# Preference-Formation and Personal Good[1]

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As persons, beings with a capacity for autonomy, we face a certain practical task in living out our lives. At any given period we find ourselves with many desires or preferences, yet we have limited resources, and so we cannot satisfy them all.[2] Our limited resources include insufficient economic means, of course; few of us have either the funds or the material provisions to obtain or pursue all that we might like. More significantly, though, we are limited to a single life and one of finite duration. We also age, and pursuits that were possible at earlier points within a life may become impossible at later stages; we thus encounter not only an ultimate time limit but episodic limits as well. Because we must live our lives with limited resources—material and temporal—we are pressed to choose among and to order our preferences. Without some selection and ordering, few if any of them would be satisfied, and we would be unable to live lives that are recognizably good at all. Moreover, we would be unable to function well as the autonomous beings that we are. Our practical task then is to form a coherent, stable, and attractive ordering of aims—to develop a conception of our good.[3]

[1] This paper was presented at the annual conference of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, St. John's College, Cambridge, on July 15, 2004. Many thanks to fellow presenters and audience members for their helpful questions and comments.

[2] Strictly speaking, the notion of preference is comparative as the notion of desire is not. A person prefers one thing *to* another. But in most instances, a desire can be recast as a preference of one among at least some small class of alternatives, and a conflict of desires is, in this respect, also a conflict of preferences. For this reason, I follow what I take to be common practice in using the terms 'desire' and 'preference' for the most part interchangeably.

[3] I assume, of course, that we are not talking about aims (or desires or preferences) that one has only insofar as one is concerned about the requirements of morality. I roughly follow Rawls in treating a conception of the good as an ordered scheme of final ends, together with a story about what makes those ends appropriate or worthwhile, though Rawls' idea has seeming moral elements which I want to leave to one side. See John Rawls,



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The task is a complex one, for many of our conflicting preferences represent not merely the different things we might happen to want but the different selves we could become and the different lives we might lead. The choice among our preferences—actual and possible—can thus have far reaching consequences. If we fail to choose and order our aims well, we may find ourselves living lives that disappoint us or, worse, lives self-deceived, resigned, or riddled with regret.

If we are to form a coherent, stable, and attractive ordering of aims, however, we must first have something suitable to work with. A moment's reflection tells us as much, and those who have explored the phenomena of adaptive and deformed preferences have aptly illustrated their distorting effects.[4] The person whose preferences tend toward the self-destructive may coordinate her preferences however much one might please; she will still end up leading a self-destructive life. The person whose preferences have been stunted by her social conditions or by indoctrination may organize her aims as carefully as one might wish; a diminished life will yet be all that she achieves.[5] If we are to understand how it is possible for us to lead good lives, then, we cannot merely inquire about how it makes sense to organize our aims or preferences. We must also inquire about how to form our preferences in the first place.

Now it strikes me as an interesting fact that some people are especially good formers of their own preferences. What I mean by this is that they are particularly adept at forming preferences for

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'Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory: The Dewey Lectures 1980,' *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1980): 515–72, p. 544. I explore the ideas in this paragraph in greater detail in 'Mortality, Agency, and Regret' (forthcoming, Sergio Tennenbaum, ed., *New Trends in Philosophy: Moral Psychology*, Rodopi, Amsterdam). For extended discussion, of practical reason and the need for intrapersonal coordination of aims and activities, see Michael Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

[4] See, e.g., Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); and Wayne Sumner, *Welfare and Happiness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 162–171. See also Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Adaptive Preferences and Women's Options,' Symposium on Amartya Sen's Philosophy: 5, *Economics and Philosophy* 17 (2001): 67–88.

[5] Barring intervention, of course.



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things that seem, at least over time, to benefit them, and to this extent, they seem to be particularly successful at achieving good lives. Others, as we all know—even leaving to one side the more extreme problems of deformed and adaptive preferences—are notoriously poor preference formers. If they do not gravitate towards things that are positively bad for them, they at least seem to flounder and stumble their way through life far more than most of us do.

Of course, none of us comes into the world fully equipped from the outset either to order or to form our own preferences. Instead, our parents, or those responsible for raising us, must do the ordering on our behalf, at least until we have the maturity and skill to do it on our own, and they must also serve as the primary formers of our preferences.[6] Since parents are the original formers of our preferences and presumably influence how we go on to form preferences in the future, it would seem to follow that some parents do especially well at equipping their children to become effective preference formers. Let's say, speaking roughly, that good or effective parenting is parenting that produces effective formers of preferences, that is, formers of preferences the satisfaction of which is at least more likely to yield a good life for the person whose preferences they are. My suggestion will be this. If we want to arrive at an adequate theory of preference-formation, at least that part of a theory that concerns our welfare, we should study the efforts of those who are both most experienced in shaping our preferences and most strongly motivated to advance our good.[7] If we want to understand the connection between preference-formation and personal good, we should try to understand the

[6] I will talk throughout in terms of parents, but my points should be understood to pertain to any primary caregiver.

[7] Throughout this essay, my interest will lie with the good, welfare, or well-being of individual persons—what I will most often refer to as 'personal good.' The value at issue in talk about a person's good is nonmoral, relational value, where our concern is with what makes a person's life go well for her. So when I talk, as I have been, about leading 'good lives,' I mean lives good for the persons living them, as opposed to lives good for others. I have elsewhere explained my preference for the expression 'personal good' over more common expressions like 'welfare,' 'well-being,' and 'flourishing' and have also made a preliminary stab at providing an analysis of the *good for* relation. See Connie S. Rosati, 'Personal Good' Mark Timmons and Terry Horgan, ed., *Metaethics After Moore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.107–131.



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impact that parenting has on preference-formation when it is done well; we should try to understand how parenting might *be* effective.

One might be inclined to say that what our parents do, in raising us well, is simply raise us to form preferences that are in keeping with our good.[8] As a first approximation, this claim is surely correct, though as we will see, the story to be told about what effective parenting accomplishes is far more complex. I will try to cash out what this claim might come to and to do so in a way that does not require us to take a position on the question of whether personal good itself just is the satisfaction of well-formed and well-ordered preferences.[9] The ideas I want to advance about preference-formation should in fact be compatible with a variety of theories of welfare, even if they lend special support to certain ways of thinking about our good. This means, of course, that what I have to say will leave a gap between preference and personal good, and I make no attempt here to close it. My aim, I want to stress, is not to offer a theory of preference-formation but simply to lay some of the groundwork for such a theory.

## Good Parenting

We should begin then by considering what characterizes good parenting and return later to explore any implications for a theory of preference-formation. In setting out features of *good* or *effective*

[8] I leave mainly to one side the moral and social dimensions of raising us well—that is, raising us reasonably to conform our behavior to the requirements of morality and to social roles and expectations—so as to focus on the relationship between preference-formation and personal good. I briefly address this incompleteness in my account later in the text.

[9] My own view is that while preferences may have some interesting role to play in fixing our welfare, personal good does not consist merely in satisfaction of well-formed and well-ordered preferences. For criticisms of informed-desire theories of personal good, see, e.g., J. David Velleman, 'Brandt's Definition of 'Good,'' *Philosophical Review* 97 (1988): 353–371; David Sobel, 'Full Information Accounts of Well-Being,' *Ethics* 104 (1994): 784–810; Don Loeb, 'Full-Information Theories of Individual Good,' *Social Theory and Practice* 21 (1995): 1–30; and Connie S. Rosati, 'Persons, Perspectives, and Full-Information Accounts of the Good,' *Ethics* 105 (1995): 296–325, 'Naturalism, Normativity, and the Open Question Argument,' *Nôus* 29 (1995): 46–70, 'Brandt's Notion of Therapeutic Agency,' *Ethics* 110 (2000): 780–811, and 'Agency and the Open Question Argument,' *Ethics* 113 (2003): 490–527.



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parenting, I mean, of course, to articulate an ideal of parenting, though one that I hope will have intuitive appeal and fit well with those examples of actual parenting that strike us as particularly successful.[10]

What makes parenting optimal, I have been supposing, is its special effects. And presumably good parenting succeeds in achieving its effects not wholly owing to good fortune but also to its being a properly guided activity. I have already mentioned the idea that parents, in raising us well, raise us to form our preferences in keeping with our good. But if we want to understand how they might succeed in this, we must first try to understand not how our parents raise us to be guided but how they are themselves guided in raising us.

One might suggest, in accordance with our original idea, that a parent's efforts at preference-formation must be guided by his own regard for his child's good; and one might think that means that what guides his efforts is the perceived value of the objects of his child's possible preferences or at least his prediction of the benefit those objects will yield in relation to her. No doubt our parents shape our preferences in keeping with their perceptions of what has genuine value, though we will still want to understand precisely why, when, and how they should attend to those perceptions, given their interest in our welfare. And no doubt our parents shape our preferences in keeping with their best judgments as to how we might benefit from our engagement with various goods, though we still need to understand, as theories of personal good aim to tell us, the precise nature of this 'benefit.' But the key to understanding effective parenting and what it accomplishes in shaping preferences is to recognize that parents are guided in the first instance not by a regard for the child's good but by a regard for the child herself.[11] And this suggests, as I will explain, that preference-formation ought to be guided not so much by the nature and value of the

[10] I will often talk simply in terms of parenting rather than good parenting, but it should be understood that I mean throughout to articulate a normative account.

[11] Stephen Darwall has recently suggested that welfare just is what one ought to want for a person insofar as one cares for her or for her sake. On this analysis, the direct object of care or concern for another is the person herself. See Stephen Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). I have argued elsewhere that Darwall's rich and appealing theory does not in fact offer us an analysis of welfare. See Connie S. Rosati, 'Darwall on Welfare and Rational Care' (forthcoming, *Philosophical Studies*). But I believe something is deeply



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objects of preferences or even their value in relation to a particular person but by the nature and value of the person whose preferences are at issue.

In what sense, though, is parenting guided by a regard for the child herself? It is guided by a regard for the child herself, I want to suggest, in at least three related senses: first, a parent has regard for the child's agent-neutral value; second, he has regard for the child as a being with the capacity for autonomous agency; and finally, he has regard for the child as the distinct individual that she is. These respects in which parenting is guided by a regard for the child are importantly related, for they reflect those factors that must be borne in mind if parenting is to succeed in its fundamental aim, namely, producing happy, autonomous agents—beings who both fare well and function well.[12]

## Regard for the Value of Children

Good parenting is, first and foremost, an activity in which a person responds appropriately to the value of children.[13] The acts a loving parent performs on behalf of his child both honor and express the child's value. These acts obviously include, though they go well beyond, nurturing the child, protecting her, and providing her with basic discipline and education.[14] What is especially important about

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right in what I take to be the insight that underlies Darwall's analysis, namely, that goodness for a person is importantly related to the goodness of persons.

[12] Again, I leave out the component of producing morally decent agents. See note 8. I explore the deep connection between autonomy and personal good and the role of parents in simultaneously seeing to it that we fare well and function well in 'Autonomy and Personal Good: Lessons From Frankenstein's Monster' (manuscript). My use of the word 'happy' should not be construed hedonistically. Rather, I use the word merely to connote a positive or flourishing state of existence, however we should best understand what that is for a person.

[13] It is thus an example of what Darwall has recently called a 'valuing activity.' See Darwall, ch. IV. See also Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 8–16, for discussion of how goods differ in kind and of how different modes of valuing are appropriate to different goods.

[14] For exploration of this and related ideas, see Tamar Schapiro, 'What is a Child?' *Ethics* 109 (1999): 715–738, p. 716.



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the sundry acts a good parent undertakes for his child's sake, out of his regard for her value, is that they effectively convey to the child a sense of her worth or value.[15]

The sense of one's worth that good parenting conveys should not be confused with self-esteem. Although some complex connections surely hold between having self-esteem and having a sense of one's worth, the underlying attitudes differ in at least three critical respects. First, whereas self-esteem rests in large measure on an assessment of merit—one's sense of one's own apparent excellence or of what one has accomplished through one's own (seemingly) worthwhile activity—a sense of one's own worth does not properly rest on achievement, either actual or perceived.[16] Instead, a sense of one's worth properly rests only on an accurate perception of one's value, a value one has in common with all persons.[17] Second,

[15] Throughout, I use the terms 'worth' and 'value' interchangeably.

[16] In this regard, the distinction between self-esteem and a sense of one's worth corresponds to the distinction Darwall has drawn between 'appraisal respect' and 'recognition respect.' See Stephen L. Darwall, 'Two Kinds of Respect,' *Ethics* 88 (1977): 36–49. I explore the parallel a bit more in 'Autonomy and Personal Good: Lessons From Frankenstein's Monster.' As Darwall explains the distinction, whereas appraisal respect rests on a person's perceived merit—her apparent possession of features which are excellences of persons, recognition respect, where its object is persons, does not rest on merit and is owed to all persons as such. Kant refers to recognition respect, Darwall says, when he writes of persons that 'Such a being is thus an object of respect and, so far, restricts all (arbitrary) choice.' See Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. L.W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1959), p. 428. Darwall discusses this passage and further connections to Kantian ethics at pp. 45 ff.. A sense of one's worth or value, in my view, inclines one toward recognitional self-respect but also to a variety of other self-directed attitudes, including self-concern. In the text this note accompanies, I have expressed the contrast between a sense of worth and self-esteem in a way that draws on Darwall's suggestions regarding the connection between self-esteem and merit in Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care*, p. 96. See also Rosati, 'Personal Good.'

[17] And, perhaps, with all valuable beings. Complex questions arise, to be sure, about what it means and how it is possible for persons (or other beings) to have value, and theoretical efforts to untangle and defend this essentially Kantian idea have not fared especially well. For recent critical discussion, see Donald Regan, 'The Value of Rational Nature,' *Ethics* 112 (2002): 267–91. See also David Sussman, 'The Authority of Humanity,' *Ethics* 113 (2003): 350–366, replying to Regan. I make no attempt here to address these questions.



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whereas self-esteem admits of degrees and can properly be enhanced by one's own activities and efforts at self-improvement, or diminished by one's own failures and faults, a sense of one's worth is not something to be earned or forfeited. It is an internalized apprehension of a value inhering in oneself, rather than a response to one's assessment of how one stacks up relative to certain external standards. A sense of one's worth can, to be sure, be weaker or stronger. When incorrectly rooted or confused with self-esteem, it can also be inflated, as in the thought of the egotist or of the high achiever that 'I am worth more than anyone else.' But it cannot be more or less deserved. Finally, whereas self-esteem seems to be something one feels, a sense of one's own worth is best understood, I suspect, not as a distinct feeling or emotion at all but as a basic orientation one has when parented well. The most ordinary way in which it manifests itself is in the absence of doubt that one is entitled to be cared for or loved, and what it involves is therefore most conspicuous, and most debilitating, when it is absent.[18]

[18] My notion of a sense of one's worth has affinities with the notion of self-respect. For helpful discussion and useful references to the substantial literature on self-respect, see Robin S. Dillon, 'How to Lose Your Self-Respect,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1992): 125–139, 'Respect and Care: Toward Moral Integration,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1992): 105–131, and 'Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political,' *Ethics* 107 (1997): 226–249. Like Dillon, I have found Darwall's distinction, in 'Two Kinds of Respect,' helpful in isolating the notion I take to be of most interest. And my characterization of a sense of one's value or worth comes close to Dillon's characterization of self-respect: 'reflection on fine-grained descriptions of self-respecting individuals urges that self-respect is not a discrete entity but is rather a complex of multiply layered and interpenetrating phenomena that compose a certain way of being in the world, a way of being whose core is a deep appreciation of one's morally significant worth.' Dillon, 'Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political,' p. 228. Dillon in fact distinguishes a number of senses of self-respect, and corresponding ways of losing it. The sense of worth that interests me seems most closely related to what Dillon calls 'recognition self-respect.' As Dillon, drawing on Darwall, describes it, recognition respect 'is a matter of taking appropriate account of the fact that something is a person. It involves (a) recognizing that something is a person; (b) appreciating that persons as such have intrinsic moral value; (c) understanding that the fact that this being is a person morally constrains our actions in connection with her; and (d) acting or being disposed to act only in fitting ways out of that recognition, appreciation,



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I am, in fact, tempted to describe what a child acquires in acquiring a sense of her worth as a piece of knowledge. Insofar as it is properly so described, when parents behave in ways that communicate to the child a sense of her own value, they operate not only as caretakers but as moral teachers, for they impart an important bit of self-knowledge that is itself a bit of moral knowledge.[19] Those who maintain that nothing but states of affairs have value will no doubt insist that a sense of one's worth, even assuming that it involves a belief in one's worth, couldn't possibly constitute an item of knowledge. Indeed, they will deny having any belief in their own value or worth, however much they might actually feel loved and enjoy feeling loved.

Defending the idea that we have a piece of knowledge in having a sense of our worth would obviously require far more argument than I could possibly undertake to give here. But let me offer a quick observation and then a qualification. Whatever one thinks is the correct account of the metaphysics of value, it would misdescribe both our psychology—our inner experience—and our ordinary moral convictions to deny that, as a general matter, people tend to believe that they have value and that other people do, too. We well appreciate the difference between merely being loved and being worthy of love and our grasp of the distinction shows itself in common emotional states. People who are seriously depressed,

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and understanding. *Recognition self-respect*, then, is responding appropriately to one's own personhood.' See Dillon, 'How to Lose Your Self-Respect,' p. 133. Still, a sense of one's worth is not, I think, the same thing as self-respect. Rather it is an orientation that underpins a great many attitudes one can take toward oneself—love, sympathy, and concern, as well as respect. I suspect that Dillon's characterization of self-respect may incorporate too theoretical a view of one's worth, a view that ordinary agents may lack and that many otherwise self-respecting agents might reject, however mistakenly.

[19] This claim depends, of course, on the truth of the claim that persons have value. Those who reject this idea will need to account for features of moral discourse that presuppose that persons do have value, as well as for the basic psychological phenomena connected to talk about a person's value. As I go on to explain, people certainly tend to see themselves and those they care about as having value, and a host of psychological maladies reflect a basic absence or erosion of a person's sense of her own worth. I discuss the latter point in 'Autonomy and Personal Good: Lessons From Frankenstein's Monster.' See also Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care*, p. 6.



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for example, may not be ignorant of the fact that they are loved by others, they just do not feel worthy of that love; they feel worthless, that they are not appropriate objects of others' care or concern.

In any case, and this is the qualification, although I will continue to talk about it as a piece of knowledge or information, nothing I shall say requires that a sense of one's worth amount to an item of knowledge; it is enough that the orientation I mean to point to is familiar. Think of it, if you prefer, as a sort of confidence akin to the kind of confidence Wittgenstein describes us as having that we are not now dreaming, say, or that there really are hands in front of me typing on this keyboard.[20] Like those other items of belief in which we have such confidence, it is among the 'hinges' on which a great deal turns. For as we will see later, a sense of one's worth, whether it is a bit of self-knowledge or not, helps to prepare the way for broader and deeper forms of self-knowledge, and in this and other ways, it plays a critical role in preference-formation.

Of course, the information about our worth that good parenting conveys to us is not transmitted in the same way as, say, facts about the natural sciences or history. Instead, we acquire this knowledge in much the way that we acquire knowledge of other valuable things. We learn the value of a piece of sculpture, for instance, not by being told that it is a valuable or important work of art. Instead, we receive training or at least relevant exposure—in particular, exposure to how others respond to its value—and this training or exposure enables us to come to grasp and appreciate the value that it has. Consider the debate in recent years about how properly to clean Michelangelo's David so as to preserve its aesthetic value. Participants to this debate both expressed, through their actions and arguments, the value of that work of art and modeled how properly to respond to it. Through the acts our parents perform in nurturing us, providing for our needs and so on, they likewise model how we are to be valued. In seeing to our needs and helping us to make our way in the world, our parents prepare us to grasp or sense our own value, and we absorb the information their actions convey, more or less unconsciously, through our interactions with them.

[20] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1972/1969).



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## Raising Autonomy Agents

In responding appropriately to the value of their children, parents respond to the value of a special kind of being. To respond appropriately to the value of a child is not merely to recognize that she has physiological needs as a particular sort of organism but to recognize also that she is a person, a being with the capacity for autonomous agency who must eventually shape her identity and her good on her own. Since good parenting is guided by a regard for the child as a being with the capacity to become an autonomous agent, much parenting consists, unsurprisingly, in training a child in autonomous functioning. As a preliminary matter, parents must help their children to develop those skills that provide the necessary foundations for genuine self-governance. To begin with the obvious, they must help their children learn to control their impulses and delay gratification. Unless they succeed in their efforts, their children will be unable to evolve from wantonness to agency or to develop the capacities for the long-term intentional action and planning that we associate with full autonomous functioning. Good parents impart these and other 'skills in living' not only by correcting and structuring the child's behavior but by behaving themselves in ways that model these skills for the child. For instance, children learn to control their anger and express it in constructive ways, at least in part, by watching how their angry parents manage their own feelings. As part and parcel of their efforts to guide their children in becoming autonomous, parents will also allow their children to practice at being autonomous by engaging in more or less supervised experimentation, appropriate to their developmental stage.[21]

Just what our autonomy consists in remains a perplexing question, and I can't undertake to develop an account of autonomy here. We needn't, in any case, settle the question for present purposes. Whatever the proper analysis of autonomy might turn out to be, autonomous functioning will require the successful exercise of those capacities that render us self-governing, that help to free us from the immediate grip of our desires so that we are not simply moved by whichever first-order desire is presently strongest. The relevant capacities are no doubt varied but almost certainly include these: the capacity to engage in self-reflection and so to understand, to varying degrees, what we are doing; to exercise imagination and so to envision possibilities; to reason and be moved

[21] For related ideas, see Schapiro.



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by reasons and so to look for warrant for our actions; and to form and act on higher-order desires and so to guide our own conduct by what we reflectively support.[22]

[22] The idea that certain motives and capacities are either constitutive of or at least essential to agency has been suggested by a number of writers. Velleman has argued, that intrinsic desires for self-understanding and self-awareness, or more recently, an inclination toward autonomy, are constitutive of agency. See J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection*, and 'The Possibility of Practical Reason,' *Ethics* 106 (1996): 694–726. In *Practical Reflection*, Velleman argues that the motives constitutive of agency are intrinsic desires for self-understanding and self-awareness, but he shifts to talk about an inclination toward autonomy in 'The Possibility of Practical Reason.' See J. David Velleman, 'Deciding How to Decide,' in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, ed. Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 41, n. 20, on why these formulations are supposed to come to roughly the same thing. Michael Smith has argued that a disposition toward coherence is constitutive of rational agency. See Michael Smith, 'A Theory of Freedom and Responsibility,' in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, pp. 293–320. Richard Brandt has argued that humans happen to have standing desires for their own long-term happiness and for desires that are consonant with reality, and these standing desires enable them to act (against a present desire) in favor of their longer-term interests. See Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 156–57 and 85. See also Rosati, 'Brandt's Notion of Therapeutic Agency', for discussion of this aspect of Brandt's views. Finally, Rawls has argued that the possession of certain moral powers (the capacity for an effective sense of justice and the capacity to construct, revise, and rationally pursue a conception of the good) and corresponding highest-order interests in exercising them is constitutive of persons on a Kantian ideal and renders persons autonomous in the original position. See Rawls, 'Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,' p. 525. Numerous philosophers have discussed the importance of capacities for self-reflection and the formation of higher order desires, while taking differing positions on their relation to free will or autonomy. See Gerald Dworkin, 'Acting Freely,' *Nous* 4 (1970): 367–83; Harry Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,' *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5–20; Wright Neely, 'Freedom and Desire,' *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 32–54; and Gary Watson, 'Free Agency,' *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 205–220. See also Charles Taylor, 'What is Human Agency?' in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. VII; and Sarah Buss, 'Autonomy Reconsidered,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XIX (1994): 95–121.



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Developing and exercising these capacities is no small task, and so if we are to exercise them successfully and function well as autonomous agents, we must presumably have some motivation to do so. It seems plausible to think that autonomous agents are intrinsically motivated to persist as the sort of creature they are; as a consequence, we would expect them to develop standing desires or dispositions to exercise those capacities the successful exercise of which renders them autonomous.[23] These considerations suggest that beyond cultivating those 'autonomy making capacities' that are the basic preconditions for the development of deeper forms of self-governance, parents must also foster development of the 'autonomy making motives.' Parents can presumably nurture or squelch motivational tendencies to be self-reflective, to reason and act for reasons, to consider the possibilities before acting, and so on, much as they can help to develop a child's capacity for self-control.

We have been considering the character of good parenting with an eye to its effects on preference-formation in relation to our good. But it might seem that this fact about us—that we are autonomous agents as well as creatures of a certain biological type—means only that valuing a person requires that one show respect for her autonomy as well as concern for her welfare. And so one might think that this fact has little bearing on our original inquiry, but I believe that would be a mistake. Respect and care are indeed distinct attitudes one can take toward persons, and parents owe their children both respect and concern. But the relationships that hold among respect, care, and our good are more complex than it might seem. Our being autonomous agents bears not only on the respect that is owed us but on the very nature of our good.[24] For

[23] We find expression of something akin to the idea that autonomous agents want to persist as such in John Stuart Mill's famous observation that a discontented Socrates wouldn't consent to become a happy fool. See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979). The other desires or dispositions we acquire, in having a motive to persist as autonomous agents, will likely be of greater or lesser strength, depending upon an individual's upbringing, aptitude, and personality.

[24] Darwall seems to rely on a fairly sharp distinction between care and respect in his efforts to address what he calls the 'scope problem,' which was first raised for desire theories by Mark Overvold. See, e.g., his discussion of the case of Sheila in Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care*, pp. 43–45. According to Darwall, what is good for a person is what one ought to want for her insofar as one cares for her. Both care and respect are attitudes toward a person, but whereas care responds to her as a being with a welfare, respect responds to her as a being with dignity. Darwall might



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one thing, we clearly fair better to the extent that both others and we ourselves treat us with due respect. More deeply, though, what is good for us must presumably fit the sort of creature we are, and since we are beings with a capacity for autonomy, our good must fit us as autonomous agents. It would seem to follow that for creatures like us, important connections must exist between our well-being and our autonomy and, therefore, between what our parents must do to ensure that we fare well and that we function well.

One such connection takes us back to our consideration of how good parenting conveys to the child a sense of her own worth. Just as having a stable sense of one's value seems indispensable to leading a good life, so it seems indispensable to autonomous functioning. The most basic way to see this, I think, is to consider the fact that the vast bulk of the actions a person performs are self-regarding, though the balance between self- and other-regarding actions may vary at different points in a person's life. We feed, clean, and clothe ourselves; we pursue our hobbies and pass time with our friends; we educate ourselves and try to pursue work that we will love. In the ordinary case, we take ourselves to have reason—to be justified—in performing these acts. Arguably what best explains how we could take ourselves to have reason to act in self-regarding ways—and, thereby, how we could autonomously so act—is our sense of our own worth, something we ordinarily do not question.[25] Indeed, it is just at those times when a person feels worthless, as we see in cases of severe depression, that she sees little reason for doing anything, least of all for herself. In the latter cases,

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suggest, in response to my remarks in the text, that among that things one ought to want for a person insofar as one cares for her is that she be treated with respect. This would be to count respect among the substantive goods for a person, while treating care as part of the analysis of goodness for a person. Because I find reason to doubt Darwall's analysis of welfare (see note 11), I'm not inclined to accept this response. I merely register here my sense that the interactions among care, respect, and welfare stand in need of much fuller exploration.

[25] A number of philosophers have recently suggested that the normativity of welfare depends on the value of persons, that what is good for us matters only if we matter. See especially J. David Velleman, 'A Right of Self-Termination?' *Ethics* 109 (1999): 606–620 and Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care*. See also Anderson. I here make the related point that one wouldn't see oneself as having reason to do anything, at least that part of what we do that is self-regarding, without a sense that one matters.



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as well as in many cases commonly regarded as paradigmatic instances of failed or diminished autonomy, the problem seems rooted in a lack of adequate self-regard. A sense of one's worth thus seems to be indispensable both to living good lives and to autonomous functioning.[26] By treating us in ways that impart a sense of our worth, our parents see to our development as happy *and* autonomous agents.

Adequate development of the autonomy making motives and capacities ordinarily requires many years of effort. Training in autonomous functioning must, in any case, go a step further. It is not enough that children learn to control their impulses or to exercise their reason and imagination. To develop well, children must not only be stopped from acting in certain ways and taught how to exercise self-control; they must also be given positive reasons for acting in some ways rather than others. One might doubt that parents need to supply reasons for acting on the grounds that children will themselves have desires which will supply them with reasons. But even if our desires or, better, the fact that we desire something, could supply us with reasons, recall that our desires or preferences are the source of the practical problem we face. As already observed, the task we each confront in living a life arises because we have many conflicting desires, desires that may pull us toward different life paths and different future selves. Moreover, not just any desires or preferences will supply positive reasons for acting; that is precisely why we wonder how our preferences ought to be formed and why we would seek a theory of preference-formation in the first place. If we are successfully to make our way in the world we will require some means of reflecting

[26] See 'Autonomy and Personal Good: Lessons From Frankenstein's Monster' for more extended discussion and defense of this claim. Paul Benson has made an apparently similar claim about the relationship between autonomy and self-worth. See Paul Benson, 'Free Agency and Self-Worth,' *Journal of Philosophy* 91 (1994): 650–668. But Benson appears to mean something very different by a sense of self-worth. For Benson, it is evidently a sense of one's competence to respond to the various demands one thinks others could appropriately make. So whereas I have in mind a sense of one's own inherent worth or value, Benson's sense of self-worth has as its focus a feature of one's status in relation to others and to standards of conduct. A person could regard herself as competent in the way that interests Benson, while lacking a sense of worth as I understand it. Perhaps both senses of self-worth must be present if a person is to function autonomously, but I leave the question whether that is so for another time.



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on and ordering our preferences, and this must amount to more than just opting for some desires over others, more than just acceding to those that happen to be strongest. Rather, we will require some framework for ordering desires—ordinarily, a set of rules, principles, and basic commitments—and such a framework will shape the formation of our preferences, extinguishing some desires, inducing others, and enabling us to settle conflicts among them. In these ways, the framework will itself favor certain preferences over others and, when well constructed, it will do so in a way that affords positive reasons for acting.

Insofar as our capacity for autonomy consists in the capacity to act for reasons, our ability to function autonomously partly depends on our having some such framework for ourselves. Since children cannot develop a framework for shaping their preferences all on their own, a critical part of how parents aid in the development of autonomous agency is by giving their children such a framework until they have developed the ability to decide for themselves what rules, principles, and commitments to embrace. Early on and well into adolescence, our parents must not only structure our time and activities; they must also directly supply us with rules and principles and discipline us to conform to them. In so doing, they shape the formation of our preferences rather directly. Parents commonly provide a framework for their children through a variety of devices, making use of extended family and of a host of existing social structures, including religious and educational institutions and moral and political associations. In so doing, they provide their children with a provisional or 'working' conception of their good and a provisional 'self-ideal'; they give their children a life to live and someone to be until they are able to choose a life and form an ideal for themselves.[27]

[27] This may well amount to endorsing the ideal they have been given. See Connie S. Rosati, *Self-Invention and the Good* (doctoral dissertation, 1989) on the importance of a self-ideal. See also Rosati, 'Persons, Perspectives, and Full-Information Accounts of the Good' and 'Naturalism, Normativity, and the Open Question Argument.' For related ideas, see Christine Korsgaard's discussion of practical identities in, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also David Velleman's discussion of a person's self-conception in J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).



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## Attending to Individuality

Although our parents must give us someone to be they obviously cannot make us into whatever sort of person they might like. We each come into the world with a basic physical and psychological makeup, and the bundle of features we each possess not only creates opportunities for but sets limits to our future development. This brings us to the third sense in which good parenting is guided by a regard for the child: it is guided by a regard for the individual that she is. Children's preferences cannot be shaped in just any way at all if they are both to flourish and to function well. After all, they may not have the ability to undertake certain aims and pursuits. Or they may have the ability, but given their personality, circumstances, and capacity for change, they may never find those aims or pursuits rewarding. When children are pressed into pursuing unachievable aims or engaging in activities they find unrewarding, they tend to lead less satisfying lives and find themselves unable to act in the whole-hearted manner characteristic of fully autonomous engagement in the central activities of one's life.[28] Thoughtful parents attend to their child's personality and circumstances and will be guided in what they do for their child partly by the child herself. They will take notice of their child's strengths and weaknesses; they will be alert to what their child finds stimulating or frustrating. Of course, while good parents must be guided by what the child herself enjoys, they must also steer her away from those things that she may enjoy but must learn to shun, as well as toward those she must learn to enjoy (or at least not to mind). Still, in having a regard for their child as a distinct individual, parents seek to foster their child's interest in activities that do or can, with the proper effort, 'suit' or 'fit' her.

In this last way, a parent's acts on behalf of his child most conspicuously and directly promote her good. For a person's good would seem to consist, intuitively speaking, in just those things that suit or fit her. If this is right, then an analysis of what it is for something to be good for a person ought to elucidate this normative or reason-generating relation of fit or suitability; we would then understand, to return to an earlier aside, the nature of 'benefit.'[29]

[28] See Harry Frankfurt, 'Identification and Wholeheartedness,' in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 159–76

[29] I explore the notion of fit while attempting to spell out the *good for* relation in 'Personal Good.'



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Although a parent most conspicuously promotes his child's good by attending to her as a distinct individual, he also sees to her welfare, though more indirectly, by having due regard for her agent-neutral value and her capacity for autonomy. As we have seen, in having regard for the child as a valuable being, a parent helps to impart information and an orientation critical both to flourishing and good functioning. And in having a regard for the child as a budding autonomous agent, a parent helps to equip her to build a life.

## Normative Implications

I hope that this account of good parenting will strike you as just so much common sense. As mundane as these considerations may sound, however, they have quite interesting implications for our efforts to theorize about preference-formation. A theory of preference-formation has both normative and explanatory import. I shall focus on the normative implications of the approach I have taken to laying the groundwork for a theory of preference-formation—the strategy of looking to how a person might come to be an effective former of preferences.

Thus far I have suggested that insofar as parents succeed in the goal of raising their children to be happy, autonomous agents, they thereby raise their children to be good regulators of their own future preference-formation. Let me stress that in making this suggestion, I do not mean to claim that well brought up children will infallibly form self-regarding preferences the satisfaction of which advances their welfare. I want to claim only that however one analyzes what it is for something to be good for a person, and whatever one might plausibly think comprises an individual's substantive good, satisfaction of a well-parented person's self-regarding preferences is, on the whole, more likely to advance and less likely to undermine her welfare. Of course, I have been supposing that effective parenting produces persons who regulate well their future preference-formation. But I do not mean thereby to be making a stipulative claim; rather, my claim is partly conceptual and normative, partly empirical, and I will offer further support for it as we proceed.

The normative import of the foregoing account of good parenting might be expressed, at least as a first approximation, in the following way: properly formed preferences are those preferences that a person would form for herself at a time insofar as she viewed herself and her situation from the standpoint of an ideal



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parent. What this would mean is that properly formed preferences are those a person would acquire or retain were she guided by a regard for her agent-neutral value, by a regard for her status as an autonomous agent, and by a regard for herself as the individual that she is. In being well-brought up, I am suggesting, a person will tend to deliberate, choose, and act *as if* guided in this way. But of course, she does not do so precisely by contemplating her actual position from the standpoint of an ideal parent. Nor does she, at least not in the ordinary case, think to herself, 'What honors me as the valuable being I am?' or 'What would promote my functioning as an autonomous agent?', though she may well ask what suits her. Rather, she comes to be guided as if she had adopted the standpoint of an ideal parent by virtue of possessing a certain orientation toward herself and by the operation of the complex set of motives and capacities that good parenting has fostered in her. To add a twist to Freud's insight about the superego, she has, in effect, internalized the parental standpoint. This does not mean that she has internalized her parents' particular substantive views about a good life—their values, religious beliefs, and such—though she may have done that, too. It also does not mean that she treats herself in the particular ways parents treat a child, since she is obviously no longer in the condition that warrants and, indeed, calls for the special care and guidance parents give to children.[30] Rather, she has internalized, and so, in effect, has adopted with respect to herself, the normative stance toward children that makes for effective parenting. It is worth considering in more detail why having internalized this standpoint would produce a tendency to form preferences satisfaction of which is more likely to yield a life good for the person whose preferences they are.

I indicated earlier that the many acts a loving parent performs out of a regard for the value of his child and on her behalf effectively convey to the child a sense of her own value. In raising us well, our parents are guided by our value and impart a sense of our value which guides us in turn. Now having a regard for one's own value is not itself having a regard for one's welfare, and yet it is far from irrelevant to whether one fares well. Compare responding to the value of a work of art. When we appreciate the value of a work of art, we endeavor to protect it and preserve its aesthetic integrity, though of course a work of art does not have a welfare. Persons, unlike paintings, do have a welfare, and what is good for persons is not unrelated to the goodness of persons. When we

[30] See Schapiro.



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appreciate the value of a person, we endeavor to protect her and to preserve her integrity as the valuable creature she is. This will mean, among other things, seeing to her good functioning as well as to her basic needs, and while her good does not consist just in her good functioning or in satisfaction of her basic needs, both are critical to whether in fact she fares well. Through their experience of being cared for, persons learn to grasp and respond appropriately to their own value, and they learn to act successfully in ways that tend to their benefit by seeing to their needs and supporting or at least not undermining their successful functioning.

A person's sense of worth, I have claimed, most ordinarily manifests itself in a basic absence of doubt that she is loveable, but it manifests itself in other important ways as well. First, it shows itself in a certain resilience, an ability better to handle what life might throw her way. In acknowledging our value and in providing us with a sense of our worth, our parents foster in us an emotional stability that provides a firm basis from which to act. Our having a sense of our worth is not only essential to our flourishing, it is also essential to our autonomous functioning. Insofar as autonomous action depends on our authority to speak and act for ourselves, that authority depends not merely on our being in an especially good position to know ourselves and our good, but on our nature as beings whose worth grounds their authority to act and justifies them in acting on their own behalf. A person's sense of her worth better enables her to fare well and to function well and so to manage well even when life does not go as she might wish.[31]

Second, a person's sense of her worth reveals itself in her having both the tendency and capacity to resist those who disrespect her or who would disregard her needs and interests.[32] She will tend to prefer the company of those who value her or at least do not leave her feeling diminished or in doubt about her basic worth. More generally, she will tend to prefer not only people but those activities and pursuits engagement with which supports or at least does not erode her sense of her own worth. This is obviously not to say that

[31] It helps to equip her, borrowing Aristotle's words, to 'bear[] with resignation many great misfortunes.' Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), 1100b.

[32] I have already suggested that persons who have a sense of their own worth will manifest self-respect. As Dillon has emphasized, persons with a sense of self-respect will also be disposed to certain emotional responses to their treatment by others, such as a sense of indignation or resentment of others' disregard of them. See Dillon, 'Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political,' p. 230.



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she will shut out or ignore legitimate criticisms or that she will not be stung by negative remarks or assessments of her failings. But experience suggests that a person's ability to take in and respond to legitimate criticism is greater when she has a stable sense of her own value. Greater, too, is her ability to take risks and to recover and learn from her failed experiments.

More generally, a person's sense of her worth manifests itself in her acquired habits of looking out for herself, of seeing to her own needs, of treating herself with care. She will naturally prefer those things that she can see as consistent with her needs and interests. None of this should be mistaken for being self-centered or narcissistic. Nothing in her orientation or habits of self-concern preclude her caring for others. Indeed, having been cared for and having learned how to respond to her own value, it is plausible to think that she will be better able to appreciate and respond appropriately to the value of others. The fact that being the product of effective parenting should have such moral effects in addition to its effects on a child's own flourishing and functioning should not surprise us. In being guided by apprehension of a person's worth, preference-formation, whether effected by us or by our parents acting for us, is guided by a foundational moral value, and this is so whether or not the preferences a person forms are themselves peculiarly moral.[33]

Preference-formation will be guided, too, by a person's status as an autonomous being. Parents attempting to raise a child have as a principal task creating an autonomous agent—they must shape a self-governing being out of a mass of impulse and desire—and so much of their effort is directed at developing the autonomy making motives and capacities. The person who has been well-raised, whose parents have succeeded in this process of shaping, now has a set of internalized motives and capacities at her disposal. Her preference-formation will reflect this and will, as a consequence, tend to redound to her benefit in a number of ways.

First, her preferences, at least as regards the major aims, undertakings, and relationships in her life, will have been formed in the course of ongoing operation of her capacities for imagination, reason, and reflection. What that means is that she will tend to form preferences for those possibilities attraction to which survives her

[33] This is most obviously the view of those who accept broadly Kantian approaches in ethics. But some suitable notion of the value of persons (which is not to say of persons alone) is arguably critical to ethics in general and so would have to be a part of any plausible moral theory.



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imaginative reflection and consideration in light of reasons. Her 'native preferences,' those arising from the autonomy making motives, are, we might say harnessed in shaping her preferences. Second, since her preferences are formed through and in keeping with the exercise of her autonomy making motives and capacities, we have reason to predict that acting on them will tend to support or at least not undermine her autonomy. Finally, notice that the self-control a person achieves through the operation of these motives and capacities is itself a form of self-concern. The person who effectively governs her own choices and conduct protects herself, at least to some degree, not merely from the outward consequences of acting on unreflective desires or impulses, but from disruption of her efforts to live out her self-ideal and her conception of her good.

Among the things a person will consider in forming her desires are the facts about herself and her circumstances, at least as she knows them at the time. A person ordinarily comes to know herself partly as a consequence of her parents coming to know her as the individual she is and helping to foster her self-awareness. But in addition, effective parents teach their children how and when to draw on their feelings as a source of self-knowledge. They teach their children to exploit effectively the natural mechanisms that operate in the formation of desires and preferences—the feedback we receive in the form of states such as pleasure or satisfaction and pain or frustration, feedback that requires interpretation in light of a person's features and circumstances.[34]

It is important to appreciate the role that inculcating a person's sense of her own worth plays in facilitating the growth of

[34] My discussion at this point was prompted by Phillip Pettit, who I here thank for pressing the question of how my account interacts with what he called 'internal norms of preference formation.' I want to say just a bit here to address his question more directly than I have in the text. I am uncertain which norms count as those internal to preference formation. If we understand them to be, or to include, norms of consistency, transitivity, responsiveness to information, and so on, then surely effective parents will shape their children's preferences in keeping with those norms; to do otherwise would, for obvious reasons, subvert the aim of producing happy, autonomous agents. The internal norms may also include ones connected to the natural mechanisms that seem to be at work in preference formation. I have tried to make clear how effective parenting facilitates successful exploitation of these mechanisms in our efforts to achieve good lives. I hope to have said enough here and in the text to allay any worries that my account may be in tension with such internal norms of



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self-knowledge. People who lack a stable, appropriate sense of their own worth, who are deeply insecure, notoriously do not see themselves or their circumstances accurately, and they have difficulty accurately gauging what they want and feel.[35] They are less able to recognize when their perceptions are distorted, and they lack the confidence to form and trust their own judgments and self-assessments. They also have a diminished ability to envision genuine possibilities for themselves or to see obvious options as within their reach. People who lack a sense of their own worth tend to be especially defensive and sensitive in the face of legitimate criticism or too willing to acquiesce in the face of unjust criticism; either way they may miss out on the kind of self-learning and the opportunities for growth and change that help to make for success in living a life. These are rough, common sense generalities, of course; some people who lack a sense of their own worth engage in self-scrutiny and self-transformation for that very reason. But a concentrated effort, a sustained act of will, is involved in what they do that isn't necessary for the person who can, even if with some discomfort or pain, simply face the facts about herself.

Insofar as these generalities hold, we should not be surprised that preference-formation under conditions in which a person lacks a basic sense of her own worth would regularly lead to departures from her good. For she will tend to overestimate (or underestimate) her faults, to underestimate (or overestimate) her abilities, and to operate with inaccurate perceptions of her circumstances and possibilities. Not equipped to sort out her feelings, not feeling comfortable with herself, she will tend not to take appropriate care or ferret out what matters most to her and will matter most to her over time. When a person has been well-raised and has a firm sense of her own worth, when she has acquired the kind of self-knowledge that good parenting helps to make possible, she will be more likely to form preferences in line with her real feelings and accurate self-perceptions. To that extent, satisfaction of her preferences will be more likely to reflect and advance her good.

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preference formation as may exist. No doubt far more needs to be said, but filling out the details is, I think, work for those whose aim is to construct a theory of preference-formation.

[35] This sort of common sense observation has been explored in some of the literature on self-respect. See Dillon, 'How to Lose Your Self-Respect,' p. 131.



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## Questions

I want to consider briefly certain questions that might be raised about my account of parenting and its effects on preference-formation. These questions chiefly concern ways in which the account may seem incorrect or in need of modification. I turn last to the issue of its incompleteness.

A first question concerns the account of good parenting and whether it accurately distinguishes the parental role from other roles, such as that of a teacher. After all, though I have often made reference to the acts of loving parents, my discussion makes no mention of what may seem critical to ideal parenting, namely, unconditional love for the child.[36] In my view, the role of parent and teacher are not so utterly distinct. It is no accident that we describe teachers as acting and expect them to act 'in loco parentis,' and that means showing regard for the child in the ways a parent ought, at least compatibly with meeting the other demands of the teacher's position and with observing the limits on what a teacher may appropriately do with a child not his or her own. Furthermore, I suspect we think teachers of children ought to have something like unconditional love for their students; they simply ought not to develop the affection and attachment of a parent, since this might (among other difficulties) lead to disruption of the primary caretaking relationship. So I want to insist that good parenting is guided by a regard for the child in all the ways that I have described even if not only 'official' parents or primary caretakers ought to be so guided.

But recognizing that others appropriately guide their interactions with children as effective parents do leaves unaddressed the more basic issue of whether the account stands in need of modification. What then of unconditional love? I suspect that many people view unconditional love as unique or at least essential to the parent-child relationship, and certain apparent counterexamples would seem to support their view. For instance, many believers maintain that God has unconditional love for mankind. But we are not God's children, not literally anyway, and so God's unconditional love would seem to be a counterexample. But God's unconditional love is often said to be for all of 'his children,' and this common form of expression apparently links unconditional love with the specifically parental role. Still, I believe that other examples show that unconditional love is not unique to the parent-child relationship. To be sure,

[36] I am grateful to Christian Piller for pressing this point.



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when I describe the unconditional love I feel for my nieces and nephews, I find myself saying that I love them 'as if they were my own kids'—or, as we say, 'no matter what.' But I love a great many people 'no matter what.' I feel this way about my own parents and siblings, for example, but I would not be at all inclined to say that I love *them* as if they were my own kids.

One might nevertheless urge that unconditional love remains essential. But I doubt this, too. I in no way mean to challenge the claim that parents ought to feel unconditional love for their children, at least assuming some plausible understanding of its 'unconditional' character. In my view, however, a parent's unconditional love for his child is merely the form his appreciation of the child's value takes.[37] It may well be that for reasons having to do with the contingencies of human nature, a parent's apprehension of the value of his child finds expression in unconditional love; and it may also be that for reasons having to due with our human nature, a parent can effectively impart to the child a sense of her own unconditional value only by loving her unconditionally. In these ways, unconditional love might plausibly be essential to effective parenting. But we shouldn't confuse the form in which parents (or others) manifest a regard for the value of children for a distinct condition of good parenting.

Having said all this, let me stress a more basic point in response to this first question, and that is that I have been appealing to an ideal of parenting as a heuristic device.[38] My aim has not been to characterize fully 'the parental role' or the parent-child relationship; it has been to lay some of the groundwork for a theory of preference-formation by studying good parents insofar as they are expert at producing effective preference formers. Unconditional love makes no independent contribution, as far as I can see, to how good parents succeed in this. Even if unconditional love properly motivates a parent's actions on behalf of his child, it isn't what

[37] This is not yet to say that unconditional love just is a regard for the value of the child. See J. David Velleman, 'Love as a Moral Emotion,' *Ethics* 109 (1999): 338–374, for defense of the idea that love is an 'arresting awareness' of value in another person, an awareness that 'arrests our tendencies toward emotional self-protection from another person, tendencies to draw ourselves in and close ourselves off from being affected by him' (360–361).

[38] This response applies, of course, to the next two objections that I consider, but I won't repeat the point. The additional replies I make in the text are compatible with treating the appeal to good parenting as purely heuristic.



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properly guides his actions. So a reference to unconditional love need not figure in an ideal of good parenting, at least insofar as that ideal bears on preference-formation.

A second question concerns whether the account places sufficient normative restrictions on how effective parents are guided. I have claimed that parents must provide their children with a framework of basic rules and principles that provide them with a source of reasons, that give them a life to live and someone to be until they are able to choose for themselves. The natural candidate for this framework would seem to be a parent's own value system or his conception of the good. Yet certain value systems and conceptions of the good seem at odds both with a child's welfare and with the development of her capacity to choose and decide for herself. One might insist that parents can exhibit due regard for their children's well-being and for their status as beings with the capacity for autonomy, only if they refrain from imposing or seeking to inculcate their own values, religious beliefs, and fundamental commitments. It has been suggested to me, for instance, that parents who hold religious views that tend to instill feelings of guilt, shame, or self-loathing must refrain from raising their children to accept those views.[39]

I don't doubt that some value systems and conceptions of the good may be absolutely damaging to children, and others, while not outright damaging, may in various ways impede efforts to raise children who will, as adults, both fare well and function well. Perhaps then one cannot be even an adequate parent while accepting the former sort of value system; and one cannot be an effective parent, in our sense, while endeavoring to inculcate the latter sort of value system.

I am inclined to believe, however, that such value systems and conceptions of the good aside, a great many frameworks may be accepted by parents and employed in raising their children compatibly with having due regard for their value, their capacity for autonomy, and their individuality. In any case, the fact that accepting or imparting certain value systems may be incompatible with effective parenting does not require a modification of the model I have offered. Rather, that fact simply follows as an implication of the model, together with empirical considerations about the effects of raising children with differing sorts of rules and principles. And acknowledging it amounts to recognizing, as we already do, that *we* ought not to adopt certain value systems and

[39] Thanks to Andrew Williams for pressing this line of objection.



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conceptions of the good or to shape our preferences by them—at least not if we want to fare well and function well.

Finally, I have stressed three senses in which effective parents have a regard for the child, but one might remind us that these cannot be the only senses. After all, a parent must have a regard for the child as a prospective occupant of social roles within the community and a regard for her as a prospective moral agent. My account does omit direct examination of the social and moral dimensions of effective parenting. A partial explanation for the omission lies in my focus on the relationship between preference-formation and personal good—that is, an individual's intrinsic, nonmoral good. But the explanation is only partial for our positions as occupants of social roles and as moral agents bear not only on our social and moral obligations, which may be at odds with our good, but on our good itself.

I have nevertheless set to one side consideration of the social and moral dimensions of parenting for the following reason. My aim herein has been to lay some of the groundwork for a theory of preference formation rather than to offer such a theory, and, as just noted, to lay the groundwork for such a theory only insofar as it concerns well-being. Difficult questions exist about the precise ways in which behaving well within social roles and behaving morally benefit an individual, and I have deliberately sought to sidestep these particular complexities in the interest of advancing a more general idea about preference-formation. My suggestion has been that we must look not so much to the nature and value of the objects of preference—though we must consider these things, too—as to the nature and value of the individual whose preferences are at issue. Insofar as that suggestion is correct, it should remain central to our thinking even when we begin to attend—as we must in constructing a full theory of preference-formation—to the individual's position as moral agent and member of society. So attention to these additional dimensions of parenting would augment rather than upset the account I have offered.

What I have said up to this point is not, in any case, wholly unrelated to the social and moral dimensions of effective parenting. The questions of how parents must raise children to equip them for moral and social life and of how their doing so bears on preference-formation merit more direct, philosophical investigation. But while we must be careful not to exaggerate the moral impact of good parenting, as I have described it, I find it plausible to believe, as already suggested, that children who have been well cared for and who have learned to respond to their own value will



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be at least better able to recognize and respond appropriately to other valuable beings. Insofar as parents convey to their child a sense of her worth—a value she has in common with all other persons—they begin to lay the foundations for proper moral conduct and social interactions.

## 'Mind the Gap'

I have been examining the links between good parenting, preference-formation, and personal good. Insofar as my claims and conjectures seem plausible, they help to display some of the sundry connections between what good parents do in seeing to our welfare and in seeing to our development as autonomous agents. By attending to their children's nature and value, effective parents help, in all the ways we have considered, to make their children into more effective formers of their own preferences.

In saying, as I have, that persons who have been well raised will be *more likely* to form preferences the satisfaction of which results in good lives for them, I make note of the residual space that exists between a person's good and the preferences she would form if well raised. Presumably that space exists whether or not one thinks personal good just consists in satisfaction of well-formed and well-ordered preferences, and it exists for a number of reasons.

Before making note of them, we must distinguish this gap from a very different one. This other gap arises because a parent can have a regard for his child in all the ways that I have described, while failing to produce the expected effects. Actual parents, however well they approximate to the ideal we have considered, must work with the children they've got. A child's intellectual capacities and emotional makeup may impede in sundry ways a parent's best efforts; the child may be unable, for instance, to internalize a stable sense of her worth. In such cases, although the child may be better off for having been so raised and may be a better former of preferences than she would otherwise have been, her preferences may still routinely fall far a field from what would, intuitively, benefit her. I have, it seems, presented not only an ideal of parenting but of its effects. Yet these 'ideal effects' are just what should interest us for purposes of theorizing about how preferences ought to be formed—they ought to be formed, I have been suggesting, as if the effects of ideal parenting had been realized. So our real interest at this juncture lies, not with the gap between ideal



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and actual effects of properly guided parenting but with the gap between a person's good and the preferences she would form if *successfully* well-raised.

Even if parenting has achieved its effects, then, even if a person has acquired a firm sense of her worth and is a self-knowing, well-functioning autonomous agent, she may, simply lack critical, nonevaluative information needed to choose well, information that would alter her preferences.[40] And even if a person forms preferences after imaginative reflection and consideration in light of reasons, her actual reflection may just fall short. In addition, an individual may fail to recognize or properly assess the value of the objects of her preferences. Of course, if a successfully well parented person is just as we've imagined, we can reasonably predict that she will, over time, make efforts to compensate for deficiencies in her own reflective capacities by, say, consulting others. We can also reasonably predict that once she acquires critical information she previously lacked, her preferences will undergo a shift toward ones more consonant with her sense of her own worth, more in keeping with her autonomous functioning and with what she knows more generally about herself and her circumstances. We might also predict, though perhaps with somewhat less confidence, that she will learn over time to distinguish worthless from worthwhile pursuits and undertakings. Nevertheless, for all of the reasons we have just considered, and no doubt others besides, satisfaction of a well-raised person's preferences may depart from her good.

Still, by studying the effects of good parenting, we go some important way toward understanding proper preference-formation, even if we require independent theoretical work to close the gap between preference and personal good. Having gone this far, however, we can better understand and explain what has gone wrong at least in many cases of deformed and adaptive preferences and, more generally, in cases in which our preferences intuitively depart from our good. When the problems with people's preferences arise from limited deprivation, like a lack of adequate education, distortions can often be easily remedied.[41] But the

[40] This is, of course, true whether or not one holds an ideal preference or informed-desire theory of welfare.

[41] Martha Nussbaum describes a case involving a village with no reliable supply of clean water. The women had experienced no anger about their physical situation, because they had no recognition that they were malnourished and living in unhealthy conditions. Once adequately



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problems commonly arise from more pervasively adverse material and social conditions. Consider the condition of most men and women in Afghanistan under the Taliban. In many such cases, I want to suggest, the deprivation that leads to malformed preferences may be due not simply to desperate circumstances but, more deeply, to the way in which these alter the prospects for a good upbringing.[42]

We can also better appreciate the appeal of certain theories of welfare in light of their resources for addressing the problems with

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informed about their situation, through government sponsored consciousness raising programs, they began to demand a host of changes. This is just the shift in preference we would expect, a shift toward preferences more consonant with their own value, as well as the value they attach to their children. Nussbaum, p. 69.

[42] Nussbaum describes the case of Vasanti, who stayed in an abusive marriage for a number of years. While disliking her abuse, Nussbaum tells us, she also thought of it as something women simply must tolerate as a part of their role in life once they marry and move into the home of their husbands. Nussbaum, pp. 68–69. We might plausibly explain this case in the following way. Vasanti lives in a culture in which women are not properly valued, and so in being raised, they do not acquire a sense of their own worth but instead are taught that their value is instrumental to the needs of their husbands and children. Moreover, autonomous functioning is not encouraged, and so neither the autonomy making capacities nor the concomitant motives are adequately nurtured. Not having been encouraged to reason and be moved by reasons, not having been encouraged to reflect, not having been stimulated to imagine possibilities, it is no wonder that women like Vasanti may lack a sufficiently critical perspective on their life circumstances and may have trouble envisioning how their circumstances might be better. Whether people are better off for having adjusted their preferences to their limited life prospects is, of course, a complex question. In some cases, we may be inclined to say that a person is better off with her diminished preference scheme; in others, we may judge that the preferences that suit her circumstances deprive her, sadly, of a good life. Whatever we say about a particular case, thinking prospectively, a person arguably fares better if her preferences not adapt, at least not fully, to her difficult circumstances; for she does better to be prepared for the possibility of changed circumstances. Women who illicitly educated girls while the Taliban remained in power presumably took the view that, rather than raise their daughters to accept fully their limited circumstances, they would ready them for a better day. Doing just that, I would suggest, is in keeping with the foregoing account of good parenting and its relation to preference-formation and personal good.



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our actual preferences.[43] Consider informed-desire theories, which identify a person's good with what satisfies her informed desires. These theories of welfare rightly stress that we often need far more information than we may have if we are to form preferences satisfaction of which enhances our lives. Fuller information surely would go some way toward offsetting the conditions that lead to deformed, adaptive, or otherwise problematic preferences. But perhaps the most significant information we require concerns ourselves. Unsurprisingly, self-knowledge especially well equips a person to form preferences for those things she can well live with. Unfortunately, self-knowledge can be especially elusive; our actual upbringings—and both our idiosyncratic and shared psychologies—can make it especially difficult to acquire. Any plausible 'reality requirement' on preference-formation would surely include such information, as well as information about a person's character as an autonomous agent, and this may partly explain the appeal of informed-desire theories.[44]

One piece of information informed-desire views, at least as forms of naturalism, must preclude is information about a person's own worth. To be sure, they may include facts about how an individual's life is affected when she has a stable sense of her own worth, but for all the accounts say, that sort of knowledge plays no special role in the formation of preferences. This omission may help to explain the attraction of some sort of 'objective value requirement,' even if one finds perfectionism or objective list theories otherwise unappealing. Theories of welfare that adopt such a requirement would maintain that satisfaction of a person's preferences enhances her life only insofar as she prefers those things that have genuine value.[45] Attention to and recognition of

[43] I do not mean to suggest that all welfare theorists see themselves as addressing these problems, though proponents of preference or desire theories of welfare surely do.

[44] I borrow the term 'reality requirement' from Sumner, pp. 158–65, where he contrast a reality requirement with what he calls an 'objective value requirement.'

[45] As Sumner explains, an objective value requirement takes one of two basic forms, depending on whether welfare is thought to have a subjective component. See Ibid., pp. 163–166. The first form holds that a person benefits only from satisfaction of her preferences for objective values, and she benefits regardless of whether she finds engagement with those values satisfying. The second adopts a hybrid approach, maintaining that a person benefits only from satisfying engagement with objective values.



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those things that have real worth surely would help to shape more beneficial preferences. For the achievement of a good life does seem to depend on engagement with objective values—most critically, on engagement with one's own value as a person.[46]

## Conclusion

I have relied heavily throughout this essay on an ideal of parenting, an ideal that I acknowledge not everyone will accept. But it is an ideal, I want to insist, that matches the sort of creature that we are, and so what it might suggest about preference-formation in turn will tend better to match the sort of good that must be ours as creatures of this kind. I have not attempted to offer a theory of preference-formation, and what I have said will not by itself answer a great many questions that remain. I have not attempted to address the broader roles of information or of objective values in the formation of preferences, for instance, and I have not attempted to address complex questions about the place of our moral and social upbringing. My suggestion has simply been that efforts to construct a theory of preference-formation should be guided by what guides effective formers of our preferences, namely, attention to the nature and value of persons.

[46] The difficulty arises when proponents of objective value requirements attend only to the value of the objects of preferences and not to the value of the preferring individual. Of course, some who reject the idea that persons have value also reject the notion of anything being 'good for' a person in favor of the idea of 'good occurring in the life of' a person. See Thomas Hurka, "Good' and 'Good For,'' *Mind* 96 (1987): 71–73 and Donald H. Regan, 'Against Evaluator Relativity: A Response to Sen,' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12(1983): 89–132. In a more recent essay, in which he criticizes attempts to show the value of rational nature, Regan suggests that Mooreans can accept a picture that comes pretty close to what 'good for' theorists have in mind. See Regan, 'The Value of Rational Nature.' For his most recent discussion of 'good for,' see Donald H. Regan, 'Why Am I My Brother's Keeper?' in R. Jay Wallace, Phillip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith, ed., *Reason and Value: Themes From the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).



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