



## WHY PARENT TOGETHER?

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper offers an account of co-parenthood according to which co-parents are parent and child to one another. The paper begins by reviewing extant theories of the value of being a parent, to see whether the value of co-parenthood is reducible to this. Finding that it is not, I briefly elaborate a theory of parenthood on which parents are those who create persons. Using Aristotle's four causes as a helpful prism, I outline how parents are the cause of their child, and how in causing a child together co-parents become parent and child to one another. For instance, since parents create children by offering themselves as models to be copied, co-parents should enjoy the best type of friendship with one another, each treating the other's flourishing as a human person as their end. I suggest that co-parenthood contains parenthood virtually, that the co-parents' love of their child is a manifestation of their love for one another, that the teleological fulfilled state of the friendship between parent and child exists in the friendship of co-parents.*

**Keywords:** Aristotle; co-parent; family ethics; parent; solo-parent.

## Introduction

It seems that there is some value, for the parent, in having a co-parent. It seems that this value must be something other than utility of the most basic kind; that financial costs and household chores are split. The value of such things is generic, it could easily be substituted by a financial windfall or hired help. What is the special value of the co-parental relationship? What distinctive contribution to human flourishing does having and being a co-parent make?

One way of answering this question would be to reduce the value of being a co-parent to the value of being a parent. Perhaps having a co-parent is valuable just because it allows one to attain more easily, reliably, or completely, the value involved in parenting—something very valuable. I argue against this type of answer by reviewing the extant theories of why parenting is valuable for the parent. I show how, on these theories, the value of parenting is just as accessible to a solo-parent as a co-parent.

If the value of having a co-parent is not reducible to the value found in being a parent, then close attention to the nature of the co-parenting relationship—scant in the philosophical literature (Cutas and Hohll 2021)—will be needed to discern its value. Since co-parents are those who parent with another, no such account could be entirely agnostic about the nature of parenting. So, I outline my own theory of parenting; parenting is the action that aims to create a person. I then offer an account of co-parenthood on which co-parents are those who stand in relation to one another as both parent and child—that for A to be the co-parent of B is for A to be both the parent and the child of B. I show how, in creating a child together, co-parents take on the goals of creating, and being created by, one another. The co-parental relationship is, in the ideal case, the perfection or completion of the parent-child relationship, the model to which it aspires, in which the child has been brought to maturity and reciprocates the person-creating action of their parent as their now-equal.

The question of the value of the co-parental relationship has some social importance given the growth of solo-parents, those who make the intentional decision to become parents by themselves (as distinct from single-parents, those who find themselves parenting alone due to bereavement, abandonment, etc.). Solo-parents have some media profile (Brockes 2018; Roberts 2019) and online support communities (“Single Mother’s by Choice Forum” 2019; “Choice Moms Discussion Boards” 2019). The reports of the United Kingdom’s Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority give some idea of the popularity of solo-parenting. In 2019, 2% of those who undertook *in vitro* fertilization registered as

having no partner, 1,470 people. In the same year, 18% of those who underwent *in utero* insemination with donor sperm registered as having no partner, 1,027 people (“Fertility Treatment 2019: Trends and Figures” 2021). One might also note the report of the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Justice that, in 2016, 16.3% of adoption orders were issued to sole applicants, 951 people (MoJ 2019).

The focus of this paper is axiological (value, good) rather than normative (ought, obligation). So, though I do elucidate something valuable that solo-parents necessarily cannot avail of, I offer no ethical prescriptions concerning solo-parenting. My theory employs Aristotelian ethical and metaphysical concepts. The goal of the paper is not to do Aristotle scholarship or reproduce Aristotle’s accounts of the family (Aristotle 1991a, Bk. 7; 2011, Bk. 8), but to give a plausible account of the axiology and metaphysics of co-parenthood.

## **1. Extant Theories of Why Parenthood Is Valuable for The Parent**

I now review the main extant theories of parental rights, each of which involves a theory of why parenthood is valuable for the parent (the philosophical literature focuses much more on the former). I examine whether, on these theories, the value of having a co-parent can be reduced to, explained purely in terms of, some tendency to help achieve the value of being a parent.

### **1.1 Liberty Theories**

For authors such as Charles Fried and William Galston, the rights of a parent are just the rights of a free citizen. Fried writes:

The right to form one’s child’s values, one’s child’s life plan and the right to lavish attention on that child are extensions of the basic right not to be interfered with in doing these things for oneself. (Fried 1978, 152)

Galston writes:

(...) the ability of parents to raise their children in a manner consistent with their deepest commitments is an essential element of expressive liberty. (Galston 2002, 101–2)

On these theories, being a parent is valuable because it affords an opportunity to live out one’s life in ways consonant with one’s own values

and commitments without external interference. A solo-parent is just as able to take advantage of this opportunity as a co-parent, and so to attain the relevant value.

Although Fried and Galston have in mind the free citizen's liberty rights as held against the state, their theories suggest that being a solo-parent is more valuable than being a co-parent. Co-parenthood often involves some limitations on the exercise of liberty as compared with solo-parenthood. For instance, one co-parent might insist that the other not eat sugary snacks in front of the child, or not share their interest in blood-sports. These are limitations on liberty that a solo-parent does not face. These limitations are certainly normatively different than those imposed by law. Yet, *ex post* to voluntarily becoming a co-parent, one's freedom is in fact limited in a variety of ways.

## 1.2 Shaping Theory

Edgar Page argues that the parent's rights are grounded in the value, for the parent, of engaging in a certain action, "shaping":

(...) parents have a positive desire to influence the course of a child's life, to guide the child from infancy to maturity, a desire to mould it, to shape its life, to fix its basic values and broad attitudes, to lay the foundations of its lifestyle, its priorities, its most general beliefs and convictions, and in general to determine, to whatever degree is reasonable and possible, the kind of person the child will become. (Page 1984, 195–96)

On Page's theory, parenthood is valuable for the parent because it allows them to engage in shaping. A solo-parent is just as able as a co-parent to engage in shaping.

Page's theory implies that solo-parenthood is the more valuable form of parenthood for the parent. At some margins, a solo-parent will be better able to shape the child just as they please. Co-parenthood means neither parent seeing the child shaped in precisely the way that they would prefer. For example, your child spends more time watching TV than you prefer when your co-parent is looking after them, your child is exposed to your co-parent's religious or political attitudes that differ from your own.

## 1.3 Identity Theory

Yonathan Reshef emphasizes the value of one of shaping's products; a sense of identity between parent and child:

(...) parents reproduce some of their characteristics in their children and thereby establish a powerful sense of interconnectedness and continuity between their own identity and their child's. Through the intimate process of upbringing parents can bequeath their cultural, national, and religious horizons to their children. Children acquire their parents' language, they are raised according to their parents' values and beliefs, and they follow their parents' practices. Some of the parents' more personal characteristics also pass on to their children, such as favourite dishes, leisure activities, hobbies, body language and outward 'look'. (Reshef 2013, 140)

A solo-parent is just as able to generate a sense of identity between themselves and their child. From Reshef's examples we can see that his view also suggests that solo-parenthood is potentially more valuable for the parent. Co-parents are often from different cultural or religious groups, and will almost always have differing tastes and preferences. At the margins, co-parents will be less able to generate a sense of identity between themselves and their child, or that sense of identity will be weaker than if they passed on only their values, beliefs, nationality, hobbies, and the like.

#### **1.4 Fiduciary Theories**

On fiduciary theories, the rights of parents derive from the rights of children. Parental rights are awarded because having these rights helps parents to act as fiduciaries who secure the rights of their children. On this view, parenthood is valuable primarily because it secures the rights of children. Fiduciary theories generally do not involve a specific theory of why parenthood is valuable for the parent, why anyone would want to be such a fiduciary. Jeffrey Blustein's fiduciary theory allows that parents may find many varied kinds of value in being a parent, e.g., achieving a kind of personal immortality, taking pleasure in altruistic behaviour, having a sense of competence, fulfilling an important social role, and the eventual friendship, gratitude, and support, of their adult children (Blustein 1982, 148–50, 175–95). For Blustein, the value of parenthood for the parent is largely subjective. Yet, whatever the value of parenthood might be for the parent, attaining that value depends on them securing the rights of their child. For instance, to attain the valued sense of competence, the parent must ensure that the child is educated appropriately.

Fiduciary theories could explain the value of having a co-parent if, empirically, co-parents are able to secure the rights of their child more reliably or completely than solo-parents. Many studies suggest that the

children of single-parents stand at a higher risk of ills such as psychological problems and poor educational outcomes, even after controlling for financial disadvantage (Lipman et al. 2002; Weitoft et al. 2003). Plausibly, some of these outcomes are violations of the child's rights or are empirically associated with violations. This gives reason to think that solo-parenthood is a less reliable way of attaining the value of parenthood.

Yet, the empirical literature on the children of solo-parents is uniformly positive; such children appear to do as well as the children of co-parents with respect to psychological problems, educational achievement, and the like (Golombok, Tasker, and Murray 1997; Murray and Golombok 2005b; Golombok et al. 2016; Chan, Raboy, and Patterson 1998; MacCallum and Golombok 2004). Plausibly, this undermines reason for scepticism about outcomes for the children of solo-parents. However, this empirical literature features only small-N studies, and at present solo-parenting is done largely by highly-educated and financially stable professionals in their late 30s and early 40s (Golombok et al. 2016). Perhaps solo-parenting is *ceteris paribus* a less reliable fiduciary, or is reliable only in certain socio-economic contexts.

Wherever one stands on these empirical questions, on fiduciary theories the value of having a co-parent would be something highly contingent. Depending on how exactly the value of parenthood is spelled out on a fiduciary theory, one could end up with the result that lacking a co-parent is better than having one. By analogy, a solo-author gets more 'credit' than a co-author, completing a task by myself gives me a greater sense of competence than doing it with another's help, perhaps the parent's sense of personal immortality is stronger if the child is only their own.

## 1.5 Relationship Theory

Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift offer a theory on which parental rights are partly fiduciary. Additionally, parents have a right to a relationship with their child because it makes "a distinctive and weighty contribution to the well-being of the parent" (Brighouse and Swift 2014, 86). Brighouse and Swift suggest that a successful parent-child relationship depends on some degree of shared values, beliefs, hobbies, and the like (Brighouse and Swift 2014, 155). So, the parent's right to a relationship with the child gives rise to the right to shape the child's values, and the like, to the extent necessary for a successful relationship (Brighouse and Swift 2014, 153).

Conceptually, it does not seem that having a parent-child relationship depends on the child having a relationship of that same type with someone else. Empirically, solo-parents are not found to have worse relationships

with their children. Indeed, one study found “a lower frequency of conflict between mothers and their children in solo mother than in two-parent families” (Golombok et al. 2016, 415).

Plausibly, Brighthouse and Swift’s theory implies that solo-parenthood is the more valuable arrangement for a parent. If co-parents have different values they will, at some margins, be less able to shape the child’s values to the degree necessary for sustaining successful parent-child relationships. On the topic of raising children in a value-neutral way, Brighthouse and Swift write:

The idea that parents should constantly monitor themselves in their relations with their children in order to screen out anything that might have any influence on their children’s emerging values is ludicrous. It would risk distancing them, creating artifice in the relationship, and depriving their children of the possibility of the warm, spontaneous, genuine relationship that they need. (Brighthouse and Swift 2014, 154)

Yet, to some degree, co-parents do monitor themselves so as not to influence the child’s values, and the like, in ways that their co-parent finds objectionable.

## 1.6 The Work Theory

Joseph Millum offers a theory on which parental rights have two grounds. Some parental rights derive from the role of parents as fiduciaries of children’s rights (Millum 2018, 53–56). The other ground is that there are some goods that parenting produces for the parent, that the parent has an interest in enjoying (Millum 2018, 50–53). One is the parent-child relationship. The other is the child’s flourishing; their successful development through each stage of childhood, into adulthood. On Millum’s theory what bridges from these things of value to parental rights is an investment principle; “the extent of an agent’s stake in an entity is proportional to the amount of appropriate work he or she has put into that entity” (Millum 2018, 25). As such, Millum’s theory also seems to imply that solo-parenthood is the more valuable arrangement *qua* the value of parenthood—no one else will have a stake in these goods; all the work, all the goods realized, will be one’s own.

## 1.7 Discussion

Each of these theories of the value of parenting is unable to explain why having a co-parent is valuable for the parent. Instead, they suggest some tension between having a co-parent and attaining the value of parenthood. So, by induction, plausibly the value of the co-parental relationship is not reducible to the value of being a parent—the former must have some value of its own.

To bolster this conclusion, note that parenting is clearly an action that can be done by one parent. By contrast, actions such as “warring with Venice”, lecturing to a class, or playing in a band, require the participation of many agents to be tokened. A solo-parent performs the same action as the co-parent, and so can attain the same value, the goal that the action aims at.<sup>1</sup> So, any additional value of parenting that co-parenting would tend to promote would be highly contingent (in terms of personalities and socio-economic situations). Such an account would fail to justify or explain the popularity and normative status of co-parenting.

## 2. The Person-Creating Account of Parenthood

My view is that parenting is the action that aims to create a person. A parent is one who does this action. A child is the object of this action. This view also allows that the value of parenting is available to the solo-parent, but suggests an account of the metaphysics and value of co-parenthood. I now outline this action.

Actions are defined and differentiated by their goals (Aristotle 2011, 1094a; Wilson and Shpall 2012). To do a particular action is to will a particular goal, to use *energeia* for its *ergon*, to be active in its operation (Aristotle 2011, 1098a 7-18, 1106a 23). Muttering to yourself and talking to someone else may involve identical behaviours, yet are different actions due to their different goals. Although parents and non-parents often behave in the same ways, their actions are different. For example, a parent and a school canteen-worker both give the child food. Parents engage in this behaviour because it contributes to their person-creating goal. Lacking this

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<sup>1</sup> One objection here might be to deny that solo-parents and co-parents perform the same action. Perhaps the action of a co-parent is a collective action of the co-parents. In response, I would deny that co-parents do a different action than the solo-parent. Such a thesis does not explain the normative contours of parenthood—e.g., that each parent is able to exercise the normative powers of parenthood as an individual, that the ethical duties of a co-parent to their child are not different from those of a solo-parent (Hunt 2022).

goal, having some other goal, the school canteen-worker is not doing the action of a parent.

Since the goal of the parent is to create a person, the distinction between “biological parenthood” and “social parenthood,” “bearing and rearing” (Archard 2004, 137) can distract from the underlying unity of the parental action. There are different ways of participating in person-creating action. One parent participates in it by bringing a new human organism into existence—contributing gametes, gestating—and another by perfecting that organism’s existence—feeding them, educating them. Here, nutrition and child-rearing continue the action that procreation initiated. Though the behaviours of each part of the parental action may be very different, they are parts of the same action since they have the same goal. Since solo-parents can be both biological and social parents, they can do every part of this action.

Action aims at the good (Aristotle 2011, 1094a 1). To act is to approach the good under the guise of a goal; willing to make the world better, creating something of value—whether a good artefact or a good state of affairs, internal or external to the agent. An action, and the creation that it aims to actualize, can be more or less perfect in two ways; *fulfilled* and *finished*.

An action or creation that is more fulfilled is one of the better tokens of its type, exhibiting more of its characteristic value. For example: one speech is rousing and another not, one painting is more beautiful than another. For a creator to fulfil a creation, to make it better, is for them to continue in the act of creating it, rather than a distinct action. The notion of fulfilment rests on the Aristotelian and Platonic doctrine of the interconvertibility of being and well-being, existence and goodness (Aristotle 1991b, 1051a 18-21; Plato 1997c, 508b-e). To flourish is to exist more, whilst to wither—to be diseased, ethically vicious, ignorant, friendless—is to tend toward non-existence, showing forth human form less fully. So, we rightly use intensives for the better painting (action and artefact): “now *that* is (a) painting!”

As things that become over time, an action and its creation can be more or less finished. Consider *Sagrada Familia*. This is an unfinished cathedral, rather than a non-cathedral. To finish something is a part of creating it. Now that *Sagrada Familia* exists in the minimal sense that the sufficient condition for being that cathedral is met, the continued sculpting, hoisting, designing, etc., of the workers seamlessly continues the act of its creation.

Parents seek to perfect their child in both of these senses. Parents, in fulfilling and finishing an already-existing human person, continue their participation in the parental action. The person-creating action does not end at conception, or birth, or for many years after. As a person is a substance of a rational nature (Teichman 1985), a good human person is one who makes their animality participate in their rationality. A good human person enjoys some knowledge of the world around them, basic skills like speech, balanced affect, prudence, a healthy body, a family and community, and, most especially, ethical virtue.

I now characterize the parenting action in terms of Aristotle's four causes, four respects in which one person can create another (not that this is the only conceptual schema that could be fruitfully applied to it). I will then be able to show how co-parents are parent and child to one another in these four ways. Throughout, I speak of what parents and children do in the ideal case, rather than making empirical claims.

## 2.1 Parents as Material Causes

Matter is potential, the potential for receiving form (Aristotle 1991b, 1029a 20-26, 1036a 7, 1048b 1-7); matter is “a receptacle of all becoming—its wetnurse” (Plato 1997d, 49a), itself lacking form, but able to manifest it. Form is pattern, activity, and goal (respectively Aristotle 1991b, 1013a 26, 1050a 15-22, 1023a 32; Plato 1997a, 389b; 1997c, 508d-e; 1997b, 75a), matter is that in and from which form appears.<sup>2</sup>

In generation, in creating after their kind, children are made from the matter of their parent's bodies, their gametes. In generation, parents are matter in relation to their child in that they are, together, the potentiality out of which a new child can emerge, they are that which can receive the actuality of new life.

In nutrition, parents continue as material causes of their child by providing them with more matter to incorporate—at first from the mother's body via the umbilical cord, then via lactation, and then, proximately, through other food. Nutrition helps actualize the child's potential for growth. In child-rearing, parents are material causes of their child in that they provide the

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<sup>2</sup> “Form” and “formal cause” are not quite interchangeable. For both Aristotle and Plato, “form” is the formal, efficient, and final cause of matter (pattern, activity, goal). Aristotle's discussion of the four causes conceptually separates out these three aspects of form. This Aristotelian-Platonic conception of matter differs from the more modern conception of matter as that which is fundamentally real, the fundamental particles. The former prefers the metaphor of form descending into matter, the latter the metaphor of form emerging out of matter. These understandings overlap in seeing matter as an indefinite sludge which, by being properly arranged, becomes otters, cassette tapes, and everything else.

potentials out of which their child's perfection is actualized—e.g., in buying a xylophone, parents help actualize their child's potential musical skill. Of particular importance is that the parent's own life (as opposed to various objects and environments that they might orchestrate) is a material cause of the child. A parent's body and mind are actualized in some ways and not others by their parenting action—changing diapers, learning to tolerate messiness, practicing patience, etc. These states of the parent are the parent as enformed by their child, as matter actualized by the child as form, the child's life received into their own. The parent's own life is, then, a potential in which and from which the child is created and perfected.

Lastly, parents are material causes of their child in the sense that they attend to their child considered as a material thing, as a body, that has the potential for change, including the potential for non-existence—keeping them warm, washing them, clipping their nails.

As actions are defined by their goals, not everyone or everything who happens to be a material cause of a child's existence and perfection counts as their parent. Gametes are not parents, the formula salesman is not a parent, and the person who generously donates formula is not a parent, since the potential that they aim to actualize is more limited in scope than that of the parent (they are not offering to rock the baby to sleep, take them to visit grandma, educate them, etc.). This point applies to each of the four causes.

## **2.2 Parents as Formal Causes**

The formal cause is the pattern according to which a goal actualizes matter (Aristotle 1991b, 1013a 26). In generation, parents impart the human form to their child. The parent's biological contribution determines the organism as one that grows according to the human pattern, that in time will more fully manifest the human pattern.

In child-rearing, parents act as formal causes of their child by using themselves as the model, the pattern, from which their child learns the capacities of human personhood, such as speech, social skills, and decision-making—playing with them, exhibiting appropriate affect, showing them how to make eggs. This is not to say that parents propose themselves to their child as perfect models of human personhood, as ideals to be copied in every respect. Rather, parents use themselves as the actual models of human personhood for their child to copy, and with an awareness that their child will often copy and idealize them (which imposes a normative demand to model sufficiently well).

Here, the difference of my theory of parenthood from Page's is best captured in his statement that the goal of the parent is to determine "the kind of person the child will become" (Page 1984, 196)—a lover of crochet, a trade-unionist, a fan of *The Smiths*. On my account, the goal of the parent is to create a human person, with no 'kind' being selected for other than 'good'. Shaping a child toward various particularities (usually, those of the parent) is often harmless or good, but not the goal of a parent as such. Again, in generation parents do not just impart the generic human form to their child, but their own individual human form—a set of physical and psychological particularities. My account claims that being a biological parent is valuable because it means participating in a part of the person-creating action, but not because of these particularities.

Lastly, parents act as formal causes of their child in the sense of attending to them *qua* formal cause, as a being that should be actualized according to a certain pattern, that can deviate from it—attending to their health, ethical behaviour, psychological state.

### 2.3 Parents as Efficient Causes

Efficient causes bring about change (Aristotle 1991b, 1013a 24), they manifest a new activity in time. In generation, parents cause a change; a human person comes to be. In nutrition and child-rearing, parents continue as efficient causes of their child by acting in ways that keep them in existence and bring about their increasing perfection as a human person.

### 2.4 Parents as Final Causes

A final cause (goal, end, telos) is "that for the sake of which a thing is" (Aristotle 1991b, 1013b 3), that toward which it is ordered, that in light of which matter is actualized according to a given pattern. To explain how it is that the parent is *the* final cause of the child, I must first elaborate on how it is that the child is *the* final cause of the parent. The parent makes the child *a* final cause—wills their flourishing for its own sake, dedicates some portion of their *energeia* to this *ergon*, just as they might do for a friend, dog, or political cause. More than this, the child's existence and perfection as a human person is the goal of a parent in that this goal is sufficient to justify the parent's continued existence and growing perfection. A parent is willing to give up their weekends for their child's sake, to quit smoking, work a dead-end job, to die, or continue living, for their child's sake—to *be* for their sake.

Whilst radically altruistic, the parent is simultaneously radically selfish—the child is the parent’s final cause because the parent treats their own existence and perfection as their final cause. From a biological perspective, considered as an organism, the parent flourishes by having a child;

The most natural act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far as its nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and divine.  
(Aristotle 1991c, 415a 26-30)

Having a child is not merely *a* goal of the organism, but *the* goal of the organism *qua* organism—the goal which distinguishes living things from non-living things is generation, reproduction. In procreating and rearing a child, the organism affirms its own goodness in the manner of an organism.

Since a rational being affirms itself rationally, having a child is also the goal of the parent considered as a person. Our cognitive and conative powers aim at the good. So, *ceteris paribus*, the more valuable the goal, the better it is for the agent that they pursue it. For instance, knowing how many blades of grass there are in a field is not a very valuable goal (except extrinsically, in some bizarre scenario). So, counting the blades of grass is a worthless activity, human languishing. The goal of creating and perfecting a human person is an extremely valuable goal. Accordingly, to create and perfect a human person is the greatest, most transformative, and most sustained, actualization of their potential that most people experience. Some indication of this is that “94% of parents say that having children is worth it despite the costs, and parents report that having children is *the most positive event in their lives*” (Nelson, Kushlev, and Lyubomirsky 2014, 8 *my italics*). Again, whilst Abraham Maslow’s classic hierarchy of needs featured “self-actualization” as the peak need, recent evolutionary psychology finesses this to “parenting” (Kenrick et al. 2011). For the human person to have a child is for them to affirm their own goodness in the manner appropriate to a person; by choice, lovingly, and in relationship, casting their self into an other self. As the parent performs their action by being a model of human personhood, it actualizes them toward personhood.

I now begin turning to how, in light of this, the parent is the end of the child. All good things call for a return, for us to respond to them in some way; the friendly dog ought to be pet, the sweet crisp apple ought to be savoured, the chance ought to be seized. One helpful distinction to draw among these responses is that between passive and active responses.

To be passive toward to a good thing is to allow it to be good for you, to be affected by it in the way that is best. For instance; laughing at a humorous joke, using a financial windfall prudently, remembering the interesting fact. To be passive to a good includes cognitively and conatively appreciating its goodness, and also absorbing it, bringing it into one's life. To have an active response to a good is to act to promote the good, to do something for it, typically in a way that is not 'selfish'. For example, preserving the good thing in existence, copying it or creating things that are like it, sharing it with others, honouring it. For example; telling the humorous joke or interesting fact to your friend, pointing out the beautiful sunset to your friend, voting to keep the forest preserve, imitating the display of skill, returning the kind favour.

In cases where the good was produced by a moral agent, a return in the more paradigmatic sense, doing something that is good for that very agent, may be an appropriate active response. However, the agent who does good automatically receives a good return, insofar as "it is a greater perfection for a thing to be good in itself and also the cause of goodness in others" (Aquinas 1947, ST I Q103, A6, co.) and "it belongs to the essence of goodness to communicate itself to others" (Aquinas 1947, ST III, Q1, A1, co.). These dicta also illustrate that passive responses to a good lead to active responses; e.g., that part of what it is to truly appreciate the melody is to be disposed to invite others to hear it.

Each ethical virtue is a disposition to action and passion (emotion, desire) that responds to a particular type of good in the way that is best (Aristotle 2011, 1104b 15). For example, moderation responds to the good of bodily pleasure. The ethically virtuous person displays *ordo amoris* (the order of love); they are disposed to respond to all goods in the way that is best in a given circumstance; they are always poised to achieve what is best (Aristotle 2011, 1106b 5–30) (rather, than, say, responding to bodily pleasure at the expense of health).

Filial piety is the ethical virtue that makes a response to the goodness of the parental action, is the ethical virtue of a child *qua* child. Its passive response, most obvious in the life of an immature child, is to imitate the model of human personhood presented by their parent, to obey their instructions, and to "attach" to their parent; to feel loved by them, to feel safe with them. In these ways, a child is effected in the way that is best by their parent's action. The active response of filial piety, most obvious in the life of a mature child, is to imitate their parent by themselves having children, reciprocating their parent's person-creating action insofar as this is possible (feeding their elderly parent, keeping them socialized, etc.) and, to perfect their parent's action by being a good person (Hunt 2023). In

these ways, the parent-child relationship is one in which each party treats the other as an end by treating themselves as an end, perfects the other by perfecting themselves. Since beings are defined by the goals that they are for the sake of (e.g., the knife is for cutting), and since the child is for the sake of the parent, the existence and perfection of the child is defined with reference to the parent; a token person could not have had different token parents, and piety is “leader of all the virtues” (Hierocles 2002, 174).

The response of filial piety, as an imitation, involves a reciprocation of the parental action—being a material, efficient, formal, and final cause of one’s own parents. In other words, whilst the parent-child relationship begins as one in which these two roles are played exclusively by two distinct individuals, in its mature form, in its teleologically fulfilled state, the two individuals are both parent and child to one another. I now illustrate how this is the relationship that obtains between co-parents.

### **3. Co-Parents as Parent and Child to One Another**

Co-parents are creators of one another and created by one another, and so are both parent and child to one another.

#### **3.1 Co-Parenthood and Final Causes**

The goal of the parent is to create and perfect a human person. Parents do this by offering themselves as goals, as models, to their children. Good parents provide a model of human personhood that is worthy of imitation; living well, ethically, beautifully. If a child ends up living well *despite* their parents, then those parents have not parented well.

The co-parent is one who has the same goal in respect to the same child, who also offers themselves as a model to that child. So, whether one co-parent does their action well is of intrinsic concern to the other—if I am showing my child a good way to live, but allow my co-parent to show them a bad way to live, then I am failing in my capacity as a parent: I am not in fact showing them a good way to live. For example, if your co-parent overshadows their anxieties with your child, or drinks too frequently, or otherwise sets a bad example, this is intrinsically bad for you, *qua* the model that you propose to your child in allowing these things. So, co-parents have a concern for one another *qua* the child’s model, final cause.

To pursue this concern, co-parents treat one another as final causes. That is, they offer themselves to each other as models, receiving one another as models, particularly in relation to child-rearing activities—e.g., “when I

get upset by the baby’s screaming, I count to 10”, “when I’m getting her ready, I let her put her jacket on by herself”.

That co-parents treat one another as models makes sense of the claim that co-parents have a kind of say over one another; that they can impose claims of significant normative weight on one another in making requests of one another, that they should deliberate and negotiate together in forging a shared way of life. This seems analogous to the say that parents and adult-children have over one another, who may make and take requests with patience, compromise, and trust in one another’s good will, but not issue “commands”.

The best modelling of human personhood will involve modelling the best type of human friendship—of mutual love, stability, equality, openness, accountability, ethical elevation, and the like. The goal of the parent is not to create an isolated rational agent, but one who is embedded in, and will embed themselves in, rich personal relationships. The friendship that co-parents enjoy with one another should be of this best type, since it is this model that they propose to their child as being the best. So, in having their child as their final cause, co-parents have one another as final causes; pursuing one another’s human flourishing, treating one another as a sufficient reason for being. At the biological level, the two co-parents again treat one another as final causes in procreating, affirming one another’s goodness in the manner appropriate to sexual organisms.<sup>3</sup>

Here we have seen one respect in which co-parenthood originates, in the order of time, in the parental action—we become co-parents by parenting a child together. Yet, in the order of being, the parental action originates in the co-parental action, the former finds its perfection in the latter. The co-operation, mutual love, and mutual say of the co-parents enables and shows itself in the parental action, and calls the child to develop toward co-operation, mutual love, and shared life, with their parents and others. The action of the parent exists virtually in the action of the co-parent (Aquinas 1947, ST I Q4 A2); the former is contained pre-eminently in the latter, the former unveils something borne in the latter. Or again, the co-parental action is the paradigm and the parental action its image, the love toward the child the matter in which the love between co-parents is manifested:

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<sup>3</sup> Within current technology—i.e., excluding cloning—generation is something that requires two parents; the two parents are together the final, formal, efficient, and material cause of the child. I think it is best to describe gamete donors, surrogate gestators, or those who place their child for adoption, as ceasing to be parents because their participation in the parental action ceases. At some point in time, their goal and action was that of a parent (even if this was never their conscious intention). So, there are no solo-parents in the sense “the only parent that a child has ever had”, but there are solo-parents in the sense “by choice, the only parent that a child has and will have”.

“the giver possesses primitively the character which it gives, while the recipient is by derivation what the giver is” (Proclus 1963, Pr. 18).

### 3.2 Co-Parenthood and Formal Causes

Co-parents recognize one another as formal causes of the same child. So, each co-parent enables the other to act as a formal cause—to impart their preferences, tastes, and dispositions with the child. Yet, since the action of the parent is to perfect their child’s formal cause—to shape them in the way that is best, towards the full expression of human form—co-parents are also formal causes of one another. That is, co-parents offer and receive one another’s form; harmonizing their way of life, their evaluative attitudes, and so forth.

For example, if my formal cause has departed from the human—e.g., if I am viciously jealous—then, as a parent, my co-parent has an interest in repairing this, imparting the human form upon me by their example, encouragement, and correction, and as a parent I have an interest in being receptive to their action. Again, given the scope of the parental action, that a parent is a model of human personhood (not just a model of cookery, etc.), co-parents have an interest in one another as models of human personhood. So, in respect of formal causes, co-parents are related as creators and creations of one another’s human personhood, as parent and child.

### 3.3 Co-Parenthood and Efficient Causes

In child-rearing, co-parents, recognizing one another as parents, enable one another to be efficient causes of their child’s perfection; ensuring that the child learns interests from both, hears the perspectives of both, etc. For example, the “primary caregiver” might arrange the child’s daily schedule in a way that maximizes the time that the child spends with the “secondary caregiver”, “working-parent”, or one co-parent might go along on a fishing expedition if this enables the other to share their interest in fishing with the child. As the action of the parent touches on practically every aspect of their life, and can reasonably be expected to last until their death, co-parents act as efficient causes of their co-parent’s perfection *qua* human person in acting as efficient causes of their child’s perfection. In harmonizing their way of life to the degree necessary for performing the parental action well, in treating one another as final and formal causes, co-parents change, and are changed by, one another. As children are receptive to being changed by their parents, so should co-parents be. Negatively, imagine that one had a very bad co-parent—in light of the burdens of parenting, this would seriously impede one’s human flourishing, make it

hard to change one's life for the better. So, as efficient causes of one another's perfection as human persons, co-parents are related as parent and child.

### 3.4 Co-Parenthood and Material Causes

As noted, parents are the material cause of their child in that they are matter for the child's form, potentials in and from which the child is actualized. The rhythms of the child's way of life are incorporated into that of the parent—the parent wakes at one time rather than another, plays games rather than working. The respective patterns of life of co-parents are together a material cause of the child—e.g., knowing that my co-parent will attend to dinner, I can do the laundry. For this reason, co-parents are material causes to one another as human persons. The pattern of life of each co-parent is expressed in, and co-ordinated with, the other. By harmonizing their patterns of life, each provides potential for the other to flourish as a human person. Negatively, imagine the worst co-parent—co-parenting with such a one would very seriously limit your potential for flourishing. Again, co-parents are material causes of one another in the sense of attending to one another *qua* material thing—caring for one another's nourishment, health, etc. So, co-parents are material causes to one another as human persons, and so are related as parent and child.

### 3.5 The Value of Having a Co-Parent

With this description of co-parenthood in hand, its value is self-evident. Co-parenthood is a form of friendship, and friendship in general is valuable for creatures like us. The friendship of parent for child, and of child for parent, are generally acclaimed as the greatest human friendships, the greatest bestowals and receipts of goodness. Co-parents, as parent and child to one another, share a friendship that is the ontological ground and teleological completion of these friendships. Co-parenthood is a friendship which unites human persons as human persons through the act of creating a human person. It is an extensive friendship, touching every aspect of the friend, and an intensive friendship, touching them at the deepest level, a friendship that unites and transcends its participants, a friendship whose fruit is an image of the divinity, a human person.

To be sure, it seems that two people could simply decide to act toward one another in the way that co-parents should—using one another as models, caring for one another, etc. However, the co-parental action is distinguished from such a friendship in that it has an objective basis in the child; given the responsibilities of each co-parent toward the child, their

responsibilities toward one another are not a matter of ongoing voluntary decision. I now turn to answering objections.

#### 4. Responses to Objections

- (i) *To say that co-parents are parents to one another and children to one another seems to conflict with the ordinary use of these terms—if asked to point out their parents or their children, no one would point out their co-parent.*

I hope that the claim that co-parents are parent and child to one another is somewhat surprising. A philosophical account should produce insights that are not commonplace. It makes sense that in pointing out “child” and “parent” we would point to uncomplicated cases. So, the present objection is not troubling. My account does indeed revise the common-usage extension of “child” and “parent” —my application of these terms to co-parents is in no way metaphorical or analogical. But, I do not think that my account revises the common-usage intension of these terms (that parents are creators, children the created).

- (ii) *When you say “co-parents” don’t you really mean “marital partners”? The features that you ascribe to the co-parental relationship seem very similar to marriage.*

In common usage, “co-parents” is often used to pick out those who are only or primarily co-parents; divorced people, or platonic parents. Yet, most people who are co-parents are also romantic partners or marital partners, and this seems to be the normative ideal for most people. It might be that the marital relationship involves, is ordered towards, having children, and therefore the co-parental relationship. However, it seems unlikely that the marital relationship (which I have not yet considered in philosophical detail) and the co-parental relationship are identical. The extensions of the two can be diverge, even if one takes the view that their extensions ought, ideally, to coincide. *Prima facie*, it seems plausible to me that the marital relationship is architectonic in relation to the co-parental relationship—includes it but supersedes it; that there are aspects of the relationship between marital partners that are not exhausted in the co-parental relationship, that co-parents as such do not *a fortiori* count as marital partners.

(iii) ***If co-parenthood is so valuable, what explains the rise of solo-parenthood?***

A survey of users (n=290) of *Choice Moms*, an online community for solo-mothers, was conducted to investigate their reasons for wanting to have a child. Naturally enough 97% cited “I wanted to be a mother”, 62% cited “I was getting older”, 50% cited “I was financially secure”, and 43% cited “It was now or never” (Jadva et al. 2009, 179). 76% of the users reported having been in a long-term relationship in the past. As their reason for not having had a child during their previous long-term relationship, 64% cited “The relationship was not right”, 48% cited “The timing was not right” and 26% cited “Partner did not want a child” (Jadva et al. 2009, 177–78). In a smaller survey (n=27) of heterosexual solo-mothers, 87% reported that they would like to become romantically involved with a man in the future, with 40% citing the desire for the child to have a father as a reason for having a romantic relationship in the future (Murray and Golombok 2005a, 250).

Whilst limited and ambiguous, this evidence suggests that many solo-parents might agree that co-parenthood is valuable. It seems that the choice for most solo-parents is between solo-parenthood and no parenthood. As seems reasonable, they did not make the perfect the enemy of the good. The demographics of solo-parenting suggest that sociological and economic factors are the key drivers of the rise in solo-parenting, not a perception that it is axiologically interchangeable with, or superior to, co-parenting.

(iv) ***Don't solo-parents also have to co-create their child with others? Single-parents often engage their child with extended support networks, including the parent's own parents, siblings, close friends, and neighbours, as well as the child's daycare providers, teachers, coaches, and other kinds of mentors.***

In response, I deny that solo-parents co-create their child with these others. As creating a child just is the action that makes one a parent, to say that these others were co-creating their niece or student would be to say that they were their parents. This is counter-intuitive. Whilst extended support networks add many good things to a child's life—an interest in the arts, an appreciation for some personal virtue—the goals of the other agents in these cases are more limited than the goal of a parent—to help them in some respect, to create some kind of trait in them, not to create *them*. This is not to deny that, in many cases, a member of the child's extended support network may become their parent—e.g., the grandparent who replaces an

absent parent—but then we have a case of co-parenthood. I note that none of these types of relationship are closed off to co-parents or their children.

(v) *Doesn't this view suggest that the more co-parents the better? Why not 3 or 4 co-parents?*

To state my intuitions, I am comfortable with the claim that more than 2 people can be co-parents, and find the value thereof, but uncomfortable with the claim that “multi-parenthood” is better than “duo-parenthood”.

The value of having a co-parent is that in this type of friendship one is charged with helping to create, and simultaneously be created by, another human person. As we noted in the first section, the person-creating action is one that can be done by an individual: co-parents and solo-parents do the same action to their respective children, and are both able to attain the relevant value. So, *qua* the value of parenting, there is no advantage to the co-parent in doing their parenting action with 3 or 4 others, rather than just with 1 other, or by themselves. To deny this would be to deny that solo-parents are in an axiologically equal position to co-parents *vis-à-vis* parenting. Likewise, *qua* the value of being parented, to conclude that multi-parenting is better for the child than duo-parenting one would also have to conclude that duo-parenting is better than solo-parenting (something that, I suspect, liberal-minded advocates of multi-parenting might not wish to conclude).

A separate response can be drawn from Richard Swinburne's *a priori* argument for the Trinity (Swinburne 2018, 430). Although love can obtain between a dyad, a love that is not jealous is more perfect, a love that shares the beloved with others is more perfect. God is the perfect being. So, God must be a triad rather than a dyad. Yet, God need not be more than 3 persons since more than 3 would not make the love between the persons less jealous or more sharing: 4 would be otiose. Translated to our context, the child shares the role of the Holy Spirit, the giver of life; they allow the love between the two co-parents to not be jealous, but to be shared with another. So, to introduce more co-parents would be otiose, would not make co-parenthood more perfect.

## 5. Conclusion

To give an account of the value of having a co-parent I first examined whether such value could be reduced to the value of being a parent, and found that it probably cannot. So, I gave an account of parenthood and co-parenthood. The view that emerged is that parents are those who create

persons, and that co-parents, in creating a person together, come to create and be created by one another, are parent and child to one another. I noted that the idea that the parent-child relationship is a reflection of the co-parental relationship meshes with the traditional Aristotelian and Platonic view that effects pre-exist in their causes, are contained virtually in their causes (Aquinas 1947, ST I Q4 A2 co., Q19 A4 co.).

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