unequal treatment* for children. To explain further, it should be noted that empirical studies have found that being the disfavored child in the family has a proclivity to undermine children's well-being comparted to both favored children and to children who are shown equal concern by their parents (Jensen et al., 2013; Suitor et al., 2008; Tamrouti-Makkink et al., 2004). Additionally, having this status tends to harm children's development by causing them

[1]I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for recommending that I clarify this point.

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to develop low self-worth (Feinberg & Hetherington, 2001; Jensen et al., 2013; Shebloski et al., 2005). But that is not all. Perhaps surprisingly, even *being the favored child* has been shown to undermine people's well-being and to lead to higher rates of depression (Suitor et al., 2008; Tamrouti-Makkink et al., 2004), which might due to the fact that such children feel guilt over their privileged position (Hill, 2019) and/or the fact that, as the preferred child, they take themselves to have a special responsibility to look after the welfare of one or both parents (Paul, 2020).

I suspect these detrimental effects of parental favoritism can, on their own, explain why parents should generally treat their children as equals, and that this allows us to avoid the problems plaguing PLA. Specifically, unlike PLA:

- CWA can explain why loving one's children—or, if one does not believe in parental duty to love one's children, showing them adequate concern—requires that, above a certain threshold, differences between children that would otherwise warrant unequal treatment, such as differences in their level of empathy or the emotional closeness of one's relationship with them, be ignored. Its explanation is that such unequal treatment is likely to harm children's well-being and development and thereby militates against the parent's responsibility to ensure that their children receive an adequate or sufficiently good upbringing.
- CWA can explain why people often—but perhaps not always—do not seem morally required to treat their friends as equals, or simply appear to have weaker moral reasons to do so, *even if* they love their friends. For one thing, people are generally less negatively affected by unequal treatment by shared friends than children are by parental favoritism, which is true especially—but not exclusively—when those sharing a friend are not friends themselves.[2] One plausible reason for this is that friends tend to be less dependent on each other than minor children are on their parents. Another is that favoritism among friends is frequently less visible. While minor children typically spend a significant amount of time with their siblings in the presence of their parents, those who share a friend generally spend less time together in the presence of that shared friend, making inter-friend favoritism less conspicuous (this is true despite the existence of club-like friendships where friends engage in many activities as a group (cf. Dunbar, 2018) and of situations where friendship hierarchies can become highly salient, as when one friend is chosen as a best man at a wedding, selected to be a godparent, given the status of a "Best Friend Forever" or bromantic partner, or simply favored to join on a vacation (De Vries, 2024).) For another, we do not usually bear the same level of responsibility for our friends' well-being and development as we do for our minor, and arguably even our adult, children.
- CWA can account for the difference that Floris and Spotorno posit between the two types of love. Whereas these authors believe that romantic love is sometimes, if not always, appropriately influenced by the extent to which the beloved possesses valuable qualities, they do not apply the same view to parental love, at least not insofar as factoring in such gradations leads to parental favoritism. The explanation CWFA offers for this difference—assuming *arguendo* it exists—is that favoritism and, by implication, any harmful consequences stemming from it, are not possible in monogamous relationships, although it might be in polygamous ones. For example, women in a harem might suffer severe distress and insecurity if, and when, their partner shows greater concern for his other wives, which might impose a comparable duty of equal treatment.

[2]Indeed, whereas children may not generally want to be shown less parental concern than their siblings (e.g. Hill, 2019), many of us seem content with being treated less favorably by at least some—though perhaps not all—of our friends compared to these individuals' other friends. This may be the case, for example, when we are satisfied with having a relatively casual relationship with someone and prefer to avoid the more demanding duties of assistance and support that come with a higher position in that person's friendship hierarchy even if that position would result in us receiving more concern from them in return.

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- CWA does not rule out that adjusting one's level of concern for one's children to fluctuations in children's possession of morally relevant traits, such as benevolence, is permissible under certain conditions. This speaks in favor of this account, as we saw it is far from obvious that such tailored responses are always inappropriate. For example, when there is no risk of parental favoritism—suppose a parent only has one child—and the level of parental concern exhibited does not drop so low that duties to show adequate love or concern to one's children are violated, it might well be innocent. The same could potentially apply once children become adults, as people's well-being and development seem generally less affected by parental favoritism at this stage than in childhood, and they generally bear greater responsibility for their actions (I leave this for the reader to decide).
- CWA can explain why unequal parental concern is more problematic in some situations than others, such as when the unequally treated children are underaged; when they are living together; and/or when they involve allocations of relatively important resources, whether in an objective sense (e.g., medical resources, nutritious food) or simply in the eyes of the children. Its explanation is that these are all circumstances where children's well-being and development are at an elevated risk of being harmed or of being severely harmed.[3,4] While there is nothing in Floris and Spotorno's account that prevents them from accepting that the wrongness of unequal treatment depends on how much the children's welfare is likely to be adversely affected, doing so requires their account to be complemented by a consequentialist principle like CWA, suggesting that CWA is preferable by virtue of being more parsimonious, that is by explaining more considered judgements with fewer principles.
- CWA does not require parents to maintain the same absolute level of concern for their children throughout the latter's lives. As was argued, not only does such uniformity appear unnecessary in certain contexts, even if we accept that the same level of concern calls for different levels of parental investment based on factors like a child's evolving needs, exhibiting it would still be highly burdensome for parents, as it would imply that they may not go above or below certain predetermined amounts of parental investment.

4. Objections to the Child Welfare Account

At this point, it is important to turn our attention to several scenarios where PLA but not CWA might be thought to capture our normative intuitions.

4.1. No negative effects

One such scenario is *when parental favoritism does not have negative effects for the children involved.* Consider again the case where a non-custodial parent plays favorites between two children from previous marriages who live in different households, are not genetically related, and are unlikely to ever meet one another. Here, some might argue that *even if* the children in question will never suffer any adverse hedonic or developmental consequences from being treated unequally by the parent, or, we might add, any material disadvantages (as could happen, for instance, when the money in the parent's college savings account is unevenly divided between them), the parent's favoritism remains

[3]The fact that parents have greater moral responsibility for their children's lives during childhood than in adulthood is another factor that makes parental favoritism more problematic in children's early years. What is relevant for our purposes, however, is that since both CWA and PLA can acknowledge this, it does not seem to provide a reason to favor one account over the other.

[4]Regarding the intuition that the extent of unequal treatment matters—for instance, all else being equal, larger disparities in access to playing time or pocket money seem more problematic than smaller ones—I believe both PLA and CWA can account for this. CWA can do so by pointing to the greater harm that more pronounced inequality is likely to inflict on children, while PLA can explain it by noting that more unequal treatment constitutes a stronger violation of the supposed duty to disregard variations above the relevant threshold in morally relevant properties. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for urging me to clarify this.

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morally problematic. Yet, if this is correct, this might be understood to support PLA's thesis that parental favoritism i*s inherently wrong* (or to use Floris and Spotorno's terminology, "unfitting"), that is wrong irrespective of the impact on the children and other possible parties.

I believe this inference is too quick. Upon closer inspection, there are various factors that might plausibly explain our normative intuitions in cases like the one at hand without committing us to PLA. First, while I stipulated that the children will never discover the parent's favoritism, there will normally be a significant risk of them finding out sooner or later. Even in the somewhat improbable event that they will never meet in person, there remain various ways in which they might do so; it is not too difficult to imagine, for instance, that their shared parent will say things that provide evidence of favoritism (e.g., by speaking more fondly about one child or lavishing more praise on them, either in direct conversation with the child or when discussing them with others within the child's earshot). Alternatively, or in addition, the parents' social media activities might provide such evidence (e.g., by posting disproportionately about one child's accomplishments while rarely acknowledging the other's or by uploading more selfies with the other child). However, if this is correct, then this makes it hard to place ourselves in a situation where the risk that children will become aware of their parents' favoritism is truly absent or simply vanishingly small, casting doubt on our intuitions about cases where we are asked to imagine such cases. That is, even if these imaginative challenges do not definitively disprove the claim that parental favoritism is wrong in the given scenario, they should at least weaken our confidence in it, as our intuitions may well be influenced by an underlying unconscious suspicion that there remains a significant risk of the children discovering their parents' favoritism.

Second, worries about the treatment of disfavored children often seem at least partially fueled by sufficientarian worries that the children in question are not receiving *enough parental concern.* This is supported by the fact that once we assume the disfavored child in the present case still receives sufficient concern from the parent (meaning the parent not only provide them with material necessities such as food and medicine, but also offers emotional support, encouragement, and spends quality time with them), and, one might imagine, more concern than most children receive, the relevant inequality starts to look much more innocent.

Third, besides potentially betraying sufficientarian motivations, worries about unequal treatment often reflect concerns that the unequal treatment results from *discrimination*, that is, from treatment based on morally irrelevant features, which in our case might include children's gender, sexual orientation (cf. Spotorno, 2021), or the extent to which they physically resemble a given parent. Yet, if we assume that a particular instance of parental favoritism is entirely based on fitting factors, which might include children's varying levels of benevolence, braveness, or intellectual integrity—the reader can plug in their preferred criteria—such favoritism appears less problematic. (Which, to be clear, does not rule out that it may still be unjustified, whether across the board or only during people's childhood; I leave this for the reader to decide.)

Fourth and finally, even when parental favoritism is motivated wholly by morally relevant differences between children, parents could still be responsible for the existence of these differences, such that it would be inappropriate to assign them normative weight. For example, when the reason why child A is more benevolent than child B is that one of their shared parents stimulated A more than B to develop altruistic attitudes, it might be inappropriate for that parent to show A more concern than B based on A's greater benevolence, at least during children's childhood when we often assume that parents bear a large amount of responsibility for their children's behavior. What is pertinent for us is that, rather than showing parental favoritism to be inherently problematic, as PLA maintains, all this establishes is that parents should refrain from letting their levels of relative concern be influenced by inter-child differences that they should have prevented from emerging.

Once all these possible confounders are controlled for, it is far from clear whether parental favoritism is inherently objectionable. Furthermore, even if Floris and Spotorno are right that there is *always* something problematic about it for the reasons suggested by PLA, which I have not strictly disproven, the examined shortcomings of this account suggest that it must be complemented by another account of filial equal treatment, CWA, to fully explain the wrongfulness of such favoritism.

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4.2. Further putatively implausible implications

Having addressed the concern that CWA does not condemn parental favoritism when it lacks negative effects, several remaining putatively implausible implications need to be considered. They include the following:

- All else being equal, parents have stronger reasons to treat their children equally when the children are more sensitive to unequal treatment, meaning that for a given level of parental favoritism, they suffer greater harm.
- When parents can make their children more resilient to unequal treatment, CWA allows for the possibility that fostering resilience (e.g., by teaching stoicism) might be preferable to trying to eliminate or simply reduce parental favoritism.
- Likewise, when parents can conceal their favoritism, CWA allows for the possibility that such concealment might be preferable to trying to eliminate or simply reduce parental favoritism.[5]

Although each of these implications might seem implausible on the face of it, a closer look suggests otherwise. Regarding the first, it is hard to believe that for children to suffer more harm as a result of parental favoritism would not even somewhat strengthen parents' reasons to treat their children as equals. Even deontology-inspired moral theories normally accept that the impact of our actions on people's welfare and development is one normatively relevant factor, even if this factor is not always decisive. Yet, if this is correct, then to the extent that children are more likely to be negatively affected by parental favoritism, parents will have more robust reasons to be neutral than they would have otherwise. (Whereas some might point out that, as indicated by the last two implications, equal treatment is *only one way* of solving the problem of parental favoritism under CWA, note that by addressing the welfare-related problems associated with parental favoritism, this approach still strengthens our reasons to pursue it even if it is not uniquely supported.)

What about the second and third implications, according to which CWA allows for the possibility that fostering children's resilience to parental favoritism or concealing such favoritism could be equally, if not more, desirable than attempting to eliminate or simply reduce it? The first thing to say about these implications is that proponents of CWA can accept a presumption in favor of addressing unequal treatment directly on the ground that this measure is generally more effective and efficient. To illustrate, imagine a parent with twins who gives one child more pocket money than the other, takes that child on more elaborate parent–child trips, provides them with more homework support, offers greater emotional care to them, and so on. While this parent could dedicate their time and energy to concealing these acts of favoritism or to help their children psychologically cope with them (I use "children" in the plural, as we saw that although parental favoritism tends to be especially hard on disfavored children, favored children often suffer adverse consequences as well), it seems that a more productive and straightforward approach would be to simply start treating children equally within these areas. (Of course, this does not preclude the possibility that there might be independent reasons for attempting to make one's children resilient so that they are better equipped to handle any current and future hardship.)

That said, consistent with CWA, there are situations where parents may need to invest at least some of their time and energy in concealing their favoritism and/or helping their children cope with it, rather than focusing solely on eliminating it. As previously mentioned, when parents have a favorite child, as no less than 10 percent of parents in the UK openly admit having (YouGov, 2020),[6]

[5]I am an indebted to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this implication.

[6]Considering the strong social taboo against having a favorite child in Western societies (e.g. Fleming, 2012; Rodman, 2016), it is likely that the true percentage of parents with a favorite child is even higher than reported.

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completely suppressing these preferences in one's behavior can be notoriously difficult, often leading to some degree of differential treatment persisting. When this is the case, it makes sense that, beyond attempting to minimize the extent of parental favoritism, parents should also protect their children's welfare by limiting their children's exposure to foreseeable acts of favoritism (whether intentional or unintentional) and/or by helping them develop (more) resilience to cope with such experiences. For instance, if a parent realizes they naturally show greater affection to a football-loving child during football matches and finds it challenging to suppress this, they might choose to attend matches exclusively with that child while engaging in separate meaningful activities with the other sibling. Likewise, if a parent recognizes that, despite their best efforts, their favoritism still unintentionally manifests in subtle ways, it may be appropriate for them to help the less-favored child in particular, to develop resilience-building strategies to better navigate this and other future challenges, such as by introducing them to techniques from stoicism, mindfulness, or cognitive reframing.

In short, while the abovementioned implications might initially appear to challenge CWA, there are good grounds for believing they actually support this account, giving us further reasons to accept it instead of PWA.

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