

Contemporary Philosophies and Theories in Education 4

Stefan Ramaekers
Judith Suissa

The Claims of Parenting

Reasons, Responsibility and Society

 Springer

The Claims of Parenting

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ISBN 978-94-007-2250-7 e-ISBN 978-94-007-2251-4
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-2251-4
Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg London New York

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011937967

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Printed on acid-free paper

Springer is part of Springer Science+Business Media (www.springer.com)

Acknowledgements

Early versions of some of the ideas developed in this book have appeared in the following publications:

Lambeir, B., & Ramaekers, S. (2007). The terror of explicitness: Philosophical remarks on the idea of a parenting contract. *Ethics and Education*, 2, 95–107.

Ramaekers, S., & Suissa, J. (2010). Wanneer is ‘goed’ ook ‘goedgenoeg’? Enkelekanttekeningenbij de verwetenschappelijking van de ouder-kindrelatie. *Signaal*, 19(72), 4–21.

Ramaekers, S., & Suissa, J. (2010). The scientization of the parent-child relationship, in L. Hopkins et al. (Eds.), *Negotiating childhood*. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press.

Ramaekers, S., & Suissa, J. (2011, forthcoming). Parents as ‘educators’. Languages of education, pedagogy and ‘parenting’. *Ethics and Education*, 6(1).

Suissa, J. (2006). Untangling the mother knot: Some thoughts on parents, children and philosophers of education. *Ethics and Education*, 1, 65–77.

Suissa, J. (2009). Constructions of parents and languages of parenting. In N. C. Burbules & D. Kerdeman (Eds.), *Philosophy of Education* (pp. 117–125). Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society.

A version of some of the discussion in Chaps. 1 and 6 was presented as a paper entitled ‘The parent-child relationship: The hidden normativity of developmental psychology’ at the annual conference of the Research Community Philosophy and History of the Discipline of Education, Leuven, 18–20 November 2010. We are grateful to the participants for their helpful comments on this paper (to be published in the forthcoming collection: Smeyers, P. & Depaepe, M. (Eds.). *Educational research. The attraction of psychology*. Dordrecht: Springer).

Some of the themes we discuss here were initially explored in a series of interdisciplinary workshops on ‘Changing Discourses of the Parent-Child Relationship’ which we ran in London and Leuven during the 2008–2009 academic year. We would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Funding Council (UK) for the funding that supported this workshop series, and the workshop participants for their intellectual contributions, collegiality and generosity: Julia Brannen, Bob Davis, Ros Edwards, Bas Levering, Kristien Nys, Richard Smith and Adam Swift.

We have been living with the idea of this book for some time, and the arguments and analyses it brings together have taken shape gradually over the course of the past few years, mostly in conversations with each other but also, crucially, in conversations with colleagues and friends. We couldn't possibly thank (and can't remember) all the individuals who have contributed to these conversations, but we would like to name a few whose wisdom, insight and support have been hugely valuable: Rima Apple, Janet Boddy, David Bridges, Nicholas Burbules, Eamonn Callan, Ann Chinnery, Ruth Cigman, Miriam David, Jan Derry, Bert Lambeir, Bruce Maxwell, Mike McNamee, Ian McPherson, Philippe Noens, Janet Orchard, Myriam Philips, Paul Smeyers, Naomi Stadlen, Paul Standish, Sharon Todd, Jai Tolentino and Patricia White.

Thanks are also due to Jessica, Adam and Talia for willingly (and sometimes unwittingly) supplying such a delightful stream of insights into the daily realities of attachment parenting.

Thanks to Jente, Niels and Gijs, and to Lia and Yonatan, without whom it probably wouldn't have occurred to us to write about this subject in the first place.

Finally, our heartfelt thanks go to Lies and to Elhanan for doing a lot of parenting while we were just writing about it.

Introduction

Our main concern in this book is to show how the parent-child relationship, the importance of which is universally acknowledged, has been claimed by certain languages and forms of reasoning, to the extent that it has become difficult to find other ways of talking about it and exploring its significance, at both an individual and a societal level. There is, in fact, an intentional ambiguity in the title *The claims of parenting*. First of all, this is meant to capture the idea that parents today have various claims made *on* them in the sense that they are expected to perform in certain ways and to achieve certain outcomes. Moreover, and connectedly, there are the various claims, in the public domain, *about* parents and parenting. And finally, there are the claims *of* parenthood, in the sense of what it is that parenthood demands of us when we come to see it as a human activity in a rich ethical sense of the word. Importantly, this ambiguity is reflected not just in our conceptual distinctions but in our lived experiences, where, as we discuss throughout the book, these very distinctions can often become blurred in the sense that the claims that are made *about* and *on* parents can eventually become claims that are made *by* parents themselves, as parents gradually come to see themselves in the ways implied in the predominant languages of ‘parenting’.

We begin by exploring and discussing some examples of these languages, the most prominent of which are the languages of psychology, particularly certain forms of developmental psychology, that have come to dominate popular and policy literature about and for parents in a very particular way, with significant implications for how we talk and think about childrearing and the parent-child relationship. The focus of the first chapter of the book, and the basis for the thematic discussion which we take up again in later chapters, is an account of the conceptual and ethical aspects of childrearing and the parent-child relationship that are suggested by and, perhaps more importantly, that are left out by, these dominant ways of speaking.

Our starting point for this exploration is the present experience of being a parent at a particular moment in history and in a particular part of the western world. While our discussion is primarily philosophical rather than historical or sociological, we make no claims to universality; indeed, it is part of our argument about the parent-child relationship that this relationship is always situated within and mediated by

particular contextual values and meanings. Nevertheless, there are, we believe, certain significant and troubling features of our current dominant ways of talking about childrearing and the parent-child relationship that represent a particular emphasis and understanding, and that raise important questions worthy of rigorous philosophical exploration. These are manifested and reflected in the current proliferation of advice, manuals, classes, literature and TV programmes aimed at parents, which go hand in hand with an unprecedented burgeoning of policy initiatives in the area of families and parents. More often than not, these initiatives are explicitly designed to address perceived problems such as lack of discipline amongst children, a rise in teenage pregnancies, increasing levels of drug and alcohol abuse amongst teenagers and children, eating disorders, childhood depression, and so on – at the root of which, it is claimed, are issues to do with how parents relate to their children. In short, ‘parenting’ is on the public agenda. And while it is certainly true that experts and literature on childcare have been around for a long time, the normative assumptions and the logic of the arguments behind the language in which parent-child relationships are, overwhelmingly, addressed in our current climate, represent a significant shift in emphasis. This is, perhaps, most evident at the policy level where, whether through parenting support classes, ‘parenting orders’, or proposals for ‘home-school agreements’, and the like, there seems to be a growing consensus that accumulative evidence has indicated the undisputed role of early parenting patterns on children’s social, emotional and intellectual development, and that to abstain from intervening in family life in order to disseminate this evidence and optimise outcomes accordingly would amount to a moral and political failure. It is, indeed, the very ubiquity and moral force of this consensus and of the scientific language on which it relies, that, we argue, makes it difficult to critically examine the evaluative and conceptual assumptions behind this language and to think about the parent-child relationship in different terms, drawing on different languages.

Many sociological, historical and cultural stories can be and have already been told about why it is that parents in post-industrial, western societies face an often overwhelming array of advice on how to bring up their children (see for example Dekker 2010; Edwards and Gillies 2004; Furedi 2001; Phoenix et al. 1991; Schaubroeck 2010, to name but a few). At the same time, there have been several philosophical treatments of the legal, moral and political issues surrounding issues of procreation, the rights of children and the duties of parents (see Archard 1993; Blustein 1982; Brighouse and Swift 2006; O’Neil and Ruddick 1979), as well as some philosophical accounts of the shifts in our underlying conceptualisation of childhood and adult-child relationships (see Kennedy 2006; Stables 2008). While this book partly builds on the insights of this literature, we see our project here as significantly different in that it offers a philosophically informed discussion of the actual practical experience of being a parent, with its deliberations, judgements and dilemmas. As philosophers of education, we are part of a tradition of rich and rigorous thinking and writing on questions such as what it means to educate children, the nature of human flourishing, the idea of introducing children into a common world, preparing them for an independent and fulfilling life and the significance of intimate relationships. However, while we are indebted to the thinkers and writers who have addressed these questions, many of whose insights are reflected in this book, we feel

that the parent-child relationship and its educational significance is an area that has not been sufficiently addressed by philosophers. In probing the ethical and conceptual questions suggested by this relationship, we hope to open up a space for thinking about childrearing and the parent-child relationship beyond and other than in terms of the languages which dominate the ways in which we generally think about it today. The central premise of the book is that childrearing and the parent-child relationship are ethical all the way down. Though this may seem like a fairly obvious thing to say since, surely, there is nothing new in asserting the ethical significance of raising children, we feel it is important, especially today, to start by affirming this point because articulating what exactly is meant by the phrase 'ethical all the way down' is a project that, we believe, gets to the heart of the experience of being a parent in contemporary conditions, while at the same time exposing the limitations of some of the languages within which contemporary 'parenting' is conceptualised and discussed.

Following from this, then, the book has two central strands. The first is to offer an account of what it means to be a parent so as to capture the complexity of that experience in contemporary conditions. We develop this account in dialogue with contemporary discourses in a way that will enable us to offer a conceptualisation of the parent-child relationship that goes beyond what we see as the often narrow and impoverished ways in which this relationship is conceptualised in popular and scientific discussions. The first stage of this project thus consists of exploring the languages and conceptual landscape that have come to characterise much contemporary discussion of 'parenting'. As stated above, we explore this language and its significance in detail in Chap. 1, although its features and manifestations involve themes that we revisit and discuss throughout the entire book. While we do not want to suggest that our identification of or indeed our critique of this language is entirely new or original, we do believe that the perspective we develop in the following chapters sheds new light on this area. Some objections to contemporary policy and popular discourses of 'parenting' take the form of problematising the use of the term 'skills' within policy and practice aimed at supporting parents; others reflect a scepticism about the very viability of the project of articulating a normative account of 'good parenting'; others, while acknowledging the potential defensibility and value of such an account, are concerned with the possibly damaging consequences of attempting to implement it in a top-down, state policy context. What we want to suggest here is that articulating reservations about various prescriptive accounts or interventions on the part of the government and its agencies does not really resolve any of the philosophical questions raised by the parent-child relationship and its place in contemporary culture. On the contrary, the more we probe these questions, the more we come to feel that ethical and conceptual issues come into the discussion at all levels.

In discussing the problems we are facing today, in a climate of increasing government intervention in family life, Paul Smeyers expresses the hope that his analysis will enable people

to foster recognition that the practice of parenting involves complex considerations that exceed simple articulation within a discourse of skills, of effectiveness and output, as well as of risk and control, and within a particular sense of rights. (Smeyers 2010, p. 283)

In the chapters to come, what we are doing is, in fact, articulating and discussing just such complexities, their significance and the myriad ways in which they are manifested in the day-to-day experiences of parents raising their children. While one could see this approach as one of offering an account of ‘parenting’ from a philosophical perspective, we find this description a bit misleading as we do not understand our project to be one of developing ‘a philosophical perspective on parenting’, or a distinct philosophical position from which we (then) try to analyse the experience of being a parent. This is true both in the sense that the philosophical elements of our discussion emerge from, and are intertwined with, other, existing accounts (philosophical or otherwise) of ‘parenting’, and in the sense that we do not find it helpful to situate ourselves within a particular philosophical tradition. Throughout the process of writing this book and the discussions that preceded it, we have found ourselves drawing on a variety of philosophical sources, combining and integrating insights, and making use of the tensions between different perspectives, in an effort to make sense of the claims of parenting – in all senses of this phrase – today. Yet while not perhaps offering a distinct philosophical *position* on parenting, our discussion throughout the book does reflect our conviction that it is impossible to say anything about the experience of being a parent without this inevitably being, to some degree, philosophical in nature.

Our way into this discussion involves the recognition that part of the very attempt to say something about the parent-child relationship must come from within the relationship itself. In explaining and articulating just what it would mean to ask questions about the parent-child relationship from the inside, as it were, we develop and draw on a distinction between the first-person and the third-person perspective. This distinction, again, while connected to existing philosophical work, is used here in a particular way, as discussed primarily in Chap. 2. Crucially, it is through probing and exploring the insights yielded by what we refer to as the first-person perspective, articulated throughout the following chapters by means of both philosophical analysis and discussion of ‘thick’ examples, that we draw attention to some significant aspects of the parent-child relationship that, we believe, are all too frequently overlooked or obscured in today’s climate.

The second strand in the book is, alongside and as part of the attempt to articulate an account of the ethical and conceptual complexities involved in being a parent in contemporary conditions, a defence of a perspective on the parent-child relationship in which the political significance of this relationship, and of the family in general, is reaffirmed and valued, albeit in a very different sense from that which characterises a great deal of familiar contemporary discussion on the politics of parenting. Specifically, we offer an account of being a parent that reconceptualises the family as a site of political action and reflection in a way that goes beyond the narrow sense of ‘politics’ that characterises those critical discourses that are suspicious of government intervention in family life. This account is explicitly discussed in Chap. 6, although the possibilities and potential suggested by different, philosophically informed and possibly less restrictive notions of the political form part of our general approach of probing and challenging the words and concepts we use to describe what parents do and should be doing with and for their children, and of

suggesting other languages with which to describe and explore this central area of our lives as individuals and as a society. It is precisely this current use of language and its pervasive effects throughout public discussions of ‘parenting’ that, we argue, stands in the way of spelling out what exactly it means to say that childrearing and the parent-child relationship are ethical all the way down.

It is probably worth stating at the outset that our aims, as articulated above, may be seen as fairly modest and may even seem somewhat disappointing if one expects ‘aims’ to lead to specified ‘outcomes’. In writing this book, we do not wish to inform policy in the direct sense of the term; nor do we want to say that current policy is simply ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’. If anything, what we hope to achieve is that anyone involved in helping parents, setting out directives for those helping parents, or producing policy guidelines in the field of parent support, will exercise far more caution in doing so. We are not arguing that offering parents advice on how to bring up their children is a bad thing in and of itself and should thus be generally abandoned. What we wish to convey is something that, in a sense, goes beyond the question of whether or not parents ‘need’ expert advice, and whether or not it is appropriate or even acceptable to give them such advice about raising their children. Our point is that whatever it is that is communicated to parents through such advice does not, and cannot, capture the complexity involved in raising one’s children; that is, it does not, and cannot, capture the complexity of the ethical issues and questions that are inevitably bound up with being a parent. To put this differently, while there is undoubtedly a role for advice to parents, this does not trump personal judgement and personal responsibility. Importantly, though, in saying this, we are not just referring to personal judgement and responsibility in the sense of assessing the applicability of the advice in question to a particular situation with its unique features – in other words, this is not simply a version of the familiar philosophical point about what is entailed in applying a rule; rather, what we want to draw attention to is the unique meaning and value of personal judgement and responsibility within the context of the parent-child relationship; within the context of the question of what is important for *me*, here, now, in relation to *my child*.¹ This theme will recur at several points throughout the book, but it is addressed explicitly in Chaps. 2, 5 and 6. It also connects to our central argument that it is not sufficient to just demand that we reject the mass of expert advice and instate something else in its place (‘muddling through’, maternal instinct, intuitions), since this, again, fails to address the particular ethical complexities of the parent-child relationship (see especially Chaps. 3 and 6 for a discussion of this point). In short, we do not claim, nor would we aspire, to be offering a full account of the parent-child relationship, but we see our work as a contribution to an ongoing and multidisciplinary discussion of these issues; a discussion in which, so we argue, the kind of perspectives we articulate here have been all too frequently ignored.

¹It is important to note that we do not intend with this phrase, which we use frequently throughout the book, to ascribe any special status to biological parents, as opposed to adoptive parents.

Given this perspective, we hope that the book will contribute to discussions of parents and families within various disciplinary arenas and by various different audiences. The critical line we develop here does, we think, suggest important insights for two broad audiences. The first such audience is that of policy makers in the field of ‘parenting’, parenting support practitioners, parent practitioner trainers and maybe even teacher educators, who may all, in one way or another, draw on theoretical work on families, children and parents that, our account suggests, is often *not broad enough*. In other words, the assumptions, logic and language of this work tends to obscure significant ethical, existential and political dimensions of the parent-child relationship. The second such audience is that of philosophers of education, political philosophers and moral philosophers writing about families, parents and children, where often, the theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks drawn on and articulated are in a sense *too broad*, in that the parent-child relationship is frequently treated as a subcategory of moral relationships or an instance of a tension within political or moral theory, and thus not considered as a relationship with its own unique ethical and philosophical significance.

It seems necessary, in a book on this topic, to address the issue of gender. While we do not want to ignore the importance of this issue, we do not discuss it systematically in the following chapters. Specifically, we will speak about parents and parent-child relationships, not about fathers, or mothers, and their relationship with their children. By doing so, we do not want to deny that there are differences between the experiences of mothers and those of fathers, nor that any first-person experience of being a parent is, amongst other things, always an embodied experience in which issues of sex and gender cannot but play a part. But focusing on this aspect of the experience and positioning of mothers and fathers and their different relationships with their children would, we feel, detract from our central concern here, which is to articulate what it is that is at stake in what we refer to as the first-person perspective of being a parent, as against what we refer to as a third-person perspective. As we hope will become clear throughout the book, in taking the lens of the first-person perspective, what is foregrounded is not so much one’s experience as a member of a particular gender, but one’s experience as a parent, here and now, in relation to one’s own child.

In developing our own account, we acknowledge a debt to the kind of experiential accounts by women that have played such an integral part in the feminist struggle, whereby women’s first-person articulation of their everyday experience (as opposed to third-person accounts of the legal, political or socio-economic status of women in society) served as a way of exposing the conceptual and ethical assumptions underpinning the conceptualisation of categories such as ‘woman’, ‘wife’ and ‘mother’, and thus of challenging the political power structures that were reproduced within the family and other intimate relationships. As Sarah Ruddick put this in 1989: ‘Maternal voices have been drowned by professional theory, ideologies of motherhood, sexist arrogance, and childhood fantasy’ (Ruddick 1989, p. 40), and her own work belongs to the tradition of reclaiming a voice – ‘naming the nameless so that it can be thought’ (Lorde, quoted in Ruddick 1989, p. 40) – championed by feminist writers and multicultural theorists. In a sense, what we are doing here can be seen as revisiting this approach in the light of current discourses which, on the face of it, no

longer seem to embody such a blatantly universalising, oppressive language that ignores mothers and their experience. Yet while acknowledging that it might, at times, matter very much in one's experience of being a parent to one's child that one is the mother, and not the father, of that child, and vice versa, it does not necessarily, on our account, *have* to matter, or to determine the experience. As we will argue later, to take the first-person perspective in thinking about parenting is to acknowledge a radical pluralism when it comes to the experience of being a parent; which is also to acknowledge that there is no self-evident way to identify a set of experiences and actions that determine what it means to be a parent; rather, what it means to be a parent will have to be decided and, in a sense, claimed for anew in every instance.

A similar point applies to issues of social class. We are acutely aware of the fact that in speaking in the first-person throughout this book, we are speaking as members of a particular social class in a particular developed part of the world. However, while not wishing to play down the significance of this point, we do want to insist that in trying to understand the parent-child relationship from the first-person perspective, the matter of there being *differences* between social classes, in a sense, disappears, since what is at stake is not one's experience as a member of this or that class, but to repeat the point made above, one's experience as a parent, here and now, in relation to one's own child. This does not preclude one's belonging to a particular class being highly significant in one's experience of being a parent, but it should not, we argue, become a narrative in its own right, as in doing so it would in a sense function as a type of third-person account, thus possibly silencing the first-person account of being a parent.

A note on methodology may be appropriate here. It is notoriously difficult for philosophers to talk of methodology in their work, and we share the distaste of many of our colleagues for the use of this term. Nevertheless, a few words are in order here. In a sense, we take ourselves to be doing something closely related to what Wittgenstein says about 'supplying remarks on the natural history of human beings':

What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark because they are always before our eyes. (Wittgenstein, PI, I, # 415)

What we are trying to foreground and to expose in our discussion, particularly in Chap. 1, is what has become natural to us today in relation to childrearing and the parent-child relationship; so natural, in fact, that we seem to hardly even notice it anymore. We take ourselves to be 'supplying remarks' on what has, in recent years, become part of our nature when it comes to childrearing and the parent-child relationship. We do this mainly through presenting and discussing several detailed examples. To a certain extent, this may come close to what in another field of study is called a history of the present:

Studies of the history of the present start from an unease with the values of the present, and by historicizing and denaturalizing the taken-for-granted notions, practices, and values of the present, such studies can open up a space out from which one can revise and reformulate other possible ways of reasoning and practicing pedagogy. [...] research within a history of the present can be seen as a form of critical engagement of the present, as making the production of discourses open for scrutiny and denaturalization also makes them open for revisions. (Dahlberg 2003, p. 262)

Thus Dahlberg examines, for example, ‘what kind of ethic the *norm of autonomy* embodies’ (Dahlberg 2003, p. 262). By historicising and denaturalising the way the norm of autonomy currently works, she hopes to destabilise the present, which in turn would enable one ‘to explore if there are other possible ways of conceptualising the child, teacher and pedagogy than in terms of the norm of autonomy’ (Dahlberg 2003, p. 262). In a sense, this approach describes what we will be doing throughout the book.

Finally, a note on language. Firstly, we have chosen throughout this work to use, where possible, the gender-neutral term ‘parent’ or ‘parents’ rather than ‘father’ or ‘mother’. This is largely because, as indicated in the above discussion of gender, in our analysis of our contemporary linguistic and conceptual landscape, we wish to draw attention to other, non-gendered aspects of the discourse and practice of ‘parenting’. However, in doing so, we are not trying to ignore the point that, as Ruddick warns, ‘To speak of “parenting” obscures [the historical fact that] [...] even now, and certainly through most of history, women have been the mothers’ (Ruddick 1989, p. 45). This point notwithstanding, we generally use the feminine pronoun ‘she’ to refer to the parent in our examples. This is in order to avoid the clumsy, gender-neutral alternatives.

Secondly, though this might at first sight be a bit confusing to the English-speaking reader, we use the expression ‘*the pedagogical relationship*’ at several points throughout the book. This is a literal translation of the Dutch term ‘pedagogische relatie’, and it is important to note that the term ‘pedagogical’ here has a far broader sense than the narrow, somewhat didactic connotations of the word as it is commonly used, in English, in the context of discussions of teaching. Although appropriately applied to teachers, the original Dutch term also refers to parents and, importantly, it denotes something like the development of the child, in a sense that goes beyond the narrow notion of teaching. The concept ‘pedagogical relationship’ was actually introduced some time ago into Anglo-Saxon philosophy of education by Ben Spiecker, although it has had limited consequent usage amongst English-speaking philosophers in the field. In his 1984 article *The pedagogical relationship*, Spiecker conceptually developed the idea of the pedagogical relationship as foundational in educational theory, especially in the ‘*geisteswissenschaftliche*’ tradition. For Spiecker, the pedagogical relationship is, in its most general formulation, that particular relationship within which a child can become a person (Spiecker 1984, p. 208). Put in this general way, a number of particular kinds of relationships count as pedagogical relationships: the relationship between parent and child, between teacher and pupil, between master and apprentice, etc. since in all of these relationships a child can come to develop as a person, or can come to develop aspects of what (at a particular given time) is meant by ‘person’. The relationship between parent and child is probably the archetypical instance of that relationship in which children can grow up to become persons given the (generally) long-term relationship between parents and their children. To complicate matters even further, there is in Dutch another concept used to speak about the relationship between parents and their children in as far as this concerns the process of what is commonly referred to as bringing up or raising children: *opvoeding-srelatie*. Literally translated, this would be something like ‘childrearing relationship’.

This is clearly a concept that is not used in the English language. In English, the concept most commonly used in this context is ‘parent-child relationship’ – and this is, in fact, the concept that we generally employ throughout the book, in preference to the more common term ‘parenting’.

As regards the word ‘parenting’ itself, although this word is now part of everyday English, it is not, we argue, either ‘innocent’ or ordinary since it is expressive of a shift in our way of thinking and speaking about childrearing and the parent-child relationship.² Part of our project of denaturalising this usage could be read as an attempt to recover the now somewhat unfashionable English term ‘upbringing’. While this older term is obviously not without its own problematic evaluative connotations, the currently pervasive term ‘parenting’ epitomises the particular understanding of childrearing and the parent-child relationship as pervaded by scientific knowledge and the need for expertise that forms the focus of our discussion in Chap. 1 and the rest of the book.

To reflect these insights, the term ‘parenting’ appears in inverted commas within this Introduction and in Chap. 1, but will appear without them in the subsequent chapters. Although the reader may find this a little annoying, we believe it is justified as what we want to highlight in these chapters is the ways in which the very usage of this term has contributed to common assumptions and implications about the meaning, nature and significance of the parent-child relationship.

In summary, and to follow on from the above points, one way to express what we are trying to do through this book is to say that we are trying to speak and to encourage the speaking of other languages – other, that is, than the ones that hold us captive through the ways in which we conceptualise and speak about childrearing and the parent-child relationship. This is not an attempt to construct a ‘new’ language, but, rather, an attempt to voice an ‘old’ one. Or better yet, it is an attempt to (re)introduce certain words into our ways of conceptualising childrearing and the parent-child relationship that are perhaps bound to be perceived as ‘old’, or even, perhaps, as ‘philosophical’ or ‘esoteric’ – but nonetheless words, we think, that allow us to shed a different light on what childrearing is, or could be, and what it means, or could mean, to be in a relationship with one’s own child. This is not to be understood as just reviving or invoking the old meaning of these words and taking them as authoritative, but rather using these words here and now, in contemporary contexts, allowing the friction between these words and our current taken-for-granted terms and conceptualisations to work in such ways as to generate a different understanding of childrearing and the parent-child relationship. Such a move might, we hope, not only inspire us to rethink certain practical issues such as the very notion of advice and support for parents, but help to reframe the central area of our lives that is the parent-child relationship as a fundamentally moral and political aspect of human social practice.

²For an illuminating discussion of the historical origins and context of this usage, see Smith (2010).

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Chapter 1

The Languages of Psychology and the Science of Parenting

Do not let St. Nicholas come too early.

Unfortunately St. Nicholas comes so early these days that children already experience stress a month in advance. And this is all the result of commercial factors. Unfortunately, then, the fun part for children has disappeared before the real festival.

Do not use St. Nicholas as the “big stick”.

St. Nicholas as a person, and all the ideas associated with him, can cause anxiety in children. To start with, there is this character from Spain with his Black Petes, whose appearance alone can induce anxiety. Alongside that, the particular meaning that is attached to them can induce additional anxiety. Some songs contain the threat: “the naughty ones will get the rod”. And many parents play along with this, telling their children that St. Nicholas sees all and knows all. This is used in contexts like, for example, finishing a meal, doing homework, going to bed, being a good boy/girl, and so on. Tell your child that St. Nicholas knows perfectly well that all children can be both good and bad, and that that is completely normal. The fact that St. Nicholas is coming should be a genuine children’s festival that is free from stress.

Limit the number of times St. Nicholas comes to visit.

It is very sensible to allow your child to put her shoe out only a limited number of times – though this can of course be troublesome when other children are allowed to put their shoes out regularly. It will take some creativity to figure out a way to deal with this. Maybe you could write a letter from St. Nicholas in which you emphasise your child’s positive traits, also explaining when he will come by.

St. Nicholas in the classroom. (St. Nicholas is coming to our school on Friday December the 5th)

We will let you know when we start the theme of St. Nicholas in our class. From that moment on, you may give your child books and other items related to this theme to bring into school. We ask you not to give them anything to bring in with them now in order to keep the stress to a minimum. Thank you for your understanding and cooperation.

We wish all children a nice festival of St. Nicholas

(authors’ translation)¹

¹In Belgium and the Netherlands the (folklore) figure who brings candy and toys for children is not Santa Claus (US) or Father Christmas (UK), but St. Nicholas. And since the latter’s name-day

This is a letter² which one of us received 3 years ago, from his child's kindergarten teacher, with the title 'Tips for parents regarding the festival of St Nicholas'. The teacher, obviously with the best intentions, wished to give parents some advice as to how best to handle this significant event in their children's lives. The letter is a good example (one among many) with which to introduce the topic of this chapter. It is a good example both because it contains the very features of the languages of 'parenting' that we wish to discuss here, and because it is such an ordinary example; there is nothing particularly unusual about it, or at least, we believe, nothing that people would see as especially problematic (apart from, granted, a slightly patronising tone). Without wishing to downplay the importance of issues of classroom order here, or of the teacher having some concerns about the children in her classroom bringing things into school that may 'disrupt' the normal, mostly thematic routine of kindergarten education, we want to draw attention to the following two elements in this example. First, the teacher's concern in this letter is about the children's mental health, as testified by her repeated reference to (the reduction of) stress and anxiety. The time children spend at school (or in this case preschool or kindergarten) should be a time of, one could say, psychological peace. Education, it seems to be implied,

(sometimes said to be his birthday) is the 6th of December, the big event for children takes place either on the 5th of December in the evening or the 6th in the morning (St. Nicholas having delivered everything overnight). St. Nicholas is accompanied by one or more 'Black Petes', who are black because of crawling up and down chimneys to bring presents to the children (though there are different interpretations of the black colour of their skin). The idea is that children put their shoes out in front of the chimney, with a carrot or a lump of sugar for St. Nicholas' horse (with further regional differences as to what is put in the shoe and for whom). On the evening of the 5th of December, or the morning of the 6th, St. Nicholas and his Black Petes bring presents for the children – the evidence of their really having been there being that the carrot (or whatever is left there for the horse) has disappeared. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Nicholas#Celebration_in_Belgium_and_the_Netherlands for more information; retrieved December, 2008.) Until not very long ago the figure of St. Nicholas was also (and sometimes probably still is) used by parents as a figure with which to urge children to behave well, through invoking the threat of not getting any presents. Children who have been bad get no presents, so the folklore goes (although in practice, all children turn out to be good), but get a rod (a rather clear symbol of punishment), or might even get stuffed into a jute sack by the Black Petes and taken to Spain (where St. Nicholas is believed to come from). Recently this 'punitive' atmosphere surrounding the figure of St. Nicholas has changed significantly, undoubtedly because of larger changes in the conception of how to raise children, though it is still present in some forms.

Regarding St. Nicolas coming to visit, children can put their shoes out in front of the chimney from the moment St. Nicholas has arrived. (He arrives by steamboat, mostly two weeks before the 5th/6th of December.) The idea of putting the shoes out some time before the 5th/6th of December is, for example, to give St. Nicholas a letter specifying what toys one would like this year. So, for example, children can put their shoes out on the evening of the day of his arrival, leaving the letter in their shoes for St. Nicholas and/or his Petes to pick up. It is customary that they then also leave some candy for the children (for example a chocolate figure of St. Nicholas) – again proof of him having been there. Traditions differ, of course and one element of difference is how many times children can put their shoes out between his arrival and the real event.

²It is customary in this school to exchange information (brief notes, announcements, sometimes letters) between parents and teachers by putting these in the so-called 'to and fro-portfolio'.

is something that should run smoothly, or at least should not be disrupted by negative emotions and experiences. Parents, evidently, should collaborate with the school in order to accomplish this. Second, parents are conceived as being in need of advice. What seems to be implied here is that parents do not know how to handle this (and possibly similar) event(s) and thus need to be told how to deal with it. Parents are addressed here as being responsible for acting on their child's behalf and in her interest – this being, clearly, the child's mental health. Or to put this even a little more pointedly: parents are understood as having to be informed, even educated, about the fact that what they should be concerned about is the matter of their child's mental health.

The example is expressive of the very features of the particular ways in which we have predominantly come to conceptualise and speak about raising children, about the parent-child relationship and hence also about what parents should be doing, and how they are expected to understand themselves and to relate to their children. These conceptualisations and ways of speaking are strongly informed, as we will show and argue below, by the languages of psychology – particularly, in the case of childrearing, by the languages of developmental psychology, behavioural psychology and, fairly recently, neuropsychology. Alongside this, they are also strongly informed by the idea that parents are somehow in need of education. Or, more generally, our conceptualisation and talk about childrearing and the parent-child relationship today is pervaded with a sense of the need for expertise in this area, even to the extent that parents are expected to professionalise themselves in a certain sense, something which we see encapsulated in the very use of the verb 'parenting'. Taken together, these two phenomena – of scientific languages and professionalisation – refer to what we would like to identify as the scientisation of the parent-child relationship.

We are not suggesting that our discussion in this chapter will offer an exhaustive account of current conceptualisations of childrearing and the parent-child relationship, though, admittedly, we think the themes identified here are very powerful, if not predominant ways of conceptualising childrearing and the parent-child relationship today. Our reason for addressing this is not that we think that none of the scientific findings that have emerged from those disciplines of psychology can be in any way useful in the context of raising children. Nor do we think that giving parents advice is wrong per se. As noted in the Introduction, our concern is how the 'scientific account' of parenting – saturated with the discourses of psychology and the (perceived) need of, even fixation on, expertise – define and restrict both how we think and talk about childrearing and the parent-child relationship, and how parents accordingly understand themselves. There are, we argue, other ways of conceptualising, other languages with which to talk about childrearing and the parent-child relationship that are being obscured due to, most notably, the dominance of the languages of developmental psychology and neuropsychology. We see it as an important task in this book to draw on these other languages, and let their possibly 'untimely' registers work to open up our thinking about childrearing and the parent-child relationship. What is expressed in these other languages is not just something that we want to present here as simply left out or forgotten within or because of this scientific account. More importantly, we want to suggest that these other ways of conceptualising

childrearing and the parent-child relationship can alter and perhaps even enrich our understanding of what it means to be a parent today, to raise one's children in contemporary conditions, and in doing so, can even help us to see the psychological concepts and descriptions in a new light, and perhaps reconceptualise the very idea of something like parenting support.

What we are particularly concerned with is how, within the current discourses, rich notions such as responsibility are taken to have a very narrow sense within the parent-child relationship. Responsibility is understood narrowly, we will argue, in terms of the correct application of scientific knowledge and in terms of an attitude on the part of parents of (what we could call) vigilance (as opposed to care, in some form). In this chapter, we will briefly go into this point by identifying this narrow sense, and indicating some of the problems surrounding it. A more extensive account of responsibility in the context of childrearing and the parent-child relationship will be given in Chap. 6.

No doubt, the fact that the languages of developmental psychology and (currently to a lesser extent) neuropsychology have become part of our everyday way of speaking about childrearing and the parent-child relationship is part of the intrusion of the language of the various sub-disciplines of psychology into everyday language and life in a more general sense – to the extent that one could even say that we have been going through a ‘psychologisation’ of significant parts of our lives. To be more precise, ordinary language has always had its share of psychological concepts, i.e. concepts that are used to describe what in an ordinary sense of the word have been seen as ‘psychological’ states, such as, for example ‘intention’, ‘motivation’, ‘stress’ or ‘shy’ and the like. What we are highlighting here are two elements: first, that these concepts are increasingly being used in a more specialist, or technical sense, because of the research that has been done into the processes they are taken to express, and second, that technical concepts drawn from research in, for example, developmental psychology and neuropsychology are becoming an obvious part of our ordinary language. In this chapter, we will not go into this more general trend as such, but will focus on how the languages of psychology shape our conceptualisations and understandings of childrearing and of the parent-child relationship, and how this way of speaking is present in our everyday language (see Ramaekers and Suissa 2010a, b, 2011a, b).

Our concern is to show how these languages of psychology, in Burman's succinct phrasing, ‘both contribute[s] to and reflect[s]’ normative assumptions about parenthood and upbringing, ‘both in structuring research agendas and in informing practice’ (Burman 2008, p. 117). We will do so by analysing recent prominent research and popular literature on parenting and policies on parent support, in both the UK and Flanders. Our unease, to use Dahlberg's term (see Introduction), is that when it comes to childrearing and the parent-child relationship, there is a growing sense in both policy and popular literature that the only relevant story that can be told is the one offered by scientific languages, mostly that of developmental psychology – which we think is, as said, a narrow and impoverished way of conceptualising childrearing and the parent-child relationship. By presenting examples, putting them side by side, we hope to ‘de-naturalise’ the presence of the

languages of specifically developmental psychology and also neuropsychology in relation to childrearing and the parent-child relationship. In a similar vein, we hope to ‘denaturalise’ the idea that parents have to professionalise themselves in order to be able to raise their children. Minimally, our aspiration is thus to problematise the taken-for-grantedness of the concepts we predominantly use these days when conceptualising childrearing and the parent-child relationship. And connected to this, an important sense in which we ourselves understand the work of this book is in trying to use other words and other expressions, to conceptualise and understand childrearing and the parent-child relationship in order to open up ways of seeing this arena in a different light.

Scientific Languages in Childrearing

It is hard to miss the presence of the language of developmental psychology in current ways of conceptualising and talking about childrearing and the parent-child relationship. An important aspect of this phenomenon is the way in which developmental psychology serves as, if not the only, then at least as a very important, research base for identifying and defining, if only implicitly, ‘good parenting’. In recent years, this has been supplemented by increasing reference to aspects of neuroscience as the basis for pedagogical action. Examples abound; one need only look at websites for parents, magazine supplements on upbringing, the kind of issues that are addressed in the columns of these magazines; one need only be attentive to the very ways of speaking about childrearing, children’s behaviour, etc. and to how, accordingly, parents are then positioned in relation to their children, and, tellingly, their children’s development.

Developmental psychology is responsible for much of the jargon that is used in such media, and that has now become an almost taken-for-granted part of ordinary language. Characteristic expressions here are, amongst others, ‘offering emotional support’, ‘enhancing well-being’ (of parents and children), ‘accommodating children’s needs’, ‘creating stimulating contexts’, ‘enabling interactions’ between parents and their children, ‘experimenting with taking distance from parents’, ‘ensuring one’s child’s attachment’ or ‘enabling secure attachment’, etc. So, for example, on the popular UK website ParentlinePlus, theoretical constructs from developmental psychology, such as ‘separation anxiety’, pepper the accessible, chatty-style text as if they were an obvious part of our everyday language. Products for babies and children are promoted with explicit reference to children’s development. The product description for the *Arm’s Reach Co-Sleeper* is a fine example here: ‘Besides enhancing bonding between parents and their baby, the Arm’s Reach Co-Sleeper® provides night-time security that benefits a growing baby’s emotional development’,³ or the

³See <http://www.armsreach.com/pages/about-us-sleep-pv-c10-1.html>, retrieved December, 2010.

Amazing Baby Developmental Duck which ‘is uniquely created and based on accepted research of how babies develop within the first 2 years of life’.⁴ Ordinary behaviour tends to be translated surprisingly quickly into (developmental) psychological jargon. For example see how quickly a lively young child’s (usually a boy’s) behaviour is called ‘hyperactive’, and, connected to this, how ordinary behaviour after having been thus translated is treated as a symptom of one or another kind of disorder (in this case ADHD). As the title of a recent book suggests, we no longer seem to speak about (and hence there no longer, in a sense, are) ‘naughty boys’,⁵ but boys that have ADHD, or an anti-social behaviour disorder, or some type of self-regulation disorder (Timimi 2005). And, apparently, parents are expected to look at their child’s behaviour in this way, or worse even, it is assumed that parents are already looking at their child’s behaviour in this particular way; that is, that they are not just seeing ordinary behaviour, but looking at ordinary behaviour as a possible sign of a disorder, a problem or at least something to worry about. See for example how in a recent handbook for parents the editors address what they think of as questions parents typically ask:

Is their young child’s unruly behaviour a sign of hyperactivity? Is their teenager’s moodiness a symptom of a dangerous depression? Is their daughter’s latest food fad part of an incipient eating disorder? Is her first relationship a prelude to pregnancy? Has their son’s skirmish with the law launched him on a criminal career? (Bailey and Shooter 2009, pp. 1–2)

Especially significant for our understanding of childrearing and the parent-child relationship, is the translation of what parents do into a specific, developmental jargon: parents no longer just live together with their children in a family, but ‘interact’ with them; when parents buy toys for their children this is no longer just talked about in terms of the concept of ‘playing’, but in terms of creating stimulating environments for their children, and in terms of what this playing is good for (i.e. what particular capacities it will allow to develop); reading stories to one’s children is something one speaks about in terms of opportunities for bonding and for stimulating children’s linguistic capabilities, and so on.⁶

⁴See <http://www.amazingbaby.net/>, retrieved December, 2010.

⁵Supernanny’s ‘naughty step’ is no evidence against what we are saying here. In fact, as we hope will become clear, Supernanny’s use of the word naughty in the contexts and in the ways in which she uses it, proves our point that developmental psychology constitutes our conceptualising of childrearing and the parent-child relationship.

⁶See for example the website of the Flemish governmental organization, Kind & Gezin (Child and Family), http://www.kindengezin.be/home_ouder.jsp, or http://www.kindengezin.be/English_pages/default.jsp for an English version. Kind & Gezin/Child and Family are, as stated on their website ‘a Flemish governmental agency with responsibility for young children and families in Flanders. ... Its main task is to implement government policy for young children and for families with young children, in particular in the fields of preventive care, child care services, family support, diversity and children’s rights’. We will be referring to Kind & Gezin/Child and Family a number of times in this chapter, since it is a good example of what we are trying to show here. See also the popular Flemish website on childrearing ‘Groei Mee’. On reading, see <http://www.groeimee.be/dossiers/voorlezen-plezier-voor-twee> (retrieved December, 2010).

A lot of websites and magazines for parents, parenting handbooks and guides, also contain presentations of developmental stages, explaining what children at a particular age are doing or should be doing. Thus, in a manner typical of the phenomena described here, the statement on the Amazing Baby website advertises books and associated toys to parents with the following statement: ‘These innovative and award-winning toys are based closely on the books and reflect babies’ key developmental stages’.⁷ While there is some variation in the description of the stages, the suggestion is almost always that these stages are universal – with this sense of universalism of the stages or phases heightened by (or epitomised in) the usage of the word ‘developmental milestones’, suggesting that if a child misses one of these steps, she will most likely not be able to catch up. So for example parents are informed, in a recent issue of a Flemish magazine, how ‘social’ children are at different ages. This occurs in an article about children’s social behaviour, under the title ‘How do I make my children social?’⁸ where the characteristic way of putting this is ‘Your child reacts [in such and such a way]’, ‘Your child shows [this or that behaviour]’, ‘This is the age at which children ...’, etc., expressions which do not leave much room for doubt that this is actually what children *should* be doing, or how children *should* be behaving. In the recent handbook for parents mentioned above, developmental stages are explicitly posited as the point around which everything revolves and hence which one simply cannot ignore:

This book helps to distinguish between these layers of concern [which parents have], beginning with what lies at the centre of it all – the stages of child and adolescent development that are the foundations on which life is built. (Bailey and Shooter 2009, p. 3)

The framework of child and adolescent development ... will tell us what a child at this age ought to be wrestling with, what issues will be important to him and therefore how he might be expected to behave, within broad parameters. (Bailey and Shooter 2009, p. 21)

It is interesting to note that even on websites aimed at parents, such as Mumsnet and Kidsdevelopment.co.uk,⁹ where there is an acknowledgement of the point that not all babies reach these milestones at the same age, and an attempt to reassure parents that there is a fairly wide ‘normal’ range of development, nevertheless the milestones themselves are not questioned as universally valid conceptual and descriptive categories. For example, when a piece on the Kidsdevelopment.co.uk website states ‘Piaget found that most babies seemed to have an understanding of object permanence at about 8–9 months of age, during the Sensory Motor Stage of Cognitive Development, but as all babies vary, so does the age when they reach this particular milestone’,¹⁰ the meaning of ‘object permanence’, as a useful and universally appropriate category, is not questioned or even addressed.

⁷See www.amazingbaby.net, retrieved December, 2010.

⁸From *Goed Gevoel* (edition March 2010).

⁹See <http://www.mumsnet.com/> and <http://www.kidsdevelopment.co.uk/>

¹⁰Cf. <http://www.kidsdevelopment.co.uk/ObjectPermanenceInfants.html>, retrieved October, 2010.

The implications this has for parents need hardly be spelled out: whatever it is parents want to do when raising their children, they need first and foremost to learn about these developmental stages, for if they do not do so, they will be acting without a firm foothold. Their children's experiences and events in their children's lives can only be evaluated against the background of these developmental stages. No matter how complex 'the relationship between life events and child development' (Bailey and Shooter 2009, p. 24), a parent's task nonetheless is to 'try to work out how [a particular] life event cuts across or gels with the tasks with which a child of this age and developmental stage would be struggling anyway' (Bailey and Shooter 2009) – implying no less than that developmental stages are the final point of reference when making decisions as a parent.

A prominent feature of the current discourse about childrearing and the parent-child relationship is talk about attachment and bonding. This ranges from a full-blooded parenting 'style' based on the latest research in attachment, so-called attachment parenting,¹¹ to the more integrated use of attachment as part of the language of developmental psychology described above, i.e. as part of the assumption that what is developmentally speaking crucial for parents is to make sure that their children are securely attached. In the UK, as Burman notes, Sure Start was explicitly conceptualised against the background of attachment theory (See Burman 2008, p. 154). The importance of secure attachment – and, for our purposes, the way it is presented to parents and all those concerned about 'our children' – should not be underestimated, for it is claimed to have a far-reaching impact on individuals' lives. Thus, in the above parenting handbook, attachment is said to have 'important implications for how the child grows up to manage relationships, how she copes with difficult situations and how safe she feels to explore and develop' (Bailey and Shooter 2009, p. 69). In an even more explicit sense, these writers say of attachment, that 'early patterns persist into adult life, affecting future relationships' (Bailey and Shooter 2009, p. 169). Some go even further in arguing for the importance of early secure attachments beyond the individual's well-being and interpersonal functioning. Thus, for example, the opening statement of the international website on attachment parenting, <http://www.attachmentparenting.org/>, explicitly links attachment to 'strengthen[ing] families and creat[ing] a more compassionate world',¹² and Sue Gerhardt, in her book, *Why love matters. How affection shapes a baby's brain*, suggests that people may end up with problems such as alcohol abuse, eating disorders, depression and physical violence 'largely because their capacity to manage their own feelings has been impaired by their poorly developed emotional system' (Gerhardt 2004, p. 87) – an emotional system which, she argues, is crucially established through appropriate parental interaction in infancy.

A recent and remarkable development in this context is the way in which findings from neuro(bio)logical research are used to boost arguments for this type of approach

¹¹Cf. for example <http://www.attachmentparenting.org/>. Interestingly, in Dutch 'attachment parenting' is translated as 'natuurlijk ouderschap', which literally means 'natural parenting'. See <http://www.natuurlijkouderschap.org/>. We will discuss parenting styles in more detail in Chap. 4.

¹²Retrieved October, 2010.

to childrearing. In his recent book, Adriaenssens, for example, explicitly says that the knowledge we have gathered about how children's brains work offers us important insights about how to deal with our children, i.e. communicate with them, interact with them, etc. (Adriaenssens 2010).¹³ While he does acknowledge that there are individual differences and needs amongst children, his main argument is that we need to attune our pedagogical ways of dealing with children to what we know from such research. He refers to, amongst others, Michael Gurian, who in his book *The mind of boys* (quoted in Adriaenssens 2010) gives an overview of the neurological areas and structures which, according to Adriaenssens, 'can provide handles for trying to find a more boy-friendly approach' (Adriaenssens 2010, p. 23, our translation). Another good example in this context is Margot Sunderland's popular book, with the telling title *The science of parenting. How today's brain research can lead to happy, emotionally balanced children*. The book is premised on the assumption that its advice to parents on how to handle common problems involved in dealing with young infants is more robust and reliable than that of previous generations of parenting books as it is based on the latest neuroscientific research. Thus, in the section entitled 'Why children behave badly', the author offers as one possible reason for a child's angry outburst or disruptive behaviour:

You activate the wrong part of your child's brain. – for example, if you shout and issue endless commands – “Do this”, “Don't do that” – you could be unwittingly activating the primitive RAGE and FEAR systems deep in the mammalian and reptilian parts of his brain. In contrast, lots of play, laughter and cuddles are likely to activate the brain's PLAY system, and CARE system. These systems trigger the release of calming opioids, and presto! You have a calm, contented child! (Sunderland 2006, pp. 111–120).

Needless to say this neuropsychological language fits in easily with the developmental psychology language, or more precisely: it fits in easily with the emphasis within childrearing literature on things like developmental stages and milestones. Children need to be securely attached or else their brains will not develop properly.

Scientific Languages in Childrearing and the Parent-Child Relationship: Normative Assumptions

There are a number of problems and difficulties which we want to address regarding these scientific languages in relation to childrearing and the parent-child relationship. The first and the second of these have to do with the status of the research

¹³P. Adriaenssens is generally acknowledged as 'Flanders' childrearing specialist'. See <http://www.lannoo.com/content/lannoo/wbni/listview/1/index.jsp?titelcode=25136&fondsId=11> (retrieved December, 2010). He was recently named 'man of the year' by a Flemish weekly magazine, see http://knackweekend.nnews.be/nl/life-and-style/radar/people/onze-knack-weekend-mens-van-het-jaar/article-1194888364477.htm?utm_source=Newsletter-14-12-2010&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=Newsletter-KnackWeekend-nl#

itself, in particular the status of research in developmental psychology. We think it is important to point this out, not for its own sake, but because it enables us to see the extent to which this affects the way we think about parents and what they do. Other problems (the third and fourth) have to do with the very use of concepts from developmental psychology and neuropsychology in the arena of childrearing and in relation to the parent-child relationship. The final difficulty we will identify has to do with the problematic relationship (or at least a relationship far more complex than sometimes assumed) between research findings (notably from neurological research) and prescriptions for action.

Universalism

First, perhaps one of the most pressing issues has to do with the status of research in developmental psychology as such – a problem we can identify as a ‘somewhat presumptuous universalism’ (in Willem Koops’ words, 2007, p. 15, our translation):

... the regularities in development of cognitive and social behaviour we nowadays discover in our laboratories are so impressive that we, perhaps wrongly, seem to have forgotten that children have not remained the same throughout history, and that the very concept “child” is culturally and historically determined. (Koops 2007, p. 15)

We are not going to go into these changes in the concepts ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ here – others have done so in considerable depth (see for example Cunningham 2005). The point we want to make here is simply that research in developmental psychology cannot be understood apart from the contexts in which it is undertaken, and hence cannot claim to be generalisable, let alone objective. What presents itself as the indisputable given of empirical research (for example developmental stages, milestones, etc.) is at best a reflection of the characteristics of a large group of research subjects. The problem we are hinting at here – which, we think, is generally well-known and acknowledged in the academic literature, but, strangely perhaps, ignored when taken in relation to childrearing and parent support – is that ‘what is generally the case’ is misleadingly granted the status of a ‘norm’. In this context, Burman even speaks of a process of ‘naturalisation of development’ (Burman 2008, p. 21), meaning that regularities in development that are discovered in large groups of children (importantly: mostly Western, white middle class children) are elevated to the status of a norm and consequently considered to be ‘natural’.

That central theoretical concepts in developmental psychology are often embedded in a complex background of evaluative assumptions is nicely illustrated by Jerome Kagan. He argues that the enthusiasm for attachment theory amongst psychologists is largely the result of cultural and historical factors. He claims, for example, that the atrocities of the Second World War generated a desire among psychologists and psychiatrists for a conception of human nature with less dark, Freudian pessimism than earlier conceptions (reflected in Erikson’s replacement of Freud’s oral stage with a stage of trust). Attachment theory’s popularity, Kagan says (Kagan 1998,

pp. 94–96), ‘thrives on the deep assumption that humans require love more than any other resource and the illusion that we can prevent men from hacking others to death by loving them when they are young children’ (an assumption he thinks is seriously challenged by recent atrocities). Socio-economic factors also played a role in this shift in emphasis, specifically in that the ‘economically parasitic’ role of children in the modern period, compared to earlier periods, ‘renders them more needy of reassurance that they are loved than children who perform daily chores’. The 10-year old in a fifteenth century farming village realised he was an object of value because he could see that his work made a material contribution to the family’s welfare. Modern children are more dependent on symbolic signs of affection (Kagan 1998, p. 94). Finally, Kagan notes, Bowlby’s focus on the idea of security as the basic description of the infant’s relationship to its caretaker is rooted in the sense that we live in an age of anxiety: in pre-modern rural areas, and in many developing countries today, the main source of uncertainty was whether the infant would live. In industrialised countries with safe water, medicine and so on, this worry has been replaced with worry over the infant’s psychological vitality. Bowlby, Kagan says, sensed that ‘the angst of his historical era was a rupture of family and social bonds and guessed that the child’s secure attachment protected her from fear and inoculated her against future uneasiness’ (Kagan 1998, p. 95). Seventeenth century European parents, in contrast, also wanted their children to be able to cope with anxiety, ‘but they were certain that forcing children to deal with difficulty was a better way to teach resilience than to shower them with affectionate care’. (Kagan 1998, p. 95)

In sum, then, concepts, such as attachment, which we now associate so easily with childrearing and introduce in parenting advice, always reflect certain values and normative assumptions about what constitutes being human, living well, about what the role of childrearing is in a particular society, and about what constitutes good parenting. These assumptions are never uncontroversial and should thus be open for discussion. Much of the contemporary childrearing advice which takes concepts such as attachment for granted, is in fact explicit about the normative assumptions about the aims of childrearing that are imported along with these concepts. Yet these normative assumptions are never themselves defended or argued for, or even presented as possibly contestable. They are simply offered as part of the descriptive language of research. Thus Sue Gerhardt, in the book mentioned above, explains in the context of presenting research on the long-term effects of poor parenting in the early years that ‘people need to have a satisfying experience of dependency before they can become truly independent and largely self-regulating’ (Gerhardt 2004, p. 90). Yet what exactly it means to be ‘independent’ and why we would want children to turn out like this is never addressed. Similarly, Helene Guldberg, in *Reclaiming childhood. Freedom and play in an age of fear*, while criticising the way in which the notion of ‘critical periods’ is used in (popular) literature, defines ‘insecurely attached’ children as ‘being overly “clingy” with their caregivers and often inappropriately friendly with strangers’ (2009, pp. 136–137). Guldberg thus takes this as a neutral, scientific description of some category of human behaviour; what is not addressed is that ‘insecurely attached’ implies a valuation of some human form of relating to one another and indicates what is appropriate and what not.

What we want to argue for here in relation to attachment and bonding goes somewhat further than just arguing that attachment and bonding need to be contextualised, or that what attachment and bonding mean, for example, is culturally relative. For the danger that lies behind such a move is that attachment and bonding come to be seen as something separate from or apart from ‘context’. On this reading, the context is something that is only brought in afterwards, as some kind of ‘mitigating variable’¹⁴ giving a particular meaning to these concepts by taking all the contextual elements (for example culture-specific practices) into account. The problem is that this leaves the status of attachment and bonding untouched. They are still treated as the (naturalised) givens revealed by empirical research, and not as being themselves part of a particular culture. Following the line of argument developed by Kagan, we propose to see attachment and bonding as themselves part of a set of relational practices that have been given shape in particular societal and cultural conditions, and that thus *tell us* something about what we, in this particular societal and cultural constellation, value today, here and now. These concepts and their usage tell us something, in particular, about the kind of relationships we find worthwhile to develop and entertain, and, possibly, also about the kind of relationships we usually have (or want to have) with other people and that do not conform to the desirable attachment model of relations. Attachment and bonding, on the account we are suggesting, should therefore not be seen as something that needs to be ‘performed’ or achieved in familial practices, in particular in parent-child relationships, and that, accordingly, can be performed well or badly, but as ‘tropes’ (see Burman 2008, p. 130), i.e. labels that cover a vast range of relationships that are valued for particular reasons. Seen in this way, one can then begin to ask other questions. Instead of the usual question of ‘how to’ ensure the development of secure attachment, we can pose questions about the significance of the practices and the values implied in these concepts in relation to our current understanding of childrearing (as well as of the relationships we find ourselves in as adults).

Developmental Psychology and the Family

Alongside this ‘presumptuous universalism’, a further problem is, as Burman (2008) argues, that within developmental psychology it has not been sufficiently acknowledged that what a family is has undergone quite some changes in recent years, with the effect that ‘until recently most developmental psychological research conformed to dominant familial assumptions of the nuclear family containing a male breadwinner and female caregiver’ (Burman 2008, p. 11). This has had a profound impact on our understanding of the relational setting within which children, especially in their early years, are supposedly brought up:

¹⁴This term is taken from Burman (2008, p. 122).

... the overwhelming emphasis of developmental psychological research on the early years of childrearing produces an impoverished conception of the family unit as “mother and child”, ignoring the fact that most women have more than one child, and that therefore the familial context in which most children develop – even within exclusive childcare by mothers – is far from dyadic. (Burman 2008, pp. 111–112)

The ‘standard’ relational setting within which children are supposed to be brought up is taken to be the one-to-one relationship between parent (usually the mother) and child. As Woollett and Phoenix put it, ‘[B]y concentrating on the mother-child pair (or dyad), developmental psychology assumes that mothers are the critical influences on children’s lives’ (Woollett and Phoenix 1991, p. 38). What Woollett and Phoenix want to highlight here is the ways in which this dyadic construction leads to a theoretical perspective whereby ‘fathers and other important people are viewed as only marginally significant and the impact of factors such as social class, lone mothering and divorce are rarely considered’ (Woollett and Phoenix 1991, p. 38). While we agree with this point, we want to suggest the further idea that it is because we predominantly understand childrearing in developmental terms, as something in which the focus should be on stimulating one’s child’s development, helping her to perform developmental tasks, or to reach the required developmental milestones, that childrearing has been situated predominantly within the one-to-one relationship between parent (mother) and child. The focus on attachment contributes to this situating of childrearing in a dyadic relationship by conceptualising relationships surrounding children ‘as individual, and even neurophysiological, properties’ (Burman 2008, p. 130). It is this limited understanding of the context of parent-child relationships that is behind some of the criticisms of the methodology behind the original research on attachment, as Kagan discusses:

... the mother and infant, who have been together for over a year, have experienced pain, pleasure, joy and distress, and the infant’s representations of and behavioural reactions to the mother must contain aspects of all these experiences. Is it reasonable to believe that a half-hour sample of behaviour in an unfamiliar laboratory room could reveal the history of all these experiences? (Kagan 1998, p. 99)

The issue we want to highlight here, however, is not just that of the limitations of the methodology of research into – for example – attachment; rather we want to argue that what we are faced with here is a general problem of what Burman refers to as a very ‘impoverished representation of the social’ (Burman 2008, p. 60):

This suppression of other relationships that surround and involve infants and young children is an overwhelming illustration of the permeation into research of particular ideological assumptions about the structure of families, about which relationship is the most important for a child and how the social world is categorized into the domestic and the public. (Burman 2008, p. 60)

Specifically in relation to childrearing, what we want to point out, drawing on Burman, is that a particular sense of the social seems to be lost in current understandings, i.e. an understanding of the social that goes beyond the one-to-one relationship between parent and child, an understanding in which childrearing is (also)

conceived of as introducing children into a common world, or as having a public dimension. We will come back to this point in Chap. 6.

The (Causal) Logic of Developmental Psychology

The language of developmental psychology assumes a particular logic, i.e. a causal logic, as well as a particular kind of goal, and both logic and goal are taken for granted and imported into the very language itself. The way to understand childrearing is in terms of a linear-developmental story, in which certain outcomes are implicitly posited as the desirable – and, ultimately achievable¹⁵ – end-point, and anything parents do along the way is understood as effecting the next step and, crucially, as taking us one step closer to reaching this end-point. This language and its suggestion of ‘achievable’ are evident at the policy level, for example in the UK government document entitled ‘Parenting Support; Guidance for Local Authorities in England’, issued in conjunction with the Every Child Matters policy,¹⁶ which opens with the confident statement that ‘We know the key principles of effective parenting’. You don’t have to be a philosopher to ask, ‘effective at what?’, but these questions are not asked. Behind such statements lies an account, whether explicit or not, of what the desirable ‘outcome’ of parenting should be: emotionally stable children, happy children, confident children, emotionally literate children – take your pick. Again, it is not that telling parents what kind of children they should produce is anything new. Generations of doctors and psychologists have done this and, indeed, one could perhaps argue that there is not much to be said against the idea of raising one’s child to be emotionally stable or happy. But our point is that this ‘outcome’ has a particular and precise meaning that itself is defined from within the same psychological discourse, rather than being the subject of a moral and cultural conversation. It is not even open to interpretation or questions, but is introduced almost imperceptibly, as if it is self-evident.

What is particularly misleading is that this kind of language suggests that it is only about the means, and that it has nothing to do with what parents find valuable or important. A good example here is the (so-called) parenting support programme Triple P which, in many western countries, is now being imposed on parents in sometimes quite aggressive ways, through websites and in magazines, where its supposedly proven effectiveness is constantly emphasised. But in fact, a particular conception of the aims and values of childrearing is being introduced through the very language of this discourse. Apart from the very idea that childrearing should have ‘outcomes’, the important questions are, of course: what do concepts like ‘emotionally stable’ mean? ‘Stable’ as against what? Why do we value emotional stability

¹⁵We would like to thank Jean-Paul Van Bendeghem for suggesting this line of thought to us.

¹⁶DfES, October 2006.

(or, similarly, confidence and happiness) today above other aims? Even apparently neutral terms such as ‘mental health’, which appears in childrearing advice books at least as far back as the 1930s (see Apple 2006), are now given a very specific meaning, within a culture of quantifiable measurements of levels of self-esteem, anxiety, personality types and so on.

In a sense it is not surprising then, given the logic that is embedded within the very language of developmental psychology, that a number of characteristics of human life, such as love and play, have become ‘instrumentalised’ in relation to the optimal outcome of childrearing. That is: the ‘value’ of these human activities and capabilities comes to be measured in terms of what they can contribute to a child’s development. Love and play are important (or rather are described as being important) because they maintain a functional relationship to children’s development. Again, a good example comes from the website of Child and Family. Here, the fact that children play is described as being important in developmental psychological terms: playing is important for one’s child’s cognitive and linguistic development, for her bodily movements, for her senses and for social interaction. And a parent’s wanting to make time to play together with her child is important as well, since this is beneficial for the bond between parent and child.¹⁷

The same functional relationship between play and children’s development can be found in Guldberg’s *Reclaiming childhood*, referred to above (2009). Within the context of an argument in which she criticises what she calls our current ‘safety-obsessed culture’ (Guldberg 2009, p. 2) and the ways in which within this culture children’s spaces have been reduced and children’s freedom of activities and exploration have been gradually curtailed, she tries to restore the importance of play for children’s lives, but does so only in developmental terms, i.e. because it helps children to explore ‘difficult emotions or experiences’ (Guldberg 2009, p. 76), or because it is necessary for their socialisation (Guldberg 2009, p. 78), or because it is ‘a preparatory stage in the development of children’s written language’ (Guldberg 2009, p. 80). Free play, then, is never just ‘free’, but still ‘for something’.

A similar instrumentalisation can be observed in the case of love. A good example here is Sue Gerhardt’s *Why love matters* (2004), referred to above. Gerhardt explains how an early emotional bond between the infant and its primary care giver is essential for the developing brain, establishing the neural foundations for the child’s later ability to maintain healthy relationships, a strong sense of self-worth, and productive social behaviour. An instrumentalisation of a similar kind can be found on the website of Child and Family, where loving one’s child is understood as something that parents need to ‘do’ within the contours of positive, stimulating interaction with their child.¹⁸ What concerns us is not the empirical validity of such causal claims, nor indeed the intuitively sensible aspects of Gerhardt’s or anyone else’s basic point that children need to be loved, but the way in which the associated

¹⁷Cf. http://www.kindengezin.be/Themas/Opvoeding/Spel_en_speelgoed/belang_spelen.jsp, retrieved October, 2010.

¹⁸http://www.kindengezin.be/Themas/Ontwikkeling/ontwikkelingpositief/tips_bij_opvoeding.jsp

research findings are presented, and the effect that the logic of this discourse has on our ability to think and talk about the experience of being a parent. Such discussions are couched in a language of instrumentality: it is important for parents to love their child *because* this will ensure that the child develops into a healthy and emotionally stable individual; it is important to spend ‘quality time’ with one’s child *because* this will improve her self-esteem, which in turn will lead to fulfilling lives, healthy relationships, better academic performance and so on. As discussed above, the ideas posited here as desirable outcomes of successful (in this case ‘loving’) parenting are not themselves addressed as involving morally complex and possibly contentious values, but rather taken as self-evident.

Even books aimed at challenging the dominant misunderstandings that abound in popular parenting literature often adopt the same logic as that of the discourse they are critiquing. So the authors of *Nurture shock. Why everything we think about raising our children is wrong* (Bronson and Merryman 2009) repeatedly talk about ‘hitting developmental milestones’. What they address is whether *other* scientific accounts of how to hit these milestones are right or wrong. What is not addressed is the very possibility of stepping outside this way of talking about what parents are or should be doing.

Again, we are not taking issue with the basic insight of these authors that it is important for parents to love and play with their children. What we are drawing attention to is the way this is presented in these handbooks or on these websites, and thus made available to parents, in a language which predominantly conceptualises, for example ‘loving one’s child’ or ‘playing with one’s child’ as ‘useful’ for something else. We are not challenging the empirical validity of claims that particular loving parental interaction, for example, can contribute to aspects of the child’s development and the quality of the parent-child relationship (although obviously the nature of this causal relationship is far more complex than is often suggested in the research). What we want to highlight is the absence, in contemporary discourse on parenting, of other languages, languages which, perhaps, not aspiring to the neat, clinical precision of that of empirical psychology, can capture what it means for parents to love their child, and why this is important, in a manner which does not gloss over the ethical complexity of this experience but rather makes it a subject for discussion and exploration. It is not necessarily psychology as a discipline which is the problem here, but rather a particular type of psychology, and one which has come to dominate our practice and our language.

It is instructive, in this context, to look back at an earlier generation of psychologists writing on childcare, whose intellectual roots lay in the tradition of psychoanalysis rather than cognitive developmental psychology. Though somewhat unfashionable now, writers like Winnicott may have been closer to the kind of language which, we argue, is now being lost, when they wrote, for example, of the mother ‘introducing the child to the world in small doses’ (Winnicott 1964, p. 69), of parents needing to ‘have the imagination to recognise that parental love is not merely an instinct within themselves’ (Winnicott 1964, p. 104), or of the mother needing ‘to be able to find her infant and to enable her infant to find her’ (Winnicott 1964, p. 107). Contemporary developmental psychology may be uneasy with Winnicott’s statement that ‘there is

no such thing as a baby' (Winnicott 1964, p. 88) or with the aim of 'the provision of conditions for the richest possible experience' (Winnicott 1964, p. 57), and wishy-washy notions such as 'richness of experience' are now more often than not replaced by 'emotionally balanced children', the latter phrase given even more precise definition by cutting-edge research in neuroscience. Winnicott's language, often more poetic than scientific, may have been rooted in a strong, even dogmatic, psychoanalytical framework, but it is, unlike much current discourse, unapologetically moral, poetic and evaluative, and thus at least suggests that the parent-child relationship is an arena for moral and imaginative thinking and discussion, not just for empirical scientific study.

The logic underlying the language of developmental psychology can sometimes 'take you on holiday' (to paraphrase a familiar Wittgensteinian expression (Wittgenstein 1953, #38)). An extreme example of this is Erica Etelson's recent book *For our own good. The politics of parenting in an ailing society* (Etelson 2010), in which childrearing is conceptualised in terms of a very straightforward and explicit (but in our view flawed) conception of causality between children's early years and adulthood. Etelson goes so far as to blame the current state of the world on the fact that today's adults (especially those apparently responsible for the worst excesses of political violence) lack the secure psychological and emotional foundation that should have been provided by appropriate parental interaction in their early years. We need, she says,

to recognise that unhealed childhood wounds perpetuate inegalitarian, autocratic and environmentally unsustainable institutional, cultural and economic norms and, conversely, that positive parenting can play an important role in restoring our individual and societal sense of security and well-being (Etelson 2010, p. xviii).

Or, as she elsewhere puts this:

To see the dire consequences of our collective failure to instil empathy and the capacity for thoughtful reflection in our children, look at our government's responses to the two biggest national emergencies in recent years – 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. (Etelson 2010, p. 12)

The problem with this kind of rhetoric is not just, as discussed above, the simplistic ascription of a straightforward causality between parental behaviour in early childhood and personal and social outcomes, but also the fact that the meaning and value of these outcomes are never themselves questioned or discussed but are assumed to have the same self-evident validity as the research findings themselves.

A possible reproach to what we are saying here might be that we are not sufficiently taking into account recent advances in developmental psychology, in which it is actually acknowledged that developmental psychology is not only about the developing individual, but is essentially about a 'developing system' (see Van den Bergh 2003a, b, 2010). Van den Bergh for example explicitly acknowledges that traditional developmental psychology has been focused too exclusively on research on the development of individuals (children), and, in doing so, has contributed to advancing a universal image of childhood which works in normalising ways. What is missing from traditional developmental psychology, the argument goes, is a societal dimension, within which an individual's development should be situated

and against which development can be evaluated. In this way, the kind of questioning or discussing of the meaning and value of developmental outcomes could have a place here.

From a societal viewpoint, there may be reasons to be concerned about some ideas from traditional developmental psychology – ideas that were influenced by the Enlightenment thinking and progression ideology. For example, the idea of perfection: a perfect child, perfect body, perfect love, perfect house, perfect career, etc., and the idea that, if one applies the correct and appropriate method, everything you ever dreamed of will be given you. Parents may be unhappy or worried if they think they are unable to give their children “what they need”. Undue anxiety, tension and stress may be induced in some parents if the educational and other efforts do not automatically lead to the expected results regarding their child’s behavior – if the “gold standard” has not been reached. (Van den Bergh 2010, p. 8)

Drawing on Gottlieb’s theory of probabilistic epigenesis and Magnusson’s modern interactionism, Van den Bergh proposes a conceptualisation of development as a multi-level process in which environment (home, neighbourhood, school, community), behaviour and gene expression relate to one another in bidirectional exchanges. Quoting Lickliter, she argues:

In recent developmental psychology theories, behaviour is generally viewed as “emerging and being maintained or transformed during development by the dynamic and reciprocal interaction of a complex system of factors both internal and external to the organism. Each individual encounters an array of developmental resources, experiences, and constraints over the course of its development, thereby making some behavioural outcomes more likely to be supported and maintained and other outcomes prevented or eliminated”. (Van den Bergh 2010, p. 9)

The problem with this account, however, is that in the end it does not change the basic form of reasoning within developmental psychology. What is referred to here as ‘the environment’ or the ‘societal dimension’ is integrated within the very developmental logic, that is, as yet another factor (or set of factors) that has to be taken into account in an individual’s development.

Put differently, the societal dimension argued for here is not a dimension in which developmental outcomes and related parental activities can be an object of reflection (collective or otherwise); rather it is understood as one factor among many that can have an influence on an individual’s development. As is clear for the example from the first passage quoted above, societal expectations about children’s development, on this account, do not form an occasion for further moral reflection, but can become something like a risk factor in the sense that they can induce anxiety in parents, which then could have a further effect on their children (for example because they do not know what to do, and may be doing the ‘wrong’ things). A more direct instance of this can be found in Van den Bergh’s argument that ‘[W]e should establish whether there are women who, during pregnancy, already start to really become worried about their future role as mother. An overwhelming anxiety may have a direct influence on the fetus with long-lasting consequences in his/her postnatal life’. (Van den Bergh 2010, p. 9) Here, worries about one’s future role as a parent do not form an occasion for questioning or discussing the very fixation on being the best possible parent, or on doing the best possible job, but are treated as possible risk factors for one’s child’s development. (See also Van den Bergh 2003b, p. 327)

Informing Research Agendas

One of the most difficult issues to tackle is that developmental psychology structures research agendas in relation to childrearing. This is difficult in the sense that from the standpoint of those providing funding for research it ‘goes without saying’ that this is the kind of research that needs to be done (for example, research on the effectiveness of parenting styles, on what kind of approach is best for stimulating children’s development, on what kind of environment is best for children’s development, etc.).

A good example of how developmental psychology – specifically, our current conceptualisation of childrearing and the parent-child relationship, dominated as this is by the language and logic of developmental psychology – informs policy and research agendas in a very particular way, is provided by the case of so-called meeting places for parents and their children in Flanders. Recently, the idea of meeting places for parents and their children has gained significance in the context of parent support in Belgium. Meeting places for parents and their children have been in existence for some time in other countries (for example the *Maison Vertes* in France, and the *spazio insieme* in Italy) and these have been an important source of inspiration for the Belgian cases (see for example Vandenbroeck et al. 2007, 2009). Meeting places are usually houses – frequently called ‘open houses’ – that are reorganised in such a way as to allow a number of parents and their children to come by and spend some time there.¹⁹ The interest in meeting places can be understood as a reaction to more formal kinds of support for parents (i.e.. mostly professional advice in institutionalised settings) and, connected to this, as a response to what parents themselves, in a number of surveys, have expressed a need for (see for example the research report by Buysse 2008, which is frequently referred to in Flanders in this context). Parents have indicated a lack of informal networks, and a wish to have the opportunity to share their concerns and worries with likeminded people (i.e. other parents with similar experiences) instead of talking about bringing up their children with professionals. Meeting places for parents and their children are said to offer this opportunity for informal social interaction; places where parents can find emotional and social support for what can sometimes be the very tough task of bringing up children. In the literature, this idea of meeting places is connected to the idea of a pedagogy of the encounter, in which, at least in its original conception, childrearing is conceived as something that takes shape in the encounter itself rather than being preconceived or determined by one or another framework. (For a discussion, see Ramaekers 2010.)

However, very recently, Child and Family has been trying to reconfigure the idea of meeting places for parents and their children in such a way as to best accommodate children’s needs as defined by the research agenda of developmental psychology – i.e. ensuring secure attachment, stimulating children’s development, etc.²⁰ Meeting

¹⁹For examples in Flanders see: <http://www.despeelbrug.be/> and <http://www.speelodroom.org/>. For Brussels see: <http://www.baboes.be/>

²⁰Cf. <http://www.expo.be/nieuws/dialogomomenten-ontmoetingsplaatsen-en-triple-p>

places are now seen, so it seems, as ‘new’ opportunities to ensure that children receive whatever it is that parents cannot provide within their own private sphere, within their own family. Not surprisingly, this also implies the presence of an expert, helping parents when necessary. And connected to this, it is not surprising either that these meeting places are then also constructed in such a way as to position parents in a particular way, i.e., as already described above, parents are (also) addressed as learning subjects. Meeting places are places where parents can learn to do it the right way (i.e. how to properly stimulate their child’s development). In a sense, meeting places thus are in danger of becoming forms of what could be called ‘damage limitation’.²¹ These places are thus configured and understood as offering a setting which can provide what parents fail to provide their children, i.e. proper developmental opportunities.

Neuroscience and Pedagogical Action

To conclude this section, we briefly point out some issues relating to the emergence and use of neuropsychological language in the area of childrearing.²² More so than developmental psychological language, neuropsychological language has the effect of establishing the idea that it is now possible to have ‘real knowledge’ in this area. Specifically, the infusion of neuropsychological language into our conceptualisation of childrearing and the parent-child relationship and into the ‘knowledge’ we already think we have in this area has the effect of indicating that the relevant claims to knowledge are now (finally) robust. We can really claim ‘to know’ something in this area, where knowledge is taken to mean: we now know how to *explain* something. Thus, for example, Adriaenssens gives an example of how testosterone has a significant effect on a young boy’s developing brain, in particular the frontal neocortex – the ‘smart brains’ or ‘wise areas of the brains’. Testosterone diminishes the flow of blood through these smart brains, which is unfortunate since this is the part of the brain ‘that helps someone to respond more wisely to a particular incident’ (Adriaenssens 2010, p. 18, our translation). So when a young boy, whose smart brains are still in maturation, finds himself confronted with an incident, his response to it is more often initiated from the lower parts of his brains, the place where our primitive reactions are located.

²¹Concept borrowed from Burman (2008, p. 133).

²²For an interesting piece of empirical research on the ‘seductive allure of neuroscience explanations’, see Weisberg et al. (2008). The authors have investigated ‘the impact of adding scientific-sounding but empirically and conceptually uninformative neuroscience information to both good and bad psychological explanations’ (Weisberg et al. 2008, p. 476). One of the most interesting findings in this study was that explanatory irrelevant neuroscience information has an important effect on people’s judgements of those psychological explanations. In particular, they found that ‘[F]or novices and students, the addition of such neuroscience information encouraged them to judge the explanations more favourably, particularly the bad explanations’ (Weisberg et al. 2008, p. 476).

... the fist or the rude answer thus is allowed to be launched too quickly, for the more wise reaction of higher areas of the brains is delayed. A fight is what follows then. When, later, the boy is sitting in the principal's office, and is asked what is going on, the boy sighs: "I know, I know, I shouldn't have let myself go." When the principal asks why he couldn't have thought of that at the time, the boy doesn't know the answer. *But we do*: his wise brains come into action too slowly, but by the time he is sitting in the principal's office, they have been activated and the boy is able to give meaningful, calm answers. (Adriaenssens 2010, pp. 18–19, our translation, emphasis added)

As already noted, we are not questioning the validity of the empirical neurobiological or neuropsychological research behind such work. What we are interested in is the way the use of this kind of research *works* in relation to our understanding of how we (are expected to) relate to children. Here the suggestion is clearly that we now *know*, where previously we did not know, or at least did not know enough, or only thought we knew. And there is also no doubt that since we now know what is going on (i.e. we know the explanation), we now also know what we (parents, teachers, educators) *should* do.

However, the relation between 'what is' and 'what should be done' is much more complex than is suggested in examples such as this one. Bas Levering has put his finger on the spot by correctly asking the questions: what exactly it is that we now claim to know which we did not know before, and what exactly it is that would follow from this knowledge? (Levering 2010) Some of the examples he uses are those of teenagers not being able to get out of bed in the morning, or the fact that adolescent boys are not as capable of planning things as adolescent girls are – behaviour which now, with the help of MRI scans, can be shown to be linked to the activity of certain parts of the brain. Obviously, we now 'know' something 'more' (in the sense of having more information) about these kinds of behaviour, in other words, we can say that in comparison with grown-ups, or, depending on the example, with girls, particular parts of a developing boy's brains are activated and other parts are not. And we may even be able to say that we now 'know' that it is difficult to get our teenagers out of bed in the morning 'because' particular parts of their brains are still developing (and thus need more sleep). But – again – what exactly do we claim to know more than before? We already knew, as Levering says, that it is hard to get our teenagers out of bed in the morning. And what we already knew here was not the result of neurobiological research, but of long and careful observation. More importantly, it is not at all clear what follows now from what we claim to know more than before. At the most this could lead to some more understanding and compassion on the part of parents – 'He can't help it', or 'He'll grow out of it' – but weren't parents saying similar things even before this neurobiological research? Things get even more difficult when we start to think in terms of pedagogical and educational measures. Levering rightly argues:

That our youngsters have to live with a permanent jetlag does not imply – as some have suggested – that we then should start school one hour later. If this were the case, there would seemingly be no end to the argument: we could just keep moving it further and further. And despite the fact that we know that adolescents cannot yet plan ahead, we will still insist that they do. (Levering 2010, p. 11, our translation)

The same reasoning applies to the example from Adriaenssens, quoted above. It is not clear what follows from this for parents or teachers. In any case, what seems to follow is not something that can be straightforwardly translated into a prescription for one-to-one-interaction with a particular child, but – if it can be resolved, or at least addressed, at all – can only be done so by opening up and discussing the broader questions to do with how today’s society and today’s schools are organised and functioning, how young people relate to one another in particular conditions and settings, and so on.

We have already discussed, above, the causal logic that is imported with the very language of developmental psychology into our understanding of childrearing. It is not hard to see how the use of neuropsychological language reinforces this. A classic example of this, and more generally of the instrumental approach we described earlier, is the example from Sunderland’s *The science of parenting* (2006), part of which we used above. Whenever your child is behaving badly, according to Sunderland, it is due to one or more of the following six reasons:

1. Tiredness and hunger.
2. An undeveloped emotional brain.
3. Psychological hungers.
4. Needing help with a big feeling.
5. Picking up on your stress.
6. You activate the wrong part of your child’s brain. – for example, if you shout and issue endless commands – ‘Do this’ ‘Don’t do that’ – you could be unwittingly activating the primitive RAGE and FEAR systems deep in the mammalian and reptilian parts of his brain. In contrast, lots of play, laughter and cuddles are likely to activate the brain’s PLAY system, and CARE system. These systems trigger the release of calming opioids, and presto! You have a calm, contented child! (Sunderland 2006, p. 112)

This passage is remarkable not only in its explicit adoption of the causal, even deterministic, logic of development, but also in its choice of language. ‘Rage’ and ‘fear’ here are not acknowledged as moral concepts, whose meaning is determined in social use and that are used interpretively to describe and evaluate human behaviour, but serve as descriptive terms equivalent to physical states in the brain. While the neuroscientific research reported in this book may be sound, choosing to present it in this way is not a simple matter of reporting on empirical evidence. This is not to say that the matter is as simple as just saying that, for example, Winnicott’s depiction of the child (which we referred to above) is better than the now fashionable picture of a human being in the making, ‘needing to be programmed’ (Gerhardt 2004, p. 18), or as a collection of neurons. Rather, the point is that there is an element of choice here: it matters a lot whether we choose to describe babies, and corresponding parenting practices, in terms of the workings of neurons or in terms of dealing with an individual person. It matters a lot because it makes us see particular things, and disregard others, and accordingly, it makes us want to do particular things and not other things, and makes us feel that those are the only sensible things to do, unless one wants to be depicted as a bad parent.

Crucially, for example, what this way of describing the parent-child interaction encourages is a fixation on one's child's first 3 years – 'If I miss out on any of the steps here, it'll be too late since the "hardware" will have been formed'. Adriaenssens, for example, though he is not specifically referring to the first 3 years, nevertheless speaks about some kind of marker or index card being given shape or installed in the developing brain because of particular kinds of interactions with the child (see Adriaenssens 2010, p. 126). The message this entails for parents does not need to be spelled out: they need to act, or interact with their children, in the right ways. The same message runs through several UK government policy statements and initiatives, such as the recent report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances from MP Frank Field. This report, which is essentially about 'improving the life chances' of children in the UK, repeats time and time again that 'during the earliest years, it is primarily parents who shape their children's outcomes' (Field 2010, p. 37) and states in no uncertain terms that '[B]y the age of three, a baby's brain is 80% formed' (Field 2010, p. 5).

The Need for Expertise in the Area of Childrearing: The Professionalisation of Parents

As already indicated in the above discussion a number of times, parents are, within the current conceptualisation and talk about childrearing and the parent-child relationship, understood as being in need of education. It is hard to miss the fact that recent policy initiatives in the UK and mainland Europe reflect a growing acceptance of the need for some sort of parenting support. Parents, apparently, are no longer capable of just bringing up their children by themselves. In recent years, a number of scholars and popular writers have analysed and documented the socio-cultural and historical conditions and background which have led both to our current understanding of childrearing as something parents can no longer do without some form of expertise, and to the acceptance of the area of childrearing as a field for increasing government intervention.²³

To a certain extent one could say that childrearing, or more correctly parenting, has become an object of 'public' attention lately – as evidenced by the increasing number of books and manuals on parenting and for parents, parenting courses, policy initiatives in parenting support, and so on. This, however, by no means implies that childrearing has become (to use a concept from Latour 2004) a matter of public concern. The 'public' attention that falls on parents today has to do precisely with their being understood as being in need of education, as not being capable (any longer) of raising their children by themselves – the atmosphere being that it is in some

²³ See for example Edwards and Gillies (2004), Furedi (2001) and Schaubroeck (2010), to name but a few. See also the recent special issue of *Educational Theory* (2010, 60(3)) in which the issue of state intervention in families is addressed.

sense generally accepted that parents need help from outsiders, namely experts. We will come back to the broader, alternative sense in which childrearing can be a matter of public concern in the final chapter. Here we focus on the observation that parents nowadays have, to a certain extent, to professionalise themselves and that, accordingly, they are expected to conceive of their relationship with their children in special, i.e. educational, ways.

To start with, the very concept of ‘parenting’ can be seen as part of the aspiration to bring all aspects of human experience under the auspices of scientific research, where our choices about how to act are ‘backed up by sound evidence’. A very clear example in this context is the book *Parenting with reason. Evidence-based approaches to parenting dilemmas* (Strahan et al. 2010) – the title speaks for itself. The authors (a clinical psychologist, a developmental psychologist and a doctor of family medicine) describe one of the goals of the book as follows:

To give parents recommendations on the best available practices in parenting. In some cases those recommendations will be very clear because the weight of the evidence is so strong in favour of one approach. In others, we will simply provide you with the pros and cons of a particular decision, based on current scientific evidence, so that you can make an informed decision, or at least be armed with information to discuss with your healthcare provider. (Strahan et al. 2010, p. 3)

The book deals with parenting issues ranging from sleep and breastfeeding, toilet training and disciplining to ADHD, psychological health, adolescents, etc. By way of providing a clear structure for the reader, the authors end each chapter with the same bullet-pointed list of questions:

- What are the key dilemmas parents have to struggle with on this topic?
- What does the science say about this topic?
- What do the authors advise? (Strahan et al. 2010, p. 3)

Parenting here takes the form of an instruction manual: topics, questions, evidence and advice. What more could parents want?

Alongside the obviously very explicit reference to evidence and the need to use it in parenting, the authors are unmistakably voicing, and also contributing to, a set of clear expectations for parents. In effect, they are constructing a very explicit ‘agenda’ for parents, even if they may not explicitly express it as such: parents are called upon to actively engage with their childrearing; specifically, they are expected to keep themselves up-to-date with the latest scientific developments regarding good parenting and prepare themselves for the ‘job to come’, for example by reading (the right) books, attending parenting classes, participating in information evenings, etc., thus actively seeking out information and advice regarding childrearing (see Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007). In short, parents are expected, to a certain extent, to professionalise themselves.

It is no longer surprising, let alone odd, at least in certain contexts, to hear people speak about skills and training in relation to childrearing. Neither, in fact, is it very new. As early as 1984, the authors of *The needs of parents*, summarising a 3-year study carried out by the UK National Children’s Bureau, argued for a rethink of the network of public services available to support parents. The authors emphasise the

importance of acknowledging the many and complex skills involved in bringing up a child, providing parents with a range of flexible approaches to enhance and develop aspects of their role as parents, such as ‘social skills’ (for example ‘the ability to cope with stress and conflict; the ability to communicate; the ability to care and nurture other people’). Yet at the same time, running through the book is a cautionary note warning against the possibility of parents feeling their confidence undermined by professional ‘expertise’, and an insistence that the agents involved in supporting parents ‘value and build on the abilities, the skills and the knowledge that parents bring to their role’. Similarly, the authors emphasise the life-time nature of the parenting relationship, and its two-way direction – noting the fact that ‘children influence and shape parents’ behaviour right from the day of birth’ (Hugh and De’Ath 1984, p. 21). Throughout the book, the emphasis is on the plurality of ways of parenting, and the ways in which the needs of parents are interwoven with the needs of children and families. In more recent policy documents, however, the scales seem to have tilted entirely to the other side. For example, in the recent UK government policy document on parenting support we already mentioned above, issued in conjunction with the Every Child Matters policy (DFES 2006), the focus seems far narrower. Authoritatively stating that ‘We know the key principles of effective parenting’, the document goes on to list these, not leaving much to the imagination when it comes to what parents should know and do in order to be good parents.²⁴ Another recent example is the report from MP Frank Field (Field 2010), which explicitly recommends ‘positive parenting’ at several points throughout the text, referring to specific programmes such as Triple P which ‘has been shown to lead to positive changes in parenting and reductions in child problem behaviour’ (Field 2010, p. 55), and argues for ‘more opportunities to learn parenting skills [...], including through the curriculum’ (Field 2010, p. 54). What is worth drawing attention to is that within this understanding of what it means to be a parent, parents are positioned as and expected to see themselves in their capacity as learning subjects, who continuously have to gain more knowledge, and by doing so refine their skills, to the extent that not actively looking out for opportunities to enhance one’s parenting skills is almost seen as a questionable attitude. Seeking expert advice is considered to be the normal course of action.²⁵

The implications for how we tend to look at young parents and parents-to-be need hardly be spelled out: they are seen as insufficiently, or simply not at all, prepared for bringing up children. For example, in the above-mentioned handbook for parents the words used are ‘untrained’ and ‘lack of training’ (Bailey and Shooter 2009, pp. 1 and 27).²⁶ Children, so it is argued, have a right to expert

²⁴See http://www.dfes.gov.uk/localauthorities/_documents/content/SD06_30%20attachment.pdf, retrieved December, 2009.

²⁵See for example the homepage of www.parentchannel.tv which has a banner saying ‘Watch videos packed with expert advice on raising children’ (retrieved May, 2010).

²⁶See also Furedi (2001) who argues that societal conditions and expectations create a sense of unpreparedness on the part of parents.

parents' (Van Crombrugge 2008, p. 9) and therefore parents should do all they can to prepare themselves as well as possible. We will return, in Chap. 5, to the context within which this is argued for, looking specifically at proposals for a so-called 'upbringing pledge' or 'civil birth ceremony'. For our current purposes it suffices to draw attention to the expectation that parents should do as well as possible and that this implies that they are conceived of as being in need of some kind of education. Willems for example explicitly emphasises that parents are in need of education when it comes to the responsibilities usually associated with childrearing:

Investments are needed in all kinds of parent and child facilities and services. And parents need to be educated as well on the availability of programmes and services, on what may and what must be asked from all kinds of professionals – doctors, teachers, social workers, therapists, youth care professionals and so forth. Empowerment begins with education, but it includes many other things, such as child care and early childhood services, counselling, psychotherapy, mediation, and many other forms of both material and immaterial support and assistance. (Willems 2008, p. 18)

According to Willems, there is an important task here for the state to provide whatever is necessary to realise this kind of education. He sees the state's task as a way of fighting what he calls 'transism, or transgenerational discrimination' (Willems 2008, p. 18). The state should, he argues, adequately address socio-economic and socio-emotional differences between parents. As for these socio-emotional differences, these

... refer to extreme inequalities between (young) parents in relation to parenting knowledge ("child rearing literacy") and parental awareness, which includes qualities and conditions such as parents' sense of responsibility, parents' responsiveness and sensitivity to their child's needs, parents' reparation of own childhood trauma, parents' mental health, emotional stability and maturity, social network, social integration, and so forth. (Willems 2008, p. 18)

In sum, parents, thus, are addressed in very particular ways. They need to be made aware of their roles and responsibilities. And, connected to that, they are in need of education when it comes to their parenting skills. It is also worth noting that parents' responsibility is understood as a quality, implying that it can somehow be assessed, measured, and, supposedly, taught. In this respect, it is significant that mention is made of the idea of 'child-rearing literacy'.

Connected to this idea of parents having to professionalise themselves is the point that they are also expected to relate to their children in very specific, i.e. 'educational' ways. Parents are expected to do things with their children that are in a very specific sense goal-oriented. 'The successful parent is a pedagogical one', as Popkewitz puts it (Popkewitz 2003, p. 53). In the context of the US, and quoting from the U.S. Department of Education, Popkewitz points out that a good parent:

... is someone who "learned, for example, to use a list of common words to help children make sentences, learn grammar, and sharpen their reading skills; they also learned how to use a 'number line' manipulative to help children practice adding and subtracting". (Popkewitz 2003, p. 53)

Understood in this way, parenting becomes a supplement to and even, as Popkewitz puts this, 'a surrogate to schooling' (Popkewitz 2003, p. 53). Popkewitz further points out that in this way parents are activated as participants in a collective effort

‘to produce social progress through making better readers, more positive attitudes about school, improved attendance, and better homework habits’ (Popkewitz 2003, p. 53). What interests us here is the implication that what parents do then becomes modelled along the ‘cultural patterns of the classroom’ (Popkewitz 2003, p. 53). Parents, to put it simply, are expected to relate to their children as teachers relate to children – that is, with one or more specific educational targets in mind – which stands in contrast to their ‘ordinary’ daily interactions with their children. To be sure, such daily interactions are obviously not free from particular orientations, or from a sense of purpose and value. Yet the ways in which they are so are often far more vague than those implied by the discourse in question. What is more, significantly, while these dimensions of purpose and value are inherently ethical (parents may want their child to be happy, to have a good life, a good job and so on), they are so in a sense which cannot be neatly disentangled from the parents’ ethical commitments and values in other areas of their life, nor from the particular constitution of their unique relationship with a particular child. (We will come back to this and develop the distinction between the parent-child relationship and the teacher-pupil relationship in detail in the next chapter.)

In ways similar to the language of developmental psychology, the discourse of professionalisation has become part of our ordinary way of speaking and thinking about childrearing and the parent-child relationship. This is captured in the observation that childrearing has come to be conceptualised as a ‘job’, or a ‘task’, and the now common references to ‘parenting skills’ – the verb parenting, again, being a clear expression of the task-nature of bringing up children. Raising children is something a parent *does*; one has to *act as* parents, as opposed to *be* a parent.²⁷ And sometimes the two languages go hand in hand, as for example in a recent parenting book by Stephen Briers (2008). Though his approach at first glance looks like a welcome departure from the all too familiar talk of popularised parenting gurus such as TV Supernanny, Briers’ language does not differ from the kind of language we are arguing is predominant today in relation to childrearing and the parent-child relationship. Briers not only explicitly advances the idea that parents should be child psychologists, but also conceptualises what parents do in terms of a job, while offering reassuring guidelines as to how we can be certain that we are doing the job properly. For example in explaining the importance of listening to children, he suggests that being a good listener requires maintaining eye contact for roughly a third of the time one’s child is talking (see Briers 2008, pp. 44–45). Another aspect of the job, according to Briers, is, for example, to ‘practice cognitive strategies with your child to analyse and manage distressing feelings’ (Briers 2008, p. 85) and to ‘take every opportunity to pick out negative thoughts and examine them’ (Briers 2008, p. 84). In thus conceptualising parenting as a task that can be learned, Briers not only reinforces the idea of professionalisation described above but, in doing so, also obscures, like the very psychological language which he employs, the evaluative

²⁷See Suissa (2006) and (2009).

aspects of terms like ‘negative thoughts’, which are presented here as straightforward empirical labels.

Another example of how our ordinary ways of speaking and thinking about childrearing and the parent-child relationship have adopted the discourse of professionalisation is the very expectation that parents should have reflected upon their parenting ‘approach’ or ‘style’. We have already mentioned the so-called attachment parenting-style. Alongside this approach, which in a sense constitutes a style of its own, probably the most well-known categorisation of parenting styles is the one offered by Baumrind (see Baumrind 1966, 1967), who distinguishes between three styles: the authoritarian, the permissive and the authoritative parenting style. We will discuss parenting styles in greater detail in Chap. 4. For present purposes it suffices to point out that the parenting style that is most widely promoted and referred to with approval by contemporary practitioners and theorists is the so-called ‘authoritative parenting style’ (see also Field 2010 for a typical policy endorsement of this approach) or, in its fairly recent translation: the ‘assertive democratic style’. This ‘style’ is considered to be a kind of middle ground between the ‘authoritarian’ and the ‘permissive style’ and is widely assumed to be the most effective style to ensure that one’s child develops in a healthy way.²⁸

The suggestion behind the very concept of an ‘approach’ or ‘style’ in relation to parenting is that parents should (no longer) act in unreflective ways, but should have given some thought to, or should at least be willing in principle to give some thought to, exactly what it is they are doing. It is not hard to see how this is connected to the above point about how the language of developmental psychology has invaded our understanding of the parent-child relationship, specifically in the sense that parents are expected to be concerned first and foremost with their children’s developmental needs. Acting in appropriate ways, that is, in ways which are most appropriate to ensuring one’s child’s development is, on this account, not something that just happens, but something that requires a particular approach.

Being a Parent: Professional Status Versus Experience

In this final section, we will explore some further consequences of the perceived need for expertise in the arena of childrearing and the related expectation that parents professionalise themselves. Specifically, we will look at some issues to do with the socio-cultural embeddedness of predominant ‘parenting styles’ at particular points in time. We will then discuss the sense in which the professionalisation of parents and the expert discourse in general work in such a way as to marginalise parents and alienate them from their own parenting. To draw this chapter to a conclusion, we will briefly go into how, taken together, the dominance of the scientific languages discussed above and the understanding of childrearing and the parent-child relationship

²⁸See e.g. <http://www.parentingstyles.co.uk/>

as something in need of expertise – a trend which we refer to as the scientisation of the parent-child relationship (see Ramaekers and Suissa 2010b, 2011a) – has a profound effect on our understanding of the notion of parental responsibility or pedagogical responsibility.

Socio-cultural Embeddedness

In the same way that, as discussed above, theoretical concepts drawn from psychology are embedded in a complex background of evaluative assumptions, it is not hard to see how particular parenting ‘approaches’ or ‘styles’ cannot be considered apart from the social and cultural context in which they are predominant. The work of sociologists such as Edwards and Gillies (2004), Gillies (2006), Woollett and Phoenix (1996), Phoenix et al. (1991), Vincent and Tomlinson (1997) and others, is valuable in challenging, for example, the classed and gendered aspects of accounts of good parenting implicit in some of the policy discourse, and in explaining how these factors, in turn, affect the ways in which such accounts are taken up and understood in various practical contexts. Likewise, the work of historians can remind us how what often appear to us to be neutral, universal norms of parenting, are, at least to a degree, historically and culturally constructed (see for example Hardyment 2007, for an illuminating history of childcare advice; see also Apple 2006; Archard 1993; Cunningham 2005). We will not go into these accounts as such, but they will form the background for our specific focus here. Drawing on these sociological and historical critiques, we would like to emphasise that whatever style is predominant at any particular time, this cannot be considered apart from a conception of what child-rearing is, of the idea of human nature, and of what it means to be a child today. Put differently, scientific research does not have the final word here, not just because there simply is no conclusive evidence for the effectiveness of this or that particular style, but because the ‘choice’ of particular ways of relating to and interacting with our children (ways which, as we argue in Chap. 4, cannot be simplistically translated into a ‘parenting style’) is informed by moral considerations: how we see ourselves as parents, how we *want* to relate to and interact with our children, what kind of people we hope our children will grow up to be, etc. Consider for example the issue of whether or not spanking one’s child can be part of one’s way of dealing with them – an issue that frequently sparks emotionally-charged debate, as witnessed by recent press coverage.²⁹ Very often, the debate on this issue is framed as being about the positive or negative effects of spanking on children. However, this misrepresents what is at stake – which, as we argue, is not an issue of positive or negative effects, but of whether or not we, today, find this an acceptable way of interacting with our children – and this is primarily a question of an ethical nature. What is at issue here is

²⁹See for example http://www.nydailynews.com/lifestyle/2010/01/04/2010-01-04_spanking_makes_kids_perform_better_in_school_study.html

whether we can reconcile spanking children with the idea we wish to uphold of what constitutes a moral person (an idea that applies to the parent as well as the child). And this is always already interwoven with particular conceptions of what constitutes being human, being a person, being an individual, being a child and so on.

We should not, then, be misled by the neat classification of parenting styles and the (implicit or explicit) message that the authoritative style is the best, or most effective style. Classification and advice are not discoveries of scientific research, but are inextricably interwoven with particular valuations of what kinds of ways of interacting with children we find worthy of preserving in our current society. The advice that parents should work towards practising the authoritative parenting style is a reflection of a socio-cultural context in which certain relations between people are valued in either positive or negative ways. In this context, it is perhaps interesting to compare what is now called the permissive parenting style with its older name, so-called ‘anti-authoritarian parenting’. The latter way of bringing up children was, at the time of its popularity (1960s and 1970s), inherently connected to a particular societal context, in which the general feeling was that the world had to change, and that in order to do that people had to be freed from all kinds of authority, and that, in turn, this implied that children should be given radical freedom to liberate themselves from oppressive and conforming societal mechanisms and structures. In this sense, it is as instructive to see that what, in the context of this anti-authoritarian way of bringing up children was called ‘giving children freedom’ is translated, in the context of current discussions of the permissive parenting style, into ‘giving in to all the child’s wishes and initiatives’, as it is to see that the authoritative parenting style has recently been given the label ‘assertive democratic style’. Even more clearly than the label ‘authoritative parenting’, the label ‘assertive democratic style’ shows how this is an expression of the fact that we want a way of dealing with our children that is a reflection of a way of interacting which we (hope to) have with our fellow citizens. This is not to say that we are arguing against, or indeed in favour of, this way of dealing with children; we are simply pointing out that the ‘decision’ to adopt this or that ‘style’ or intervention cannot be made solely on the basis of empirical research, but has to do with values and norms, and thus is something that has to be addressed in a moral discussion of the matter at hand.

Marginalisation

A number of writers (such as for example Furedi 2001, and Schaubroeck 2010) have pointed out that the current climate of parenting, in which parents are expected to seek advice or become proto-professionals themselves, burdens parents with a new sense of guilt, i.e. the sense of always falling short. Importantly, we wish to add here (following Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007), this is not the sense of guilt that is connected to the idea of parents having duties towards their children which result from the sense of being called upon by their own children. Rather, as Lambeir and Ramaekers point out, it is ‘a sense of falling short due to a public longing for

competent and effective parenting – a sense of falling short prompted by the incorporation of parenting into the project of science that instigates the need for professional support’ (Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007, p. 105).

This ‘expert discourse on parenting’ puts parents in a rather strange position, in two ways. Firstly, parents are positioned as ‘spectators of their own situation’ (Bouverne-De Bie et al. 2006, p. 64, our translation). Along similar lines, Bristow argues that families become ‘mere “partners” in child-rearing with officials who presume to know best’ (Bristow 2009, p. 78). In a sense, in other words, parents are positioned as having to take a distance from the very situation they find themselves in, as being expected to try to get a clear ‘overview’ of it, and then to decide what is best to do. Paradoxically, then, parents are no longer expected, in a sense, to be *in* the situation in which they find themselves. They are no longer expected to take their own point of view as parents, but the point of view of experts. Put differently, parents should take, so the message of this discourse goes, the third-person perspective of experts, instead of the ‘insider’ or first-person perspective they have *as* parents. (We will develop this distinction between first- and third-person perspective in Chap. 2.)

Secondly, and connected to this point, there is a sense in which one could say that within the current discourse of the need for expertise in the area of childrearing, parents are ‘blind’ to their *own* children. Parents are being positioned in such a way that the object of their daily, pedagogical concerns is in fact not their own child, but ‘the child’ or ‘a child’ as demanded by a particular ‘expert’ way of looking at children. The ‘expert parent’ is ‘blind’ because she only ‘sees’ her child (and acts accordingly) through the lens of the discourses she is being offered. Obviously, this relates to our earlier point about scientific languages, since the ‘expert position’ into which parents are manoeuvred, and which blinds them from seeing their own child, is saturated with the scientific languages of psychology. A good example that captures these points is that of the mother who adopted a child and then, after struggling for several months, decided to give him back to the agency for re-adoption.³⁰ Many readers were outraged by the mother’s actions, and considered her to have failed in her moral duty towards the adopted child. What we are interested in here, though, is the way the mother in question articulated her reasons for the decision. Having done ‘lots of research on adoption, including attachment problems’ prior to adoption, she came to the conclusion, about half a year after the boy’s arrival, that there were attachment problems: ‘I knew that D. wasn’t attaching’ and ‘I also knew that I had issues bonding with him’. She sought help and they ‘had some attachment therapy to strengthen our relationship’, but this didn’t solve the problems. She talked a lot about this with her social worker who, as the mother reports, ‘mostly listened and told me to focus on D’s future and wellbeing above everything else’. Struggling with her emotions she felt ‘that I wasn’t the parent I know I can be, and that I should place D. with a better family, with a better mother’. Eventually the social worker found another family, where the mother was a psychologist, and who ‘had adopted

³⁰ See <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/26/terminating-an-adoption/>

another boy with similar issues a couple of years before'. Having finally handed over the child to the new family, the mother felt reassured: 'His new mum would love him so, so much; my little man would be OK'.

From the start, the mother has accepted the idea that 'parenting' is a task or a role that one can be well or inadequately prepared or qualified for and, crucially, can perform well or fail at. Furthermore, she has absorbed the notion of 'attachment' into her everyday language and accepted that it is a crucial aspect of a successful parenting process. We are not querying the fact that the mother felt there may be possible issues around her relationship with an adopted child compared to her relationship with her biological children. The point is that her way into thinking about these issues is *through* the supposedly neutral scientific concept of attachment. 'Not being attached' was seen as a *reason* for not being able to parent well. The mother was sure that the evidence suggested that she had failed to develop the appropriate degree of 'attachment'. Why this was a problem was never articulated. The assumption was that this *in itself* was indicative of a failure at parenting, as it would fail to produce the right outcome. There is no prior questioning about what attachment means, why it is important and what role it plays in the context of the mother's own feelings, desires, fears and values about her relationship with her biological and adopted children. Nor is there any real articulation of what it would mean for D. to 'be OK', or what his 'wellbeing' would consist of, other than the implication that whether or not he was OK would be largely determined by him having the right kind of mother.

Buber makes an interesting point about the educational encounter between pupil and teacher, which, we find, applies to the parent-child relationship as well. In his lecture, *The Education of Character*, he talks about the qualities of the educational 'meeting', one of which is confidence, or trust, between the pupil and the teacher. But he makes the point that 'confidence is not won by the strenuous endeavour to win it, but by direct and ingenuous participation in the life of the people one is dealing with' (Buber 1947, p. 107). Likewise, although the educator may want to educate moral character, '[T]o dictate what is good and evil in general is not his business. His business is to answer a concrete question, to answer what is right and wrong in a given situation' (Buber 1947, p. 107). But if one comes into the situation with this explicit intention, it inhibits one from encountering the pupils in the 'educational meeting', because, as Buber puts it, 'every living situation has, like a new-born child, a new face that has never been before and will never come again. It demands of you a reaction which cannot be prepared beforehand' (Buber 1947, p. 114).

Buber's point is highly relevant to the parent-child relationship. In the current climate, parents are expected to be 'fully prepared' and to be 'always prepared'. For some years now, an annual so-called 'Childrearing Week' is held in Flanders. The year 2011 theme is 'Bringing up is growing up':

With this theme we mean to emphasize that it is not only children that grow and develop, but also parents and educators who grow and develop with their children. This means that every day is a new day, with new challenges! Most of the time you can build upon what you already know and do, but sometimes you cannot ... If you don't find any answers yourself

or in people near to you, there are always a lot of parent support practitioners ready to help you find a solution.

(<http://www.groeimee.be/weekvandeopvoeding>, retrieved January, 2011, our translation).

It is interesting to see how every new day is understood here in terms of new challenges, which, in turn, reinforces the idea that parents should prepare themselves, time and again, for whatever is coming their way. Paradoxically, and following Buber, this prevents parents from actually meeting their children, from actually and genuinely engaging in a relationship with their own children. Alongside this, Buber's point also allows us to relate to what we earlier said about the instrumentalisation of features of the parent-child relationship such as love and play. These features are not pre-existing attitudes, skills or moral qualities one can bring to the parent-child relationship, but relational qualities that emerge and take shape within the relationship itself. To come to the 'meeting' with one's child prepared, or, as it were, armed, with 'love', or the requirement to play, may, then, prevent one from fully meeting one's child and allowing these qualities to develop.

Responsibility

The scientisation of the parent-child relationship has important implications for our understanding of parental responsibility. For our present purposes it suffices to point out that this scientisation of the parent-child relationship leads to a narrow understanding of what parental responsibility is. What follows from the current conceptualisation of childrearing and the parent-child relationship, as we have described it in this chapter, is that parents are held responsible for creating a *particular kind* of child, and for a *particular kind* of pedagogical process. They are held responsible for ensuring the optimal conditions for growth for their children and for maintaining a firm grip on this developmental process. Parental responsibility is, in this sense, defined narrowly in terms of the 'needs' of 'the child' (which are determined, largely, by scientific research in psychology), and is confined to the one-to-one-interaction scheme between parent and child. Pedagogically responsible parents, on this view, are parents who in the first place are concerned about their child's proper development, and who are willing to do whatever is necessary, including learning whatever is needed in this area, to ensure the optimal developmental process of their child's capabilities, talents, needs, etc. Parental responsibility thus tends to be understood in terms of a kind of vigilance: parents are positioned in such a way as to be constantly vigilant – since every new day is a day with new challenges – for developmental opportunities, risks, etc. In general, the scientisation of the parent-child relationship strongly encourages a particular kind of attitude on the part of parents: an attitude of continuous alertness for possible opportunities, risks and shortcomings in their children's development (see Masschelein 2008). In an important sense, we could say that parents are not really *in* their very own relationship with their own child. On the contrary, they are positioned as standing (or having to stand) 'outside'

the relationship, taking a distance in order to get a clear picture, so as to be able to decide on the ‘correct’ course of action. The expert parent is ‘blind’ precisely because she is not (expected to be) fully *in* the relationship, but, rather, is (expected to be) looking at her own child(ren) through the lens of the expert discourse. Being *in* the parent-child relationship requires a particular kind of attention: attending to the situation she finds herself in with her own child – a kind of attention which is inherently ethical in nature. This is very different from the kind of (scientific) ‘attention’ she is expected to exercise in order to be a ‘good parent’ (according to the dominant discourse), i.e. being ‘attentive to’ her child’s developmental and other needs, being attentive to developmental opportunities. As mentioned above, this is something that can be observed especially in parents of children age 0 to 3, since this is, as almost all handbooks, guides, websites, etc. for parents say, the crucial age in terms of children’s development. Parents are increasingly encouraged ‘to see the technological capacities of their offspring at ever earlier ages, contributing to the compression of developmental time in the rush to competence and “mastery”’ (Burman 2008, p. 43). In a criticism of the current climate of parenting, Guldberg rightly argues that ‘[I]t is the responsibility of adults to prepare children for a full and independent life, not to protect them from every conceivable risk in the wider world’ (Guldberg 2009, p. 179) – though, unfortunately, it is not clear what she means by ‘a full and independent life’.

In questioning the dominance of the scientific account and the effects of its language, and suggesting other ways in which to think and talk about the parent-child relationship, part of what we want to explore is the ways in which a broader, and we argue richer, notion of responsibility, can play a role in an expanded understanding of this relationship and its moral and social significance. We will develop this alternative account of responsibility and how it is played out in the context of the experience of parents, alongside a discussion of the political and social implications of this idea, in the following chapters, particularly in Chap. 6. In the next chapter, we will pick up and develop the distinction we made, above, between the first-person and the third-person perspective.

Chapter 2

The Priority of the Particular and the First Person

Practical deliberation is in every case first-personal, and the first person is not derivative or naturally replaced by anyone. The action I decide on will be mine, and its being mine means not just that it will be arrived at by this deliberation, but that it will involve changes in the world of which I shall be empirically the cause, and of which these desires and this deliberation itself will be, in some part, the cause.

(Williams 1985, p. 68)

The Critique of Technical Rationality

The discussion in the previous chapter highlighted some of the ways in which, we argue, the language of parenting that dominates popular and policy discourse tends towards an instrumental, supposedly neutral and objective perspective that occludes other, more complex ways of thinking about the parent-child relationship and the demands and obligations that it implies for parents.

The way in which we characterised the language of developmental psychology, with its causal logic applied to the area of childrearing, could be seen as an example of the general scientific aspiration to articulate reliable, transparent, and predictable laws. The idea of science as predictive knowledge, which first emerged in the sixteenth century with the Scientific Revolution, was originally envisaged as applying to the material environment. But, as Joseph Dunne points out, as early as the seventeenth century, as reflected in the work of theorists like Hobbes, aspirations for the power and applicability of the new scientific knowledge were being extended:

[...] the object of this new kind of explanation and control was not to be limited to the material universe. It would include human behaviour too, the new physics presaging a new psychology and politics [...] (Dunne and Pendlebury 2003, p. 196)

The causal logic of developmental psychology, as discussed above, does indeed seem to fit the model of the kind of scientific knowledge that posits a predictive judgement of the form: ‘given conditions a, b, and c, it can be reliably predicted that x, y, and z will occur’ (Dunne and Pendlebury 2003, p. 196). As such, it can be seen as part of the general scientific paradigm that seeks

to confer objectivity (no distortion by merely subjective prejudices), generalizability (no confinement to merely local or particular concerns), replicability and control (no exceptions or unpredicted outcomes), transparency and publicity (no reliance on personal gifts or inarticulate intuitions), and clear-cut criteria for assessing success and establishing accountability (no ambiguous interpretations or interminable disputes). (Dunne and Pendlebury 2003, p. 196)

Contemporary philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Joseph Dunne have provided an illuminating account of the historical origins and philosophical underpinnings of this conception of reason and knowledge; a conception commonly referred to as technical rationality. Significantly, they have also argued that it was precisely against this conception that ‘older forms of practical knowledge came to seem hopelessly inadequate’ (Dunne and Pendlebury 2003, p. 196).

This work has been particularly influential in the field of philosophy of education, where the articulation of older, Aristotelian accounts of practical reason have formed the basis for a powerful critique of the application of technical rationality to areas of human practice such as teaching, and of the culture of ‘managerialism’ more generally (see Smith 1999, 2005; Dunne 1993; Dunne and Pendlebury 2003). Contemporary philosophers of education working in this vein have drawn on the work of neo-Aristotelian philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, and in particular on MacIntyre’s account of practices. A practice, according to MacIntyre, is a ‘specific set of coherent activities – say, teaching, farming, architecture, chess – embedded in a tradition of ongoing collaboration, with goods and standards of excellence that are internal to itself and can thus be properly achieved and furthered only by those who have become practitioners’ (Dunne and Pendlebury 2003 p. 202).¹

Thus, proponents of this alternative, Aristotelian position, emphasise the value of seeing human activities such as teaching as part of a coherent tradition, or practice, with its own internal goods and standards of excellence, as opposed to a role defined by a set of learnable skills and externally defined standards. This position has offered

¹It is interesting to note that in an interview with Joseph Dunne (Dunne and MacIntyre 2002), Alasdair MacIntyre actually argued, against Dunne, that teaching is not itself a practice but rather ‘a set of skills and habits put to the service of a variety of practices’ (Dunne and MacIntyre 2002, p. 5). The ‘goods’ of teaching, on MacIntyre’s account, are in fact the goods of the activities and practices into which children are initiated by education. As Dunne points out (Dunne and MacIntyre 2002, p. 7), this position is problematic when it comes to primary school teaching, and we are persuaded by Dunne’s arguments that teaching, as a ‘complex form of socially established cooperative activity’, can be helpfully construed as a practice on MacIntyre’s original conception. Whether or not there is in fact a genuine disagreement here (and MacIntyre acknowledges, in the same interview (Dunne and MacIntyre 2002, p. 8) that there may not be that much of a disagreement after all), the notion of teaching as a practice raises interesting and important questions for the possibly analogous case of parenting, as shall be explored below.

an appealing conceptual framework from which to challenge ‘the technicist pretensions of the input-output models’ (Dunne and MacIntyre 2002, p. 7) that characterise a great deal of contemporary educational discourse. As Michael Smith puts it,

The kinds of restraints imposed by managerial theories on the role and character of teachers are rejected in this conception. The idea of contingent acts and actions in general is conceptually voluntaristic. It requires teachers to be aware of their professional circumstances and make responses which seen from a distance form a coherent set of actions within the practice of the school. (Smith 1999, p. 326)

In other words, there are goods and ends that are internal to and indeed constitutive of the practice of the school, and the good teacher, on this conception, is one who is aware of and acts in adherence to these goods. As opposed to the instrumental reasoner, who ‘regards the relation of ends and means as purely external’ (Lasch, quoted in Smith 2005, p. 209), the *phronimos* – the person embodying practical judgement – ‘see[s] the good to be realized as something to be sought through the action and not as an independently specifiable aim’ (Lasch, quoted in Smith 2005, p. 209). To be a ‘practitioner’ in this rich sense, contrary to the perspective of technical reason – which attempts to construct and apply a theory through disembedding the knowledge and skills involved in the practice so as to capture them in generalisable procedures – is to embody the practical virtues of intellect and character that are specific to the particular practice in question. The goods internal to any coherent practice are essentially values and ‘standards of excellence’ (Dunne and MacIntyre 2002, p. 7) – in the case of the school, for example, a commitment to ‘the development of students’ powers’ (Dunne and MacIntyre 2002), as well as values such as collegiality, truth, respect for pupils and justice (Smith 2005, p. 210) – thus illustrating the important point that practical judgement, unlike instrumental or technical reason, has ‘a significant and irreducibly ethical dimension’ (Smith 2005, p. 209). The crucial qualities required of the person of practical judgement, accordingly, are flexibility and attentiveness, understood as a kind of ethical sensitivity to the particular and concrete features of the situation.

Aristotle’s thought, and its interpretation through the work of philosophers such as those discussed here, offers us a compelling critique of the growing trend for various forms of technicism, instrumental rationality, or managerialism evident in so many aspects of our public lives, from school improvement and assessment to business management and health policy. Could the dominant discourse of ‘parenting’, described in Chap. 1, be the latest instance of this ‘triumph of technical reason’ (Dunne and Pendlebury 2003, p. 197)? There is much to support such a suggestion. Certainly, Dunne’s critique of the narrow and instrumental model of knowledge as involving predictive formulae would seem highly relevant to a great deal of recent policy discourse on parenting. For example, such a model is reflected in reports published in conjunction with the Every Child Matters policy, in which parenting is talked of in terms of ‘outcomes’, in confident statements such as ‘we know the key principles of effective parenting’, and in arguments for ‘[T]he case for parenting initiatives to be evidence-based’ (Scott 2010, p. 1). The implication here is that there are certain forms of objectively identifiable parenting behaviours that will produce objectively desirable results; results which are, it is implied, independently

determined. A similar logic is perhaps even more apparent in a spate of recently published self-help books for parents with titles like *How to Raise a Happy Child* or *The Science of Parenting* which often, by their very name, first imply that the ends of good parenting are determined independently of particular instances of parent-child relationships and, second, that being a good parent consists in applying established scientific knowledge.

Perhaps the most explicit recent articulation of the view that the paradigm of technical rationality has been worryingly imported into the area of parent-child relationships is Richard Smith's 2010 paper, 'Total Parenting', where he argues that being a parent has become 'one of the latest sites to show the effect of the rampant performativity characteristic of our late-modern age' (Smith 2010, p. 357).

The term 'performativity' is used in this context to refer to 'the obsession with efficiency and effectiveness, with improving the input-output ratio, with exclusively instrumental reasoning – and in particular with these values in areas of life where they are (sometimes spectacularly) inappropriate' (Smith 2010, p. 357), thus clearly echoing similar critiques of instrumental rationality in the field of education and teaching. We share Smith's distaste for the apparent expectations, evident in much of the literature and policy initiatives referred to in Chap. 1, 'that parenting, in line with everything else in our time, be more efficient and effective, more all-embracing in its scope, and better controlled and monitored' (Smith 2010, p. 358). However, while welcoming these philosophical distinctions and the articulation of an alternative language to that of performativity, we want to move beyond this suspicion of intervention in the parent-child relationship on the part of external agents manifesting such performative models, to probe just what is involved in being a parent, including questions of the social, moral and cultural demands on parents and the significance of bringing up a child. This involves moving beyond an emphasis on – indeed, perhaps questioning the very notion of – the internal goods or qualities of the parent-child relationship that, as an intimate relationship, are possibly being trampled on, as suggested by Smith, by the discourse of performativity.

Smith laments the very concept of 'parenting', as opposed to 'being a parent', as 'a technological deployment of skills and techniques, with the loss of older, more spontaneous and intuitive relations between parents and children' (Smith 2010, p. 357). As he points out, and as suggested by our own analysis in Chap. 1, there is a tendency for talk of *parenting* 'to take place in the language of instrumental reason, as a matter of tasks to be confronted, the skills necessary to carry them out, and, of course, the experts to consult for advice. The experts will tell parents "what works"' (Smith 2010, p. 361). In developing the contrasting conception of 'being a parent', Smith draws on Suissa (2006) and on the work of Naomi Stadlen, whose research with new mothers reveals just how much of the experience of motherhood, especially in the early stages, involves 'a kind of passivity, being there for the baby'. It is essentially a state of what Stadlen describes as 'being instantly interruptible' (Stadlen, quoted in Smith 2010, p. 365). The mother of a baby is not usefully focused on techniques; rather, she has to 'loosen her active conscious mode and sink into something older and simpler in order to get closer to the world of her baby' (Stadlen, quoted in Smith 2010, p. 365). There is, Smith comments, 'something Zen-like

about this' (Smith 2010, p. 365): 'A mother trying to understand her child may suddenly notice the astonishing beauty of an ordinary gravel path, and suddenly the busyness of everyone else rushing around in instrumental thinking mode looks crazy. "Whatever is all the hurry for?"' (Stadlen, quoted in Smith 2010, p. 365). Stadlen also describes qualities such as 'alertness' and 'feeling your way', as well as 'disorientation' and 'uncertainty' that, on this account, 'are a prerequisite of being flexible and responsive to *this* baby, here, now – rather than as a representative of the universal class of babies that fall within the scope of general baby-care principles' (Smith 2010, p. 365.). As Smith notes, the words with which Stadlen describes 'what mothers do' (the title of her 2005 book on which this discussion is based) – words like alertness and flexibility – 'are strongly reminiscent of the Aristotelian idea of practical reason (*phronesis*) that we lost when our notion of rationality became almost exclusively 'scientific', with its ideal located in mathematics and geometry' (Smith 2010, p. 365).

In emphasising these ideas, Smith echoes the work of philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, who have written extensively on the significance and meaning of a kind of ethical attentiveness or 'perception', involving sensitivity to context and attention to particulars, as intrinsic to the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* and as sharply contrasted to the alternative view that 'rational choice can be captured in a system of general rules or principles which can then simply be applied to each new case' (Nussbaum 1990, p. 66). Aristotelian practical judgement, as Nussbaum notes, does not represent a non-rational approach to ethics, but rather an alternative form of rationality that 'cannot be a systematic science concerned throughout with universal and general principles' but is rather 'a defence of the priority of concrete situational judgments of a more informal and intuitive kind to any such system' (Nussbaum 1990, p. 66).

The Priority of the Particular

It is tempting, in the context of this important critique, to develop an account of the experience of 'being a parent' (see Suissa 2006) from a first-person perspective which, in contrast to the dominant scientific account of 'parenting', would draw attention to issues such as the importance of sensitivity to context and the role of ethical judgement. And indeed Dunne and Pendlebury, in contrasting the scientific conception of reason with the older Aristotelian conception that it displaced, state that '[I]t puts a premium on detachment and "objectivity", suppressing the context-dependence of first-person experience in favour of a third-person perspective which yields generalised findings in accordance with clearly formulated, publicly agreed procedures' (Dunne and Pendlebury 2003, p. 195).

Some earlier work by feminist philosophers has, in fact, gone a considerable way towards developing such an account, focusing specifically on the practices of caring and motherhood. In such work, for instance that of Sara Ruddick and Susan Bordo, the paradigm of abstract, scientific rationality is identified as a specifically male paradigm and is contrasted with an alternative conceptualisation of reasoning as

embedded in the concrete context of everyday experience. Thus, Susan Bordo, referring to the model of Cartesian rationality, comments:

The key term [that defines reason] is detachment: from emotional life, from the particularities of time and place, from personal quirks and prejudices, and, most certainly, from the object itself – from whatever and whomever reason knows (quoted in Ruddick 1990, p. 6–7)

Ruddick's work, and the work of other feminist philosophers within this tradition, is primarily concerned with articulating a 'way of knowing' and defending the point that the objective 'view from nowhere' required by traditional deontological moral systems and models of scientific reasoning is either logically impossible or epistemologically flawed. In articulating the alternative view, Ruddick draws on the philosophical tradition of practicalism, especially the work of Wittgenstein, Winch, and Habermas, according to which our thinking 'arises from and is shaped by the practices in which people engage' (Ruddick 1990, p. 9). Within this view, as in the work of MacIntyre discussed earlier, the notion of 'practice' plays a central role. Practices are understood as collective human activities distinguished by aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims (Ruddick 1990, pp. 13–14). It is in this sense, then, that one can understand the aims of a practice as being constitutive of the practice. The suspicion, shared by many feminist writers, of the scientific paradigm stems from the same epistemological position, whereby science itself is a practice like any other practice, presupposing communities with shared goals and purposes. Thus, as Ruddick states, 'practicalists have been suspicious of attributing to science a privileged relation to reality and making scientific knowledge the paradigm of intellectual accountability against which all other ways of knowing are tested' (Ruddick 1990, p. 15).

Ruddick's project is to explore and articulate an account of 'woman's practice' (Ruddick 1990, p. 15) so as to develop the forms of thinking and knowing that emerge from, and constitute, this practice.² A crucial aspect of maternal thinking as Ruddick describes it, and a clear way in which it shares some of the features of the Aristotelian account of practical reason, is the contrast between the concrete and the abstract, and the prioritising of the former in moral reasoning:

[...] as she practises her understanding of a child's mind, a mother comes to develop a cognitive capacity for "concrete" thinking, which is called forth by and enables the work of fostering growth. Concreteness is opposed to "abstraction" – a cluster of interrelated dispositions to simplify, generalize, and sharply define. To look and then speak concretely is to relish complexity, to tolerate ambiguity, to multiply options rather than accepting the terms of a problem. (Ruddick 1990, p. 93)

We have a great deal of sympathy for the critique articulated by such theorists. Yet Ruddick's work suggests, like Smith's, a prioritisation of the present-oriented, experiential aspects of the parent-child relationship – or 'being a parent' – over its future-oriented, more instrumental aspects – 'parenting'. While this is a valuable

²Ruddick is careful to avoid essentialist thinking on biological gender and insists that men can also be, in the sense in which she is using the term, 'mothers'.

distinction, we feel that there is still a great deal more philosophical work to be done in exploring the ways in which these two aspects are in fact irreducibly intertwined in the daily experience of parent-child relationships. What we want to develop in the following chapters is a perspective that allows us to probe and explore these aspects of parent-child relationships – questions of what parents want for their children, how they want them to develop, and what social and cultural values they embrace in their relationships with them – not as contrasting, ‘external’ factors to the relationship but as emerging from and inherent in the experience of being a parent itself. This perspective can only be revealed, we suggest, by the kind of first-person accounts such as we develop and explore in what follows.

The First-Person Perspective

In characterising the perspective we develop here as a first-person account, we are partly taking on board the insights of the philosophical critique of technical rationality discussed above, but also going beyond it in important ways. Probing the insights that emerge from such first-person accounts allows us to develop philosophical arguments that say more about parent-child relationships and the meaning of parenting in our current cultural climate than the critical perspective articulated by, for example, Smith and Stadlen. The first-person account allows us, also, to move beyond the contrast between technical rationality and practice by exploring aspects of the parent-child relationship that are unique to it rather than being a feature of other, similar ‘practices’, or even other relationships, such as the teacher-student relationship. While Dunne and Pendlebury refer to ‘the context dependence of first-person experience’ (Dunne and Pendlebury 2003, p. 195), what we want to address in our own exploration of the first-person perspective in parenting is how there are significant aspects of parent-child relationships that are more than just a question of context dependence or attentiveness to the particulars of the situation.

It is certainly true that the idea of ‘sensitivity to context’ offers an important reminder of the inadequacy of certain forms of predictive social science as applied to the area of parenting. An obvious example is the way in which empirical data drawn from large-scale studies – e.g. ‘Babies are prone to wake far more than adults because their average sleep cycle lasts only 50 minutes, compared with our 90 minute cycle’ (Sunderland 2006, p. 65.) – are combined with other research into the neurological effects of oxytocin and melatonin, to lead to prescriptive advice for parents: ‘Your primary aim at bedtime is to bring your child down from a super-alert awake state by activating the calming brain chemical oxytocin and the sleep hormone melatonin. The most likely way of achieving this is by establishing a soothing routine. Whenever this is repeated, there is a chance that it will activate the same calming chemicals in the brain’ (Sunderland 2006, p. 66).

Clearly, to exercise practical judgement as a parent is not a question of mindlessly applying this rule in such a way that one cannot tolerate any flexibility or deviation from the established routine. Faced with a real-life dilemma, such as

whether to take the baby along to a family party in the evening that will make it impossible to put him to bed at the normal time, the parent who, without reflecting, simply refuses the invitation on the grounds that the principle of establishing and maintaining calm bedtime routines must override other principles is not, on the above account, exercising sound practical reasoning. A person with the virtue of practical judgement, on the other hand, will reflect on the specific situation, taking into consideration all the ethical and other aspects of it, drawing on past experience, and assessing the possible effects of each course of action on all those involved. This will entail, crucially, discerning which elements of the situation are ethically salient and why. For example, the event in question may be a party to celebrate the eightieth birthday of the baby's grandmother. The parent may reason that it would be hugely meaningful for the grandmother to have her grandchild present at the celebrations; that not attending would upset other family members, that she herself might be miserable if she were to miss out on such an important family gathering, and so on. It should be noted that this is not just a matter of weighing up a theoretical conflict between two different principles ('look after the well-being of your baby' versus 'loyalty to elder family members', for example) and deciding rationally which of them takes priority. It is rather, as Nussbaum says, a question of 'seeing the way things are' (Nussbaum 1990, p. 96) and making a judgement. This process cannot be reduced to just a matter of finding or articulating 'the right rule', for each situation has its own requirements, and deliberating in such a situation constitutes 'an adventure of the personality as a whole' (Nussbaum 1990, p. 88).

Yet this analysis, while helpful, does not go far enough. The concrete details of the situation – the rich context of practical deliberation which no book on 'solving children's sleep problems' can ever fully capture – is, in principle, one which any careful observer, provided with the kind of thick description offered above, could appreciate. It is surely nothing remarkable to note that, while the findings of neuroscience and developmental psychology may yield useful rules of thumb based on research that suggests a correlation between certain early infant behaviours and later manifestations, nevertheless of course individual children are all different, and each situation calls for a response that is sensitive to such differences and to other contextual factors. And it seems fairly commonsensical to observe that, while it may on the whole be a good thing to establish a bed-time routine for young children, it is unlikely that a particular child will turn out to be aggressive, bad tempered, or emotionally unresponsive just because his parents deviated from this routine on a few occasions. But this is precisely where our notion of the first-person account becomes crucial: *Any* reader or observer could reach such a commonsensical view. The critiques of theorists such as MacIntyre, Smith, and Dunne, when brought to bear on the area of contemporary parenting advice, offer us an important corrective to the worrying tendency to treat scientific correlations as formulae with predictive and practical implications for individual actions. But what we want to draw out in our particular use of the first-person account is not only the importance of context and the need to remember that individual children and individual parents are different, but also the significance of the fact that, for the parent, any judgement about what to do in particular situations with their child is inseparable from the fact that *it is*

my child. The relationship of a particular parent to her own child is not just one more aspect of the ‘priority of the particular’ that needs to be taken into account along with various contextual factors; it is, rather – so we shall argue – the way in to thinking about parent-child relationships and the obligations and forms of judgement involved in them.

Nor is this simply another aspect of the account of ethical life which emphasises the agency of individuals and their particular commitments over the general and impartial perspective of a moral ‘view from nowhere’. The Aristotelian account of moral reasoning is in clear contrast to the kind of moral theory which understands the idea of moral reasoner as impartial, able to abstract her particular substantive commitments from a moral judgement of the situation. Moral theorists who have challenged this view have articulated accounts such as that of Bernard Williams, who, as articulated in the quote with which we opened this chapter, points out that:

Practical deliberation is in every case first-personal, and the first person is not derivative or naturally replaced by anyone. The action I decide on will be mine, and its being mine means not just that it will be arrived at by this deliberation, but that it will involve changes in the world of which I shall be empirically the cause, and of which these desires and this deliberation itself will be, in some part, the cause. (Williams 1985, p. 68)

From a philosophical point of view, our position is closer to this perspective on morality than to more Kantian perspectives. But thinking about the parent-child relationship and the way in which to understand and approach the ethical demands that it presents suggests, we believe, important and philosophically rich ideas and practical questions that cannot all be captured by subsuming them under this theoretical ethical framework. The experience of being a parent and the perception that the child I am caring for, living with, and bringing up is *my child* raise a whole range of philosophically significant questions and ethical demands that encompass more than the important insight that my ethical decisions are, as Bernard Williams puts it, *mine*. There is a unique ethical significance, we want to argue, to the fact that parents, in acting as moral agents, are not just engaged in bringing about ‘changes in the world’ but are aware of the fact that the changes that may or may not result are changes in their child, that this child is both of this world and not yet fully part of it, and that the parent’s own relationship to the world is, in part, constituted by her relationship with this particular child. Thus, rather than contrasting the ‘passivity’ Stadlen talks about with the effective action required by the dominant discourse, we wish to explore further the ways in which being a parent does in fact involve a set of demands and responsibilities and the sense in which bringing up a child clearly involves more than just being there. But rather than just rejecting the performative sense of responsibility, we want to try to articulate a different sense of responsibility that captures the experience of being a parent. It is not just the fact that we are faced with, as Smith puts it (Smith 2010, p. 265), ‘*this* baby here, now...’ but also the fact, and the awareness of the fact, that it is ‘my baby’ that brings with it such an immense and morally demanding responsibility.

A fuller appreciation of the significance of the first-person account of parenting and its demands will emerge in the following chapters. For the present discussion, though, we want to emphasise how this perspective encompasses more than an

insistence on the concrete particulars of a situation or the moral agency of the individual parent. It is worth returning to the above critique of technical rationality in the field of teaching to draw out some of these points. For example, Richard Smith, in discussing the qualities that make up practical judgement – flexibility, attentiveness, relevant experience, and so on – notes that these qualities ‘are found more in some people than in others. They are found for instance in those who have a rich acquaintance with the subject-matter in hand, and in those prepared to attune themselves to the subject-matter rather than to treat it as one more field for the operation of pre-established skills and techniques’ (Smith 2006, pp. 159–160). One can see the importance of such a conception in a field like teaching where the more experience one has in dealing with teaching situations and teacher-student relationships, the more resources one will have to draw on – perhaps intuitively – in exercising one’s practical judgement in new situations. Yet while this is undoubtedly true to a certain extent in parenting – as reflected in Winnicott’s statement that mothers ‘have to learn how to be motherly by experience’ (Winnicott 1964, p. 49) – to completely go along with this analogy would be to overlook what we believe is a crucial aspect of the parent-child relationship and an aspect which, ultimately, makes it difficult to conceive of this relationship as a practice analogous to teaching. If the ‘subject matter’ of teaching is, on MacIntyre’s account, the practices into which teachers are initiating children and their internal goods – or on Dunne’s variation of this account, certain goods internal to the practice and tradition of educational institutions such as schools – what is the ‘subject-matter’ of parenting? No doubt it is true that a parent with some experience of the daily care of children will perhaps be able to exercise more practical wisdom when it comes to making judgements about them than a totally new parent with no such experience. But it is also importantly true that the appropriateness of a particular judgement in the context of a parent-child relationship is inseparable from the fact that the child in question is ‘my child’, as it is inseparable from whether (even for the same parent) the child in question is ‘Molly’ or ‘Thomas’. Being a parent is always being somebody’s parent. While it sounds somewhat odd to talk of someone being ‘a math teacher’ if they are never actually teaching anybody, it is nevertheless not the relationship with a particular child that constitutes the identity of the teacher. The ‘subject matter’, in the case of teaching, lies outside the particular children whom she is teaching. The teacher-pupil relationship in fact cannot be coherently described without a third element: the subject matter. To be a teacher, even a primary school teacher, is to teach *something*. In a parent-child relationship, however, even when this relationship is construed as educational (see Chap. 1), there is no independently existing ‘subject matter’ other than that arising from within her relationship with a particular child – a child for whom she is, in a deep sense, responsible. This is not to say that parents do not have ‘external’ aims or values that they hold and things they want their children to do and be, even mundane things like sleeping through the night, but the significance of these aims and their very meaning in daily life is partly informed by the particular child in question and the parent’s relationship with and understanding of her. This is not simply a question of opening oneself up to the ‘Zen-like’ experience of just being with one’s child, any

more than it is a question of simply working out and applying abstract principles and knowledge to the area of child rearing.

A good teacher, if we go along with Dunne's account, is, like any good practitioner, someone able to make contextual judgements of what is good or appropriate in different situations. Thus, faced with particular curricular requirements or school rules, the good teacher will have the experience and practical wisdom, the understanding of the internal goods of her practice of teaching, to know when and how to employ these rules in a particular classroom with particular children. But for parents, the issue is not just that they are dealing with particular, individual children; the issue is that they are dealing with *their* children. Certainly, a good teacher, one would hope, would make an effort to get to know her pupils and respond to them on an individual basis, but what matters here is not that they are *her* pupils but that they are particular pupils. Of course teachers often talk about 'my children', but this phrase is meant in a very different way, and has a different moral status, from the sense in which a parent can say 'my child'. One could in fact convincingly argue, as Richard Smith and others have done, that one element of the goods and values internal to the practice of being a teacher is the virtue of fairness; the inclination, and the ability, to treat all children in one's care fairly, and not to let one's relationship with a particular child dictate the way one teaches them (this is not, of course, to say that an awareness of individual differences between the children one is teaching – for example in their intellectual abilities and temperaments – should not inform one's teaching practice). But in the case of a parent, there is surely no equivalent internal good. On the contrary, there is something a bit odd about the idea of a parent reading all the literature and working out how to be a good parent independently of their experience of being, say, Alfie's father or Natasha's mother.

Similarly, the MacIntyrean notion of practice may be of only limited use in trying to articulate an alternative conception to the dominant mode of 'total parenting', as it is not clear to what extent being a parent constitutes a practice. There is certainly no obvious aspect of being a parent that is analogous to the institution of the school in constituting a form of 'making and sustaining forms of human community – and therefore of institutions' (Dunne and MacIntyre 2002, p. 8). Although parents, as social agents, generally belong to all sorts of more or less coherent cultural traditions, and this may inform their actions as parents and their conceptions of good parenting to some extent, this cannot be true in the same way as it is true to say that the values and goods of teaching are bound up with the values and goods of particular forms of social practice and institutions. For parents also have individual emotional responses, commitments, desires and values that play an important role in how they act as parents. And significantly, not all aspects of parents' interaction with their children can be made sense of in terms of the 'practice' of being a parent. There is no separate area of one's life as a parent which one can delineate and describe as 'parenting', analogously to the practice of 'teaching', for unlike teaching, it is difficult to see where parenting begins and ends. In a sense, once one is a parent, one is always 'being a parent', even when one is not engaged in 'parenting'; but it is equally true that one is never just 'being a parent'. Thus, our insistence on the 'first-person' account is not intended to imply that there is a unique and qualitatively distinct

realm of human experience existing somehow apart from and beyond the other parts of our social and personal lives.

These are themes that we will develop more fully in the following chapters. What we want to articulate, through probing thick examples of individual parent-child interactions, is the way in which thinking about what it means to be a parent from this first-person perspective offers us an important way in to understanding parents, children and families that, we argue, is omitted from the dominant discourse. This way in is not simply a matter of learning to be more sensitive to the particularities of context, in the way that notions of good teaching need to be more sensitive to the demands of the infinite variety of experience involved in the rich practice of teaching. It is a matter of putting the ethical significance of what it means to be the parent of one's own child, to be responsible for that child, in the centre of our discussion.

An example from the popular TV show *Supernanny* will help to illustrate some of the above points. In a way, this series can be seen as a typical instance of the way in which external, third-person conceptions of 'good parenting' are applied, in a way reminiscent of Dunne's account of technical rationality, to a range of practical situations. Jo Frost, the *Supernanny* who is called in to help parents struggling with a variety of behavioural issues with their children, is in a clear sense representative of the 'expert' with the professional knowledge of parenting practice and thus is emblematic of the form of scientific rationality discussed above. Furthermore, and crucially, what Jo Frost is there for is to *get results*. She teaches the parents in question skills and techniques that, if applied correctly, will, it is promised, yield the desired outcome. Yet what this outcome consists in is never itself made explicit, much less made the subject of ethical deliberation; for, unlike the *phronimos* who deliberates about ends as well as means, instrumental rationality requires only that we adopt the most effective means to achieve the externally specified ends.

In this particular episode (Episode 1 of Series 2), the Collins family is clearly struggling. Mum, Karen, in particular, is under considerable stress and is often pictured on the verge of tears in the face of her four children's increasingly destructive and aggressive behaviour. They charge around the house and garden destroying their own and others' property; they throw things at each other; they swear at, spit at, and occasionally hit Karen when she reprimands them and seem oblivious to any attempts on her part to get them to perform simple tasks like getting ready for school in the morning or coming into the house for a meal. Enter Jo Frost, with her familiar arsenal of techniques. Karen agrees to adopt Jo's 'house rules' and disciplinary approaches and, after considerable frustration, begins to see at least limited success and tangible results in terms of being able, for example, to get her children out of the house in time for school in the morning without all-out warfare on the way. She is somewhat hampered in her efforts by father Jason, who is used to playing the role of the tough disciplinarian in the family and seems to resent being usurped. Jo Frost is not insensitive to these issues of family dynamics and deals with them by pointing out how children need consistent messages of discipline and that 'all Karen's good work' would be undone if Dad came home and started undermining her approach by implementing his own rules of discipline and punishment. There is no question, of course, about the intrinsic value or meaning of the kinds of punishment – the

means – involved. The only logic at work here is the instrumental, rational one according to which what counts is getting results. Jason, quick to adopt this logic (indeed, by assenting to having Supernanny enter his home, one may argue, he is already committed to it) seems inclined, quite reasonably, to extend it even further when he is faced by a frustrating situation in which it appears not to be yielding the desired results: Joseph, the 4 year old, has misbehaved – deliberately pouring a cup of juice over his brother’s homework and then hitting Karen on the head with a toy sword when she told him off. His punishment: to stay in the naughty zone until he is prepared to apologise to Karen. Karen dutifully explains this to him, kneeling down and speaking firmly but calmly, as coached by Supernanny, and shuts him in the designated room. Within minutes, he is out and rampaging around the kitchen. Karen, under Jo’s guidance, calmly escorts him back to the naughty zone, repeats the explanation of his punishment and what is expected of him, without raising her voice or showing she is upset, and shuts the door. Once again, he is out and shrieking gleefully within minutes. Jason, after watching this performance repeated several times, can clearly stand it no more. He points out to Karen and Jo that there is a lock to the door of the naughty zone-room. ‘Why don’t we just lock the door?’ he asks Jo. Given the logic of the approach, this would seem to be an entirely reasonable thing to ask. But Jo, instead of engaging in this question, immediately shuts it down: ‘Because you can’t ever lock your kids up’. This is an interesting response. It is clearly an external, third-person perspective. And in one sense, it reflects an important, supposedly universal position: Certain things are simply morally unacceptable. Locking children in rooms, it is implied, is a form of abuse that we cannot tolerate in an enlightened, liberal society as it treats children as objects and affronts their human dignity. One could, though, see Jo’s response as a narrow and insensitive imposition of a prescriptive norm of parenting that, of course, reflects particular class and historical and cultural values; in some cultures, such a critic could argue, it was and still is perfectly acceptable to lock children in rooms. Who is Jo Frost, we may wonder, to tell these parents what to do with their own children? On whose authority is she acting? Thus we have here, on one level, a clear case of scientific parenting. An approach which suggests that sensitivity to context and attention to the particulars of the situation are what makes this form of instrumental rationality ethically problematic, would, perhaps, emphasise the absurdity of Jo Frost purporting to know how to deal with Karen and Jason’s problematic situation after only spending a matter of hours in their family home. To really appreciate the various layers of meaning involved in this situation, and to make a judgement as to what the appropriate response would be, Jo would have to spend far longer with the parents and their children; to develop an awareness of the dynamics between them, their cultural and psychological backgrounds, and so on. Yet what we want to highlight in developing the first-person perspective, as we conceive it, is the point that no matter how sensitive she was to the situation, how ‘finely attuned’ to its multiple layers of meaning and complexity, any judgement that Jo Frost formed and any action that she recommended would still be from the third-person perspective, in that they would not be concerned with *her child*. In a sense, approaches that emphasise the importance of attention to particulars and to context are making an epistemological

point. Yet even were Jo to achieve the epistemological shift in perspective required by this critique, there is, we argue, a further and irreducible ethical weight added by the parent's perception that the child in question is her child.

This is, perhaps, an obvious point, but it is one that, we believe, has not been sufficiently addressed in the relevant literature and one which suggests philosophical issues worthy of exploration. Some contemporary critics, such as Jennie Bristow in *Standing up To Supernanny* (Bristow 2009), have voiced a suspicion of externally imposed, prescriptive techniques of 'good parenting', pointing out how approaches such as that exemplified by Jo Frost are disempowering to parents and possibly represent a worrying political paternalism. There may well be an important moral principle behind Jo's statement that 'You don't lock children in rooms', but she does not seem to think it is worth wasting time trying to explain it to Jason: It is enough, her comments imply, that he accept the instrumental reasoning inherent in her authority. What critics such as Bristow seem to be suggesting is that such intervention by the representatives of scientific authority is illegitimate by definition: The best thing would be to let the parents just 'get on with it'. Yet this is precisely what Karen and Jason have been doing for months, and they are clearly miserable and need help finding some way to change the intolerable domestic situation in which they find themselves. So while we have some sympathy for the line of critique voiced by Bristow, we nevertheless want to reject the idea that there is some kind of intuitive, responsive form of practical judgement that would be accessible to parents if they just 'opened themselves up' to the experience of being parents and followed their instincts. Karen and Jason, like many parents, need help. But the kind of help represented by Supernanny-type advice and intervention is objectionable not just because it treats parents like technicians and parenting like a set of skill that anyone can be taught, thereby devaluing the autonomy of individuals, but also because (like many of its critics) it leaves out the first-person perspective. Without implying that all parents should become Aristotelian *phronimi*, possibly with the help of some philosophical classes, we believe nevertheless that there are ways of offering help that would acknowledge and value the first-person perspective and thus would, perhaps, be more meaningful for parents. The moment in the above encounter over the locked door could, indeed, have served as a means to open up a space for ethical deliberation from the first-person perspective: Rather than starting from the position that 'it's not OK to lock children in rooms', the question posed to Jason could have been: 'Do you think it is OK to lock your child in a room?', 'What makes it OK, or not OK?', 'How would you feel if you were to do it?', 'What effect do you think it would have?', 'What is it that you want to achieve by doing it?', and so on. The very fact that Jason, on being told he couldn't lock Joseph in the room, actually asked 'Why not?' suggests that he has something to say about the issue. Were he really to engage in this conversation with Jo or, perhaps more appropriately, with Karen, pursuing this line of questioning may enable Jason to probe what he does think is acceptable and why; this could, of course, involve reference to the prevailing moral climate; what is socially acceptable; as well as, perhaps, his own relationship with his parents: what did they do to discipline him, how did he feel about it, does he think it was acceptable, does he want to be a different kind of parent, and why? Crucially, it

would also involve questions about what it is he wants to achieve with his own children, what he feels is important in his relationship with each of them, what he would consider a good – or good enough – outcome of any intervention on his and Karen’s part, and what price he is prepared to pay in order to achieve it. No single one of these questions is a conclusive summary of the first-person perspective, and no such list is exhaustive; but the point is that all such questions are ruled out of the frame by the dominant language and logic both of popular parenting advice such as *Supernanny* and by the popular critiques of these approaches.

The central point about the first-person perspective as we are using the phrase is not just that it is particular and contextual as opposed to general and neutral; it is that it embodies a relational commitment that is completely unlike that involved in other forms of inter-personal practice. This is not to argue that parents have particular priorities *as parents*, and we need to think about these so as to accommodate them into our normative political or moral theory; what we are calling ‘the first-person perspective’ is not a personal, internal, particularistic perspective as contrasted with the external, political perspective. Indeed, as we shall elaborate in later chapters, it is the intertwining of the political and the personal that gives the parent-child relationship its unique quality and that is undermined by attempts to reduce it to a narrow set of skills or techniques on the one hand, or a set of moral obligations on the other.

To further illustrate how so much of the dominant discourse on parenting obscures the first-person perspective, consider the following passage from George Elliot’s *Mill on the Floss*.

Maggie Tulliver, aged 10, has impetuously cut off all her hair and appears at the tea table where her aunts and uncles are all assembled, along with her parents and her brother, Tom, for an important family occasion:

Mrs. Tulliver gave a little scream as she saw her, and felt such a “turn” that she dropt the large gravy spoon into the dish with the most serious results to the table cloth (...)

“Fie, for shame,” said Aunt Glegg, in her loudest, severest tone of reproof. “Little gells as cut their own hair should be whipped and fed on bread and water – not come and sit down with their aunts and uncles” [...]

“She’s a naughty child, as’ll break her mother’s heart”, said Mrs. Tulliver, with tears in her eyes.

Maggie seemed to be listening to a chorus of reproach and derision. Her first flush came from anger which gave her a transient power of defiance, and Tom thought she was braving it out. [...]

Her feeble power of defiance left her in an instant, her heart swelled, and getting up from her chair, she ran to her father, hid her face on his shoulder and burst into loud sobbing.

“Come, come, my wench,” said her father soothingly, putting his arms around her; “Never mind. You was i’ the right to cut it off if it plagued you. Give over crying, Father’ll take your part.”

Delicious words of tenderness. Maggie never forgot any of these moments when her father “took her part”; she kept them in her heart, and thought of them long years after, when everyone else said that her father had done very ill by his children. (Eliot 1979, pp. 73–74)

The tone and critical content of a lot of popular and sociological literature on parenting, so we want to suggest, lure us into a third-person, dichotomising perspective

on parenting. On this account, an obvious way to read the above passage would be to see Aunt Glegg as representative of the ever-present, prescriptive voice, authoritatively proclaiming ‘the right way to bring up children’. Disapproving of Mr. Tulliver’s soft approach, Aunt Glegg is convinced that imposing strict discipline and punishment is ‘better for the child’. She appears to have a clear idea in mind of the appropriate kind of character traits to be instilled in Maggie and the right way to go about nurturing them. This view, indeed, has not much at all to do with Maggie as an individual but is simply a general view on ‘little gells’ (appropriately balanced, of course, with a parallel, but slightly different view on how to bring up ‘little boys’). This seems to be a future-oriented approach that, on the face of it, has a lot in common with contemporary childrearing approaches that stress the need for ‘clear boundaries’, ‘consistent messages’, and ‘discipline’. While most modern-day sensibilities would be offended by Aunt Glegg’s enthusiasm for corporal punishment and food deprivation, and while the kind of character traits thought desirable in young women in rural nineteenth century England are no doubt fairly different from those regarded as desirable by most western parents today, the logic of her position is similar to that of modern-day childrearing gurus who, as in the Supernanny example described above, have replaced a bread-and-water diet with the naughty zone: Part of one’s role as a (good) parent is to send clear messages that certain acts are wrong and will entail punishment, and this will help the child to develop desirable character traits.

From the same, third-person perspective, Mr. Tulliver can be seen as representing the opposing approach, perhaps most closely paralleled today in the work of parenting gurus like Alfie Kohn who emphasise ‘unconditional parenting’ (See Kohn 2005), and also reflected more generally in the work of authors such as Stephen Briers and Susan Gerhardt, who note the importance of parents providing love, warmth, and support to their children. Such work is often backed up, these days, with scientific evidence adduced to demonstrate the positive developmental effects on the child, even at the neurological level (see Gerhardt, in Chap. 1) of love and affection on the part of the parent or caregiver.

These two parenting approaches are usually seen as being in tension with each other. Thus, critics of the prescriptive Supernanny-type view may approvingly regard Mr. Tulliver as exemplifying parenting as a ‘relationship based on trust, affection and spontaneous interaction’. (Bristow 2009, p. 37).

Yet it is important to see how both the ‘clear boundaries’/‘consistent authority’ approach and the ‘what children need is love’ approach are articulated within the same logic, from a third-person perspective. Both these schools of thought posit empirical research (‘research has shown...’, ‘developing children need...’) into children in general as the normative standard against which the behaviour of particular parents interacting with particular children is to be judged. While Mr. Tulliver’s contemporaries were generally disapproving of his indulgent behaviour towards Maggie, which they saw as ‘spoiling’ her, a third-person observer, appalled at the harshness of Mrs. Glegg and her supporters, could counter that what children *really* need is love, warmth, and protection; providing this love and protection is a parent’s role and, as such, Mr. Tulliver is being a good parent. Indeed this third-person position would seem to be endorsed by George Elliot herself, who tells us that, in fact, from

Maggie's point of view, it was these signs of tenderness and this willingness to take her side and to protect her from the Mrs. Gleggs of this world that meant far more to her in her assessment of her father as a parent than the fact that he later reduced his family to poverty because of an obstinate and imprudent business decision.

But we want to suggest that, rather than inviting us to come down firmly on the side of 'love and affection' rather than 'firmness', what this passage is inviting us to do is to consider the question of who it is who has the right to decree whether, and indeed when, someone is being a 'good parent'. Is being a good parent an achievement, to be assessed by its results, and if so, when can it be deemed to be complete? Likewise, does an external observer have some privileged status in making such judgements rather than the child herself – in this case, Maggie?

And perhaps, in light of these reflections, there is another way we can read this passage. Mr. Tulliver's response to Maggie is no doubt to a large extent prompted by his reading of the situation in which Mrs. Glegg and her three sisters are vocally disapproving of Maggie's behaviour. Indeed, the full account of this scene, many of the details of which are omitted in the passage quoted, gives the overwhelming effect of Maggie being ganged up on by an intimidating chorus of disapproval by all the assembled members of her mother's family. Mr. Tulliver's perception of 'what Maggie needs' in this situation is not based on a prescription he has worked out in advance, or had imparted to him by someone in authority, but on the realisation that what she needs *from him now* is someone to reassure her that things are not all irredeemably awful and that she hasn't ruined everybody's life (remember her mother's refrain that 'she'll break her mother's heart'), including her own, by her defiant act of cutting off her hair.

What this response indicates is a kind of sensitivity to context. Yet this is not meant in the sense suggested by third-person perspectives which emphasise 'intuitive' parenting, responsiveness to children's needs, and emotional intelligence, or by those critics of prescriptive accounts of parenting that suggest that parents should just be left alone to 'get on with it'. Nor is it captured fully in the accounts of practical judgement and sensitivity of the neo-Aristotelian philosophers discussed above. To go back to the point made by Bristow that parenting is a relationship 'based on trust, affection and spontaneous interaction' (Bristow 2009, p. 37), it would be misleading to view Mr. Tulliver's response as somehow 'spontaneous' or 'based on [his] instincts' (Bristow 2009, p. 43). Bristow's critique seems to imply a dichotomous stance in which the only alternative to the unappealing (and scientifically dubious) view that parenting represents 'the determining force in a child's life' is the view that it is 'something special and personal that just exists' (Bristow 2009, p. 32). Neither Mr. or Mrs. Tulliver nor Aunt Glegg, in fact, represents anything like a kind of unmediated 'instinctive' or 'intuitive' kind of parenting that 'just exists'.

Mr. Tulliver's reading of the situation and his response to it are informed by cultural and personal understandings, not just about Maggie and his unique relationship with her (although surely this must be a part of it) but also of the broader norms and expectations concerning his life as a father, as a mill owner, as the family breadwinner, as a well-known and respected figure in his local community, as a husband regarded somewhat disapprovingly by his wife's wealthier relatives, and so on.

His perception of what is important to Maggie, likewise, is not guided by a clear sense of what the developmental effect on her will be of certain kinds of behaviour on his part but by a grasp of the current situation in which she is overwhelmingly under attack from the other significant people in their environment. Crucially, then, this response is not just about sensitivity to the particularities of the situation rather than the application of general rules; for it is *as Maggie's father* that Mr. Tulliver is responding; and the reality of his relationship with Maggie – its demands, its significance, and how it shapes and has already shaped his life – is an inseparable part of his response to her. There may be, from a third-person perspective, a convincing story we can tell about the importance of certain aspects of parental interaction – trust, comfort, expressions of love – on the child's emotional and mental development. And in the case of contemporary parenting, these stories often form an inescapable part of the backdrop against which parents make their decisions on how to act. But parents' response as parents to certain situations such as the above cannot itself be couched in this narrative. This is not to say that the choices parents make have no causal effect on how their children turn out; Maggie's own biography, indeed, testifies to the lasting importance of her relationship with her father and its influence on her choices and actions as an adult. But nor is it to say that 'the parent-child relationship is [...] something special and personal that just exists'. It is due to the fact that the context in which parents' daily decisions are made – Mrs. Glegg's disapproval, the cultural norms of nineteenth century England, Maggie's wilful and impetuous character, and her love for Tom – is inseparable from the normative force of what makes them good decisions that we cannot step back and make generic, prescriptive statements about 'what children need' or what 'the good parent' should do. Indeed, it is only because the rest of Maggie's environment is what it is that her father's actions have the significance and the value they have. What is more, his decisions as a parent in turn feed into the structure and meaning of this context, which then has even further complex significance for Maggie's future, and so on, in an endless spiral.

It is in order to try and articulate how parents find themselves within this apparent spiral, and the ethical significance of their actions in terms of the personal, political, and social context of bringing up children, that we develop and explore the first-person account throughout the following discussion.

Chapter 3

The Intuitive, Caring Mother

I am not naturally alone. I am naturally in a relation from which I derive nourishment and guidance. When I am alone, either because I have detached myself or because circumstances have wrenched me free, I seek first and most naturally to reestablish my relatedness. My very individuality is defined in a set of relations. This is my basic reality.

(Noddings 1984, p. 51)

In trying to conceptualise childrearing and the parent-child relationship along the lines we have been developing here, those theoretical perspectives that emphasise some idea of the caring mother (parent) seem, at least at the outset, to be helpful. Feminist work on care and maternal understanding is in a sense a development of the work on the priority of the particular, and this is an important theoretical resource as it pays attention to the quality and the nature of particular relationships, thus promising to capture something more akin to the parent-child relationship than the categories and concepts often used in work in philosophy and philosophy of education. Part of this has to do with the feminist positions from which this work developed, some of which specifically focus on mother-child relationships.

The aim of this chapter is a modest one: to draw on some theoretical resources from this feminist perspective that at the outset seem to be in line with our project, in order to investigate if and to what extent these accounts may in fact be helpful in spelling out further the first-person perspective we started articulating in the previous chapter. So to some extent, this chapter can be seen as an extension of the previous chapter. We will not offer a comprehensive survey of the ethics of care and the philosophical debates around it, or similar positions. The selective account of writers we draw on in this chapter speaks for itself, we think, given our project and the central concerns of the work of these writers.

In the previous chapter, we referred to Ruddick's work as potentially helpful in spelling out the first-person perspective. Here we will take this up again and develop our criticism of her work a little further in order to spell out the ways in which it differs from our account of the parent-child relationship and thereby to shed some more light on the first-person perspective. Alongside this we will also go into Nel

Noddings' work on care, specifically as developed in her seminal work *Caring* (1984). Noddings' emphasis on the priority of the receptive and the relational seems to capture something important about what it means to raise children from the perspective of the parent doing so. A third author we will be drawing on is Naomi Stadlen, who in her book *What Mothers Do, Especially When It Looks Like Nothing* (2004) sets out to articulate that for which there seem to be no words in our ordinary language, i.e. what exactly it is that mothers do, especially when it looks like nothing – a project which, again, seems to be very much in line, at least at the outset, with our focus on the first-person perspective.

For each of these authors, we will first briefly indicate what exactly accounts for the attraction of their work for our project. Second, we will show that there are important and clear distinctions between these positions (and their projected implications for childrearing and the parent-child relationship) and our own account. In general, what we wish to reject is the way in which a particular kind of experiencing, knowing or understanding – captured in concepts such as intuition, engrossment, maternal thinking and the like – is privileged over and against another kind of experiencing, knowing or understanding – captured in concepts such as interpretation, analysis, abstract reasoning and the like. Alongside this we also reject the suggestion, inherent in this dichotomisation, that this privileged kind of experiencing, knowing or understanding is somehow accessible apart from the evaluative backdrop in which our human lives are inevitably embedded. To conclude, and following on from this discussion, we will briefly develop a criticism of recently proposed conceptions of parenting (by Jennie Bristow and Frank Furedi) offered in opposition to the unwanted rise of the parenting expert and the increasing levels of state intervention in family life.

A Feminist Perspective on the First-Person Perspective?

Ruddick's Maternal Thinking

In the previous chapter, we introduced Ruddick's work, drawing attention to how it can be situated in a neo-Aristotelian tradition in which the priority of the particular and the contextual is emphasised over and against the paradigm of abstract, scientific rationality. There are ways in which Ruddick's view seems to be in line with our critique of the scientisation of childrearing and the parent-child relationship as described in Chap. 1. Part of what we want to do in resisting this scientific language of parenting is to reclaim the ambiguity, the fuzziness of the concepts involved in our thinking about parents and children, because this is what makes them human descriptions of a human being, rather than hard facts of science. Ruddick articulates something like this in saying:

For the first few months, it may seem that only biological life needs preserving, although even in infancy the distinction between physical and other needs is spurious. The tiniest babies seem lonely, excited, angry, frustrated, or friendly. (Ruddick 1989, p. 80)

It is interesting to contrast this description with the scientific language of many parenting manuals in which, for example, the ambiguity and evaluative force of notions like ‘angry’, ‘lonely’ and so on are completely erased as they are couched in neutral empirical terms – or even defended by descriptions at the neurological level. To say, as Ruddick does, that the distinction between the physical and the ‘other’ forms of needs is spurious is not to say that all perceived ‘other needs’ can be reduced to the physical, or have a physical dimension, but rather the opposite – that all needs are human needs.

Another aspect of Ruddick’s account that seems to share our suspicion of the narrow language of psychology (and that is closely related to the previous point) is her discussion of the notion of development. She contrasts her own evaluative account of ‘fostering growth’ with the supposedly more neutral notion of ‘development’ as follows:

To foster growth is to nurture a child’s developing spirit – whatever in a child is lively, purposive, and responsive. (Ruddick 1989, p. 82)

I associate “development” with particular schools of psychologists who order hierarchically peoples’ cognitive and moral capacities [...] I mean by “development” something closer to the dictionary meaning: to develop is to “unfold more completely” [...] “to form or expand by a process of growth” [...]. (Ruddick 1989, p. 80)

The richness of the concept ‘development’, suggested here by Ruddick, as well as her understanding of needs and emotions, are helpful in resisting the over-scientific third-person language that we criticise in Chap. 1. Instead of giving talk of emotions, needs, development and the like some kind of ‘scientific’ veneer by linking them with established, empirically verifiable outcomes, Ruddick’s account opens up the kind of moral and imaginative thinking about childrearing and about the parent-child relationship we suggested Winnicott’s evaluative language, for example, could give occasion to (see Chap. 1).

The way in which Ruddick uses these concepts here is particularly helpful for fleshing out our understanding of the first-person perspective and its relevance in matters of childrearing, in two ways. First, in Chap. 1 we criticised the fact that needs and development are already narrowly defined from a scientific perspective saturated with the language of psychology. Whatever ‘needs’ and ‘development’ have come to mean in parenting, they are in a sense already foregone conclusions, that is: not up for discussion. Ruddick’s way of describing these concepts, however – with what may sound like fuzzy words such as ‘angry’, ‘lonely’, ‘fostering growth’ and the like – shows that these ‘needs’ and ‘development’, by virtue of their being human needs and human development, cannot be neatly defined or grasped with neat classifications. The lack of ‘clinical precision’ regarding these concepts is not to be considered problematical, but rather is in fact constitutive of the very attempt to express what it means that needs are *human* needs and that development is *human* development. Put more sharply, we find in Ruddick’s account a radical affirmation of the point that concepts that are used in scientific literature as descriptive terms do not make sense independently of the moral and political contexts in which these terms are used. In much of the scientific and popular literature on parenting, it is simply taken for granted, for example, that parents raise their children to be ‘calm’ and ‘contented’, doing their best, that is, to avoid them becoming angry, frustrated

and the like. What is not addressed here is the very question of why, for example, anger is supposedly something ‘unacceptable’ beyond an account of it in terms of the ‘normal’ developmental course of children.

Second, and crucially, Ruddick’s account of concepts such as ‘angry’, ‘lonely’, ‘needs’, etc., goes beyond an attention to particulars. That is, we take Ruddick as showing that using these concepts cannot be done independently of an appreciation of the relationship with the child to whom these concepts are applied. The meaning of these concepts cannot be articulated without an account of this also being my child. It matters a lot for my understanding, as a parent, of the needs and development of *this* child whether or not this child is *my* child who is feeling lonely (and thus in need of social contact), or who is expressing frustration (and thus in need of comforting), etc. It is through descriptions such as Ruddick’s that we can come to see the unique ethical significance, as we put this in Chap. 2, of being a parent. If parents are moral agents, the moral dimension of their agency lies not primarily in the realisation that they have paid sufficient attention to all particulars involved but in the fact that they have acted upon an understanding of the fact that their response to this or that ‘need’ is a response to their own child. Importantly, these two points – the moral-political and the first-person – are, moreover, not in tension. Both these aspects give meaning to the concepts used to describe the state your child is in and to shape the response it calls for.

However, there are also, clearly, ways in which Ruddick’s work is markedly different from our project. As mentioned in Chap. 2, Ruddick’s project can be situated in line with that of philosophers such as MacIntyre, who emphasise the concept of practice, in this case ‘woman’s practice’ (Ruddick 1989). As she says:

Of the many activities assigned to women, I chose one: the work of mothering is central to many women’s lives and indirectly affects the thinking of countless others whose daughters, sisters, or friends identify with mothers. If women were now thinking in ways we had yet to grasp, then these ways would be at least partly reflected in the thinking to which mothering gives rise – maternal thinking. (Ruddick 1989, pp. 9–10)

Ruddick suggests specific ways in which such a form of thinking can arise from the practice of mothering and even suggests, drawing on Lawrence Kohlberg’s work on moral development and Carol Gilligan’s critique of it, that it is this experience of mothering that at least partly accounts for the apparent fact that women have an ‘epistemological predilection for concrete cognition’ (Ruddick 1989, p. 96).

There are a number of problems with this, not just as such, but specifically in comparison with what we are saying here in relation to childrearing and the parent-child relationship and in relation to the first-person perspective. The main problem lies in the very fact that Ruddick sets out to articulate an account of mothering *practices*, which makes her account susceptible to the critique we developed in the previous chapter regarding the concept of practices and the limitations of its applicability to childrearing. Ruddick writes of her own experience as a young mother and philosopher in the 1960s: ‘the only “maternal thinking” with which we are familiar is thinking *about* mothers and children by “experts” who hoped to be heard by mothers rather than to hear what mothers had to say’ (Ruddick 1989, pp. 10–11). However, to ‘hear what mothers have to say’, in our view, is not in itself a resolution of any philosophical

or political problems. Accounts like that of Ruddick suggest that there are particular forms of thinking that simply emerge from an immersion in this experience or that can be made sense of without reference to the broader cultural, political and social context. To be sure, like Ruddick, we acknowledge that the practices of being a parent (or as she says ‘mothering’) are infinitely various and culturally and historically different. Yet while the different circumstances of mothering/parenting give rise to different thinking, as she puts it, she does ‘expect sufficient commonality in the demands made by our children to enable us to compare, which also means to contrast, the requirements of our work’ (Ruddick 1989, p. 53). This suggests a sense in which there is some intrinsic aspect of the parenting experience which, once accessed and acknowledged, offers us an epistemologically and normatively privileged way of theorising parenthood. So while Ruddick’s account is helpful in rejecting the over-scientific, third-person language that we critique, it in a sense goes too far in positing some kind of privileged, almost intuitive form of thinking and insight that is too simplistically contrasted with this language.

We want to resist the kind of privileging of the particular, contextual experience of social agents that implies that there is some sort of intuitive ‘understanding’ or ‘knowledge’ that is somehow accessible to parents simply by virtue of their being parents and, moreover, that is accessible in a way unmediated by theory, political and moral values, or scientific constructs. Ruddick’s argument that ‘mothering itself can be a training in attending to unsettling differences and that maternal identification can be transformed into a commitment to protect the lives of “other” children, to resist on behalf of *children* assaults on body or spirit that violate the promise of birth’ (Ruddick 1989, p. 57) seems to imply that there are moral insights that are only – or perhaps best – available through an immersion in the practice of mothering. Yet what this picture distorts, we argue, is the way in which parents, on becoming parents, are already moral agents with moral values and sensitivities and how the experience of becoming a parent, while surely challenging and contributing to the ongoing development of this aspect of moral life, does not necessarily in itself give rise to a completely different way of knowing or thinking.

Another instance in which this comes out is in Ruddick’s idea of what she calls ‘a cognitive capacity for double focus’: this involves an ability to take the mundane everyday events in children’s lives seriously, while being aware that

birthdays, serious illness, first and last days of school, births and deaths of pets, first loves, first jobs, and many other unscheduled events of childhood prompt larger questions of meaning: For whom? To what end? A mother’s answer: To no higher purpose, for no reason; the point of childhood is expressed within the child’s life, not outside it. Even for those mothers, this simultaneous, or at least rapidly shifting, double focus on small and great, near and eternal, characteristically marks their maternal vision. (Ruddick 1989, p. 78)

But we may want to question whether such ‘double focus’ is something that emerges uniquely and essentially from the experience of mothering or whether it could be seen as characterising all aspects of our moral life. Furthermore, and more seriously for our account, this passage seems to reinforce the impression that childhood and parent-child relations are imbued with some sort of mysterious quality of their own – a quality that is irreducible to and in complete contrast to ‘purposes’

and ‘reasons’ outside of childhood and parenthood itself. Yet, some measure of ‘instrumentality’ or external ends and reasons, it seems to us, are an inevitable part of being a parent: mothers and fathers do want things for and from their children, not just because of who these children are but, sometimes, in spite of who these children are. It is, indeed, in negotiating these different wants and needs – not resolving the tension by prioritising one set over another – that the moral deliberation involved in parenthood, in the first-person perspective, lies.

Noddings’ Relationship of Care

Maybe even more forcefully than in the case of Ruddick, Noddings’ work *Caring* (1984) seems to be indispensable for an understanding of the first-person perspective. As most readers may well be familiar with, in *Caring* Noddings develops an account of ethics in clear distinction from and arising from a thorough criticism of the kind of moral theory in which the principle of universalisability of moral actions stands centre-stage. Exemplary of such moral universalism are (neo-)Kantian and utilitarian approaches to ethics. The form of moral reasoning par excellence in moral universalism is one in which what is moral is conceptualised in terms of (some principle of) justice. According to canonical feminist readings of this tradition (cf. for example the contributions to Larrabee 1993), this form of moral reasoning originates in a socio-historical development in which men have dominated the moral scene – to the effect that only ‘one type’ of moral reasoning has been explicitly developed. Against this development and tradition of moral reasoning, Gilligan and Noddings have argued that women have a different motivation to act morally, that they find themselves in rather different moral relationships and that they justify their actions on the basis of other moral criteria than men do, or at least on the basis of criteria different from those in the moral tradition of universalism. For Gilligan, for example, this has primarily to do with a different conception of the self, which occasions a different conception of morality and a different appreciation of what is morally relevant and salient (cf. Gilligan 1982). Along comparable lines, Noddings makes a sharp distinction between principles and justice (the male approach) on the one hand and ‘receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness’ (the feminine view) on the other (Noddings 1984, p. 2). Women, she says, ‘enter the moral domain through a different door, so to speak’ (Noddings 1984, p. 2). She provides us both with an account of ethical relations which emphasises their indelible particularity and puts centre-stage the practicality of ethics rather than formalistic procedures of moral reasoning largely focused on (maintaining) principles, as well as, connectedly, some fairly clearly outlined educational repercussions (see for example also Noddings 2003).

We are well aware of the criticism raised against the naturalistic features of Noddings’ view of the ethics of care, and we will not reiterate these here. Our interest in Noddings, as in Ruddick, lies in the attraction her work *Caring* holds for further fleshing out the first-person perspective. In this respect, there are a few reasons why Noddings’ work may be attractive for our project. One of these is in

fact her very insistence on ‘*relation* as ontologically basic’ (Noddings 1984, p. 4). What is implied in the affirmation of this premise is an emphasis on ‘how we meet the other morally’ and on ‘preserv[ing] the other morally’ (Noddings 1984, p. 5). Noddings is particularly wary of forms of instrumentalism coming in to the (caring) relationship which would pervert the nature of that relationship, and in fact this very wariness of instrumentalism can be drawn on, by extension, to bring out sharply what is wrong with the current predominant conceptualisation of childrearing and the parent-child relationship in terms of ‘parenting’. In ‘parenting’, childrearing is reduced to ‘doing things with one’s children’, to ‘interacting’ with them, to skills and techniques – the net effect of which is a loss of attention and care for the child with whom the parent finds herself in a relationship. Positing as sharply as Noddings does the relational dimension – meeting the other morally – rightly brings out and underscores, in ways similar to Ruddick’s approach, a criticism of scientific rationality. It rightly underscores, that is, an important aspect of what is wrong with a third-person perspective and brings to the fore the importance of conceptualising the parent-child relationship from within that relationship itself.

Part of the attraction of this approach for the first-person account we are emphasising has to do with how this premise of the relation as ontologically basic works its way into how other moral concepts are understood, for example the concept of responsibility. For Noddings, ‘[R]esponsibility is not simply a matter of accountability; that is, it involves much more than simply answering for a prescribed result’ (Noddings 1984, p. 122). ‘Caring for a pet’, for example, might be considered by parents as something they should encourage their children to do because it ‘will increase their children’s sense of responsibility’ (Noddings 1984, p. 122). But Noddings strongly rejects the way in which caring and responsibility here are being placed in a merely functional relationship. Responsibility, on Noddings’ understanding, is connected to and indeed interwoven with caring on a much deeper level. Acting responsibly is maintaining and enhancing caring, and maintaining and enhancing caring is acting responsibly, on Noddings’ account. To a certain extent, we see this point as being on the same level as our criticism of the instrumentalisation of love and play (see Chap. 1), and as such it adds to our critique of the third-person perspective. What Noddings brings out here is the importance of valuing ‘caring for a pet’ for its own sake, i.e. for the very activity of caring that is ‘performed’ within it. This is not to say that Noddings would deny, we think, that caring can be good ‘for something’, but it is to say that she rejects, firmly, that the inherent value of caring (like that of love and play) can be defined independently of what it is that characterises caring, love, play and the like as the *human* activities they are – as if the importance of caring could be measured by the extent to which it shapes your baby’s brain.

The example here is about children, caring and responsibility. Regarding parental responsibility, *Caring* seems to offer us, at least at the outset, a rich conception of responsibility that stands in sharp contrast to the kind of responsibility that is implied in the predominant languages we discussed in Chap. 1. Noddings’ account emphasises the point that responsibility springs not from an awareness of obligation that has been imposed upon us from the outside but from a sense of duty that

arises from within the very relationship with one's child, thus foregrounding that the considerations parents make originate from within their relationship with their children. Though Noddings' resolute choice of a very particular conception of the good life is undeniably contestable, what her position brings out very clearly and what forms the strength of her argument is the importance of the fact that considerations of the good life are part and parcel of the parent-child relationship from the very beginning and are not secondary to, or dependent on, some type of scientifically or otherwise evidenced achievement. Seeing (some conception of) the good life as inherently part of what it is parents do or do not do in relation to their own children, from the very beginning of that relationship and stretching all the way down to supposedly neutral concepts such as attachment, needs, etc., is part of what we are trying to articulate by the first-person perspective.

Put differently, the strength we see in Noddings' argument and the aspects of it which we find in keeping with our understanding of the parent-child relationship lie in her endeavour to make her readers understand that what parents do is an expression of a particular conception of the good. When we say things like 'There, there. Everything is all right' to our crying child (Noddings 1984, p. 31), this act of talking, we take it, is itself the ethical response and is not to be understood as a solution to a problem. In the parenting language used and prescribed by experts, expressions such as these become a solution, a response to the analysis of a problem, not an expression of caring. But this misses the sense that 'there, there sweetie' is not a signal of a particular educational stance towards the child, or an adoption of a role, but the expression of something far more basic.

However, it is hard to miss the point that Noddings, in ways similar to Ruddick,¹ construes a dichotomisation between two kinds of moral approaches, i.e. caring *versus* moral reasoning, concrete *versus* abstract, feeling and perception *versus* judgement and receptive *versus* instrumental, alongside a privileging of the former over the latter. This is very clear in the 'crying' example just used. 'Mothers quite naturally feel with their infants', Noddings says (Noddings 1984, p. 31). When your baby cries, '[W]e first respond to the feeling that something is the matter', thus Noddings, '[W]e do not begin by formulating or solving a problem but by sharing a feeling' (Noddings 1984, p. 31). Or more generally, as one caring, Noddings argues, 'I set aside my temptation to analyse and to plan. I do not project; I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other' (Noddings 1984, p. 30). It is precisely this that marks the limits of the applicability of Noddings' model of the ethical relationship to the parent-child relationship as we understand it, since this kind of selfless receptivity is not a part of what is expressed in our conceptualisation of the first-person perspective. On the contrary, what the first-person perspective in the parent-child relationship, as we see it, is intended to bring out is a sense of the fact that parents' decisions and actions are always already embedded in a complex intertwining of a diversity of considerations. As parents, we are never just in ethical encounters with our children, intent on preserving the

¹And this is, of course, hardly surprising since Noddings sometimes draws on Ruddick.

caring (or some other kind of) ideal, but we are at the same time, within these very relational aspects of our lives, making judgements on other and related matters. We do not, then, have any quarrel with Noddings' statement that '[C]aring is largely reactive and responsive' (Noddings 1984, p. 19) and that a mother's (parent's) motivation to act is informed by and striving towards this very sense of caring, but we do want to resist the suggestion that this account can exhaust the moral dimension of the mother-child (parent-child) relationship, for from the beginning a parent, for example, also shapes the child's needs and desires and, at the very least, has a responsibility in relation to her child that is broader than that which can be captured by maintaining the caring ideal.

A similar reasoning applies to Noddings' emphasis on the ideal of caring being feminine. Many criticisms have been raised against this point, and we will not go into these here. What concerns us here is not so much the naturalism inherent in her proposal but, again, the very dichotomisation and consequent privileging of one version of ethics over the other. Similarly, we do not question – or at least, for our purposes it is not necessary to question – the claim that the caring attitude is universally accessible (see Noddings 1984, p. 5). What we do want to question is the prioritising of the caring attitude, as a moral attitude, over and against other forms of moral action. Noddings suggests that the only place where moral value lies is the caring relationship, and that normativity is thus grounded in the caring relationship (see Noddings 1984, p. 21). By taking this line, she disqualifies the possibility of other moral considerations entering into this relationship or of other moral considerations informing what parents do in relation to their children. This even extends to her reluctance to admit to any form of instrumental thinking coming into the mother-child relationship. As should be clear, we have a great deal of sympathy for Noddings' argument against the instrumentalisation of caring; in Chap. 1 we argued strongly against a narrow, instrumental account of human features of the parent-child relationship such as play and love which are part of the scientific account of 'parenting'. But this does not preclude the possibility of instrumental considerations coming at some point to play a role in a parent's relationship with her own child. Noddings' concerns about instrumentality are based in the claim that the only source of normativity is the caring relationship. But if one acknowledges that there are other sources of morality, other loci of moral judgement, then instrumental reasons should not be conceived of as tainting or even perverting the ethical ideal, but rather as one of the many elements that form part of the complex intertwining of the diversity of considerations, both ethical and otherwise, that parents might engage in.

In short, we want to suggest that the 'usefulness' of the conception of the caring relationship as a 'model' for the parent-child relationship stops at the point where we acknowledge that what guides us in acting as parents is not only our desire to preserve caring relationships but also broader desires in our lives as parents, which our children are a part of. A good although somewhat contentious example to illustrate this point is Amy Chua's account of her relationship with her daughters in the (already much discussed) *Battle hymn of the tiger mother* (2011). The book is an autobiographical account of Chua's attempts, as a first generation Chinese-American, to adopt 'Chinese parenting practices' with her two daughters. In one of

many similar instances described in the book, Chua relates the story of how she tried to get her youngest daughter, aged three, to begin playing the piano. Instead of copying the single note her mother wanted her to play, evenly, with one finger, as requested, the child began bashing on the keyboard with both hands and only did this harder and faster when her mother asked her to stop. When Chua tried to pull her away from the piano, she screamed and kicked:

Fifteen minutes later, she was still yelling, crying and kicking, and I'd had it. Dodging her blows, I dragged the screeching demon to our back porch door, and threw it open.

The wind chill was twenty degrees, and my own face hurt from just a few seconds' exposure to the icy air. But I was determined to raise an obedient Chinese child [...] if it killed me. "You can't stay in the house if you don't listen to Mommy", I said sternly. "Now, are you ready to be a good girl? Or do you want to go outside?"

Lulu stepped outside. She faced me, defiant. (Chua 2011, p. 12)

And thus begins the first of Chua's many confrontations and battles of will with Lulu, who, on Chua's account, 'would sooner freeze to death than give in' (Chua 2011, p. 13).

Now there does seem to be a straightforward sense in which, against the background of Noddings' ideal of caring and her insistence that 'it is our longing for caring – to be in that special relation – that provides the motivation for us to be moral' (Noddings 1984, p. 5), one can clearly say that Chua's actions towards her daughter – which over the years included refusing to allow her to play with friends out of school or to go to sleepovers, threats to get rid of her treasured toys and withdrawal of treats, all as a means of instilling discipline – cannot be said to be acts of caring. What Chua does, and her explicitly articulated reasons and motivations for doing it, are clearly not informed by a desire to preserve the caring relationship. Indeed, Chua herself testifies to this, and to the, in her view, vastly superior 'Chinese' model of parenting, when she makes comments like 'my goal as a parent is to prepare you for the future – not to make you like me' (Chua 2011, p. 49). Even after several years of tension and fighting, culminating in a full-blown outburst in a cafe in Moscow in front of a crowd of people, in which Lulu screams at her: 'You don't love me, [...], You think you do, but you don't. You just make me feel bad about myself every second. You've wrecked my life. I can't stand to be around you. Is that what you want?' (Chua 2011, p. 205), Chua still stands by her view that to succeed at the 'Chinese' model, 'You have to be hated sometimes by someone you love and who hopefully loves you, and there's just no letting up, no point at which it suddenly becomes easy' (Chua 2011, p. 161). This conception of the future-oriented aim of her role as Lulu's parent which guides Chua's thinking and understanding is, surely, what Noddings calls 'a manipulative mode' in which '[W]e want to change the other's behavior' – a mode which is, on Noddings' understanding of it, the opposite of a caring attitude (Noddings 1984, p. 32). Thus, along the lines of Noddings' account, Chua's behaviour as a mother can be viewed as not moral. What we want to suggest, however, is that although one could make a case for this view if one has already accepted the basic premise of Noddings' account of ethics – i.e. that '[T]he relation of natural caring [is] identified as the human condition that we, consciously or unconsciously, perceive as "good"' (Noddings 1984, p. 5) – this only captures the

realities of the parent-child relationship in a limited sense. In particular, and connectedly, it unduly dismisses as ‘not moral’ those elements of the parent-child relationship that do not live up to the ethical ideal Noddings proposes. Yet it simply does not seem to work in understanding childrearing and specifically the parent-child relationship to confine the locus of morality to the caring relationship. There are equally important moral commitments that cannot be reduced to the relationship of caring.

To start with, not all desire to change behaviour is ‘manipulative’. Parents do want, in a sense, to ‘change’ their child’s behaviour, in the sense, for example, that they want her to become a part of society. This is not necessarily meant in the sense of being able to control or predict the immediate effect of their actions and responses on their child’s behaviour, but in the more general sense of affecting the kind of person she will become. Chua’s story could be read in this way. Why, we want to ask, can this not be construed as an ethically relevant aspect of caring?

But apart from this reading of Chua’s book – which might lead to endless discussions about cultural relativism – a more serious consideration might be the following. As stated above, in Noddings’ understanding, what motivates us to be moral is a longing to maintain and preserve the caring relationship. However, it is not clear what counts as instances that maintain and preserve the caring relationship nor who gets to decide this and when. When, we want to ask, can a parent make the assessment that what she has done is effecting the maintenance and preservation of the caring relationship? When, that is, can a parent say her ‘parenting’ has been ‘successful’, in this sense? In an important and deep sense, parents do not control the ‘outcomes’ of their ‘parenting’, since children themselves also construe the meaning of these ‘outcomes’. As Levering et al. have argued,

no matter how good their [parents’] intentions or what specific opportunities they provide, it is not clear their efforts will come across in a particular way or what kind of overall feeling this will result in. Children make up their own mind about the upbringing they were offered by their parents and the influences they were exposed to. It is something they (have to) do for themselves. (Levering et al. 2009, p. 86)

But simply because there is no way of knowing whether a particular action by a parent is ultimately serving the purpose of preserving the relationship, this does not mean that any such particular action, as part of a parent’s relationship with her child, is to be construed as not moral – as Noddings would have us say.

Now, granted, what Chua did could easily be construed as a form of child abuse. And, to be sure, we are not condoning any form of child abuse – but at the same time we also want to say that it is not straightforwardly clear that what she does *is* a form of child abuse. Despite the things she does (or perhaps even thanks to these things), Chua is convinced that even the unsettling outburst in the Moscow cafe, which on her own account reduced her to tears and triggered a crisis in her confidence to continue on her chosen childrearing path, is not so bad as to call into question her assumptions about what is valuable. Although she finally gives in to Lulu’s demands to abandon her ‘intense’ violin-playing schedule and allow her to take up other activities, this is less out of a feeling that she had been in the wrong to impose her will from the outset than out of an acknowledgement that Lulu was too strong a match for her. When it

comes down to it, what upsets Chua more than any perceived or predicted damage to her relationship with her daughter is that ‘She rejected my vision of a valuable life’ (2011, p. 170). Clearly, Chua has in mind (and action) a conception of a flourishing life that is different from and in sharp contrast to ‘our’ Western concept (or at least one dominant version of it). This is not to say that Chua has more justifications (whatever these may be) for predicting the future state of her relationship with her daughter than any other parent or, indeed, for predicting what kind of person her daughter will turn out to be. But it is because Chua’s actions are informed by a complex background of evaluative judgements that any assessment of her behaviour cannot, as has predominantly been the case in the many comments and responses triggered by her book, be based on an account of the ‘effectiveness’ or otherwise of her childrearing approach. Nor can it be based on any single account of what is acceptable (moral, psychologically sane, justified on the basis of an account of particular rights, etc.) without an attempt to articulate why certain values are to be cherished and upheld and their role in a conception of a flourishing life.

A final point which we want to bring out, and which limits the usefulness of Noddings’ idea of the ethical relationship to the parent-child relationship as we understand this, is her suggestion that the caring attitude stems from a ‘natural impulse’ (Noddings 1984, p. 31). Against this we want to argue that there is no such thing as an unmediated ‘natural impulse’ and that what is natural cannot be understood apart from the web of cultural meanings in which we are always already embedded. What we want to bring out here is not the idea that impulses can have different meanings, but the idea that impulses are ‘conventional’ in the sense Stanley Cavell invokes in laying out his understanding of what Wittgenstein means to say by ‘agreement in judgements’ (see Cavell 1979). As one of us has argued elsewhere (Ramaekers 2008), being initiated into practices is not just about learning to use language, it is being *led into* the totality of agreement of judgements which make up the world for us, which ‘determine’ what is true and false, beautiful and ugly, good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate, just and unjust, green or red, etc. Wittgenstein speaks of this normativity as ‘the hardness of the soft’ (Wittgenstein 1961, 44e). By this he means to convey that what seems at the outset to be rather ‘soft’, i.e. merely human agreements, cultural and social accretions, linguistic valuations, something which we can (supposedly) oppose to the hard data of biology, of genetic destiny,² is in fact deeply constitutive of the way we see, understand and feel about the world. Wittgensteinian agreements are, we could say, embodied. As agreements they are not articulated; they show themselves in what we say and do, in how we speak and act and in how we feel. Cavell expresses this by suggesting that our human nature is culture (see Cavell 1979, pp. 110–111).

Take how one comes to feel about particular concepts such as ‘divorce’. It matters a lot for how one feels about this, whether one got to know this word and the reality it expresses in an atmosphere of reserve, secrecy, perhaps even shame and sinfulness,

²We are drawing on a passage from Sheridan Hough (1997, p. 13) here, who uses this line of argument on Nietzsche, but which we find applies equally well for Wittgenstein.

or at least with some special pejorative connotation, or alternatively whether one got to know it in a way similar to coming to know the colour 'green', or learning the concept 'round', or what the North Pole is. One's initial affective reaction is formed by these ways of initiating. Cavell, in discussing what it means to say that children learn language and what our relation to the child then is, puts this as follows, using some other examples:

When you say "I love my love" the child learns the meaning of the word "love" and what love is. *That (what you do)* will be love in the child's world; and if it is mixed with resentment and intimidation, then love is a mixture of resentment and intimidation, and when love is sought *that* will be sought. When you say, "I'll take you tomorrow, I promise", the child begins to learn what temporal durations are, and what *trust* is, and what you do will show what trust is worth. When you say "Put on your sweater", the child learns what commands are and what *authority* is, and if giving orders is something that creates anxiety for you, then authorities are anxious, authority itself uncertain. (Cavell 1979, p. 177)

Being initiated as coming to enter into a totality of agreements in judgements is acknowledging that valuations become part of us in the shape of feelings. It is coming to *feel* in a particular way and involves a process of impulses being formed and shaped.

To come back to Noddings' 'crying' example again: no matter how quickly we respond to a baby's crying, this crying will always be seen as having a particular meaning depending not only on the situation but also on the child, the social context and any number of other background factors. Noddings is right to point out that this response is not, primarily, an 'interpretation'. But it would be equally wrong to see it as an unmediated natural response.

Stadlen and the Experience of Being a Mother

Stadlen's book *What mothers do, especially when it looks like nothing* (2004) is based on the data received from many discussions and conversations Stadlen had with mothers at her weekly discussion group *Mothers talking* and also from *La leche league* meetings. The book is an exploration of the experience of being a mother on the basis of these conversations. What makes this book so interesting for our account is that Stadlen herself identifies the problem of trying to articulate the experience of being a mother as a problem of *language*: there simply do not seem to be the words to describe, in a positive way, what mothers do (especially when it looks like nothing). Stadlen thus sets herself the task of finding and articulating a rich language – 'motherly words' (Stadlen 2004, p. 21) – that captures and does justice to the experience of being a mother and to what mothers do. She explicitly refers to the problem a number of times in the course of her attempt to describe this experience as a problem of having many negative words and far too few, if any, positive words to describe what mothers do. In one instance, for example, she gives us a list of about forty words 'to describe what mothers do when they relate badly to their children' – a list 'one could probably carry on with' (Stadlen 2004, p. 18) – and

goes on to say that there are only very few words ‘to describe a mother who is relating very beneficially to her children’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 19). We do have some words here, but they do not capture, says Stadlen, what mothers *do*:

Examples are: warm, loving, wonderful, patient, understanding, kind, caring, nurturing, concerned, responsible, unselfish. Most of these words don’t indicate anything good that she might have done. They describe the state of a mother’s heart. The state of a mother’s heart is invisible – and she herself may not be conscious of it. This means that, when she does a number of motherly actions for her child, she has no word to describe particular actions. (Stadlen 2004, p. 19)

Another good example is her observation that ‘so *little* has been written about learning to comfort’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 65):

People ask mothers; “Is he sleeping through the night yet?” “Have you started him on solids yet?” “Has he got any teeth?” No one seems to ask: “Have you discovered what comforts him?” Yet the ability to sleep through the night, or to digest solid food or to grow teeth, has little to do with mothering. Babies reach these milestones when they are mature enough, whereas being able to comfort depends on a mother’s ability. (Stadlen 2004, p. 65)

The net effect of this lack of words to positively describe what mothers do (especially when it looks like nothing) is that mothers, as Stadlen says, do not see or realise that what they are doing is something really valuable. ‘[T]he words are missing’, she says, ‘that would enable a mother to convey the significance of daily events’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 87).

Throughout her book, Stadlen identifies a number of reasons why it is necessary to articulate a positive language about what mothers do (especially when it looks like nothing). First of all, it is important for the mothers themselves, i.e. for their feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. ‘How can anyone feel satisfied at the end of the day doing something as responsible as being a mother, without being able to explain to herself what she has done well? How can she discuss her day properly with other people if she can only describe her failures?’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 24). Second, we need these words, says Stadlen, in order to prepare the next generation of mothers. ‘Never has any generation prepared its girls as casually for motherhood as ours’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 32). Because the words are missing, the communication between the generations threatens to be hampered (see Stadlen 2004, p. 23). And third, having the words is crucial for showing the moral dimension of the work that mothers are doing (see Stadlen 2004, pp. 105–106). For example, ‘[W]hen the child begins to crawl’, says Stadlen, ‘he often develops a new way of checking his mother’s face before trying anything new. He looks to her for both pragmatic and moral guidelines’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 106). When the words are lacking, however, a mother may ‘not see herself as doing anything of value’ and as a consequence may ‘easily overlook this opportunity’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 106).

Take for instance going to the supermarket with your toddler. When asked to imagine or even to recall such trips to the supermarket, we are quite sure that few parents will have any difficulty in recalling a situation involving their child behaving in some way which is either annoying or embarrassing, or both. Stadlen describes a similar situation with a mother and her child in positive terms, which in fact comes down to making explicit what the mother is showing her child through her own

behaviour, ‘demonstrating specific “supermarket-behaviour”’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 83), Stadlen says:

[...] not knocking things off the shelves and not filling up the basket with everything to hand, but choosing items and paying for them. She is showing him personal values when shopping, such as calculating prices and prioritising speed, and demonstrating how she relates to check-out staff. She usually isn’t teaching as such, but sharing her world with him, and it’s very demanding. Everything takes twice as long, and she has to keep switching her attention from the adult shopping world to the child world of her little companion. (Stadlen 2004, pp. 83–84)

By drawing attention to what mothers do and explicitly expressing this, Stadlen shows that there exists this domain of valuable motherly actions that without the words to describe them would not be noticed and hence would be undervalued.

Stadlen argues that for want of any rich, positive language, mothers seem to go back to, and use, ‘older’ language, in particular that of psychoanalysis, ‘and perhaps’, Stadlen continues, ‘they do this in an attempt to upgrade their experience’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 20). The danger, however, is, Stadlen goes on to point out, that what mothering *is*, what the experience of being a mother *is*, becomes defined by the language that comes from outside it – as when an ‘expert’ says what mothers (should) do:

One difficulty is that as soon as a psychiatrist or researcher has invented a word, he then goes on to show how important it is for mothers and babies to do whatever his word describes. [...] It is they who define what the “task” is. This kind of writing turns mothering into a minefield, with “experts” to guide mothers through the danger areas, instead of mothers guiding the researchers and – most important – using their own language. Surely no mother ever invented pseudo-scientific terms like “bonding” or “attachment parenting” or “entrainment”. Mothers talk about love. (Stadlen 2004, p. 22)

Clearly, Stadlen’s focus here and her entire project resonate with our own focus and project, particularly our attempt to spell out a first-person perspective. What Stadlen very sharply puts her finger on is the danger that the practical experience of being a mother (and for our purposes, we could replace this with being a parent), for want of enough positive words to capture it, is being claimed by other words, specifically words that come from languages external to the very experience, from a third-person perspective – words that then come to define those experiences and, crucially, that then also become the criteria for the correctness of the mother’s (parent’s) actions.

A good example of such a third-person perspective and how this positions mothers in particular ways is Stadlen’s discussion of how the idea of ‘ambivalent love’ has gradually seeped into our understanding of motherly love. Stadlen traces this concept back to psychoanalysis, as part of a whole cluster of ideas which, she argues, ‘have spread and created a “climate of opinion”, which has influenced mothers for at least one generation’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 164). Stadlen’s reading of this concept, based on her empirical work with mothers and on her own experience as a mother, clearly shows that this idea of motherly ambivalence is not as valid as it sometimes appears. The concept ‘has been helpful in enabling some mothers to identify how they feel. But this does not justify attributing it to every mother’

(Stadlen 2004, p. 179). Nevertheless, says Stadlen, in the meantime ‘countless babies have started life with ambivalent mothers’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 179) not because mothers necessarily actually felt that way but because they were led to think that they ‘were *supposed* to feel angry’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 164). Narrating from her own experience, she says that ‘I felt obliged to feel anger towards my child to demonstrate that I was an up-to-date “honest” mother’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 164).

Insightful and fruitful though this may be, there are, we argue, some problems with Stadlen’s account that mark some clear differences with what we want to convey by the first-person perspective. These can be brought out by the distinction she makes between an exaggerated ‘focus on technique’ and relying on what she calls a mother’s ‘philosophy of human nature’ (Stadlen 2004, pp. 61ff). Stadlen is right in pointing out that ‘[T]he literature on crying babies tends to focus on techniques’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 61) and that more is involved in responding to these cries than just technique. She continues to point out that ‘[U]nderlying what a mother does is her philosophy of human nature’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 61) and that mothers can have a different philosophy (Stadlen 2004, p. 61). This seems to go somewhat in the direction of what we have been spelling out, i.e. that techniques and skills are not neutral devices, safely backed up by evidence, but that behind them are always values of judgement about what counts as human, as being a child, etc., and that what is lacking in current languages of ‘parenting’ is exactly addressing this backdrop of moral and evaluative judgements. Moreover, when Stadlen adds, regarding this ‘philosophy of human nature’, that a mother ‘may be hardly aware of it’ but that it nonetheless ‘affects the many quick decisions she has to make’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 61), there is some resemblance to what we argued above, in discussing Noddings, regarding our responses being not just ‘natural’ or ‘instinctual’ but, as *human* responses, always already invested with meaning, so ‘second nature’ as it were, in the sense that some kind of ‘understanding of human nature’ is inherently mixed up with these responses.

However, the resemblance is only superficial, and the sense of sameness of direction is vague at best. While acknowledging that mothers may ‘not share the same basic philosophy’ and that ‘[N]ot all mothers have a clear-cut philosophy’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 61), Stadlen makes it seem as if there is a matter of choice between technique and philosophy of human nature in a rather straightforward either/or way. The mother’s ‘basic choice’, Stadlen argues, ‘is either to see her baby as good, in which case she trusts him, or alternatively to see him as the product of evil human nature, or of original sin, which requires her to train him’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 61). By taking this view, however, Stadlen sets up a sharp opposition between technique/skill on the one hand and acting on some other kind of impulse or understanding on the other. Yet as we argued above and in Chap. 2, the first-person perspective is not intended to capture the insight that there is a uniqueness of the experience of being a parent *against* its reductive conceptualisation in terms of techniques and skills. Spelling out the ethicality of the first-person perspective is not a matter of siding with either abstract reasoning or caring, with either instrumentality or intuition. Rather, the uniqueness of the first-person perspective has to do with the realisation of the fact that it is *my* child with whom I am relating and that it is *my* child who is implicated in what I do as a parent. And within this constellation of the parent-child relationship, both considerations of, for example, instrumentality and caring, technique and

comforting, etc., can be relevant. Stadlen, in short, thus shows a wariness of instrumentality and technique similar to Noddings’.

It is essentially for this reason that we are also reluctant to follow the way in which Richard Smith (see Smith 2010) uses Stadlen in his account of parenting in order to criticise the culture of performativity that has taken over parenting today. As already discussed in Chap. 2, while we agree with his critique of the culture of what he calls ‘total parenting’, we want to reject the way in which he first of all draws a rather romanticised picture of being a mother, emphasising exactly what on Stadlen’s account makes up the distinctiveness and uniqueness of motherhood, and second, the way in which he then, in line with Stadlen, constructs a sharp opposition between technicality and instrumentality on the one hand and being a mother on the other.

Moreover, in the way Stadlen presents this issue, the message seems to be, reading between the lines, that mothers – real mothers – do not choose the path of techniques, of ‘training’ the baby, but the path that shows that the mother trusts her baby (which might be expressed by comforting, for example (see Stadlen 2004, p. 61)). Indeed, when she, quite assuredly, affirms that ‘[T]he essentials of being a mother appear to be changeless. But the world around the mother is always changing’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 83), it is hard to ignore the sense that there is something ‘natural’ to mothering, hence something ‘all’ mothers (should) do and feel. Granted, Stadlen is careful to point out that what she is articulating is not ‘instinctive knowledge’ or ‘intuitive knowledge’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 93). Instead, she prefers speaking of ‘maternal understanding’ and points out that this ‘grows slowly’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 93) in order to mark the distinction from ‘instinct’ which does not have to grow but is innate and thus immediately available. But nevertheless, the point remains, for she does not dismiss ‘intuition’ and ‘instinct’ because they are natural whereas this maternal understanding would not be natural, but simply on the grounds that they are ‘quick reactions’ and maternal understanding is not (as it grows slowly), thus not dismissing the naturalistic sense connected to her use of the phrase ‘maternal understanding’. Stadlen’s construction of mothering thus seems to suggest that there is some natural resource available to mothers. This seems to be confirmed by her suggestion that the moral dimension of the relationship between mother and child is secondary to the ‘natural’ dimension of it:

As the mother learns to communicate with her baby, another dimension of their relationship comes into focus. This is the moral relationship between the two. (Stadlen 2004, p. 101)

This ‘early stage’ of a mother’s communicating with her baby is what Stadlen calls the ‘maternal groundwork’ (Stadlen 2004, p. 101), which, thus, comes first, if not in the temporal sense, than at least in the sense of order of importance. The important implication seems to be that making moral decisions is distinct in principle from acting from maternal understanding.

This comes out most clearly when Stadlen connects this moral dimension to the notion of having a free will, as in the following extract:

There is rarely time to take stock. A mother is beset with moments of choice. They may seem so trivial that the mother’s decision looks pragmatic. It is easy to overlook the moral dimension. She herself often complains that she doesn’t feel like a person with a free will any more. How can she have choices? Surely the boot is on the other foot. Her strong-willed

baby is making all the choices. Isn't she almost tied to him, like slave to master, hurrying to his side when he needs her? Far from having choices, she has lost her old freedom to plan her day. Yet she is using her power to choose. The ultimate choice over what she does remains hers, every time. She is the stronger party. Every time her baby wants something and she provides it, she has chosen to use her adult power in a humane way. She is overlooking all the little moments of choice. (Stadlen 2004, p. 102)

And following on from this, the moral dimension is narrated in terms of what Stadlen calls weighing her child's versus her own interests or in terms of 'the complex balancing of sibling interests' (Stadlen 2004, p. 103). Stadlen gives examples from her conversations with mothers and concludes that '[T]hese examples are moral, because the mother is weighing up the best way to act' (Stadlen 2004, p. 103).

Stadlen is right, we argue, to point out that this moral dimension is a dimension of the relationship 'that is rarely discussed' (Stadlen 2004, p. 103). 'Silence turns into "nothing"', she says – hinting again at what mothers do when it looks like nothing. But what we argue for here, against Stadlen, is that the natural and the moral dimensions of the relationship cannot be distinguished as neatly as Stadlen seems to do here. What is 'natural' cannot be expressed apart from what is 'moral', as we already argued in relation to Noddings. The moral dimension is not a separate category alongside the kind of decisions made on the basis of maternal understanding. Put differently, whatever this maternal understanding is, then, it too is moral, all the way down. It may be not as conscious a decision as, for example, 'balancing of sibling interests', but acting on maternal understanding still is invested with evaluative judgements of various sorts.

Let Parents Just 'Muddle On'?

In this chapter we have devoted time to discussing some work that, at least from the outset, seemed to be in line with our project. To conclude this chapter, we want to stress that this is not just an academic discussion. Both Noddings and Ruddick, in criticising predominant accounts of morality, sketch an alternative picture of what mothering is and of what moral life is, hence also saying, or at least implying, that this is how it should be. In this chapter we have tried to show the limitations of applying their accounts to the parent-child relationship as we understand it. Granted, this could still be regarded as a niche debate within a particular area of academia. But this clearly cannot be said of Stadlen. The 2004 Piatkus edition of her book is displayed on bookshop shelves with a clear quote from the Guardian saying, 'The best book on parenting ... brilliantly insightful', and is intended for a wide audience. Throughout this chapter, alongside taking some time and space to further clarify what we mean by the first-person perspective in the parent-child relationship, we have also attempted to show that, within the critique of existing predominant languages that threaten to claim the arena of mothering/parenting, it cannot suffice to refer to or reify some natural, unperverted state in which one is to see one's child. For otherwise this constitutes a move similar to the move inherent in the scientisation

of the parent-child relationship (see especially Chap. 1), i.e. what one thus risks losing sight of is the fact that parents always already make decisions against the background of a complexity of evaluative considerations of different sorts. Stadlen, in fact, is affirming some type of ideal state of being a mother (parent) in ways quite similar to how, under the umbrella of scientific research, some ideal of parenting is presented on websites and in popular literature.

Stadlen is just one example. Furedi (2001), Bristow (2009) and Guldberg (2009) propose a return to a kind of parenting that is similar in nature to that argued for by Stadlen. In the previous chapter we already referred to Bristow, who criticises what she calls the ‘cultural turn that marks parenthood’ (2009, p. 37) – this cultural turn being marked by, among other things, parenting experts taking over childrearing from parents, by parents being increasingly seen by policy makers as the cause of and the solution to a wide range of social problems, etc. The pernicious effect of this, says Bristow, is that ‘[p]arenting is no longer seen as a relationship based on trust, affection and spontaneous interaction’, that parents no longer trust ‘their own instincts and judgement’ (Bristow 2009, p. 37). She approvingly quotes the child psychologist Tanya Byron, who conceives of childrearing as ‘the most basic and instinctive aspect of life’ (Byron, quoted in Bristow 2009, p. 27). In childrearing, parents ‘should make decisions based on their instincts and experiences’ (Bristow 2009, p. 43). Bristow is drawing on Furedi here, who in *Paranoid parenting* (2008) on a number of occasions makes it clear that in his view childrearing is a matter of trusting one’s instincts. Furedi devotes a large part of his book to showing that so-called parenting experts do not have any basis whatsoever to tell parents ‘what almost all of us know by instinct’ (Furedi 2008, p. 37). ‘The good news, the *really* good news, is that parents are no more ignorant than the experts. And since experts know so little about so many of their claims, we might as well ignore them and act on our instincts’ (Furedi 2008, p. 163). A similar claim is made by Helene Guldberg, in her *Reclaiming childhood. Freedom and play in an age of fear* (Guldberg 2009). Though she does not explicitly say that childrearing is an instinctual matter, the suggestion nonetheless seems to be there in the argument that we have to set aside expert advice on parenting and ‘let parents be parents’ (Guldberg 2009, pp. 129ff).³ And it is there as well in the claim that ‘two qualities – compassion and common sense – are continually being eroded by government policies and the burgeoning parenting industry’ (Guldberg 2009, p. 140).

What we hope our discussion in this chapter has shown is that it does not really make sense to argue for a return to such a state of parenting. It might work, undoubtedly, as a way of exposing the over-scientised expert culture in which our understanding of parenting seems to be trapped today. But it does not go far enough in developing an account of the parent-child relationship.

³For further discussion of this point, see Chap. 6.

Chapter 4

Good Enough Parenting?

Research around the notion of a “good enough” parent indicates that, contrary to popular understanding, “better” or “authoritative” parenting characterized by high levels of maturity expectation, supervision, disciplinary efforts, sensitivity to and support for a child’s needs leads to better-adjusted, more competent children: “good enough” parenting, characterized by only moderate levels of expectation, disciplinary effort and responsiveness, tends to produce, at best, “good enough” children.

(Gutman et al. 2009, p. v)

We have suggested that one of the main problems with the scientific discourse that dominates discussions of parenting is that it implies that there is a clearly defined, objectively valid end point of the parenting process and that the core of ‘parenting’ consists of forms of interaction that are causally related to achieving this. Implied in the language of this account is the idea that there is a right and a wrong way of parenting, and thus, in principle, a possibility of ‘closure’ or ‘achievability’ whereby one can be deemed to have succeeded as a parent. The alternative picture which we sketch out in this book involves a focus, instead, on the particular quality of individual parent-child relationships, on the open-endedness of the process of being a parent, and on the sense in which the aims and goals that parents have cannot be unproblematically captured in a neutral, descriptive language, as they are infused with values and inseparable from the experience of individual parents within the shifting and dynamic context of their lives. Here we will develop this account, with reference to current policy on parenting intervention, as well as to some of the critics of this policy.

Doing, Being and Closure

It is important to note here that emphasising the aspects of the parent-child relationship that we have been addressing here, in contrast to the scientific account, is not a question of positing a kind of process-oriented rather than goal-oriented account of the parent-child relationship; rather, it is about showing the impossibility

of identifying any single point, from outside the relationship, at which one can acknowledge that it has ‘worked’. Although it is instructive to contrast the distinction between ‘parenting’ as a verb which connotes action and *doing* with the notion of ‘*being* a parent’, which brings out the relational and non-task-specific aspects of the term, we are wary of approaches which posit a dichotomy between instrumental and existential or relational attitudes. It is this dichotomy which, we believe, leads to the flaws identified in the positions discussed in Chap. 3.

Parents, as we have discussed, have, and cannot help but have, a somewhat instrumental attitude towards their children, to the extent that part of the experience of being a parent is to want one’s child to be and do certain things. As Sara Ruddick puts it, ‘Even before a baby is born, a mother is likely to daydream about the kind of person her child will become’ (Ruddick 1990, p. 105). For care theorists, this kind of thinking represents a form of paternalism that, while they acknowledge its role, they find somewhat distasteful and in tension with the essentially responsive and receptive ethical stance of caring (see Goodman 2008, p. 237). As Goodman notes, their solution to this perceived tension is to argue that parental assessments of needs are acceptable if reflected through the prism of attentive love. But as Goodman comments on Ruddick’s above-quoted remark, ‘such dreams are not irrelevant to parenting; they spur the process’ (Goodman 2008, p. 237). We want to suggest, on the basis of our analysis of the current scientisation of parenting, that Goodman’s account can be taken further. Goodman identifies a problem within care theory that has to do with the tension between the demands on the parent to satisfy the child’s needs and the demand to shape them, and suggests a conception of parenting which resolves this tension by

blending the “receptive-intuitive” and “objective-analytic” [Held 2006b] as it does connectedness and separateness. Her [the mother’s] empathy motivates while her rationality evaluates. Parents are not engrossed by the child, they do not abandon themselves to the child’s needs; sympathy is modulated by reflection. Once this fusion is recognized, the artificial choices between loyalty and impartiality, emotion and rationality, relationship over individuality, and context over rules are diminished if not eliminated. (Goodman 2008, p. 246)

We agree, to an extent, that these tensions are at the heart of what it means to be a parent. Yet as we have begun to suggest, we see them not as something to be resolved, either in theoretical analysis or through prescriptive recipes for good parenting, but rather as something that is lived with and explored by individual parents in the daily experience of being a parent. Undoubtedly, this experience will at times be difficult and frustrating and will be so partly because of this inherent tension: the 18-month-old baby screaming in the supermarket aisle presents a problem not just because the parent wants to effectively stop the screaming but because the parent may want all sorts of other, possibly conflicting things – she may want the child to be a certain way and may want to be a certain kind of parent; she may want her relationship with the child to be a certain kind of relationship; she may want her child not to be the kind of child who has tantrums whenever she is unhappy or frustrated; she may want her to be able to ask for what she wants without screaming; she may want to feel in control; she may want to be able to calm her child down

without feeling she is controlling her and repressing her individuality; she may want her child to be assertive; she may want her to be considerate; she may want to be able to model sensitive, empathic behaviour; she may want to be able to model assertiveness; she may want to be thought of as a good mother; she may want reassurance that the child loves her;.... The list is, quite literally, endless, and not necessarily consciously articulated. Any of these desires and perceptions, or a combination of them, could be going through any parent's mind at any given moment with their child, who is behaving in a way that demands a response. To explore them, to identify what ideas, values and motivations are behind them, which of them are in tension with others, which seem more important to the parent and why, requires an attention to the meaning of the terms in which we describe and think about what we do with and for our children. This kind of thinking, though, cannot be done independently or in advance of the relational experience of particular moments of parent-child interaction. And it is precisely this kind of practical reflection and response that is blocked, we argue, by the dominance of the scientific language. In posing as a neutral and independently valid account of what children need or which developmental goals are most important, without acknowledging that these goals reflect evaluative choices, the science of parenting obscures the point that all aspects of the process in question are infused with values and interpretation. What the scientific account asks parents to do, in other words, is to see their child as 'a child' and thus to bracket out the specific commitments and understandings they have about how they want to be as a person in their relationship with their individual child. To make a choice as a parent about what to do, or what not to do, in any given situation with one's child, indeed to describe the situation in a certain way as a particular kind of situation demanding a particular kind of response, is to make a human choice, an ethical choice. The scientific account of parenting frames discussion of 'good parenting' in terms of the causal relationship between certain parenting behaviours and certain 'outcomes' for children. But this is deeply problematic not only because, as Kagan has warned us, and as critics such as Furedi (2001) reinforce, citing his account, this rests largely on 'the myth of parental determinism', but also because it assumes that there is a logical point from where we can assess whether parenting has been successful or not, and a logical line we can draw around certain parts of our experience as parents that we can then describe as causally linked to such a point. The issue here is not a simplistic (and obviously false) rejection of the claim that there is any causal link between parental behaviour and child development. The point, rather, is that parents, like children, are agents acting in a social world infused with meaning, and that there is no self-evident way in which a particular part of their complex and infinitely varied interaction can be carved off from the rest and assigned moral significance from the outside. There is no simple sense, in other words, in which to capture this causality and reduce its inherent complexity.

In David Grossman's novel, *To the end of the land* (Grossman 2010), Ora, a middle-aged mother of two sons, is reflecting back on her life and her children's childhood, telling and retelling the story of her 21-year-old son, now serving in the army, in a kind of magical attempt to preserve him. At one point, she pauses in her

telling, struck by the force and the almost terrifying wonder that she expresses in the following words: ‘Thousands of moments and hours and days, millions of deeds, countless actions and attempts and mistakes and words and thoughts, all to make one person in the world...’ (Grossman 2010, p. 454). Part of what the scientific account does, it seems, is to organise and make sense of this infinite, awe-inspiring reality, telling us which actions matter most, which mistakes we cannot afford to make; and what kind of person we will make if we do the right deeds and use the right words. The consequence of this process, however, is a loss of meaning. The contrast we want to draw out here, then, is not so much between ‘process’ and ‘outcome’, as between perspectives which offer us closure and pre-defined assessments of either the process or the outcome, and perspectives which acknowledge their intrinsic open-endedness and multiplicity of meaning. One obvious way in which a great deal of policy and practitioner guidelines based on scientific research on parenting offers a kind of artificial closure on the process of parenting is through the use of the term ‘parenting styles’. We discuss this here with reference to the above points.

Parenting Styles

The literature on parenting styles is too vast to cover comprehensively here, but the basic findings of the original research by Diana Baumrind are now so ubiquitous as to have become almost part of our everyday vocabulary. The prototypes of the parenting styles referred to were first identified by Baumrind (see 1966, 1967), and their description has changed little since her original work. Some of the relevant literature cites three styles: ‘authoritarian, authoritative and permissive (or indulgent)’, since the fourth category later identified by Baumrind, ‘neglectful’ parenting, is, arguably, not a ‘style’ but an indication of failure on the part of parents to adequately care for their children. Although much of the discussion in Chap. 1 on the methodological problems with psychological research of this type, and the normative assumptions behind the research agenda, is highly relevant to this discussion (see, e.g. the discussion of the dyadic structure of parent-child interaction; unarticulated assumptions about what kinds of behaviour are valued, etc.), what we want to draw attention to here is the way in which this research has been taken up and presented in the context of policy and popular advice on ‘good parenting’, especially in relation to the above points about closure. What we are referring to is the effect on how we think about parent-child relationships, and how parents think about their own relationships, of a language that implies a kind of closure regarding what aspects of our life with our children constitute a ‘parenting style’ and how this will affect the kind of person our child will become.

A typical example of the way parenting styles are presented in this context can be found on the website: Parentingstyles.co.uk. Although the homepage of the website displays the tagline: ‘Expert Advice on the Many Styles of Parenting’,

it turns out that in fact there are not that ‘many’ styles of parenting at all but, so the website tells us, precisely four:

Parenting styles fall into the following categories:
Authoritarian, Authoritative, Permissive, Neglectful or uninvolved

And, in yet another paradoxical move, although we are told that ‘[T]he majority of parents adopt a number of parenting styles and methods, preferring to look at their child as an individual rather than following a definite style of bringing up their children that they may have read about’, we are not only left in no doubt as to which ‘style’ is best, but also told that it is possible to identify one’s style. Indeed, it is advisable to do so, using the handy quiz (versions of which appear in countless magazines, handbooks and other websites¹). As the website explains:

A good way to start to look at your parenting skills is to establish your parenting style because this will give you a good indication of what is working and what clearly is not, and from then on you can make some adjustments and changes that could actually make a big difference to the way your child responds to you.

There is something very odd about the logic of this claim. Leaving aside the important background point that ‘what is working’ does not make much sense without some contextual account of what it is working *at*, it is not at all clear why having identified one’s parenting style will help one to make an assessment of whether or not a particular intervention is working. If one shouts at one’s toddler to stop throwing the shampoo bottles into the toilet and she stops doing it, then, surely, in a very basic sense, this parental intervention has ‘worked’. What does it add to this account to describe the shouting as representative of an ‘authoritarian’ or ‘authoritative’ style? If any reader of this passage is confused, though, the answers to the confusion are not to be found by pondering the meaning of this statement, but by filling in the picture provided by the parenting styles literature, where the ‘best style’ is clearly that which produces the right kind of child. In the remaining sections of the website, not only is each style clearly defined and identified with specific types of parental behaviour but it is matched on a one-to-one causal basis with a clearly defined outcome, as in the following extracts:

An authoritarian parent tries to control a child’s behaviour and insists that they have complete respect for authority, they are not very flexible in their approach to parenting and will sometimes resort to smacking or hitting a child if they do not behave. They often display anger and shout at their children. [...]

Children who are subjected to authoritarian parenting rarely learn to think for themselves and struggle to understand why their parents behave the way they do. Authoritarian parenting is outdated and not suited to modern life and society, it is not considered to be an appropriate parenting style for today’s family. [...]

¹See, for example <http://www.childrenoday.com/resources/articles/parent.htm>, <http://psychology.about.com/od/developmentalpsychology/a/parenting-style.htm>, <http://www.parentstoolshop.com/HTML/quiz.htm>.

[...] A permissive parent is extremely laid back and relaxed about their child's behaviour and does not insist on boundaries or even a particular standard of behaviour, preferring to keep everyone happy rather than using any form of discipline or authority. Permissive parenting is at the other end of the spectrum from the authoritarian parenting style, and basically allows children to grow up in an environment of extreme freedom and flexibility.

[...] While authoritarian parents rule their children with a rod of iron, permissive parenting styles allow children to have a huge amount of input into how the family home and environment develops, and they are seldom called upon to help or get involved with any chores or domestic responsibilities, leaving any jobs or duties firmly in the hands of the parents.

This is the parents' choice and they feel comfortable and secure in the knowledge that they are providing a firm foundation on which their children can grow and develop. They do not feel that being involved in such mundane activities, or having any level of responsibility is important to the way that children are raised.

[...] A childhood without any boundaries or responsibility can be as damaging as one with too many, and permissive parenting can result in children who struggle with environments where boundaries have to exist, such as school and the workplace. Children who have been raised in a permissive parenting style are often creative and successful academically, and can be sociable but can also find that problems will exist within their social circles as they do not always understand or respond well to mainstream behaviour—something that everyone else is used to. Permissive parenting allows children to have their own way over almost anything and it is for this reason that children may struggle at school.

[...] Assertive Democratic parents do not allow the large amount of freedom that permissive parents deem to be acceptable, and neither do they adopt the rather old-fashioned and outdated approach of the authoritarian parent. Instead, they prefer to look at each child as an individual and allow them the room and opportunities to grow and develop. [...] Assertive Democratic or Authoritative parents always keep a close eye on their children's behaviour and try to make sure that their advice to their children is consistent. [...] Assertive Democratic Parenting Style² is also often known and referred to by experts as the Authoritative parenting style. Assertive Democratic parenting produces children who are generally well balanced and able to cope with situations well. It is a parenting style that is adopted by many parents as it is a reasonable way for parents to manage expectations and encourage and reward good, positive behaviour. [...] Children have an interest and curiosity in life in general, and tend to do well at school. They have a varied and secure social life and an ability to communicate at all levels, whilst also being very aware of social and behavioural boundaries and the consequences of their actions.

(<http://www.parentingstyles.co.uk/parenting-styles-overview-category.html>, retrieved April, 2011)

So while the rhetoric on some of the website talks of 'finding the style that is right for you' and a 'combination of styles', the descriptions leave one in little doubt as to which is the right choice. And even if one does, as a parent, want to exercise one's freedom of choice, this appears to be something like a multiple-choice problem – the answers are already there, and one has to simply weigh up the available alternatives: Do you want your children to 'grow up in an environment of extreme freedom and flexibility'? If Yes, go to no. 3: Do you mind that your child may struggle at school? If No, then permissive parenting may be the right choice for you...

²See the discussion in Chap. 1 of the use of different descriptions of this particular parenting style.

Once one gets to the level of current policy on parenting support and intervention, there is even less lip service paid to the idea that parents have a variety of styles and that different styles may suit different parents. The report of The Good Childhood Inquiry (Layard and Dunn 2009), for example, tells us in no uncertain terms that ‘some parenting styles are more positive and successful than others: Researchers have studied the effects of each style of parenting upon the way in which children develop. They agree that the style of parenting that is loving and yet firm – now known in the jargon as authoritative – is the most effective in terms of children’s outcomes and well-being’ (Layard and Dunn 2009, pp. 16-17); and the recent report to the UK government by Frank Field, *The foundation years*, bemoans the retreat from the ‘tough love’ style of parenting which, ‘research shows is the style most beneficial to the child’s emotional and intellectual development’ (Field 2010, p. 18) (although interestingly, this statement seems to be based on a reference to only one recent piece of academic research: O’Connor and Scott’s report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Parenting and outcomes for children* (O’Connor and Scott 2007), the conclusions and recommendations of which are actually far more nuanced than Field suggests, as reflected for example in the statement that ‘differences in child temperament, among other factors, demonstrate that a “one parenting-style-fits-all” approach is not optimal’ (O’Connor and Scott 2007, p. 29)).

We have already discussed, in Chap. 1, some of the problems with positing an ‘optimal’ or ‘best’ outcome for children without articulating or defending the moral and social context in which it is valued, as well as the problems associated with the implied deterministic relationships between parental behaviour and ‘outcomes’. The problem we want to emphasise here is that the infinite number of moments and the complexity of the experience of being a parent – the ‘thousands of moments and hours and days, millions of deeds, countless actions and attempts and mistakes and words and thoughts’ – do not fit neatly into any pre-existing account of parenting. Most descriptions of parenting styles, for example, focus on specific incidents to do with disruptive behaviour, bedtime, mealtimes or violence in the playground. These incidents, like multiple-choice problems, come pre-packaged and neatly delineated. The ‘test’ to identify one’s parenting style, on the above-mentioned website, is typical:

1. If your child hits another child in the playground, how do you react? (a) Get really angry and tell the other child to hit your child back? (b) Ignore both of the children and just let them get on with it? (c) Make it clear to your child that hitting is not acceptable behaviour, make sure they apologise and if it happens again remove a privilege?
2. Your child and some friends have made a huge mess in his bedroom but now want to go outside and play. Do you: (a) Shout at them and make them clear it up? (b) Just let them go and play and deal with the mess yourself? (c) Invent a game that involves clearing up and get involved yourself?
3. One of your children is trying hard to get out of going to bed by claiming to be hungry. Do you: (a) Get cross and make her go to bed, even if she is hungry? (b) Let her have whatever she wants to eat? (c) Choose a healthy snack for her to have but make it clear that she should have eaten more at supper time?

4. If your children have temper tantrums, do you: (a) Get cross and send them to their bedrooms? (b) Give in and let them do whatever they like because it's easier that way? (c) Stand your ground but try and make them understand that there are better ways to express how they are feeling?
5. If one of your children wakes you in the night because they are having a bad dream, do you: (a) Get angry because they have woken you up? (b) Let them sleep wherever they like? (c) Make sure they are OK and stay with them until they fall asleep?

As illustrated by the example described above, of the mother in the supermarket with the screaming toddler, it is highly problematic to believe that one can describe a 'parenting' situation and identify the possible responses to it independently of any contextual understanding of the meaning of the situation for the individual parent and child. But some of the literature on parenting styles seems to have become so detached from any recognition of the complexity of the actual experience of real parents that it suggests that one can identify one's parenting style without any reference to parent-child relationships at all, purely by answering questions about how one 'deals with issues', as in the following example from the popular iVillage website³:

What's your parenting style?

By analysing how you deal with issues, we can ascertain what your parenting style is – and how effective it will be. Take this quiz to assess your parenting technique.

Sample questions include:

One of my primary weaknesses is:

I get sidetracked too easily.

I'm uncomfortable confronting others.

I can be too demanding.

I'm too careful or cautious at times.

Whenever I'm stuck in morning traffic:

I rarely notice that there is traffic, since I'm quite a patient person.

I try not to get too exasperated and instead occupy my time by chatting with my passengers or by making a phone call.

My blood starts boiling, and I am quick to use the horn to get traffic moving again.

I use the time for introspection or to organize my day in my mind, even if I have passengers.

Obviously, this is a somewhat bizarre example. But even if we set aside examples of this kind and focus instead on the majority of popular literature on parenting styles, and indeed on the serious academic research that employs them as descriptive categories for parental behaviour, there is a serious problem, as suggested above, in narrowly defining parenting as being about dealing with well-defined moments or events like tantrums, bedtime or inter-sibling rivalry. So much of what we do as parents has nothing to do with these moments. So much of what we do, indeed, is not a matter of acting at all, but of thinking, wondering, worrying, deliberating, interpreting and re-interpreting.

³<http://www.ivillage.co.uk/whats-your-parenting-style/121528#ixzz19nggS7Ys>, retrieved December 2010.

Consider, for example, the following extract from the weekly Family section of the *Guardian*, where Louisa Dillner, a columnist who became pregnant with her fifth child at the age of 47, writes a regular column on her experiences, called ‘A New Mum Again – at 48!’:

It’s the start of the school holidays and I thought I’d wake up feeling fabulously happy. I’m still on maternity leave and, for the first time ever, have the summer holiday off. No juggling childcare and – for this limited period only – no guilt. Yippee. Except that I don’t feel deliriously happy. I feel sad in the pit of my stomach. I do a mental once over of the children, to see if it’s anything to do with them. A friend of mine has a saying I often quote: “You’re only ever as happy as your least happy child.”

So who is my least happy child and how unhappy are they? Baby Flora seems happy enough. Before she was born, I worried that people would think I was her granny. The only case of mistaken identity so far seems to be that everyone thinks Flora is a boy. Even in her pink swimming costume people ask, “How old is he?”

“He’s nearly six months,” I say, because people get too embarrassed if I correct them. Her sisters are outraged. “No wonder some baby girls have their ears pierced,” Lydia, who’s eight, tells me. “Maybe we could put a bow in her hair.”

But Flora doesn’t seem upset. She’s growing chubby, sausage-like thighs and smiles like a Disney baby, albeit a boy one. The only time she looks unhappy is when she has nothing in her mouth.

Could it be Lydia? Yesterday, I dropped her off at a summer camp. When she signed up eight months ago, it seemed like a good idea to her, especially as it meant she needed a mobile phone to keep in touch. However, on the morning she is going, her phone doesn’t work. She’s locked herself out of it because, guess what, at eight you aren’t really old enough to have a mobile phone. She has to borrow her granny’s mobile phone, which is nearly as old as granny.

“I can’t take this,” she says. “Other children will have BlackBerrys.”

Then she’s overtired because school has only just finished.

“Just try it,” I say. “If you don’t like it I can always come and get you.”

Which are exactly the words the camp brochure says you shouldn’t use.

But she is only eight (nine in a week’s time) and six nights is a long time. Was I mad? What was I thinking of? Lydia falls asleep in the car and when we arrive we find our destination is an incredibly grand public school. She perks up immediately. “I feel like royalty,” she says.

That evening, she phones to say she has made three friends and spent a third of her week’s money in the tuck shop, so can I send some more. “I forgot to pack soap and shampoo,” I tell her.

“That’s OK, I don’t need to wash,” she replies.

“I have to go and watch a film with my friends now,” she says, hanging up. I miss her so much that I watch a DVD of one of her school productions.

I don’t think my eldest children, Sam and Maddy, are unhappy. Sam doesn’t have a job, but that only makes his family miserable, and Maddy is home from university and meeting friends all the time.

Tilly, bang in the middle of all of them, could be my unhappy child, as having just finished her last year at primary school, she already misses her friends.

“How do you feel?” I ask her, hugging her so tightly that she wriggles to get free.

“Sad,” she says. “I don’t like change.”

Which is probably the cause of my sadness too, I realise. “I want you to have a wonderful summer,” I say.

“Well then, can you find my Nintendo charger for me?” she asks.

(Louisa Dillner, Copyright Guardian News & Media Ltd 2010, reproduced by permission)

What this passage illustrates is how so much of the experience of being a parent is not actually about 'parenting' at all, if parenting is identified with exhibiting certain behaviour that fits in to a particular 'style'. But as noted above, the contrast we want to draw out here is not that between 'doing' and 'being' but between determinacy and open-endedness. It is not that instrumental aims do not come into the experience of being a parent or that these should be seen, as Noddings suggests, as either ethically or ontologically secondary to the prior relational experience. It is, rather, that the hopes, aspirations and aims we have as parents – the ideas we have about how we would like our children to be today, tomorrow or at some indefinable time in the future – do not appear as fixed and desirable end points associated with potential approaches which, once identified and followed, can be reliably achieved; rather they confront us in varied, unpredictable and subtly changing forms as a constitutive part of the experience of living as a human being who also happens to be the parent of another human being. In reflecting on what she wants for her children and how she feels about her experience as a parent, Dillner is not trying to find a solution; the question is not 'What can I do to make my child happy?' but 'What does it mean to say that an individual child is not happy?', 'How do I live with the concern for, the pain about, my children's unhappiness?', 'How do I accommodate this with my other concerns about the complex dynamics of our family life?', and so on. These are intrinsically open-ended questions. They also, as already mentioned above, hint at a basic flaw in the instrumental account of parenting: there is no straightforward, clearly-defined point at which we can step back and assess the success or otherwise of our parenting. Even assuming that we can agree that what we want is happy children, and even assuming that we can agree on what that actually means – at what point can we ever say we have achieved it? Children, like all of us, seem to be happy sometimes and miserable at others. What makes them happy is never fully within their, or our, control. How, then, can we ever say that our parenting has been 'successful'? In one sense, as discussed in Chap. 2, the question is meaningless because there is no obvious 'end' to parenting. Is it when the child reaches legal adulthood? When she leaves home? The point is not that parents need answers to these questions; the point is, rather, that being a parent means constantly asking such questions; asking, indeed, an infinite variety of similar questions that one could not possibly predict in advance; questions that themselves are thrown up by and derive their meaning from the experience of being a parent; and in asking them, parents are also asking questions about their own life: its meaning, its value, and its challenges. Yet in the quest for 'scientific' parenting, this form of questioning is shut down; it is not just the answers but the questions that are given to us in advance. The instrumentalism implicit in the scientific account of parenting, akin to that of the science of happiness, sees parents as responsible for creating a certain kind of child. There is no room, in this discussion, for questions of meaning and value, for ambiguity and uncertainty.

If, as we suggest, we can never be a hundred percent sure of how our behaviour will have an effect on our children, and if there is no single clearly defined point or criterion within the trajectory of the parent-child relationship that enables us to say

definitively that our parenting has ‘worked’ or been successful, then perhaps it is not possible to offer a definitive judgement of ‘good parenting’. But if we acknowledge that we can’t all be good, let alone perfect, parents, can we, nevertheless, be ‘good enough parents’, and what would this mean?

The Good Enough Parent

The notion of ‘good enough parenting’ is associated primarily with the work of Donald Winnicott and his concept of ‘the good enough mother’, and is thus firmly situated within the psychoanalytical tradition. Winnicott made much of the point that excessive intervention on the part of ‘experts’ in the everyday interactions between parents and their children would be ultimately damaging by undermining the self-confidence of parents, and warned against the typically patronising attitudes of health-care professionals who ‘are often so impressed with the ignorance and stupidity of some of the parents that they fail to allow for the wisdom of others’ (Winnicott, quoted in Furedi 2001, p. 170), and it is this aspect of his work that is referred to approvingly by critics of state intervention in family life such as Frank Furedi, who regard any such intervention as suspicious by definition. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that Winnicott was saying nothing more than that parents always know best what to do with their children, and so should simply be left alone to get on with it – that parenting is, as Furedi puts it, ‘not the business of the state’ (Furedi 2001, p. 181). Nor was he merely pointing out (although he did this too) that most parents do a decent job of bringing up their children and so parenting support and intervention, when employed, should only be done so in extreme cases of failure to care for children. This is the aspect of Winnicott’s work referred to by some researchers who explicitly cite him as a source for their use of the term ‘good enough’ in policy contexts, as in Hoghugh and Speight’s much referenced 1998 article, *Good enough parenting for all children – a strategy for a healthier society*, where the authors interpret the notion as follows: ‘it is unhelpful and unrealistic to demand perfection of parents, and to do so undermines the efforts of the vast majority of parents who are in all practical respects “good enough” to meet their children’s needs’ (Hoghugh and Speight 1998, p. 293).

In fact, Winnicott’s definition of the ‘good enough mother’ was very specific and central to his psychoanalytic understanding of human emotional development: ‘The good-enough mother [...] starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant’s needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant’s growing ability to deal with her failure’ (Winnicott 1953, p. 7). Key to grasping this account is Winnicott’s notion of the ‘psychic space’ between mother and infant, which also serves as an important analogy for the space between the patient and therapist in the psychoanalytic relationship. This space represents a ‘holding environment’ within which the infant gradually develops into an autonomous self. Whereas the ‘perfect’ mother who

immediately satisfies all the infant's needs is actually, on this view, damaging to the infant's development, leading to 'false self disorders', the 'good-enough mother' understands intuitively how to gradually increase the time lag between the infant's demands and their satisfaction. Through this 'graduated failure of adaptation', the good enough mother, while embodying a warm and loving attitude and 'holding' the baby's rage and other emotions, also, in her failure to satisfy the infant need's immediately, induces the latter to compensate for the temporary deprivation by mental activity and by understanding. Thus, the infant learns to tolerate for increasingly longer periods both his ego needs and instinctual tensions (Winnicott 1977, p. 246).

There are certainly affinities between the approach reflected in Winnicott's work and our own emphasis on the open-endedness of the parent-child relationship and the distortions involved in positing supposedly objective, external criteria for success or failure in parenting. Indeed, the kind of philosophical work discussed in Chap. 2, with its Aristotelian emphasis on practices and internal goods and its rejection of technicist accounts of rationality, seems to have an explicit resonance in Winnicott's remark that mothers 'have to learn how to be motherly by experience' (Winnicott 1964, p. 49) and in his often-repeated, albeit slightly paradoxical, insistence, in his books addressed to mothers, that 'I am not going to be telling you what to do' (Winnicott 1964, p. 15). We should be under no illusions, though, that the work of Winnicott and others of his generation was free of the kind of causal logic of developmental psychology that we have identified in the dominant accounts of parenting in our contemporary context. Winnicott states clearly, in his classic *The child, the family and the outside world*, that 'the basis of the whole of infant health is laid down in early childhood and in infancy' (Winnicott 1964, p. 151), and we cannot ignore the fact that he implicitly subscribed to a predefined model of optimal human development and mental health, which in turn was informed by the framework of psychoanalytic theory.

It is worth, though, drawing attention to some aspects of Winnicott's language that seem to be in stark contrast to the tidy language of closure that characterises the scientific account described above. First, his statement, 'There is no such thing as a baby' (Winnicott 1964, p. 88), reminds us of the important point that who children are and how they develop cannot be conceptualised outside the relational context. Second, Winnicott's attention to the 'ordinary' and his rather vague, often poetic and metaphorical attempts to convey the meaning and importance of certain moments within the everyday experience of mother-child interaction lend themselves to the conceptualisation of parenting as an inherently human and ethical endeavour more easily than the scientific account described above. Take, for example, Winnicott's description of the mother who should be 'able to find her infant and to enable her infant to find her' (Winnicott 1964, p. 107). Connectedly, Winnicott's detailed descriptions of what happens in a good experience of breast feeding, comforting a sleeping infant or sibling interaction and his insistence on dwelling on these moments themselves rather than conceptualising them as tasks and offering a general explanation of the developmental consequences for the child if they are performed well or badly, illustrate the points we have made here about what it means

to attend to the everyday experience of parents and the quality of this experience, rather than to pre-defined goals and correlations between outcomes and definitions of parental behaviour over time.

For an account that takes this idea even further, one has to look to the work of Bruno Bettelheim, who, in explicitly adapting and extending Winnicott's notion of 'the good enough mother', offered an account that, in his book by this name, clearly insists that 'a good enough parent' is not judged by outcomes, nor by mastery of a set of skills, but by a particular way of doing things. Bettelheim argues, as Christine Hardyment puts it 'that parenthood is an art accessible to any interested human being, not a skill learnt by listening to child-rearing experts' (Hardyment 2007, p. 360). He places a great deal of emphasis on the quality of the individual relationship between the parent and their child. Like Winnicott, though, his understanding of what is important in the quality of this relationship is informed by the psychoanalytic tradition. Specifically, it is in recalling experiences in our own childhood and grasping, indeed reliving, their emotional significance, that we can respond appropriately to our own children's anger, pain or other difficulties:

One should not attempt to understand one's child independently from oneself. If we make a serious effort at understanding ourselves in the context of a given situation, trying to see how we have contributed to it – willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously – then our view of the matter is nearly always altered, as is our manner of handling it. (From *A Good Enough Parent* by Bruno Bettelheim, copyright 1987 by Bruno Bettelheim. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc., pp. 6–7)

Bettelheim's emphasis, here and elsewhere in the book, is on the process and the quality of parent-child interaction, rather than its results: 'there is no clearly understood and freely accepted agreement on what forms or decides the desirable outcome in child-parent relationships' (Hardyment 2007, p. 5). But the crucial aspect of Bettelheim's account that resonates with the account we have been developing here and our critique of the scientific language of parenting is expressed in his Introduction to the book, where he explains:

My title suggests that in order to raise a child well one ought not to try to be a perfect parent, as much as one should not expect one's child to be, or to become, a perfect individual. Perfection is not within the grasp of ordinary human beings. Efforts to attain it typically interfere with that lenient response to the imperfections of others, including those of one's child, which alone make good relations possible [...]. But it is quite possible to be a good enough parent – that is, a parent who raises his child well. To achieve this, the mistakes we make in rearing our child – errors often made just because of the intensity of our emotional involvement with our child – must be more than compensated for by the many instances in which we do right by our child. (Bettelheim 1987, p. xi)

It is precisely this warning against perfection which seems to have been forgotten in current scientific accounts of good parenting. Indeed, in a bizarre twist of theoretical language, the very term 'good enough parenting' has recently been stripped of its anti-perfectionist meaning and ethical context and redefined within the policy discourse as simply another style of parenting – one that, it is clearly implied, was naive at best and can now be thankfully discarded in favour of more scientifically rigorous 'evidence-based' approaches.

Here, again, is the passage which we quoted at the beginning of this chapter:

Research around the notion of a “good enough” parent indicates that, contrary to popular understanding, “better” or “authoritative” parenting characterized by high levels of maturity expectation, supervision, disciplinary efforts, sensitivity to and support for a child’s needs leads to better-adjusted, more competent children: “good enough” parenting, characterized by only moderate levels of expectation, disciplinary effort and responsiveness, tends to produce, at best, “good enough” children. (Gutman et al. 2009, p. v)

There is, it seems, no getting away from the idea that being a parent is essentially about producing a certain kind of child, and being a good parent is about producing the right kind of child: a good child, not merely a ‘good enough child’. Of course, there is nothing new about the suggestion that parents direct their intervention with children towards creating a certain kind of child. As Rima Apple documents (Apple 2006, p. 166), the late twentieth century saw a shift in the breadth and focus of centuries of scientific advice to mothers, in that ‘interest in expert advice on child care moved from a focus on physical care and physical health to psychological care and questions of behaviour’ (Apple 2006, p. 166). But the models of good enough parenting and the associated outcomes seem to have now become far more explicit and definitively articulated (the sub-title of Sunderland’s (2006) *The science of parenting*, for example, is ‘how today’s brain research can help you raise happy, emotionally balanced children’). And there is, is there not, something chilling about the phrase ‘good enough children’? We turn now to a further exploration of this shift away from Bettelheim’s insights, in the process of which we will look more closely at the context in which we understand what it says – and what it leaves unsaid – about the experience of being a parent.

The Pursuit of Perfection

We have already discussed, in Chap. 1, the narrowness of the scientific account which assumes a causal, deterministic model into which all aspects of parent-child relationships are to be fitted and the restrictive effect of this language on how we think about parents and how parents think about themselves. What the above quote makes clear – and it is symptomatic of much policy discourse – is that this language is linked to a broader cultural obsession with achieving complete mental health, flourishing or happiness. The positive psychology industry tells us that we have no reason, no excuse, to be miserable. If we know, as Richard Layard tells us, referring approvingly to positive psychology, that ‘happiness is an objective dimension of all our experience. And it can be measured’ (Layard 2005, p. 224), and furthermore that ‘we can train ourselves in the skills of being happy’ (Layard 2005, p. 189), it is only a small logical step from this insight to the view that it would be an abrogation of our duties as parents not to apply this knowledge not just to ourselves but to our children. Indeed, this is the message of a great deal of work on scientific parenting. Writers like Gerhardt and Sunderland often start by describing the growing levels of clinical depression amongst adults and children in our society, before going on

to reassure us that new research on parenting styles, brain science or forms of positive thinking can rid us of this: as Sunderland puts it, '[W]e now know that millions of parent-child sculpting moments in childhood can set up systems and chemistries that will enable children to have a deeply enriching life, unblighted by the sorts of emotional anguish described above' [i.e. depression, anxiety and anger] (Sunderland 2006, p. 9).

Martha Nussbaum (2008) has expressed the concern that behind this contemporary cultural narrative lies a form of hubris that, as she points out, is misleadingly diagnosed by positive psychologists as a surplus of anxiety that can be addressed – indeed resolved – by public policy and education for positive psychology, teaching individuals the skills of happiness. The same hubris – the illusion that we can eliminate human suffering and misery – is, perhaps, also behind the aspiration to be the right kind of parent: unable to face the prospect of grieving, anxious, unhappy children, we are only too glad of prescriptions for how to raise happy, mentally healthy ones. Nussbaum's own work on ethics offers an articulation of an Aristotelian view of human flourishing which stands as an antidote to the 'already deep tendency in us towards shame at the messy, unclear stuff of which our humanity is made' (Nussbaum 2001, p. 260). In doing so, it lends philosophical support to the view articulated here that luck and contingency are an inevitable part of childrearing, as of any other aspect of human attempts to live well. This chimes in with the warnings articulated by Jerome Kagan and Frank Furedi about the 'myth of infant determinism'. We can never determine exactly how our children will turn out, and so there can never be a definitive sense in which we can say that our parenting has 'succeeded'. Yet confronting this reality is surely anxiety-inducing, at the best of times, and in a climate of uncertainty and rapid change, it must be reassuring to be told that, as the Triple P website declares: 'parenting now comes with an instruction manual' (<http://www8.triplep.net/>). Indeed, the very aspiration to provide the kind of 'parenting classes' and information that will prepare parents to bring up their children in the best way possible can be seen as symptomatic of the same aspiration for closure and 'reachability' discussed above. The following recommendation of the report of the Good Childhood Inquiry (Layard and Dunn 2009) is typical of this kind of language: 'Before the child is born (especially the first child) the parents should be *fully informed* of what is involved in bringing up the child; the physical and emotional care of the child and the impact on their own relationship' (Layard and Dunn 2009, p. 155, our italics). As our above discussion illustrates, the idea that there can be anything approaching 'full' information here is not only illusory but significantly distorts our understanding of what it means to be a parent.

When 'Good Enough' Is Not Good Enough

We will discuss the broader aspects of this cultural context and the anxiety it is assumed to induce in greater depth in Chap. 6. For the present discussion, though, we want to look more closely at the implied connection, in the scientific discourse

on parenting, between the idea of a ‘good (enough) parent’ and the corresponding notion of a ‘good (enough) child’. But there is something puzzling, indeed disturbing, as noted above, about the notion of ‘a good enough child’. In the quote above, the notion of a child who is ‘at best, good enough’ is obviously meant to suggest that the child in question falls short of some optimal model – a model variously described by hundreds of self-help books on how to produce one as ‘happy’, ‘emotionally intelligent’, possessing the appropriate amount of self-esteem, and so on. We have already discussed the problem of positing these models of optimal end points for childrearing without any acknowledgement of the cultural and historical context of the values behind them and why they are valued or adaptive. It would be a mistake, though, to conclude from this that we ought to abandon the attempt to articulate any normative standards of good – or ‘good enough’ – parenting. There is an important political argument to be made, it seems to us, that in a liberal society, the idea that some children are merely ‘good enough’ ought to be vigorously rejected. But the argument that the state has no business in deciding which kinds of people are best does not lead to the conclusion that the state has no business in determining which kinds of parenting practice are acceptable. In this context, the guidance for health-care professionals, such as the UK Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families, where ‘good enough’ parenting is seen as that which meets basic criteria of looking after children’s needs and where certain behavioural criteria are highlighted as possibly alerting professionals to the need to step in to protect children, seems fairly sensible as well as morally and politically justified. The point we want to emphasise, though, is that certain kinds of parental behaviour are unacceptable not because they are likely to lead to certain ‘outcomes’ – such as ‘not good enough children’ – but because they are morally repugnant.

Research with parenting practitioners in fact illustrates how practitioners working on the ground often struggle with the categories and criteria offered by the guidelines, as in the following discussion from Kellett and Apps’ 2009 report on parenting support for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation:

Not all respondents felt comfortable with the term “good enough” parenting and some felt strongly that it was not a concept they would use in their work. However, there was a broad consensus among different practitioner groups about what constituted good enough parenting – basic care and safety, love and affection, putting children’s needs first, providing routine and consistent care, and, when there were difficulties experienced, acknowledgement and engagement with support services. These findings correspond closely with those of Newman et al. (2005). Perceptions of risky parenting centred around three main themes – putting self before child, a lack of parental control and responsibility, and a lack of routine and order. Risky parenting was, therefore, largely the polar opposite of good enough or good parenting (two concepts that were not clearly distinguished across the sample). (Kellett and Apps 2009, p. 46)

Obviously, as long as these guidelines remain broad and fairly general, it will inevitably be the case that, as the Report acknowledges, ‘[T]he assessment and decision-making process often relied on subjective as well as objective criteria and most practitioners acknowledged that there was some element of judgement involved’ (Kellett and Apps 2009, p. 46). But the problems involved in the current languages of ‘good parenting’ are not just to do with the risks associated with

possible errors of judgement on the part of parenting support workers, the extreme consequences of which are only too familiar to us from the horrific descriptions of cases such as 'Baby P'. The problems now, it seems, have to do with the increasing tendency in policy and popular literature to bypass this moral language about what parents do and to phrase notions of good parenting in terms of good results; a move that goes hand in hand with the undermining of any sensible notion of 'good enough parenting' along the lines suggested by accounts such as Bettelheim's. Not only do the policy literature aimed at parenting practitioners and the research it relies on seem to be increasingly converging on the view that there is one 'evidence-based' parenting approach or style that is 'most effective' and that therefore should serve as the standard for 'good-enough parenting', but parents themselves are increasingly pressured to adopt a particular style or align themselves with a particular approach. As social researchers such as Hoffman (2009) have noted, contemporary approaches to good parenting are in fact almost akin to social movements, with their devotees lining up in various websites and forums to advocate and defend their approach, often making sweeping claims as to the moral, political and global advances to be achieved by widespread adoption of it. (Erica Etelson, whose work we refer to in Chap. 1, is a case in point.) Commentators like Hoffman have offered subtle accounts of how the rhetoric of certain such approaches often masks and serves to reinforce certain underlying cultural tensions and tendencies. Likewise, Frank Furedi (2001), Jennie Bristow (2009) and others have noted the way in which the implicit demand to familiarise oneself with the latest approach – even, simply to have an approach – can add to the anxiety already generated in parents by the media language that blames 'bad parenting' for a range of social ills.

The emptying-out of the notion of 'good enough parenting' from its moral content described here blinds us to the moral importance of how we treat our children, and to the view of the parent-child relationship as an ethical relationship, and encourages the instrumental view of 'parenting' described in Chaps. 1 and 2. Yet this point should not, as discussed above, lead us to posit an account of parenting that prioritises process and the quality of relationships over aims and goals. As explained, we consider it a conceptual error to suggest that these two aspects are in opposition, and the account we are developing here is one which sees them as inextricably interwoven in the experience of being a parent, as described in the Dillner example above. But it is also important to note that it is not only conceptually problematic but practically impossible to retreat from the idea of ends and values in parenting. While some critics of official forms of parenting intervention have challenged the validity of the associated prescriptive accounts of 'good parenting' by pointing out the gendered, raced and classed bias reflected in them (see, e.g. Edwards and Gillies 2004), others reject the very idea of any such prescriptive account, insisting that parents be left alone to just get on with being parents. Perhaps the most well-known and vocal contemporary representative of this line of criticism is Furedi, who, in his 2001 book *Paranoid parenting*, expresses concerns very similar to those we have articulated here about some aspects of the contemporary language of scientific parenting, such as its implied determinism and the background culture of risk aversion which it both reflects and fuels. Yet there are important respects in

which we disagree with Furedi and find his account somewhat problematic, particularly in the context of the issues raised in this chapter. While we will go into these problems in greater detail in Chap. 6, we discuss his account here in order to shed further light on the current discussion of good enough parenting.

Furedi's work, in a sense, represents a kind of minimalist interpretation of the idea of 'good enough parenting', in which it is implied that what is good for individual parents is, by definition, 'good enough' – or, as Furedi puts it, 'As long as you do your best for your child you will probably not need any professional help. No-one is likely to understand the situation of your child better than you do – so you might as well do what you think best' (Furedi 2001, p. 188).

Yet at several points throughout his book, Furedi makes statements that contradict and undermine his avowed rejection of any objectively valid account of good parenting. For example: 'the best form of parental involvement in a child's education is the provision of positive encouragement [...] But too much involvement discourages children to make the effort to stretch themselves' (Furedi 2001, p. 76); or 'effective mothers and fathers need to show sensitivity and flexibility in response to a child's development' (Furedi 2001, p. 72) and 'effective parenting requires a judicious mix of disciplinary tactics that encourage positive behaviour, and power-assertive sanctions that punish negative ones' (Furedi 2001, p. 129). Here, Furedi is not only buying into the discourse of 'effectiveness', but implicitly assuming, though never defending, a particular kind of human being that our parenting should be effective at producing; one, it is suggested, who is self-sufficient and resourceful, amongst other things: 'Learning to be alone, away from the intrusive world of adults, is itself essential for the development of a child's imagination. These private experiences are critical for the development of the self' (Furedi 2001, p. 65). Interestingly, although this ideal character and the ideal of the authoritative parent behind it is never argued for or fully explained, it is linked with a particular historical period: 'Mothers and fathers worked long hours before and during the Second World War. They certainly did not like it but they experienced their condition as a general problem of lack of time rather than as a parental time famine. They not only managed to raise their offspring in difficult circumstances, but did it surprisingly well' (Furedi 2001, p. 80). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this idyllic past era for parents and children happens to be the same one in which Furedi himself grew up.

Furthermore, although Furedi makes much of our current misguided obsession with science and the way supposedly dubious scientific research is used to support normative accounts of good parenting – it is exactly this cultural phenomenon which, he claims, is responsible for the 'paranoia' of his title – he is quite happy to enlist the same kind of scientific accounts in order to bolster his own conception of good parenting. For example, he states: 'Brain research has been misused to argue that parental stimulation during the early years helps the development of the brain of a child. Yet according to the available neuroscientific data, this process of development is mainly under genetic and not environmental control' (Furedi 2001, p. 50). Here, Furedi is simply choosing to side with empirical psychological researchers like Scarr (see, e.g. Scarr 1986), who emphasise genetic factors in human development (and whose position is contested by other empirical psychological researchers)

in order to support his view that ‘What children require are protective and loving parents, responsible adults and a surrounding community within which the child will be socialised. Within the context of this normal environment the impact of parenting is far less significant than we suspect’ (Furedi 2001, p. 50).

Apart from the inconsistencies of his critique, what this discussion of Furedi’s work illustrates is the impossibility of offering any account of good parenting – even ones which, like Dr. Spock’s, famously begin with the motto ‘trust your instincts’ – without, at least implicitly, subscribing to a normative account of human flourishing. While Furedi’s account of human flourishing has to be reconstructed from his text, some contemporary authors are far more explicit in approvingly harking back to the childrearing ideals and models of 1950s Britain and, in doing so, expressing a desire to return to a similar form of ‘character education’. This trend is particularly evident in the recent report by Frank Field, cited above, which makes wide-reaching recommendations for government policy on family support services, childcare provision and parenting education, referring approvingly at several points to social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer’s classic (1955) work *Exploring English character*, which argued that the ‘tough love’ style of parenting that became dominant in 1950s England ‘changed England from a centuries long tradition of brutality to a peaceful nation’ (Field 2010, p. 18). Talk about ‘character’ education, however, opens up a wealth of philosophical questions to do with how we think of the person as an individual, as a moral agent and as a social being, as discussed below.

What Matters?

It is important to note here that recovering a moral language in which to talk about parent-child relationships, and thus moving beyond the language of ‘outcomes’, not only allows us to anchor the notion of ‘what matters’ in a moral narrative rather than a narrow instrumental one but also, connectedly, encourages us to regard children as active agents – a move that itself has moral significance. Indeed part of the intrinsic indeterminacy and open-endedness articulated above, that undermines the strict causal determinism and closure of the scientific account, is the acknowledgement that children make their own stories and meanings out of the myriad forms of environmental ‘input’ that constitute their process of growing up. It is instructive in this context to turn again to Winnicott’s work where, time and time again, the child is depicted as an active human being: ‘the baby’, he insists, ‘does not depend on you for growth and development’ (Winnicott 1964, p. 27); ‘the baby will find you’, (Winnicott 1964, p. 27) and his classic account of transitional objects is explained by taking the baby’s point of view:

From the infant’s point of view this first object was indeed created out of his or her imagination. It was the beginning of the infant’s creation of the world, and it seems that we have to admit that in the case of every infant the world has to be created anew. The world as it presents itself is of no meaning to the newly-developing human being unless it is created as well as discovered. (Winnicott 1964, p. 169)

What comes through time and time again in Winnicott's account of the 'good enough mother' is not just the insistence on the two-way nature of the interaction between mother and child, and the emphasis on the quality of this interaction as understood and judged by the particular mother, rather than on its developmental significance, but also the conceptualisation of parenting as inherently ethical and the baby as, above all, an individual human being. The 'ordinary good enough mother', Winnicott observes, simply realises that 'the baby is worth getting to know as a person' (Winnicott 1964, p. 21), and he describes feeding as 'part of a human relationship' (Winnicott 1964, p. 46). The baby, in these pages, appears as an active, unique human being in a relationship with another human being. It is striking to compare Winnicott's language here to the reference, in Sue Gerhardt's book *Why love matters*, to the 'unfinished baby' (Gerhardt 2004, p. 18), or her comments that 'babies are like the raw material for a self' (Gerhardt 2004, p. 18) or 'like a plant seedling in [his] psychological simplicity' (Gerhardt 2004, p. 19). Accounts like Gerhardt's reinforce the idea of the parent as 'making' something (a complete baby) rather than 'acting', and thus feed into a purely instrumental conceptualisation of good parenting as about achieving certain outcomes, the inherent closure implied by which also underplays the moral agency of both the parent and the child. This is not just an empirical question about the degree of accuracy with which we can correlate parental behaviour with child 'outcomes': it is a moral and conceptual question about what these 'outcomes' mean, and also, importantly, about how we choose to describe and think about people and children in particular.

In fact, the general conceptual problems involved in ascribing character traits, virtues or personality types to individuals that are suggested by some of our discussion here are increasingly being reinforced and developed through a growing body of work in the area of moral psychology. A significant area of empirical psychology, for example, has provided moral psychologists with evidence to suggest that the notion of stable character traits persisting over time is not empirically realistic, thus offering support for the theoretical position of 'situationism' as articulated by philosophers such as Doris (see, e.g. Doris 2002). What such work points to is the impossibility – both conceptually and empirically – of making sense of moral values or virtues without considering the social context in which they occur. And this is not just because, as Susan Sontag reminds us:

... compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated [...] People don't become inured to what they are shown – if that's the right way to describe what happens – because of the quantity of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling. (Sontag 2003, pp. 90–91)

It is because it is impossible to make sense of moral values or virtues without considering the social context in which they occur. Bringing up a compassionate child or a child with self-esteem is only morally significant if the moral environment is part of our discussion and thinking and if we thus attend also to the world that these children are coming into. As Buber reminds us, qualities such as love and compassion do not just exist in individuals, but are manifested in social situations (see Buber 1947).

The kind of enthusiasm for a form of character education as the basis for ‘good parenting’ evident in Frank Field’s report completely fails to take on board any of the insights arising from this kind of work in the area of moral psychology. Furthermore, it bypasses the philosophical and political implications of this work, articulated forcefully by Kwame Anthony Appiah who, in warning against the abuses of virtue ethics, retains the essential insight that ‘one aspect of flourishing is certainly moral’, arguing that ‘the understanding of virtue required by a viable ethics is not the globalist one: so we can accept what is true in situationism. Individual moments of compassion and moments of honesty make our lives better, even if we are not compassionate and honest through and through’ (Appiah 2008, p. 70). Crucially, Appiah points out that what recent research into moral character suggests is that ‘if we want to improve human welfare, we may do better to put less emphasis on moral education and on building character and more emphasis on trying to arrange social institutions so that human beings are not placed in situations in which they will act badly’ (Harman, quoted in Appiah 2008, p. 71). And there is certainly a connected, and important, political criticism here in the context of policy documents such as the Frank Field Report where, arguably, the very focus on outcomes and the assumption of a straightforward causal relationship between parental behaviour and children’s moral character and intellectual ability has led to the absurd situation where, although a concern about child poverty forms the backdrop to the entire report, what is presented as objectionable and in need of urgent political intervention is not the simple moral outrage that, in the twenty-first century, in a wealthy industrialised country like Britain, there are still tens of thousands of children living in sub-standard housing and with inadequate diets, but that the ‘outcomes’ of these poor children are consistently lower than those of rich children. A similar criticism can be directed at Sunderland’s statement that ‘[I]f all schools knew the true effects of being bullied on the brain of a child, I think there might be a shift in concern both at school and at government level’ (Sunderland 2006, p. 238). But why do we need to have evidence of effects on the brain to argue that there is something wrong with bullying? Surely what is objectionable about bullying is the affront to the moral worth of the person being bullied; and in a climate where people treat each other with respect, bullying would be a matter for moral concern no matter what one’s knowledge of brain science.⁴

To voice this criticism, though, and to take on board Appiah’s point about social institutions, is not to retreat to a crude materialism, for ‘we can’t be content with knowing what kind of people we are; it matters, too, what kind of people we hope to be’ (Appiah 2008, p. 72). It is precisely in the sense of ‘what kind of people we

⁴This critique of the uses of neuroscience in parenting advice is connected to a more general philosophical critique of the attempt to reduce psychological and moral concepts to neural processes – or, as it is known, ‘brainism’. As David Bakhurst has noted in his critique of this trend in education, ‘Brainism struggles to make sense of the first-person perspective’ – and, connectedly, obscures the point that we have to think of people, rather than parts of people, as the legitimate and appropriate subjects of psychological ascription (Bakhurst 2009, p. 64).

hope to be' that moral values come into what we do when we act as parents; wanting to be certain kinds of people and wanting our children to be certain kinds of people is a part of living as moral agents in a social world. It cannot be reduced to a mechanical recipe for outcomes. In how we interact with our children we are expressing what we want to be and what we hope our children will be. The language of the science of parenting not only shuts down our ability to discuss, question and explore the meaning of this kind of hope but also suggests that – to use a twisted paraphrase of a famous phrase from Dewey – we can replace the hope with certainty. Obviously, so this account suggests, everyone wants emotionally stable, happy children with high self-esteem; well, here's how to get them. The suppression of the alternative, morally saturated kind of thinking about human action – indeed, the replacing of this category of 'action', in the Arendtian sense, with a category of 'making' (making happy children; making emotionally balanced children) – runs through talk of 'parenting skills' and 'effective parenting' and, as argued above, distorts our picture of what it means to be a parent. In contrast, as Dunne says,

To speak of "action" as well as (though not as separate from) knowledge and expression is to advert to the network of relationships within which one finds oneself, and to the hazardousness of one's undertakings within this network – the unpredictability, open-endedness, and frequent irreversibility of what these undertakings set in train. No one is exempt from action in this sense (a sense that allows that speech often is action); it is through it that one discloses and achieves the unique identity that distinguishes one as a person and at the same time it reveals the depth of one's interdependence with others. When a craftsperson "acts" on suitable materials in order to produce an artefact which is comfortably within his or her proficiency, there is a predictability about success which is commensurate with this proficiency itself. However, when one's actions are not imposed on materials but are directed towards other persons, such mastery is not attainable. One cannot determine in advance the efficacy of one's words and deeds. Efficacy turns out to be a form of influence; it lies not so much in one's own operation as in the cooperation of others. The nature and extent of this cooperation cannot be counted on beforehand, and even afterwards one cannot be sure just what it has been. (Dunne 1993, p. 359, reproduced with permission)

As we suggest above, it *matters* whether we choose to describe babies and parents' interaction with them in terms that depict their human qualities – as in Winnicott's talk of 'getting to know one's baby' (Winnicott 1964, p. 57) – and emphasise 'the provision of conditions for the richest possible experience' (Winnicott 1964) or whether we insist on precise, clearly delineated terms, neat structures and physically observable aspects of our biological and chemical nature, as in the passage from Sunderland's *The science of parenting* (quoted at length in Chap. 2), where the author explains that bad behaviour in children could be due to the wrong part of the brain being activated (see Sunderland 2006, pp. 111–120). What Dunne's account, above, is telling us, amongst other things, is that it matters immensely how we choose to describe and talk about human action; that our speaking in itself is already a form of action. It is not that Winnicott's depiction of the child as an active agent and an already human individual is better or more accurate than the alternative picture of a human being in the making, 'needing to be programmed' (Gerhardt 2004, p. 18), or a collection of neurons. Rather, the point is that whether we choose to describe babies, and corresponding parenting practices, as one or the other is a choice, and a choice of considerable moral significance. Behind Winnicott's

language there certainly seems to be the desire to make sense of the strange and confusing world of being a baby and being a parent, but the language suggests that this endeavour is not part of an attempt to control and optimise ‘parenting’, but to convey the everyday understanding of the experience to readers – possibly potential parents – so that they can imaginatively enter into it and begin to grasp its significance, not just in causal developmental terms, but in moral and human terms. Part of the experience of being a parent is, surely, that one can perceive the child as either or both of these things simultaneously: as both maker of the world and moulded by and for the world; as both completely other and intimately part of oneself. In living with this experience and the tensions it gives rise to, parents have to figure out where they stand and what choices they want to make, and for what reasons. Scientific accounts may form part of the background factors in negotiating this tension and making these choices, but they cannot and should not pretend to transcend it. So while we may want to take on board the idea, suggested by Gerhardt and others, that ‘the origins of our emotional life’ can be traced to early interaction with parents, this point on its own can only give us a very partial picture of human emotional development as it fails to capture or even to acknowledge the sense in which our emotional life cannot be straightforwardly described or assessed. In other words, the problem is not simply the questionable nature of any alleged causal link between particular parental behaviour and the activation of certain parts of the brain that in turn are seen as responsible for personality traits, moral character or emotional capacities; the problem is that, in the absence of a broader moral discussion and account of what makes certain types of behaviour, attitudes and capacities more valuable than others, advice based on such research is meaningless.

In terms of ‘good enough parenting’, then, if the only account on offer is the scientific developmental one, the question of what counts as good enough can only be decided from the position presented within this account itself. But first-person descriptions of being a parent and growing up with parents can show us how distorting and limiting this is. Lorna Sage, in her memoir *Bad blood*, describes the complete shift in her experience of childhood, her perception of her parents and her relationship with them, and her awareness of what it meant to be part of a family, that occurred when she moved, at the age of 7, with her parents and grandmother, into a small cottage of their own. Before then, she had lived with her mother in her grandparents’ home while her father was in the army. As she explains,

I had never known my parents together, as one, when I was small. When my father was demobilized they had become lodgers in the vicarage, an attic bedroom their only private space. The fact that I somehow belonged to them, and with them, had been obscured for me in my grandparents’ divided dominion. For a husband and wife to get on together, gang up with each other, seemed strange and unfair. (Perhaps this is why people dream back with nostalgia to the extended family? Not because you get more parenting, but because you get less? Who knows, perhaps we secretly long to avoid being eggs in just one basket, which is what you get if your parents build a nest on just one branch of the family tree.) My baby brother Clive’s birth and the move to the brand-new house not long afterwards reordered the domestic world. Clive was the child of our parents’ reunion and of their married life together. Indeed, I was free to “run wild” outdoors precisely because so much of their attention was focused on him. (Sage 2001, p. 99)

The reason we present this extract here is not to offer counter-evidence to the orthodox psychological account according to which *more* parenting, or at least more parental attention, is better for children's development. Rather, what we want to show is that it is possible to tell a different account that is not framed in developmental terms. Looking back at her childhood, making sense of the world of her family and of herself – herself in the present and herself in the past – drawing on moral and evaluative meanings and interpretations of the experience, the suggestion that less parenting was, in this case, 'better', is an idea that makes sense for Sage, and that helps her to understand her life. We can – and Sage does – ask moral questions about the choices her parents made for her, but these questions cannot be answered simply in terms of their effects on her development, as the very description of her emotional development, of what constitutes the point from where to assess it, and what kinds of development would be better or worse, cannot be separated out from who she is as an individual and how she understands herself. Lorna Sage's narrative may enable us, the readers, to speculate on how the possible flaws in her early parenting (lack of secure attachment? failure to impose clear boundaries?) may, perhaps, have set up patterns in the brain that could be related to current aspects of her personality (perhaps, indeed, she would not have become a writer if she had not retreated into the world of books in response to the chaotic environment of her early home life?). But the problem is not only the empirical one that there are too many different intersecting factors at work in any one child's life for us to be able to say with any certainty which aspects of her personality are causally related to any particular parental behaviour; it is also the philosophical one that the psychological and emotional terms we use to describe people's lives are part of the cultural, linguistic and moral landscape in which we ascribe meaning and values to our lives and those of others, not neutral descriptors to be read off clearly delineated data. Sage's own reading of her childhood, let alone that of an external observer, is overlaid by years of interpretation and action in a social context which, in the end, made her the person she was and enabled her, looking back, to construct a narrative that made sense. Running through her memoir, which in many ways seems like an account of deprivation, is also a huge affection and love for her family, a deep attempt to understand them, and an appreciation of the fact that, in spite of their failings, at a time of possible crisis in her life, her parents offered unstinting physical and emotional support that allowed her to become the person she was when writing the memoir. Along with her astute and often humorous observations of their psychological problems, inconsistencies and faults, Sage shows an appreciation of the way in which they made the most of their lives, and in doing so, made the most of hers. In doing so, she perhaps tacitly affirms a notion of 'good enough parenting' which has nothing to do with parenting styles, brain chemistry or outcomes.

The above discussion may lead to the conclusion that while the notion of 'good enough parenting' sounds odd, indeed disturbing, from a first-person perspective, we should nevertheless acknowledge that, insofar as we think the state is justified, in extreme circumstances, in removing children from their parents, a notion of 'good enough' will be useful within the third-person language of policy makers and parenting practitioners. We should not, though, make the mistake of conflating the

notion that there is a way in which, based on observation and professional judgement, experienced practitioners can make an informed assessment as to whether or not the way a parent is caring for her child is acceptable, with a fully specified notion of 'good enough parenting'. Moving away from the kind of deterministic, instrumental account described above may in fact be perfectly in keeping with the way in which social workers and other parenting support practitioners actually conceive of their work and make moral judgements. But if this is so, then should we perhaps look elsewhere in articulating some kind of moral guidelines that can help practitioners in assessing whether certain kinds of home environment are 'good enough' for the children whose welfare they are charged with protecting? It is here that the language of children's rights, and corresponding notions of needs, duties and responsibilities, may seem useful. It is to a discussion of this – different – language that we turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Rights, Needs and Duties

A Civil Birth Ceremony

The birth of a child is a great event, and great events call for ceremonies and ritual. As with a wedding, a birth is an occasion to celebrate but also an occasion to express love and commitment in the presence of friends and relations and society at large. Traditionally in Britain, the christening has performed this type of function, and at present roughly one-third of children get christened or receive a birth ceremony in another religious faith. For children who do not get christened or experience another religious ceremony, a well-designed civil ceremony would reinforce the sense of commitment of parents and their resolve to do the best for their child, through a suitable vow made in public. The ceremony would be performed by the local registrar, using a ritual similar to a civil marriage and would be celebrated in the Register office or elsewhere and recorded in a certificate.

(Layard and Dunn 2009, p. 29)

In the previous chapter, we looked at how the notion of ‘good enough parenting’, in a sense expressive of a kind of broad tolerance of a range of different approaches on the part of parents, has been subverted, within the current scientific account, to refer to a particular style or approach presented as optimal, or ‘effective’, while bypassing the moral language that enables us to make sense of the values and aims implicit in this account. In the current chapter, we will look at some philosophical work that addresses the question of the limits to tolerance, on the part of society or the state, of parents’ ways of interacting with their children, and will explore some issues raised by this work in light of our own account. We will also look at how the associated language of rights and obligations has entered into discussions of parents’ relationships with their children in some new and worrying ways which, we believe, suggest a further aspect of the problems identified in Chaps. 1 and 2, namely, the ways in which parents come to see their own experience of parenting and their own children through a third-person lens.

Needs and Rights

Our arguments, in the preceding chapters, about the limitations and dangers of employing any context-free notion of ‘what parents should do’ and our emphasis on the impossibility of any summative judgement of ‘good parenting’ without an acknowledgement of the evaluative and interpretive nuances involved, do not absolve us from the need to address the troubling question of whether, as a society, we can or should still attempt to delineate the boundaries of parents’ freedom to bring up their children as they deem fit. If it is all but impossible to offer a fully specified account of ‘good parenting’, where does this leave us when it comes to making decisions, at the level of legislation and welfare policy, concerning children, parents and families?

As the discussion in the previous chapter indicated, we do not wish to abandon the demand for some criteria that can be used to determine when parents are performing in unacceptable ways and that, in extreme cases, can justify removing children from their parents. However, we have suggested that while professionals such as social workers and parenting support workers may draw on research in the area of developmental psychology and other related fields in exercising their professional judgement, this alone cannot provide comprehensive grounds for making decisions about children and parents, and it is crucial not only to bear in mind the situated nature of criteria for assessing good or bad parenting but also to keep sight of the moral content and significance of the criteria, concepts and values in question.

A great deal of literature in philosophy of the family, political philosophy and philosophy of education on parents and children has been concerned with precisely this question of the limits and justification of parents’ freedom to bring up their children as they wish, and the relationship between this freedom and, on the one hand, the rights of children and, on the other, the rights and obligations of the (liberal) state vis à vis children. A central strand in this literature begins from the basis of the conceptual connection between needs and rights. Brennan and Noggle (1997), for example, argue that parents’ rights are ‘threshold rights’: when they fail to meet children’s needs, they give out. On this account, the moral status and authority of parents is derived from an account of the needs of the child, including ‘a need to be nurtured, a need to be educated and a need to be fed’ (Brennan and Noggle 1997, p. 12).

The notion of children’s needs adopted by philosophical work of the kind represented by theorists such as Brennan and Noggle, and, in a similar vein, Archard and Arneil, tends to be framed in a fairly vague and general way. Phrases like ‘nurture’ or ‘care’, or simply ‘the need not to be harmed’, are generally used fairly loosely without going into details of what exactly such ‘nurture’ or ‘care’ consists in. Thus, in Brennan and Noggle’s account, it is children’s right ‘not to be harmed’ that trumps parents’ rights to freedom in upbringing. This account is representative of a central tradition within political theory that defends a form of ‘limited parental rights’, described as reflecting ‘common-sense’ intuitions about children and parents (Brennan and Noggle 1997, p. 13). As Brennan and Noggle point out, this position

represents a kind of ‘middle ground’ between the two extremes of, on the one hand, the view that children are their parents’ property, and on the other, the extreme child liberation view defended by, for example, Howard Cohen (see Cohen 1980). It also evokes the Lockean insight that parental rights are based neither on parental ownership of children nor on children’s rational consent to be governed by their parents. David Archard, whose work on parents and children has been influential not only in the field of philosophy of education but also in child and family welfare legislation and policy, holds a version of this view, according to which parents have limited but significant discretion in raising children. This position has led to a range of important philosophical work addressing the question of what it is that constitutes a reasonable and justifiable limit on parental freedom, often extending and developing general accounts of the legitimacy of parental intervention by specifying a normative account of upbringing within a particular political context, rather than in general terms of needs and corresponding rights. For example, while most liberal theorists would agree that parents have the right to determine the content of their children’s upbringing to some degree, quite how far this right extends and what considerations, beyond obvious physical harm to the child, should constrain it, has been the subject of considerable debate within analytic philosophy of education. An example of a significant attempt to deal with this question is Matthew Clayton’s 2006 book, *Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing*, which addresses the issue of legitimate parental discretion in imparting substantive views to children within the framework of a commitment to political liberalism, with special emphasis on the significance of autonomy.

It would not be an exaggeration to state that mainstream political and educational philosophers, to the extent to which they talk about parents and children at all, are mainly concerned with delineating the legitimate sphere of parents’ authority vis à vis their children, on the one hand, and parents’ freedom vis à vis the state on the other, thus grappling with the tensions at the heart of liberalism around the meaning and extent of individual freedom.

As the above comments reveal, the stewardship view of parental rights, and the various versions of it, is conceptually connected, via an account of children’s needs, to a position on children’s rights, for it is children’s rights to be treated in a certain way that are invoked as the moral grounds on which to restrict parents’ rights to determine their upbringing. If, as the argument goes, children have a need for care, nurture and love, then they have a corresponding right to be provided with these. Brighouse and McAvoy (2010) are sympathetic to this view, and to the development of it by MacCormick, according to which:

It is not the case that the child or someone deemed to be acting on the child’s behalf has an option of enforcing the duty of care and nurture, which option may or may not be exercised according to arbitrary choice. On this view, children have rights to, at least, care, nurture and love. (MacCormick, quoted in Brighouse and McAvoy 2010, p. 76).

Here again, we see that the conceptual analysis of rights and the corresponding set of obligations rely on an implicit and fairly general notion of ‘what children need’, the assumption, presumably, being that before one even gets into the question

of which types of upbringing are more valuable and why, there are basic conditions that have to be met for children to be able to grow up with even a minimal level of basic functioning. These versions of the stewardship view of parental rights, while invoking the notion of children's rights, avoid what Brighouse and McAvoy refer to as the 'puzzle' that children's rights have posed for liberal theory due to the influential view – associated with H.L.A. Hart – that choice is the correct theoretical concept on which to base rights. On Hart's view, it is inappropriate to consider children as rights-bearers as they are incapable of competently exercising choice, being vulnerable, dependent and incapable (in the case of very young children) of sufficiently grasping the ramifications of their choices (Brighouse and McAvoy 2010, pp. 75–76). On the alternative view, associated with Raz, 'X has rights only if X can have rights and other things being equal, an aspect of X's well-being (his interest) is sufficiently a reason for holding some other persons to be under a duty' (Brighouse and McAvoy 2010, p. 76). Thus, for proponents of the stewardship view, according to which children have a need for care, nurture and love and a corresponding right to be provided with these, it is generally true that '[F]or some of these rights correlative duties are usually assigned to parents' (Brighouse and McAvoy 2010, p. 83), and a general tenet of this liberal position is that if parents are unable to fulfil their obligations, the state must step in: the state, on this view, is 'a guarantor of last resort' (Brighouse and McAvoy 2010, p. 80).

This general formulation can help us in articulating some limits to the toleration of various manifestations of parental behaviour. To describe a particular instance of such behaviour as 'bad parenting' would not, in itself, give an outsider a morally justifiable reason to interfere and restrict the freedom of the parent in question; one would have to be able to justify the claim that the child in question was not having his or her basic needs met, that the parent was failing to care for the child or that the child was being harmed. There is naturally a degree of vagueness around notions like 'care' here, leading to difficulties analogous to the familiar problems involved in general questions around the implication of Mill's 'harm principle' within liberal theory: How serious is the harm? How long-term are its effects?, and so on. Making a judgement of this kind in the case of children may seem particularly complex. For example, if I see a mother yelling at her child for spilling his drink on the bus, I may consider this to be an example of 'bad parenting', but I probably would not say anything. I may think the mother is stressed and exhausted; I may feel it is none of my business. I could, however, without too much difficulty, construct a narrative according to which this action is *harming* the child, and in fact, to do so would be entirely in tune with the scientific account of parenting reflected in much of the popular discourse of parenting. I could say that the child's developing sense of trust and security is being harmed; I could – following Margaret Sunderland (Sunderland 2006) – argue that his developing neural networks are being inappropriately activated, causing damage to the long-term development of the social brain.

This may sound far-fetched, but some of our intuitions about the inappropriateness of intervention here may be due to the fact that we have described a one-off incident. There may, as described above, be specific circumstances that explain the mother's behaviour; at the very least, we have no reason to suppose, in the absence

of other evidence, that her behaviour is typical of a general trend. Maybe she is generally patient and good-humoured with her child and, we may reason, it is not going to cause any significant harm if she occasionally loses her temper. But now consider a case where we witness a persistent and long-term type of parental behaviour, such as a parent who we see repeatedly yelling at her child every time he drops something or dawdles or takes a long time doing up his shoes in the morning; would we be more inclined, in this case, to describe what is going on as 'harmful' to the child? Would we want to argue that the child's needs for nurture and care, in such a case, were not being adequately met? Again, it seems that we would need a lot more information in order to make such a claim, and that this information would involve not just descriptions of the nature of the behaviour in question, but also the time-frame and context in which it took place. Would seeing someone hit a child elicit a different response than seeing someone yell (even yell abusively) at a child? While these questions may be tricky to answer in the case described above, they are obviously far less problematic in more extreme cases, and it is often these extreme cases which elicit the intuitions that support the general arguments formulated by theorists and commentators for or against state intervention in family life.

In 2009, the British public was shocked by the media reports of a horrific case of persistent and brutal abuse of a toddler, 'Baby P', by his own mother and her boyfriend over a period of several months. What most of the media reporting focused on was the repeated failure of social workers, doctors and carers to identify and report on the nature and scale of the abuse and to alert the authorities before it was too late. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that, had the relevant support workers acted in time, the agents of the state would have been entirely justified in removing Baby P from his parents. Doing so would, quite simply, have saved his life. Implicit in this account of the case and of readers' and journalists' response to it is a familiar discourse of rights and duties that provides the framework and tools for articulating our moral judgements in such instances. Yet what seemed to get lost in the commentary on this case was the simple fact that it is against a background of moral concepts and responses that this discourse makes sense. It is not, of course, that the concept of 'needs' itself here is an entirely normative, rather than just an empirical, concept; obviously, there is an empirical, descriptive truth in the observation that human children need certain basic things in order to flourish. But the moral weight of our judgement that Baby P's mother had failed in this regard is very different from the moral weight of a judgement that we might make about a parent who we judge to be not providing the kind of parenting that we consider optimal.

Furthermore, what is behind the general moral abhorrence expressed towards parents who abuse their children (irrespective of our willingness to accept that there may be explanatory reasons why particular people become abusive parents) is a sense that this constitutes a human failure: living with each other in a social world in which moral language and concepts form part of our everyday action and interaction means that there is a morally binding notion of how we should respond to each other as human beings. This must include, but, crucially, goes beyond, merely ensuring that people's basic physical needs are met. The point we want to emphasise here, though, is that the normative force behind justifications for third-person intervention

in parent-child relationships is a substantive moral one reflecting intuitions about what acceptable human moral behaviour consists in. Brennan and Noggle explicitly make this point. In defending a limited account of parental rights, according to which '[S]o long as the parents are not harming their child – either directly as in the case of outright abuse, or indirectly, as in the case of neglect – their rights cannot justifiably be infringed' (Brennan and Noggle 1997, p. 10), they explain that the attempt to offer a philosophically robust articulation of this account 'is driven by what we think are widespread convictions about how we ought to treat children – convictions that we share' (Brennan and Noggle 1997, p. 1). The *ought*, here, in other words, is a moral ought.

Acknowledging the reasonableness of the general moral agreement, in the case of Baby P, that the child was indeed being harmed and that his parent(s) had thus forfeited their rights to bring him up, thus justifying intervention to protect the child, takes us some way towards articulating a general account of the limits of toleration, on the part of the state, towards how much freedom parents should be allowed in determining how to treat their children. Theorists such as David Archard have accordingly developed an account of parental pluralism that can serve as a guideline in such third-person debates about intervention in family life. Yet the prevalence of the scientific account of parenting described in the preceding chapters extends the 'common sense', morally anchored account of children's needs and the corresponding account of parents' rights in ways which, we argue, overlook important aspects of the parent-child relationship revealed by the first-person perspective. In so doing, it not only allows a particular language of needs, rights and legitimacy to displace other ways of thinking about these issues, but, crucially, diverts our attention from the essentially moral background of the language of rights. We need, we suggest, to remind ourselves of this basic moral language; yet we are in danger of losing sight of it due to the dominance of the scientific, developmental account. It may well be that Baby P, had he lived, would have failed to develop a healthy sense of self-esteem; but it may equally be that he would have – like many victims of childhood abuse – managed to overcome his appalling childhood and function well as an adult. Whether he would or wouldn't, though, is in a sense irrelevant to the judgement that how he was treated is morally unacceptable. It is the substance of our most basic moral intuitions that enables us to form judgements about what is and is not within the boundaries of acceptable moral behaviour. In cases like that of Baby P, this is relatively easy to see. Yet within these clear boundaries, there is a very large grey area, and in adopting the language of 'needs' and 'rights' to describe and evaluate what goes on within this grey area, we are in danger of losing sight of just how grey and complicated it is. If we are to engage in any meaningful conversation about good or bad parenting, we need to recognise that this conversation has an irreducibly moral dimension, not only at the edges where some behaviours, we may have come to recognise, are beyond the pale, but also within the realm of acceptable behaviour. The problem with our current parenting talk, it seem to us, is that it encourages the tendency to bypass this moral conversation.

The language of rights, and corresponding legal advances in legislation protecting both parents' and children's rights, has been significant in leading to more progressive

political arrangements to protect children. This language seems entirely appropriate and useful in cases such as that of Baby P where what is at stake is an official intervention by the state into the intuitively appealing realm of the freedom of parents to bring up their children as they choose. Here the conceptual philosophical work articulating a limited conception of parental rights may help us in taking such difficult decisions. As with any other analogous piece of legislation, while the letter of both our laws and our political theories can and should reflect basic and general principles, such as ‘providing for children’s basic needs’, there is always going to be room for careful exercise of judgement in deciding how and when individual cases do or don’t constitute a violation of the law in question. But the background moral intuitions relied on by statements, such as Brennan and Noggle’s, that children have ‘a need to be nurtured, a need to be fed, a need to be educated’ are very different from the background assumptions behind statements such as ‘children need to know that they will be loved, supported and encouraged as they begin to take responsibility for their own lives, one step at a time...’ (Rosenfeld and Wise 2000, p. 119), or statements by parenting experts that ‘children need clear boundaries...’. Behind the second kind of statement is, beyond a basic moral assumption, a substantive vision of the kind of people the authors think children should grow up to be and the best way to get there. This is a very different use of the word ‘need’.

Likewise, in arguing that it is illegitimate for parents to induct their children into a particular substantive vision of the good, Matthew Clayton (2006) is saying something far more specific than that it is morally beyond the pale for parents to abuse their children. His argument may be perfectly sound, but in order to accept it, one has to agree with his premises about what is desirable in individuals and in political society, and whether or not one does is a question of where one stands on a particular set of values. Yet it is precisely these values which not only inform but also develop out of people’s individual and collective experiences of being parents. They cannot be simply assumed as a background framework but have to be argued for, and this argument has to take place within a context that acknowledges this important first-person perspective. Clayton himself offers an eloquent argument in defence of a particular version of liberal theory, but for people unconvinced by his argument (and, we suspect, even for some people convinced of it), it will not help to resolve the day-to-day questions of what to do with a baby who won’t sleep or a toddler having a tantrum in the supermarket. This is not because these day-to-day practical questions are questions about what to do that can be answered by insights from empirical research in developmental psychology; it is because, as we have suggested in the preceding chapters, they are ‘practical’ in the Aristotelian sense of practical reasoning and because the ethical questions here go all the way down.

Our moral theories and our moral intuitions may guide us in telling us what the outer limits are here: as illustrated by the Baby P case, there are obvious moral commitments and understanding behind collectively agreed views on what it is absolutely not acceptable to do to children; but the first-person question, on the part of an individual parent, ‘what should I do?’ is also, in an important sense, a moral one, even in less extreme situations. The fact that a wealth of psychological research and ‘evidence’ suggests that there are ready-made practical answers to this question on

offer that can be taught and learned, should not blind us to the fact that behind these answers lie moral views about human flourishing, the kind of people we want to be, the kind of children we want to have and the kinds of relationship we want to promote. In uprooting the question of ‘what children need’ and correspondingly of what parents can and should do, from its roots in our moral language, we bypass the broad conversation about these views and what they mean for us as individuals and as members of society. This is a conversation that we can and should have, yet instead, the space in which it could take place has been colonised by a debate about different conceptions of ‘what children need’ drawn from the third-person perspective of scientific, developmental accounts. When these accounts are presented as ‘the best’ or ‘the most scientifically established’ account of what children need, and accordingly what parents should do, other important conversations are shut down.

Witness, for example, the heated debate triggered by the recent publication of Amy Chua’s book, *Battle hymn of the tiger mother* (Chua 2011), to which we referred in Chap. 3. Chua is articulate in her criticisms of what she sees as the predominant trend in Western, and particularly American, parenting culture, with its emphasis on assuming children to be essentially vulnerable and aiming to nurture their self-esteem. As she puts it in an interview with the *New York Times*, ‘I stand by a lot of my critiques of Western parenting. I think there’s a lot of questions about how you instil true self-esteem’. The alternative, ‘Chinese’ view that Chua defends is one that assumes children to have a large degree of resilience, and, rather than seeing developing self-esteem as a goal, suggests that ‘[A] bigger goal is producing tougher, more resilient and (of course) higher-performing kids’, and that to achieve this, it may be that ‘[Y]ou have to be hated sometimes by someone you love and who hopefully loves you’. Chua’s book is full of descriptions of incidents, such as the time she threatened to burn her daughter’s stuffed animals if she did not play a piano composition perfectly – practices which, she argues, were ‘highly effective’.¹

What is remarkable is that the vast majority of the comments, blogs and responses spawned in the media and the online community, by reports of Chua’s book, focused on the question of how ‘effective’ these two diametrically opposed strategies – the ‘Western’ and the ‘Chinese’ one – generally are, and what their ‘outcomes’ were. The very title of the responses, such as ‘Is extreme parenting effective?’ and ‘Does strict control of a child’s life lead to greater success?’ (see above link), is evidence of the way the kind of conversation we suggest can and should take place amongst and about parents and anyone concerned with children – a conversation about what we consider to be ‘success’ and why, what values we cherish and why, and about what ‘self-esteem’ or ‘confidence’ means to us as parents and why they are valuable in particular social contexts – is shut down by a predominance of supposedly scientifically informed conversations about effectiveness.

Many philosophers, it seems, instead of contributing to this conversation, have allowed it to be framed in empirical developmental terms by assuming that the

¹ See http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/16/fashion/16Cultural.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1, retrieved March, 2011.

really interesting philosophical questions about parenting are questions about what it is permissible for society to allow parents to do, and what society must enable parents to do (and children to receive). As discussed above, the highly specified and prescriptive accounts of ‘what children need’, some of which are described in the preceding chapter, mean that the general moral notions of ‘nurture’ and ‘care’ typical of much philosophical work in this area have now been superseded by very specific – sometimes even at the level of neurons – scientific accounts. The associated developmental accounts, which, as described in Chap. 1, are often presented in a highly deterministic language, add to the sense of urgency in making an appropriate judgement to intervene in cases of ‘harmful’ parental behaviour. Any ‘harm’ to the developing brain, emotional make-up or psyche of a child will, so this narrative goes, have possibly irreversible effects on the child’s optimal development. We have already discussed the problems with the languages of psychology in terms of the evaluative assumptions behind the terms it uses to describe both the aims of such development and the processes by which it is assumed to take place. We have discussed, too, how this very same discourse, by presenting itself as neutral and ‘scientific’, allows us to bypass the moral language in which to describe relationships between children and parents as part of a broader discussion of social relationships and human flourishing. Yet this very illusion – whereby the scientists can provide us with a universal, objective account of human development and the corresponding developmental needs of children, and whereby we can employ our moral judgements to determine when and how to step in if these needs are not being met – is reinforced by the kind of philosophical work that addresses the issue of parental rights at the theoretical level, implying that the actual daily interaction between parents and children is simply an empirical question. Indeed, in some cases, this is explicitly stated, as in the work of Noggle who, in arguing for a justification of parental authority derived from the parent’s role as an interface or bridge between the child and the moral community, notes that ‘the details of how this happens depend upon empirical facts about child psychology’ (Noggle 2002, p. 110).

The problem, though, is not just that ‘the empirical facts about child psychology’, as discussed, are themselves saturated with moral and conceptual assumptions, but also that the language of child psychology is now increasingly used to define not only the process of development but also the optimal outcome or ‘end’ of that development. In this current climate, the conceptual link between children’s needs and their rights, and the corresponding demands on parents, takes on particular significance. While at a general theoretical level we see no reason to disagree with the kind of philosophical work which describes parents’ (threshold) rights as limited by their children’s rights, which, in turn, are derived from needs, this work does not take us nearly far enough, especially in the contemporary context where the general moral language in which talk of rights and needs should be anchored is apparently being displaced by a very different language. Questions about what parents do for their children and how they act need, we argue, to be reclaimed from psychology and put at the heart of moral thinking about parenting. The moral, philosophically significant questions about parenting do not end at the margins of our moral intuitions about the limits of parental freedom: a parent asking what to do is

not asking what it is *legitimate* to do, or what she is within her rights to do, any more than she is asking what psychological research suggests is the most effective way to achieve a specified goal; she is asking a practical, moral question about the meaning and value of her interaction with her child. This is not to suggest that parents do not ask for or do not often need genuinely practical advice and help in dealing with specific problems in childrearing. But it is to suggest that we refocus our orientation about what this kind of advice can and should mean. It is simply not the case that we can work out a philosophical account of parental legitimacy concerning pre-defined matters, such as imparting a comprehensive moral doctrine or choosing a school, and that this can be applied to our parenting practice alongside an independent psychological account of ‘what children need’. The moral questions involved in the experience of being a parent go all the way down. To suggest, as Noggle does, that there are matters just ‘for empirical psychology’ is to ignore the way in which, as discussed in Chap. 1, psychological concepts themselves are infused with meaning, and also to overlook the crucial difference between the first-person and the third-person perspective.

The Right to the Best Upbringing

David Archard, in addressing the general questions of ‘how should a society think of its children, how should it care for them and what rights if any should it accord them?’ (Archard 1993, p. 160), offers an answer in the form of a ‘modest collectivism’, comprised of collective responsibility that involves what he calls a ‘diffusion of parenting’ and ‘collective evaluation of children’. While we go along with most of his recommendations in terms of their implications for social policy – universal childcare provision for pre-schoolers; recognition that there are diverse styles of parenting; encouraging a view of parenting as ‘embedded in a network of kin and community’, and so on (Archard 1993, p. 165) – the problem is that these discussions remain at the level of the third-person perspective. This perspective, as argued, may be necessary for making difficult decisions about intervening in family life to protect children, yet it must not get detached from the moral language that grounds its normative force; and nor can it be straightforwardly transposed into the first-person perspective required of individual parents acting with their own children. In expanding the meaning of the terms in this discourse – ‘needs’, ‘rights’, ‘obligation’ – beyond the core moral concepts that give them their normative force, our language runs the risk of ‘going on holiday’.

Raimond Gaita has argued (Gaita 1998, pp. 17–27) that the language of rights is parasitic on a deeper moral language of love, and we have some sympathy with this view, although we will discuss similar philosophical positions in more detail below. Here what we focus on is the way that the moral language in which accounts of children’s needs to be nurtured and cared for have their natural home is being gradually displaced by a psychological language of development, in which ‘needs’ are conceived in a far more specific way leading to developmental outcomes that,

although they are evaluatively laden, are never explicitly defended or articulated in value terms. We do not want to reject the language of rights and duties outright, although we certainly take on board the warning articulated by Mary Midgley, namely that ‘no conceptual scheme should have automatic priority’ (Midgley 1991, p. 105) and that there is an important sense in which extreme cases of perceived conflict between the rights of parents and the rights of children that may lead to children being taken away from their parents, ‘like most moral problems that cause real trouble in the world’, present us with ‘a choice of evils, something which the language of rights cannot really handle’ (Midgley 1991, p. 109). What we want to challenge is the suggestion that once we have worked out the limits of parental rights and the notion of parental responsibility, and the corresponding rights and responsibility of the wider society vis à vis children, we have said all there is to say philosophically about parenting.

If, as discussed above, our notion of ‘what children need’ is firmly rooted in a general appreciation of the moral obligation to care for children, then, given the conceptual links between needs and rights, it may seem unproblematic to suggest, with Archard, that children have ‘the right to the best possible upbringing’ (Archard 1993, p. 106). What Archard presumably has in mind here is that there are basic minimal preconditions for care and nurture that have to be met; if they are not being met, either by parents or by the wider society, children have the right to be provided with them. Beyond these, though, it is presumably up to parents and other carers to do ‘the best’ they can within the conditions they live in. Yet what constitutes ‘the best’ is, surely, a moral and philosophical question, and while we may not find it difficult to agree on the basic minimal threshold of care, once we begin to specify and evaluate the relative merits of different ways of meeting and going beyond this threshold, we are entering a philosophical and moral discussion about the very meaning of human flourishing. Yet the dominance of the current scientific account, as discussed above, prevents us from having this discussion or even from seeing it for what it is. As the previous chapter made clear, ‘good parenting’ is increasingly defined in a narrow and prescriptive way that is deemed to be ‘scientifically’ supported, and ‘children’s needs’ are defined on the basis of the same prescriptive account.

Archard himself in fact expresses the worry that articulating ‘a right to the best possible upbringing would require the imposition of a single uniform style of parenting on all parents’ (Archard 1993, p. 108). What we want to suggest is that, although Archard is correct to say that this does not *necessarily* follow, in the current cultural climate, the very language of parenting policy, in bypassing important ethical and conceptual questions, is in fact going in exactly this direction. This position is in fact evident in explicit statements such as that by Hans Van Crombrugge that ‘[C]hildren have a right to expert parents’ (Van Crombrugge 2008, p. 9) and that therefore parents should do all they can to ‘inform themselves as much as possible about children’ (Van Crombrugge 2008, p. 9). Statements like this completely eschew the deliberately loose moral language of Archard’s account in favour of a clearly scientific notion of good parenting.

Increasingly, accounts of what children have a right to are based on specific developmental accounts of what children need, leading to prescriptive notions of

parental obligation. Thus, in the report of the Good Childhood Inquiry (Layard and Dunn 2009), a significant recommendation involves the establishment of a form of a civil birth ceremony, outlining parents' main responsibilities (see opening passage of this chapter). What is important to note, though, is that this section of the Report immediately follows the section on 'parenting education', and precedes the section entitled 'authoritative parenting'. Thus, the notion of what parents should do is firmly grounded in a substantive account of what children need that goes beyond moral intuitions about basic needs to promote a particular account of an optimal upbringing approach, without ever acknowledging, let alone defending, the values implicit in such an approach. Accounts of what parents should and shouldn't do are, throughout this report, couched not in any such moral conversation, but in a conversation about science and 'evidence', as in the following statement:

The evidence suggests that the best parenting induces unconditional love but also firmness in setting boundaries – what is sometimes called authoritative parenting. Parents should always give reason and avoid physical punishments. (Layard and Dunn 2009, p. 30)

Thus, the idea of 'doing the best for their child' is not, in the current cultural climate, interpreted as a general moral sense of commitment, but as a specific prescriptive norm: responsibility here, in fact, takes on a very narrow sense: parents have to be responsible for keeping up with the latest scientific research that informs them, on the basis of sound evidence, what the 'best' childrearing approach is. And if they can't do this, there are professionals out there to help them.

It is a liberal orthodoxy that, as Archard puts it, 'there are at least as many conceptions of the best upbringing as there are conceptions of the good life' (Archard 1993, p. 132). But this moral position has been superseded by a narrow view of 'what children need', which, in turn, strips parents of their deeper moral role while, at the same time, holding them responsible for the 'outcomes' of their parenting. Thus, while we have no substantial disagreement with positions like that of Archard, we think that not only is there a lot more we can say, as philosophers, about the parent-child relationship but also that in fact there is a danger in assuming that having worked out this conceptual account, philosophers have done their job and can step back and leave the nitty-gritty work to empirical psychologists.

What Children Need and the First-Person Perspective

A further problem with the conceptual link between parents' rights, children's rights and children's needs, in the current context, is in the way it has infiltrated into parents' understanding of their own relationships with their children, thus displacing the significance of the first-person account. As we have repeatedly argued, the moral questions involved in the experience of being a parent go all the way down. To suggest, as many theorists do, that there are aspects of 'what parents should do' that can be straightforwardly addressed by the findings of empirical psychology is not just to ignore the way in which, as discussed in Chap. 1, psychological concepts themselves

are infused with meaning, but also to overlook the crucial difference between the first-person and the third-person perspective.

As an example of this phenomenon, consider the following passage from *The terrible teens*, a popular book aimed at parents of teenagers. In the book, the author, Kate Figes, develops a perspective on parenting that implicitly assumes that there is a desirable end point of the process of parenting, namely, an ideal of the healthy/emotionally balanced child (an idea which, in turn, is construed as a child optimally equipped to cope with existing social reality). Discussing certain common features of this reality, Figes suggests that ‘the increased anxiety that comes from being the parent to an adolescent can also be eased through a conscious separating of one’s own emotional needs from theirs’ (Figes 2002, p. 48). She goes on to describe the mother of a teenage son who could not control her anxiety when he was out late at concerts. ‘But it’s my anxiety, not his’, says the mother, ‘and he’s clear now about the fact that I need him back at a particular time to suit my needs. A lot of the time I have to sit on my emotions so that he’s not constrained by them’ (Figes 2002). The writer and the interviewee have both here tacitly accepted the idea that there is an optimal end point, representing ‘what is good for the child’ – an end point that can, so it seems, be determined independently of the relationship between that particular parent and that particular child. From the parent’s point of view, the problem, then, becomes simply one of managing their respective emotions.

The mother goes on to describe how she felt when her son, at school in an area where gang violence was rife, told her of an incident in which a boy at his school accidentally shot himself. ‘He was an evil bastard’, said the son ‘and I wish he’d shot a few of his friends as well’. ‘Previously’, says the mother, ‘I would have tried to put the alternative view, that the boy was severely disadvantaged, but all I could say was that I could understand why he felt that way. It’s important to let them have that separateness’ (Figes 2002, pp. 48–49).

Why, though, does the mother feel that this is important? And who is it important for? These are the kinds of questions that simply cannot be asked within a language that circumscribes the parent-child relationship in the ways that we have identified here.

What the above discussion illustrates is that the idea that the moral limits to parental freedom can be determined by a specification of children’s needs in fact opens up more problems than it resolves. We do not want to reject the idea that it is ever possible to reach an informed, reasonable judgement on what children need; nor do we want to deny that there are clear-cut cases where we can confidently state that children are being harmed, or that their basic needs are being denied in such an extreme way as to justify removing them from their parents and placing them with carers who are better able to meet their needs. But what we want to argue is that the question ‘what do children need?’ is, first and foremost, a moral question, and thus that, while scientific findings may partly inform our answers to it, they cannot comprehensively address it. Furthermore, and relatedly, while this third-person question of ‘what do children need?’ may – indeed must – have some bearing on the first-person question ‘what does my child need from me?’ in any particular situation, the two questions are not equivalent. The first-person question is not reducible to the third-person question,

and the danger of the scientific account – a danger that philosophical work on parents and children’s rights does little to avert – is that we may come to believe that it is.

It is fairly appealing to go along with philosophical work that argues that children have a right to care and love, but the scientific account not only fills out these moral notions in empirical terms, but also links them to specific outcomes in the same empirical terms. Thus, the very language of rights, needs and corresponding duties, in the current cultural climate, becomes, like the scientific account alongside which it is used in the relevant policy and popular discourse, a way of diverting our attention away from other ways of talking about the parent-child relationship. Stating that parents have a responsibility to meet their children’s needs does not leave room for an appreciation of what it means to feel – as opposed to be – responsible for a child, or what it means to consider, as a parent, the question: ‘What does my child need from me now?’ Analogously, stating that children need ‘tough love’ and ‘authoritative but warm’ parenting in order to develop into emotionally healthy individuals does not leave room for an imaginative discussion of what it means to love a child; how, perhaps, loving a child is constitutive of the relationship with that child, not a requirement that can be explained from outside that relationship; and how, similarly, while part of parents’ care and love for their children may involve wanting things for them – things like ‘happiness’ or ‘success’ – what these terms mean and why one may as a parent consider them important cannot be understood independently of, indeed is partly constituted by, the experience of the relationship itself. This is not just to reiterate the familiar philosophical point that happiness, for example, means different things to different people, but to point out that it is precisely through and in the experience of being a parent of a child that one comes to understand, and possibly to reframe and reconsider, what one means by happiness and its place in human life.

A further consideration of this point may even lead one to question the neatness of the conceptual distinctions invoked by the above philosophical accounts, where children’s needs are independently defined by, for example, developmental psychologists, and the duties and limitations of the rights of parents are then derived from this conception. As Raimond Gaita puts it, ‘the requirement on parents to love their children unconditionally is not an external standard imposed from elsewhere. It is one of the standards internal to that love itself’ (Gaita 1998, p. 24).

Gaita’s point, we think, hints at the direction that we have been suggesting in thinking about parent-child relationships; namely, that we start from a detailed, descriptive account of the actual experience of being a parent, from the inside, as it were. What may seem at first glance to be mundane everyday ‘moments’ in the experience of being a parent can, we argue, serve as rich and philosophically fertile grounds for reflecting on the ethical and practical questions involved in upbringing. Yet descriptions of this experience are rarely found in philosophical literature on parents and children. This is not to say that philosophers are blind to the parent-child relationship itself, but while they often acknowledge that there is something special about this relationship, it is treated as a given in formulating philosophical discussions in particular areas of moral or political theory rather than as a philosophically fertile area in and of itself. Philosophy, in other words, when it addresses

parents at all (and it rarely does), has traditionally asked questions from *outside* the parent-child relationship: how do parents' desires to do the best for their children balance a collective concern for social justice and equality? (Brighouse and Swift 2009) How do parents' moral commitments to particular others, among them their children, conflict with general moral duties? What kind of a moral duty is involved in such relationships? (Jeske 2008) How can the obligations arising from the nature of intimate relationships be accommodated into an account of the self? (Helm 2010) How tolerant should the (liberal) state be in accommodating parents' wishes for their children's upbringing? How can the value of autonomy be reconciled with parents' right to pass on values? (Noggle 2002; Clayton 2006) Do parents have the right to induct their children into comprehensive doctrines? (Clayton 2006) Is the family politically and morally justifiable? (Munoz-Darde 1999) Do families constitute the best arrangements for bringing up children? (Brighouse and Swift 2006) Do parents have rights over their children, and if so, what kind of rights are they, and on what grounds are they justified? (Archard 1993; Brighouse and McAvoy 2010), and so on.

Brighouse and Swift, in their account of 'legitimate parental partiality', arguably go further than many earlier accounts in that they explicitly try to 'go beyond the near consensus *that* familial relationships are important to explain *why* they are important in identifying interests that only the family can help people to realize' (Brighouse and Swift 2009, p. 55) – yet ultimately, their aim is external to the actual parent-child relationship; it is an aim motivated by political theory, namely: 'to offer a theory about what states must leave parents free to do, with, or for their children if those parents and children are to enjoy the good distinctively made available by family relationship' (Brighouse and Swift 2009, p. 49).

Often, the (hypothetical or real) starting point for such discussions is a clearly defined decision or choice that is conceptualised as presenting a tension or a dilemma in the context of our moral judgements about parents: the choice of secondary school, the transmission of specific moral or religious viewpoints and decisions about the withholding or administration of medical treatment. Of course, as the discussion at the beginning of this chapter showed, it is often the extreme, clearly defined cases – the parent who physically abuses her child; the parent who brings her child up within an isolated, fundamentalist religious sect – that are most useful in testing the boundaries of our moral intuitions regarding what parents should and should not be permitted to do to their children. But, as suggested above, most of the daily practical deliberation and action of parents goes on within these boundaries, and, as the first-person account presented in Chap. 4 illustrates, most parenting has little to do with clearly delineated decisions, dilemmas or conflicts. Or, rather, while it may be the case that parents are faced with tricky moral choices, these do not present themselves as discrete problems outside the texture of their everyday interaction with their children.

Furthermore, presenting them in this way misleadingly paints a picture of the parent, or her position, as stable and fixed. Parents in much of political philosophy appear as fully formed beings with complete and clearly defined outlooks on life that they simply have to make choices about in the process of their parenting: to

impart or not to impart one's religious beliefs to one's child; to induct her or not to induct her into one's comprehensive conception of the good. In much the same way as the language of 'parenting styles', this paints a picture of parent-child relationships that is unrealistically closed and determinate and that cannot capture the ways in which one's values, how one understands them and the way they play out in one's life are themselves partly constituted by one's experience of being a parent. This alternative picture also reveals the two-way nature of the parent-child relationship, as opposed to the one-way structure of the scientific account, according to which parenting is about doing things for and to children in order to bring about a certain desirable outcome. This is not just an empirical point to remind us that children sometimes influence their parents as well as parents influencing their children; it is a partly phenomenological point about what it means to be a parent. This experiential, first-person meaning is revealed in accounts of the parent-child relationship, such as the following, offered by Ora, the heroine of David Grossman's novel, reflecting back on her years of being a mother:

A skilled sponge. Most of what she'd done for twenty-five years was mop up everything that poured out of the three of them, each in his own way, everything they spat out constantly over the years into the family space. She'd mopped up all the good and all the bad that came out of them – mainly the bad, she thinks bitterly, prolonging her self-castigation though she knows in the depths of her heart that she's distorting things, wronging them and herself, yet still she refuses to give up the bitter spew that flies out of her in all directions: so many toxins and acids she's absorbed, all the excrements of body and soul, all the excess baggage of their childhood and their adolescence and adulthood. But someone had to absorb all that, didn't they? (Grossman 2010, p. 277)

In short, coming up with a theoretical resolution of the question about the limits of parental pluralism should not lead us to assume that we have thereby exhausted all the moral and political questions about parenting, nor should recourse to developmental psychology lead us to assume that we can circumvent the moral questions at the heart of this experience. To think that we have captured the meaning of 'parental obligation' through an account of legitimacy in upbringing based on a theory of children's needs is analogous to thinking that we have offered an exhaustive account of the meaning of guilt through describing a theory of criminal culpability.

Finally, in exploring some problems with the conceptual language of rights, duties and needs, we come to some more explicit contemporary instances of the way this language has entered the realm of parent-child relationships. Within the contemporary context of parenting policy that we have been addressing here, several recent practices and policy initiatives have explicitly invoked the language of rights and duties in talking about parents and children.

Parenting Contracts, Parenting Orders, an Upbringing Pledge

Some of the latest manifestations of the scientific account and its instrumental logic involve introducing a form of 'rights discourse' not only into theoretical political work on parents and children, as addressed by theorists such as Barbara Arneil,

Harry Brighouse, Onora O'Neill and Ferdinand Shoeman, but also into the very structure of the parent-child relationship itself through explicitly contractual formulations such as the 'upbringing pledge' or 'civil birth ceremony', which envisage a form of contract, or vow, laying out parents' obligations towards their children. An initiative which has attracted some public attention in this regard is the recent proposal by Hans Van Crombrugge (Van Crombrugge 2008) for an 'upbringing pledge'. Lambeir and Ramaekers (2007) offer a sustained philosophical critique of this initiative,² and in doing so, both articulate some important insights regarding the problem of using a language of rights to think about the parent-child relationship and echo some of the points raised in the preceding chapters concerning the 'scientisation' and instrumentality of the new discourse of parenting.

Lambeir and Ramaekers argue that while we cannot deny the importance of parents' concern with their children's needs to be cared for and nurtured, 'something of the uniqueness of the parent-child relationship seems to be occluded by the language of rights and duties as that relationship becomes narrowed down to the confines of a contractual agreement' (Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007, p. 95). They draw on the work of Annette Baier, who argues that thinking of a relationship in terms of rights and duties casts it 'in terms of a relationship between autonomous persons – in principle, free and equal in power – entered into from a sense of justice. What stands centre-stage here is respect for equal rights to formal goods, such as the right to freedom of speech, to freedom of association, to freedom of religion, etc.' (Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007, p. 101).

In voicing this critique, Baier, and Lambeir and Ramaekers following her, hint at some of the ways in which there is something particular about the parent-child relationship which makes it both significantly different from other intimate human relationships and impossible to capture within a language that contrasts 'political' with 'intimate', 'instrumental' with 'spontaneous' or 'care' with 'obligation'. Thus, Baier, in describing how the parent-child relationship, which is by nature a caring relationship, differs in at least three aspects from a moral relationship based upon notions of justice, states that: 'it is intimate, it is unchosen, and it is between unequals' (Baier, quoted in Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007). Acknowledging this requires that we acknowledge not just the intimacy but the inherent aspect of dependency and, crucially, of contingency and unpredictability in this relationship. To fail to do so yields a picture of 'a strange world; it is one in which individuals are grown up before they have been born; in which boys are men before they have been children; a world where neither mother, nor sister, nor wife exist' (Benhabib, quoted in Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007).

The 'unchosen' aspect of the relationship hints, we think, not just at the familiar point that we do not choose our parents or our children but at the fact that this is an ongoing aspect of the relationship itself, not just an empirical fact about the moment of conception (issues of genetic engineering notwithstanding). We can never entirely

²Lambeir and Ramaekers' 2007 paper refers to the original (2005) Dutch publication of Van Crombrugge's work, which, in the absence of an official translation by the author, was referred to in this paper as a 'parenting contract'.

choose or control how our children will turn out, or how much and in what ways we ourselves will be changed by our children and by our relationship with them. Being a parent thus involves, in Cora Diamond's phrase, a kind of 'openness to surprise' (Diamond 1996, p. 313). Baier's work shows us how a very different notion of obligation emerges from this account of the experience of being a parent: a notion of moral requirement in which, rather than freely choosing an obligation, parents, as Ramaekers and Lambeir put it, in a sense 'find themselves in it' (cf. Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007, p. 100).

In elaborating on this notion and developing their corresponding critique of the parenting contract/upbringing pledge, Lambeir and Ramaekers show how the instrumental and legalistic language in which such contractual initiatives are formulated makes other kinds of language increasingly inaccessible to us. They connect this, too, to the perceived need, both by social agents and by parents themselves, for parents to become experts, skilled practitioners of the latest scientifically verified methods of 'good parenting'. In so doing, they echo some of the critiques we discussed in Chap. 2 concerning the way in which parenting seems to be increasingly subsumed within a language of technical rationality and 'performativity'. The very notion of an 'upbringing pledge' encourages us to think of parents as subjects whose behaviour can become an object of public evaluation, thus embedding the practice of parenting in the discourse of competences and the sphere of prevention and remediation (Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007, p. 104). As they point out, this conception of parenting 'burdens parents with a new sense of guilt, the sense of always falling short'. This sense results from the 'public longing for competent and effective parenting – a sense of falling short prompted by the incorporation of parenting into the project of science that instigates the need for professional support' (Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007, p. 104).

Recent initiatives in the UK, such as the requirement on all schools to have in place 'home-school agreements', while serving a very different purpose (namely, to regulate relationships between parents and schools), adopt exactly the same kind of logic and language. As the opening statement on the official government website, Directgov, where home-school agreements are introduced, states: 'As a parent, you can make an enormous difference to your child's chances of success in school'.³

The premise here is exactly the same as that discussed above regarding best parenting: children need certain things in order to develop optimally; what these are have been established by scientific research, as has the crucial role that parents need to play in guaranteeing, as far as possible, that their children's development follows this established path. Laying out what parents' obligations are in this regard will then serve as an added incentive in ensuring that, as a society, we meet children's right to 'the best possible upbringing'. Again, there is no room from within this account for a conversation on what kinds of interaction are most valuable in a parent-child relationship, to whom and why.

³http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/SchoolLife/DG_4016015, retrieved January, 2011.

'Rights-Talk' Versus 'Intimacy'

The above account may suggest that we are siding with critics such as Annette Baier, Onora O'Neill and Ferdinand Schoeman, who have developed important philosophical arguments to the effect that the language of rights and duties is inappropriately used in the context of intimate relationships, like the parent-child relationship, which are more aptly talked about in terms of love and care.

Some theorists working within this vein are concerned primarily about the way in which thinking of children as rights-bearers can distort, and actually damage, some intrinsic quality of the parent-child relationship, given the conceptual implication that if children are rights-bearers, parents, amongst others, have corresponding obligations towards them. As O'Neill puts it (in Brighouse and McAvoy 2010, pp. 79–80):

Any parent who refrains from doing anything more than the child has a right to will be failing to discharge all the obligations of parenthood. The child will be better off, and the relationship more fulfilling, if the parent regards the child with love and care, not as merely someone who has rights against her.

An important point O'Neill makes in this regard (and one often overlooked by advocates of some form of the children's liberation thesis – see e.g. Claire Cassidy 2007) is that the essential purpose at the heart of the historical and philosophical conception of human rights, enshrined in the UN declaration, is 'to empower the powerless'. Rights cannot, however, have this function for children, 'because the vulnerability and dependence of children is not an ameliorable artifice of unjust social institutions; it is a natural feature of their biological condition'. The way for children to overcome their dependence and vulnerability is, as O'Neill puts it, 'to grow up' (in Brighouse and McAvoy 2010, pp. 79–80).

Ferdinand Schoeman (1980) has articulated a similar view as part of his more general, and more radical, argument against the employment of 'rights discourse' in the field of intimate relationships. While Schoeman acknowledges, along with most liberal theorists, that children have welfare rights, 'talk about rights of children', he claims, may 'encourage people to think that the proper relationship between themselves and their children is the abstract one that the language of rights is forged to suit' (Schoeman 1980, p. 9). Yet it is precisely, he argues, 'via intimate relationships' that one 'transcends abstract and rather impersonal relationships with others and enters personal and meaningful relationships and unions' (Schoeman 1980, p. 14) – the kind of relationships that are essential to who we are as persons. Rights, Schoeman argues, emphasise people as separate, while relationships emphasise union. 'The language of rights typically helps us to sharpen our appreciation of the moral boundaries which separate people, emphasising the appropriateness of seeing other persons as independent and autonomous agents' (Schoeman 1980, p. 14). In doing so, it inevitably introduces the prospect of state intervention that 'depresses a sense of security'. This is similar to the points made by, for example, Baier (see Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007) on the centrality of trust in parent-child relationships.

Defenders of the ‘limited parental rights view’ within liberal theory, discussed above, such as Archard and Brighouse, generally acknowledge the force of critiques such as Schoeman’s and O’Neill’s, but argue, nevertheless, that the ‘morally full relationship’ envisaged by this account ‘is compatible with seeing the child as having some specific rights which one is required to observe, and which one is in a uniquely suitable position to protect’ (Brighouse and McAvoy 2010, p. 80). Furthermore, as such theorists argue, the political acknowledgement of children’s rights, problematic as it may be, represents important moral progress as it draws the attention of welfare agencies, governments and so on to the independent standing of the child and the centrality of her interests in determining policy (Brighouse and McAvoy 2010, p. 81). Similarly, Brennan and Noggle (1997) argue that both ‘rights discourse’ and ‘relationships discourse’ enshrine the unique value of persons, and so are not incompatible, and that, furthermore, it is a good thing that children are, through a conceptualisation of them as rights-bearers, thus placed in the public realm so they are not at the mercy of their parents. And David Archard surely is correct in pointing out that the concern with the shift to a rights-based moral theory rather than a moral theory that includes rights, ‘does not show that it would be a mistake to talk of children as having rights; merely that to talk only of rights might be insufficient’ (Archard 1993, p. 87). Or again, as Brighouse puts it, ‘[R]ights need not vie with love and care in a relationship – they can instead shape the relationship in which love has a proper place’ (Brighouse 2002, p. 34).

But our articulation of an alternative way of thinking about parent-child relationships is not an attempt to side with the ‘care and intimacy’ position as opposed to the ‘rights and duties’ position in these debates. (See also our discussion in Chap.3.) The contrast we want to draw is not so much between love, care and intimacy on the one hand and rights, needs and duties on the other, but between the inside and the outside perspective. This contrast in fact cuts across the perceived divide between the language of care and love and the language of rights and duties. To appreciate this point, consider the observation, discussed in Chap. 1, that one of the effects of the dominance of the scientific account is that terms like ‘love’ and ‘care’ – which, in the philosophical work of Baier, Shoeman and others, are seen as qualitatively different from terms such as ‘rights’ and ‘duties’ – are now themselves conceptualised within the same instrumental logic as the scientific accounts of developmental psychology, as in the title of Gerhardt’s book, *Why love matters*.

What we want to challenge, then, is not the language of rights itself but the way in which this language serves to focus our attention on end points outside the parent-child relationship itself, and to obscure the ways in which these end points themselves are in fact issues of ethical and conceptual complexity. It is not that talking of rights, responsibilities and needs is out of place in the context of thinking about parenting, but rather that there is an irreducible difference between a theoretical notion of ‘responsibility’ that may be presented to parents as an external requirement – as in the proposal for a parenting contract – and the way in which, through being a parent, one comes to understand what it means to feel and to be responsible for a child.

As argued above, what we want to insist on is that third-person questions about ‘what children need’ are, in an important sense, not the same kind of questions as

a parent's question about 'what does my child need now?' Offering a contrast between intimacy and rights does not get round this problem, as intimacy and love too, in the current way of talking, are subsumed into the same third-person accounts ('children need love...'). Beginning from the first-person perspective, on the other hand, can show us how the very notions of intimacy, love and care take their particular human and moral meaning from the relationship itself. As Buber suggests in talking about trust within teacher–pupil relationships (Buber 1947, p. 107), love and care are relational qualities, not given quantities that exist outside the relationship or character traits or skills that can be learned or acquired. It is for this reason that the experience of feeling love for a child can give rise to a new understanding of what it means to love, which may not have been available even to someone with a great deal of experience of loving relationships.

We have some sympathy for the limited conception of parents' rights discussed above. But what we want to emphasise in the current discussion is that our own position does not constitute an attempt to articulate, defend, amend or challenge some version of these different conceptual frameworks concerning the rights and duties of parents towards their children on the one hand and the state on the other. Rather, what we want to do is to show how, while this kind of theoretical work offers us valuable tools in helping to guide policy decisions about children and families as a social group, it, as such, represents another aspect of what we have referred to as the third-person perspective and thus cannot offer a full picture of the parent-child relationship.

Even theorists like Schoeman who reject the use of the language of rights and obligations as a way to think about parents and families and attempt to ground or justify 'the moral status of the family' or 'parental obligations' in terms of the intrinsic trust and intimacy of the parent-child relationship are essentially posing a question from *outside* the parent-child relationship itself. This is true too of philosophers who challenge the framework of mainstream liberal political theory, such as Barbra Arneil, who argues that 'the broad care of children was of no concern to early liberal thinkers because it belonged to the private, as opposed to public sphere' (Arneil 2002, p. 73) and, being a largely female occupation, fell outside political theory. Arneil's point is that 'by choosing the vehicle of rights to express children's needs, [theorists] ultimately import the conceptualisation of the individual, state and society implicit in liberal theory' (Arneil 2002, p. 75). Challenging the assumption that rights lead to an improved life for children, Arneil echoes O'Neill's point that, compared to other groups whose rights we may want to defend, children's dependence is a temporary state from which they grow out of, and she suggests that we adopt an ethics of care approach as an alternative position to the liberal focus on rights and obligations. On this alternative conception, questions about how to treat children and families would be reconfigured not as questions about power, authority and legitimacy, but as questions of 'how do we best care for children, and who should do it' (Arneil 2002, p. 75).

In asking 'What would an ethic of care applied to children look like? What would the implications be for the role of the family and state in children's lives in a liberal democracy?' (Arneil 2002 p. 89), Arneil introduces an important correlative to rights discourse and makes some valuable suggestions for public policy towards

families of a more ‘proactive, problem-solving’ rather than an adversarial form. Yet ultimately, Arneil, like the other theorists referred to here, is still asking a political question from the outside: a question *about* parents and families. But to ask questions about the parent-child relationship from the perspective of a particular moral or political theory, whether or not one conceives of this relationship primarily in terms of care and intimacy, in terms of obligation, or in terms of an account that attempts to incorporate both these conceptual frameworks – is to ask very different questions from the ones we are interested in here, namely, the questions that parents ask *themselves*: what should I do? Thinking about the various forms this question can take, as described in the example of the mother with the toddler in Chap. 4, shows us how the ethical issues inherent in parents’ own relationships with their children cannot be either conceptualised within or opposed to the third-person perspective of either scientific parenting or parents’ and children’s rights. It also suggests different ways of thinking about notions such as responsibility, obligation and care, as we will discuss more fully in Chap. 6.

Our aim, then, is not to add our voice to the debates over whether or not ‘rights discourse’ is inherently in tension with the intimate nature of the parent-child relationship. Rather, we want to show how to assume that the moral dimension in parent-child relationships is somehow exhausted by considering, or even resolving, these debates, is to miss out on the crucial first-person perspective which we are articulating here. In a sense, both proponents of the limited parental rights view and the ‘care and intimacy’ view are representative of a kind of third-person discourse. While this level of discourse is clearly important in offering conceptual tools for thinking about how society, as a collective, should treat children, it cannot on its own offer any specific guidelines to individual parents trying to figure out how to act with their children. This is not to say that we can or should ignore it in our actions and deliberations as parents. Indeed, we cannot ignore it, for we exist, as parents, not in a bubble of intimate, one-on-one relationships with an individual child but as social and political beings, making sense of our lives within a web of meanings that cannot, by definition, be purely personal. Indeed, it is largely for this reason that the view defended by Schoeman, according to which ‘rights-discourse’ is distorting of some intrinsic, essential quality of intimate human relationships, is as inadequate as the very view that it is attacking in terms of providing a full picture of the parent-child relationship. For to say that this relationship is appropriately captured in terms of notions such as love, intimacy and trust, is both to fall into the trap of positing a false dichotomy between the personal and the political, but also to crucially miss out some of the significant and irreducible aspects of the parent-child relationship that render it quite unlike other relationships (those between lovers or friends, for example) that are, perhaps, appropriately described in terms of intimacy. In fact, in emphasising the notion of ‘intimacy’ as contrasted with ‘rights’, theorists such as Schoeman fall into the same trap as critics like Furedi (2001) and Bristow (2009) who reject the ‘politicisation’ of parenting. For the very argument that ‘moral and social philosophy have concentrated almost exclusively on abstract relationships among people, emphasising either individual autonomy or social well-being’ (Schoeman 1980, p. 6), thus ignoring key aspects of our moral experience – namely

intimate relationships – assumes and entrenches the contrast between the intimate and the political.

This is evident in fact in Schoeman's claim that '[I]deally the relationship between parent and infant involves an awareness of a kind of union between people which is perhaps more suitably described in a poetic spiritual language than an analytic moral terminology. We share ourselves with those with who we are intimate [...]and] this makes for non-abstract moral relationships in which talk of rights of others, respect for others and even welfare of others is, to some extent, irrelevant' (Schoeman 1980, p. 8). But this has an odd ring to it: it is not, surely, that parents do not think about the welfare of their child, and this is, in an important sense, a political issue, but we cannot separate out its political meaning from the question of what meaning an individual parent assigns to the notion of her particular child's well-being.

What the above discussion suggests is that the question about what is more appropriate in talking about parents and children, rights-talk or talk of intimacy, or what trumps what, is, in a sense, the wrong question. It is not the case that talk of the rights of the parent or rights of the child must always trump conceptualisations of intimacy, love and trust as the basis of the parent-child relationship, or vice versa. Nor is it a simple matter of saying that we can use the discourse of rights and duties to frame our discussions at the level of legal decisions and policy guidelines in the public realm but that it can have no bearing on the individual decisions that parents make for their children. However, while it would be misleading to suggest that parents can carve off a sphere of intimate relationships untainted by the legal and political language and values of the public sphere, it certainly seems as if, were parents to come to think of their own parenting practice and decisions predominantly in terms of rights and duties, something would appear to have gone badly wrong. The kinds of policy initiatives that encourage parents to adopt such a view, therefore, are, in our view, deeply problematic, as discussed in the above examples. What we lose sight of in unthinkingly using the language of 'children's needs' and corresponding rights and duties, without asking ourselves what these needs are *for*, is the point that, as Archard seems to imply, ethics trumps rights. To say someone has a right to something is, as discussed above, to implicitly rely on prior ethical conceptions and commitments. But to say that ethics trumps rights is not to say that we can assume a prior, morally substantive description of the parent-child relationship like, for instance, the ontologically and ethically prior relationship of care defended by Noddings. Rather it is to acknowledge that ethics goes all the way down, and that it is in understanding and describing parents' questions of 'what to do', that we can tease out and address the ethical significance of the daily experience of being a parent.

The fact that the public and policy discourse on parenting is, increasingly, overwhelmingly framed in 'neutral', scientific, third-person terms, means that increasingly, parents are internalising this language so that it becomes part of how they think about their own practice. It then becomes harder and harder to talk about being a parent in other languages – languages which do not straightforwardly contrast 'care' and 'intimacy' with 'rights' and 'obligations', or try to reduce one to the other

or accommodate one within the other; but rather, languages which offer us a different understanding of what these notions might mean, and how they are irreducibly reflected in the everyday texture of our relationships with our children.

The work of Winnicott is instructive in grasping just how both notions of ‘obligation’ and ‘responsibility’ – and even ‘ownership’ – no less than notions of love, care and trust, all obtain their meaning from, at the same time as being constitutive of, the parent-child relationship, rather than representing alternative ways to theorise or characterise this relationship from the outside. Winnicott describes the existential significance – often overwhelming in its impact – of being a parent to a child: ‘This little boy or girl will be yours in the deepest possible sense, and you will be his or hers’ (1964, p. 20). This existential account cannot and should not be diminished by theoretical work in the tradition of liberal political thought which, following on from Locke, warns us, as Archard does, against the political and moral pitfalls of a ‘proprietary account’ of parents as owners of their children. This same phrase of Winnicott’s also alerts us to another feature of the parent-child relationship often downplayed in popular literature and policy informed by contemporary developmental psychology: the child here, in an important sense, owns the parent.

In a climate where discussions of parenting overwhelmingly use the language of ‘needs’ and corresponding ‘rights’ in developmental terms presented as scientific and neutral, we are in danger of being seduced away from the important sense in which statements like ‘children need to be cared for’ capture a moral obligation to respond to children as human beings and of forgetting that thinking about what children need, either as parents or as a society, has to be part of a moral conversation. A careful consideration of individual children with individual parents can illustrate the way the concepts with which we describe what goes on in parent-child relationships are not only irreducibly ethical but are inseparable from the description of the relationship itself. Here, for example, is a passage from Ian McEwan’s novel, *The child in time*, in which Stephen has just woken up his 3-year-old daughter, Kate, and is getting her ready for a trip to the supermarket:

The oddity of sunshine on a freezing day intrigued her. For once she cooperated in being dressed. She stood between his knees while he guided her limbs into her winter underwear. Her body was so compact, so unblemished. He picked her up and buried his face in her belly, pretending to bite her. The little body smelled of bed warmth and milk. She squealed and writhed, and when he put her down she begged him to do it again.

He buttoned her woollen shirt, helped her into a thick sweater and fastened her dungarees. She began a vague, abstracted chant which meandered between improvisation, nursery rhymes and snatches of Christmas carols. He sat her in his chair, put her socks on and laced her boots. When he knelt in front of her she stroked his hair. Like many little girls she was quaintly protective towards her father. Before they left the flat she would make sure he buttoned his coat to the top. (McEwan 1997, p. 13)

Here we see how Kate, the child in time, is both dependent and autonomous; how Stephen is both protective and protected by her; how he, in recalling this moment to himself, reads it in terms both of an objective knowledge of child development (‘like many little girls...’) and of his own experience of their intimacy. Kate, and Stephen’s experience of her, cannot, either physically or emotionally, be contained.

She squirms and writhes away from him, yet she is fully compliant with his caring administration to her needs; she is completely preoccupied with the internal world of her chants and rhymes, and yet fully engaged in his playfulness with her. The unpredictability of this real child and the constant interplay and tension between control and release, dependency and autonomy, being cared for and caring for, run through their interaction, and both give it substance and hint at its fragility and contingency – fragility and contingency that are all too painfully encapsulated in the single instant that, as readers will know, forms the dramatic focus of the novel.

At the same time, this real, solid yet unpredictable child – the child 'in time' – is contrasted with the abstract, general, fully accounted-for and theorised Child of the Official Commission on Childcare where Stephen is employed. The contrast runs through the book and is, we think, a powerful example of the contrast between the language of the third person that we have been describing here and the language of the first person.

Interestingly, Arneil, in concluding her discussion of the ethics of care as an alternative to the liberal discourse of rights and duties in matters concerning the family, makes a concrete recommendation:

The state's notion of obligation to children would not begin and end with the ministries of education and social welfare. Rather it might entail a Ministry of Children, which would encompass all children and their families from birth onwards, with their full range of developmental needs. (Arneil 2002, p. 90)

The worry we articulated in Chap. 1, however, is that in a sense, this is exactly what has come to pass. Yet both in policy discourse and in philosophical work of the type discussed here, 'developmental needs' are not seen as a subject for moral and philosophical attention; they are rather simply some form of 'raw data' – an empirical given to be negotiated by an ethic of care or an ethic of justice.

Brennan and Noggle discuss the implications for their theory of the 'moral nature of parenting', but the point we are making is that the ethical problems and issues at the heart of parenting are not exhausted or even addressed by talking of these public and political perspectives. In taking this line, we are also perhaps suggesting a broader conception of ethics, one that is not primarily about obligation and duty but about how to live. As Bernard Williams suggested, '[T]here could be a way of doing moral philosophy that started from the ways in which we experience our ethical life' (Williams 1985, p. 93).

As we have been arguing in the account we are developing here, the full picture of how this intertwining of the intimate, the personal, the political and the moral is enmeshed in the everyday practices of parents with their children, can be better revealed through an imaginative engagement with thick descriptions of parenting 'in the first person' than through theoretical accounts of the type discussed here.

Chapter 6

Existential Anxiety, Responsibility and the Political Aspects of the Family

What concerns us all and cannot therefore be turned over to the special science of pedagogy is the relation between grown-ups and children in general or, putting it in even more general and exact terms, our attitude toward the fact of natality: the fact that we have all come into the world by being born and that this world is constantly renewed through birth.

(Arendt 2006, p. 193)

Throughout the preceding chapters our concern has been to show how current predominant ways of talking about and understanding childrearing and the parent-child relationship block other ways of conceptualising the issues that are central to this arena of human life, and how these languages can even determine the very issues that are worth discussing in the first place. While exploring and examining these languages, by putting examples side by side and discussing some of the relevant theoretical positions, our concern throughout has been to show how they work, i.e. how they position parents and children in particular ways, how they invite parents to ask very particular questions and how the parent-child relationship has predominantly been conceptualised from what we called the third-person perspective. This kind of work may perhaps properly be called ‘assembling reminders for a particular purpose’, in the words of Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1953, #127). At the same time, in adopting this approach, our concern has also been to show that when one begins to conceptualise the arena of childrearing from within the parent-child relationship itself, specifically from the experience of what it means to be the parent of your own child, this opens up a space from which to ask a different set of questions about childrearing and the parent-child relationship. Trying to think through the parent-child relationship from the first-person perspective opens up a different kind of conversation about childrearing, about what it is parents should (not) do, about what it is children need or are entitled to and so on. Put differently, it enables one to see that there are other ways of speaking about childrearing and the parent-child relationship, or at the very least, that the current languages leave something out. It has been our aim throughout to show what this ‘something’ is that is not captured by the languages of psychology, of rights and duties, of natural parenting or of scientific parenting.

In this chapter, we will focus explicitly on some of the existential dimensions of being a parent that we have been referring to throughout the preceding chapters. We will be drawing on a particular set of philosophical resources, which seem to us, firstly, to capture and thematise exactly the kind of concerns we have been at pains to spell out in this book, and secondly, to open up further the kind of conversation about childrearing and the parent-child relationship which we have argued is being blocked by the dominant languages.

First, we will address the way in which the predominant ways of conceptualising childrearing and the parent-child relationship hold a particular attraction in our current cultural context. In a post-Enlightenment society, the traditional frameworks through which humans face and understand their existential condition are increasingly undermined by uncertainty and doubt. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman, we will show how the current predominant languages function as instruments that contribute to breaking down our existential condition into a series of well-defined, and thus apparently manageable, tasks and categories. In so doing they displace rather than confront the possibly limitless depth of the enormity of the reality of 'being a parent'. The way in which Stanley Cavell understands scepticism and the many ways in which some form of scepticism is implicated in our human condition will be helpful in spelling this out further. These ideas are not just (theoretically) interesting in and of themselves, but are significant in terms of what they entail for an understanding of responsibility and, by implication, what parental responsibility could mean vis-à-vis the way it is understood within contemporary predominant conceptualisations of childrearing and the parent-child relationship.

Second, we will try to go beyond an understanding of childrearing and the parent-child relationship as a scheme of one-to-one interactions – as for example in the (semi-)causal logic of 'achievability' discussed in Chap. 1, where parents are understood to be good parents when attending to their child's developmental needs; or as for example in the discussion of parental rights and duties, where what it means to be a parent is constructed in terms of what a child is entitled to (see Chap. 5). We do this by explicitly drawing on Hannah Arendt's understanding of the relationship between adults and their children in terms of a relationship between generations. This will also allow us to add a further element to the notion of parental responsibility in terms that extend beyond the kind of responsibility that is expected from parents within the confinement of one-to-one interactions with children. Connectedly, it will also enable us to spell out that there is, in an important sense, a political dimension to childrearing which has been lost, or at least relegated to the background, because of current predominant ways of conceptualising it.

Upbringing in an Age of Uncertainty and Doubt: Scepticism, Parental Responsibility and Existential Anxiety

There are broader cultural aspects of the appeal of the approaches to childrearing and to conceptualising the parent-child relationship discussed in the previous chapters. In relation to the language of rights and duties, Lambeir and Ramaekers have argued,

for example, that the attraction to this might have something to do with the recent postmodernist and poststructuralist currents that have swayed through our culture. These currents ‘have inscribed a sensitivity to difference, to otherness, in our culture and its self-understanding’, with the important consequence ‘that relationships that are typically understood in hierarchical terms, and of which the parent-child relationship is only one example, have lost their self-evidence because the ground has been cut beneath their feet’ (Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007, p. 99). They argue that

this increasing awareness of “otherness” and the incessant demand for attention to it have, in a sense, left us behind in a state of bewilderment, of not knowing what to do. In a sense, we think it can be argued that this has actually heralded a strong revival of the discourse of rights and duties. [...] That is, awareness of difference seems to have gone hand in hand with an appeal to rights: think, for example, of women’s rights movements, animal rights, minority rights, etc. Our answer, in postmodern times, to the problem of establishing an appropriate, moral way of dealing with those unequal in power (to use Baier’s examples: animals, the ill, the dying, children while still young [...]) seems to lie in a resort to the discourse of rights and duties. (Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007, p. 99)

The attraction the language of rights and duties holds thus is connected to a sense of trying to do justice to the other person’s otherness in a cultural context in which it seems to be increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to maintain relationships with one another – specifically, for our purposes, parents and children – on the basis of some substantive conception of the good.

Other analyses of broader cultural themes that we think can be usefully drawn upon in connection with the ways in which childrearing and the parent-child relationship are being conceptualised today, especially regarding the scientisation of parenting and the ways in which parents are increasingly pushed into some conception of good enough parenting, are suggested by sociological critics such as Zygmunt Bauman and (in an earlier but similar context) Christopher Lasch (1979). Bauman’s analysis strikes us as particularly pertinent to the account we have been developing here. Although Bauman does not specifically address current parenting practices, he remarks:

It is in the institution of the family that all the hauntingly contradictory aspects of human existence – mortal and immortal, doing and suffering, determining and being determined, being created and creating – most vividly meet and enter their never-ending game of mutual sustenance and reinvigoration. (Bauman 1999, p. 37)

Bauman laments the loss of the family as a ‘haven of stability’. While we would be reluctant to put it in this way, we would suggest that part of what has been lost, even in an era when ‘family’ has come to mean something far more loose and varied than in some traditional Western notions, is precisely the existential meaning described in the quotation. The very shift to the term ‘parenting’ can, of course, be seen as an understandable political move designed to accommodate the increasing pluralisation or, some would say, breakdown of the traditional, two-parent, nuclear family, as well as to acknowledge the unequal gender balance implicit in this arrangement, implying, instead, that bringing up children is, in principle, a task or a job conceptually distinct from biological relationships between adults and children, and is something that people of any gender or sexuality, in any kind of relationship, can do.

Yet in this shift, something has been lost. The reduction of parenting to a functional relationship and role, and the logic and language in which, as discussed above (see especially Chaps. 1 and 4), the aims and practices of parenting are described, make it harder for us to capture, or even to talk about, the existential meaning that Bauman describes above. Some critics of this discourse (see e.g. Furedi 2001) have suggested that one of its effects is to construct a form of ‘paranoia’ in parents, who would therefore be better off just left to their own devices, free from the interventions of experts and policy-makers and the dictates of academic research. Yet what we want to suggest, following Bauman, is that parents’ anxiety is not an artificial construct, but a human response to the real, and morally significant, existential experience of being a parent. What is demanded of us, then, is not to resolve this anxiety, or to dispel, it, but to fully understand and address it. Yet our current cultural climate is one in which collective ways to reach a shared understanding of and strategy for coping with such existential anxieties have been replaced by what Bauman calls ‘autonomous strategies’ (Bauman 1999, p. 42). Bauman quotes Adorno’s comment on how ‘terror before the abyss of the self is removed by the consciousness of being concerned with nothing so very different from arthritis or sinus trouble’ (Bauman 1999, p. 43). He elaborates on the shift from ‘health’ to ‘fitness’ as emblematic of this broader cultural shift. In a climate where we are promised a world in which few people will die of ‘natural causes’, our horizon is dominated by a ‘vision of such a life as may come to an end only because of the self’s neglect of duty, so that the self-contained and self-centred life policy with the care of the body firmly placed at its centre would truly become an adequate and sufficient source of life meaning. *When there are so many means to attend to, who would waste time in examining the ends?*’ (Bauman 1999, p. 43, our italics)

This account, we suggest, is analogous to the way in which the existential anxiety in the face of the enormity of the reality of ‘being a parent’ is broken down into a series of well-defined tasks: establishing sleeping routines, toilet training, controlling meal-time behaviour, etc., and replaced by a focused anxiety over whether one is succeeding at performing these tasks well. Thus, the various techniques of good parenting are offered as ‘solutions’ to reduce parental anxiety. The strategies offered by gurus such as Supernanny, backed up by the reassurance of ‘scientific evidence’, assure us that they will lead to desirable outcomes. All our focus then shifts to individuals and how they perform, and, likewise, the potential of ‘perfect parenting’ becomes a real vision: If one can only ‘do it right’, maybe one can dispel, once and for all, the anxiety. As Bauman puts it:

In its pure and unprocessed form the existential fear that makes us anxious and worried is unmanageable, intractable and therefore incapacitating. The only way to suppress that horrifying truth is to slice the great, overwhelming fear into smaller and manageable bits – recast the big issue we can do nothing about into a set of little “practical” tasks we can hope to be able to fulfil. Nothing calms better the dread one cannot eradicate than worrying and “doing something” about the trouble one can fight. (Bauman 1999, p. 44)

Yet the contemporary language and logic of parenting is so focused on means – providing secure attachment, managing sleep patterns, successful toilet training, weaning, behaviour management, emotional resilience training and giving ‘enough’ or ‘authoritative-enough’ love – that the ends are never even discussed.

The anxiety Bauman refers to here, and the ways in which we nowadays, according to his analysis, try to dispel it, can be usefully fleshed out further by drawing on Cavell's understanding of scepticism. That is, the ways in which the existential anxiety connected to the enormity of the reality of being a parent is addressed today – by an ever stronger focus on a 'science of parenting', or by a recourse to the (supposedly) analytical clarity of rights and duties or by a retreat into some form of 'natural parenting' – can be seen as what in Cavell's idiom could be called expressions of a sceptical attitude. This sheds further light on the first- versus third-person distinction we outlined in Chap. 2, and allows us to draw connections between this anxiety and an understanding of what parental responsibility is taken to mean nowadays.

Scepticism here is not to be understood as a philosophical position but, on Cavell's reading of it, as an existential feature of the human condition, which as such manifests itself most notably as the incessant quest for absolute certainty. The following passage from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is characteristic of this scepticism, as Cavell understands it:

"But then doesn't our understanding reach beyond all the examples?"—A very queer expression, and a quite natural one!—

But is that *all*? Isn't there a deeper explanation; or mustn't at least the *understanding* of the explanation be deeper? (Wittgenstein 1953, # 209)

The scene is one in which Wittgenstein is discussing the nature of understanding and explanation with an interlocutor. The very question asked by the interlocutor is exemplary of the sceptical move, as Cavell understands this. The sense conveyed by this question is that the examples we have – or more generally, the words we normally use, the ways in which we normally act, etc. – do not get to the 'essence' of things. Hence, the interlocutor's sense of dissatisfaction with having 'only' examples, and not something that offers more certainty (a definition of some sort or some kind of essence).

Importantly, this interlocutor is not just an imaginary third person, asking (philosophical) questions, but is in fact one of Wittgenstein's very own voices, Cavell argues (cf. Cavell 1996, p. 326; 1990, p. 83). It is important to stress this in order to see that the question asked – the question that demands, almost with a sense of exasperation, something more, something deeper than what is at our disposal, i.e. 'only' examples – is not an unnatural one, coming from some source outside us, but is in fact 'a quite natural one', i.e. it comes from ourselves. This is not to deny that the question cannot be asked by someone else, but it is also a voice within us, that is asking the question. Cavell sometimes speaks of this in terms of a voice of temptation (Cavell 1990, 1996). The above scene is thus not a staged academic discussion, but is interpreted by Cavell as a very natural human experience, which we can describe, in general terms, as an experience of disappointment with the words we normally (would) use because they (presumably) are somehow not powerful enough to express what we 'really' want to say, or somehow not firm enough to function as the foundation of our knowledge of the world and others in it – hence the search for something that grounds these words other than just me saying them.

Natural though this may be, existentially scepticism manifests itself in shapes we might find unwelcome. When we find ourselves confronted with what seems to be, in an anxious moment, the mere conventionality of our words, one response could be to dogmatically assert these words in order to (supposedly) recover 'firm ground', or more generally through any kind of foundationalism. Another response could be a shoulder-shrugging acceptance of the (supposed) conventionality of our words, hence conceding some sort of relativism or lapsing into cynicism (cf. Cavell 1979, p. 125). In both cases, Cavell is telling us here, something of our human condition is undermined. Cavell reads Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as an attempt 'to investigate the cost of our continuous temptation to knowledge' (Cavell 1979, p. 241). 'Something *is* under attack in Wittgenstein', Cavell says, 'ways of arriving at the certainty of our lives, pictures of closeness and connection, that themselves deny the conditions of closeness' (Cavell 1996, p. 331). It is difficult to get a grasp of this sense of closeness in a direct way. In fact, it seems that the closeness he is talking about here is something that we only seem to notice in the very attempt to articulate a kind of precision which we think our normal ways of speaking, acting, responding and so on cannot offer. It is a sense of closeness we come to feel when realising that our search for a more precise way of expressing something does not, in fact, get us any closer to the supposed essence we think we are looking for. Without being able to say that it was a very articulate kind of closeness in the first place, we seem to lose this sense of closeness by trying to pin it down. The sceptic finds, Cavell argues, 'that [the world] vanishes exactly with the effort to *make it present*' (Cavell 1987, p. 94).

As stated, on Cavell's reading, the sceptical voice is not an unnatural one, or rather, one's feeling of disappointment with or anxiety over what is humanly possible is not unnatural. It would, thus, be somewhat strange to say that scepticism is 'wrong' – which would come down to saying, at least on Cavell's understanding here, that part of our human condition is wrong. What is wrong here, if not the disappointment or the anxiety itself, is the very ways in which one tries to dissolve it. Trying to solve or tackle or refute scepticism is 'itself an expression of scepticism' (Cavell 1996, p. 326) because it is a denial of the very reality of scepticism. If scepticism is deeply implicated in the way we live our lives, it does not need to be solved or tackled or refuted, but rather somehow needs to be taken care of. Cavell conceives of this struggle with the threat of scepticism as a kind of 'spiritual struggle, specifically a struggle with the contrary depths of oneself' (Cavell 1996, p. 325–326).

For Cavell, this taking care of scepticism is understood in terms of some form of acceptance of one's humanity, of one's condition of finitude. In his understanding of it, scepticism begins as 'the insinuation of absence, of a line, or limitation', which then is followed by 'the creation of want, or desire'. Scepticism manifests itself, in Cavell's words, as 'the interpretation of metaphysical finitude as intellectual lack' (Cavell 1988, p. 51). Characteristically, then, scepticism is understood by Cavell as a failure to accept human finitude (see for example, Cavell 1988, p. 327).

This may seem a long way from the issues we are discussing in this book, but, in fact, they are very close to it. In the contemporary arena of childrearing, outbursts of scepticism show themselves in the repeated (and fairly transparent) attempts to find clear answers to all kinds of contingency, unpredictability, uncontrollability,

dependency on chance, surprises, etc. The incessant recourse to scientific evidence ('most effective ways to ensure your child's development'), or to some natural, unmediated state of relating to one's child ('natural parenting'), or to some idea of good enough parenting or to the analytically sound framework of rights and duties – all this bespeaks of an anxiety with the 'surprises, disappointments, accidental encounters, contingencies, and everything else to which human circumstance and history are heir' (Hogan and Smith 2003, p. 167). With reference to Arendt, what we are witnessing here is, in Smith's phrasing, a 'discomfort with natality', as for example expressed in a fear for the 'unpredictable and unconditioned' (Smith 2010, p. 368).

One way in which to understand the intrusion of the languages of (for example) psychology into our conceptualising of childrearing and the parent-child relationship is, then, exactly this: that the vocabulary we have at our disposal to conceptualise this area of human life is somehow not sufficient to express and capture what is 'really' going on in that relationship; that we need something deeper ('neuro-...'), something more precise (neat, clinical categorisations) that, presumably, will lead us to the heart of the matter. 'Skepticism's self-portrait', Cavell argues, 'tends to soberize, or respectify, or scientize itself, claiming, for example, greater precision or accuracy or intellectual scrupulousness than, for practical purposes, we are forced to practice in our ordinary lives' (Cavell 1988, p. 59). The scientisation of the parent-child relationship, as we have identified this in Chap. 1, is probably the clearest example of this move.

A more general way of putting this is to say that particular registers of our ways of expressing our lives with others are increasingly being perceived as no longer satisfactory. An example already used in Chap. 1 is that we no longer seem to speak about 'naughty boys', but instead talk about boys that have ADHD, or an antisocial behaviour disorder, or some type of self-regulation disorder (Timimi 2005). Another example is the following. In a webpost on how professional football culture is all-pervasive and is killing children's traditional, informal football culture, Viv Groskop, a journalist and regular contributor to the Observer, narrates the story of her son who, at the age of five, was yellow-carded:

"Hand! Ball!" the referee barked, flashing the card for inspection to an imaginary stadium crowd. Will shrugged and frowned. He didn't know you weren't supposed to pick up the ball. He was at a themed birthday party at a football training centre. A pitch had been hired for an hour. The referee – a gruff older man – came with the deal. And he played his role to the max.

What interests us here is the reaction to this incident by someone else, to whom the mother described it:

That sounds horrendous. That's too young to be playing a game which is properly refereed. That guy is crushing that child's self-esteem. He should not be involved in looking after children.

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/dec/19/childrens-football-competitive-organised-professionalism>, retrieved February 2011)

This reaction is characteristic of the way in which the language of developmental psychology has invaded our daily ways of speaking and thinking, as discussed in

Chap. 1. Characteristically, this event is understood and explained with the child's (developing/fragile) self-esteem in mind. Why not just say 'it makes the child miserable to be told he's got a yellow card'? we feel like asking. The voice of temptation here, the sceptical voice, is the voice that implies that it is not enough to 'just' say that it makes the child miserable to be told he has got a yellow card. We feel the need to search for something more – hence, the suggestion (which, presumably, satisfies this need) that the referee's actions will have a long-term developmental impact. A similar process is involved in the example we used in Chap. 5, from Figes, i.e. the example of the mother of a teenage son who is unable to control her anxiety when he is out late. This issue is solved by neatly dividing her own emotional needs from his, by separating what she needs from what he needs. It is striking that separateness in Figes' example has become a psychological condition. By framing it within the neat, clinical language of 'my emotional (or other) needs versus my son's emotional etc. needs', the notion of parents and children being separate from one another in a deep, existential sense of the word is relegated to the background.

What is particularly worrisome, we feel, is that this voice of temptation extends all the way to the moral registers of our language. Take again the example of the football referee. It no longer seems to count as 'satisfying' to say that the referee should not be allowed to act this way because he is dealing with human beings, with persons; we seem to need 'something more' in order to feel justified in condemning this referee for the way he behaved, i.e. we seem to need to know that his way of 'interacting' with the children is damaging their self-esteem. Or, on a similar level, it is no longer enough to 'know' that physically or otherwise abusing someone is something that is morally appalling in order to condemn the abuser; the collective possession of this kind of 'knowledge' seems to have been eroded. One now needs to establish that the abuse has in fact led to (for example) neurological damage (evidenced by means of the latest visual imaging) in order to determine the extent of disapproval.

Cavell's remarks about the cost of our temptation to knowledge, which he puts partly in terms of a loss of a sense of closeness to the world and others, can usefully be drawn on in the area of childrearing. The repeated shifts to what we have identified as the third-person perspective are expressions of this temptation to knowledge. And what is lost is our sense of a first-person perspective. The 'blindness' of the 'expert parent' (Chap. 1) is the cost of our fixation on doing the right thing.

Cavell's idiom is also helpful in fleshing out the anxiety we talked about in connection with being a parent. We remarked above, in connection with Bauman, that the anxiety parents feel is not, contrary to how Furedi theorises this, an artificial construct, but a human response to the real, and morally significant, existential experience of being a parent. We also said that we think that what is needed here – and one could perhaps call this a way of conceptualising parent support – is not to dispel this anxiety, but instead, to take it seriously for what it is, i.e. to try to understand and address it. This would mean something like allowing this anxiety to have a place in what it means to be a parent today. In this sense, both the attempt to dispel it by, for example, offering parents the prospect of a scientific approach to raising

their children, and the interpretation of it as part of a larger parenting culture that is being constructed by experts and policy makers, are in fact denying the real, existential, especially moral, undertones of this anxiety. Allowing this anxiety to have a place in one's experience as a parent could be usefully interpreted, we think, along the lines of what Cavell says in reference to the sceptical temptations. Cavell repeatedly stresses that scepticism is not something that has to be solved or refuted, but something that has, in some sense, to be taken care of. Another way of expressing this is to say that we somehow have to learn to live with these continual temptations to seek something deeper, something clearer, something surer.

Importantly, this account goes somewhat further than saying that what parents need to do is to learn to live with the uncertainties we inevitably face in our human lives, or to simply face up to the fact that we cannot control our lives. Put this way, this would come down to some kind of acceptance in the psychological sense of the word – and Figes' example is a good one here, accepting that both of them, her son and she herself, have emotional needs that might not match up. Rather, Cavell's point, it seems to us, is that we need to learn to live with the continuous temptations to certainty. In saying that we, as human beings, have to live with scepticism, the point is that we will be continuously tempted to go beyond what seems no longer satisfactory to us – which amounts to saying that there will never be a resolve, or at least, there may be only a very temporary one, after which the search for something firmer will emerge again. It is not, then, the uncontrollability of life as such that we need to learn to live with, but our continuous attempts at control, our continuous attempts at fixing the world and others in it. It is, thus, in a sense, ourselves we have to learn to live with. Put in terms more akin to the subject we are investigating here: living with scepticism, when applied to the arena of childrearing, means that in the world in which we live, it is an inevitable part of what it means to be a parent in contemporary conditions that, for example, one is called upon to 'professionalise' oneself, or finds that one has to do so. The scientisation of the parent-child relationship, for example, is thus part of the condition in which parents (have to) live today. Living with scepticism means exactly this: living with these continuous temptations.

Drawing further on Cavell's reading of scepticism and the ways in which it is reflected in current predominant conceptualisations of childrearing and the parent-child relationship, we want to develop a connected point about parental responsibility. In Chap. 1, we raised the question, against the background of what we identified as the scientisation of the parent-child relationship, of the extent to which parents are being positioned in such a way that the object of their daily, pedagogical concerns is in fact not their own child, but 'the child' or 'a child' as 'required' by a particular kind of society. The 'expert parent' is, in a sense, blind, we suggested – blind, that is, because she only 'sees' her child (and acts accordingly) through the lens of the frameworks and languages she is offered; she only 'sees' her child from the position she is manoeuvred into by, specifically, the languages of psychology. When one connect this to the idea of parental responsibility, it is not difficult to see that parents, in this context, are seen as responsible for their children's upbringing in a very specific, limited sense of the word. Within the dominant understanding of childrearing

and the parent-child relationship, as developed in Chap. 1, parental responsibility means responsibility for their children developing ‘smoothly’; it also means responsibility for the production of well-behaved and appropriately functioning citizens, with the definition of and routes to such functioning defined by the latest research in psychology; parents are understood to be responsible for attaining a certain (preconceived) idea(l) of what ‘good’, well-behaved children are. Connected to this, and specifically in relation to the so-called professionalisation of parents, parents are then also considered to be responsible for the correct execution of certain pedagogical actions, techniques and behaviour – all of which have been determined by the sciences that have claimed the area of childrearing. This, effectively, implies a confinement of the meaning of responsibility to something that belongs only within the one-to-one ‘parent-child’ interaction scheme.

Drawing further on Cavell and his reading of scepticism, we can start to sketch a much richer understanding of what parental responsibility can (and in fact, we argue, should) mean. Cavell’s understanding of scepticism is inherently connected to a sense of responsibility, specifically to a sense of avoiding some form of responsibility. The sceptical issue as an issue of disappointment – see, for example the scene from Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* quoted above – is in fact also an issue of responsibility. For Cavell, this disappointment and the subsequent search for something firmer, clearer, etc., should be understood, on an existential level, as an attempt – or a wish, as he sometimes calls it – to remove oneself (one’s self) from the claims that are made by the words one uses. ‘It is as though’, Cavell argues, ‘we try to get the world to provide answers in a way which is independent of our responsibility for *claiming* something to be so [...]’ (Cavell 1979, p. 216). The wish, then, is ‘a wish for the connection between my claims of knowledge and the objects upon which the claims are to fall to occur without my intervention, apart from my agreements’ (Cavell 1979, pp. 351–2). Another insightful way in which he puts this is in terms of ‘emptying out oneself’ from the claims made by the words that we speak. In a moment of sceptical temptation, it is as if ‘I must empty out *my* contribution to words, so that language itself, as if beyond me, exclusively takes over the responsibility for meaning’ (Cavell 1996, p. 339). In Cavell’s understanding, the consequences of this phenomenon are not to be treated lightly, for in emptying out our contribution to our words we stand in danger of renouncing the possibility of letting ourselves count and of letting ourselves be known. ‘What we lose’, Cavell says, ‘is a full realization of what we are saying; we no longer know what *we* mean’ (Cavell 1979, p. 207). In a sense, this is as much as saying that we lose ourselves (our selves).

The sceptical wish, as Cavell understands it, to put the burden of responsibility on the words themselves, is staged, we argue, in the ways in which parents are increasingly expected (and expect themselves) to be in a relationship with their child from a third-person perspective, and specifically in the ways in which parents are increasingly expected to justify whatever it is that they are doing with their children by reference to an understanding that is imposed on them from the outside. It is staged in the ways in which parents’ reasons for doing something are limited to what can be said from whatever evidence is offered from the latest research, or to what can be said from a particular rights framework, and so on. What is emptied

out is the first-person perspective. It is as though childrearing – not literally speaking, obviously, but in a very strong figurative sense of the word – is 'taken out of' their hands, is 'taken over' by something or someone else. Or more generally put, resorting to paradigms of parenting is a way of renouncing some form of responsibility – i.e. a type of responsibility which acknowledges the moral messiness of human encounters and their being subject to chance and risk. In a rather straightforward paraphrase of Cavell, what parents are in danger of losing in relying heavily or being made to rely heavily on, for example, the scientific languages of parenting, is a full realisation of what they are doing, a realisation of whatever meaning they can give from the perspective of the first-person (as we addressed this in Chap. 2).

In a passage on consent and community, and on the implications of (not) having a voice, Cavell makes a distinction between 'speaking instead of someone' and 'speaking someone's mind':

To speak for oneself politically is to speak for the others with whom you consent to association, and it is to consent to be spoken for by them – not as a parent speaks for you, i.e., instead of you, but as someone in mutuality speaks for you, i.e., speaks your mind. (Cavell 1979, p. 27)

In current conceptualisations of childrearing and the parent-child relationship, the scales seem to have tilted towards a 'speaking instead of'. The claims of parenting are with ever more fervour being voiced for parents (with reference to evidence, or rights and duties, or some naturally right way of acting). That claims of parenting can also be voiced by parents – in terms of reasons formulated from where they find themselves – is increasingly relegated to the background of the public debate.

The 'Political' Aspects of the Family and Parental Responsibility

An element of responsibility which we have not sufficiently emphasised yet is that it has inherently to do with the common, the public, with something communal. Cavell argues that what is implied by the sceptical move, or what it is expressive of, is a wish not to have to claim what the words one uses are in fact claiming. The sceptic does not want to speak – for this is to lay claim to something, hence also to speak for others, as words, by their very nature, are communal. Speaking, then, is laying claim to something communal – though, as Cavell says, '[W]ho those others are, for whom you speak and by whom you are spoken for, is not known a priori, though it is in practice generally treated as given' (Cavell 1979). Assuming responsibility for the words we express and mean is not just speaking for ourselves, it is at the same time presenting ourselves as an exemplar of the community we are part of, by virtue of the simple fact that we are employing meanings which are shared in a community. Put differently, words, because of their very nature, expose the one uttering those words, in the sense that the one uttering them is showing herself to lay claim to something communal, hence is showing herself as representative of some community. By wanting language to 'take over the responsibility for meaning' (Cavell 1996, p. 339), the sceptic also shows herself as not wanting to represent

some community. It is refusing to take part in some community, to speak for and to be spoken for by someone. This withdrawal comes with a price, though, as Cavell points out – the price being ‘having nothing (political) to say’ (Cavell 1979, p. 28).

Bringing this back to childrearing and the parent-child relationship, in as far as parental responsibility is understood along the lines sketched above, i.e. as confined by a third-person perspective, and in as far as the claims of parenting are made for parents rather than by parents, what tends to be lost here as well is the idea that parents are also representatives of some world, that they are standing for something and that they, accordingly, also have to pass on that world to their children. And connected to this, what tends to be lost is the possibility of understanding the idea of parental responsibility in ways that go beyond the scheme of one-to-one interactions. We will develop this somewhat further by drawing on Arendt. This will also allow us to bring out the ‘political aspects’ of the family – in contrast to the criticisms raised by Furedi and others of what they call the ‘politicisation’ of the family.

For Arendt, the essence of education¹ is ‘natality, the fact that human beings are *born* into the world’ (Arendt 2006, p. 171). This is to be understood in two ways. As Arendt puts this:

Human parents ... have not only summoned their children into life through conception and birth, they have simultaneously introduced them into a world. (Arendt 2006, p. 182)

The first sense refers to the natural process of procreation, a process that is, in one way or another, characteristic of all living beings. The second sense, however, refers to what it means to be born into a *human* world, to be introduced into and given a place in a meaningful world. Or, in the more active form that Arendt employs: ‘[to] insert ourselves into the human world’ (Arendt 1958, p. 176), something she also refers to as a ‘second birth’ (Arendt 1958, p. 176). Arendt, thus, emphasises that the child appears to the educator in two ways: as ‘a new human being’ and as ‘a becoming human being’. According to Arendt, this ‘corresponds to a double relationship, the relationship to the world on the one hand and the relationship to life on the other’ (Arendt 2006, p. 182). And she continues:

The child shares the state of becoming with all living things; in respect to life and its development, the child is a human being in process of becoming, just as a kitten is a cat in process of becoming. But the child is new only in relation to a world that was there before him, that will continue after his death, and in which he is to spend his life. (Arendt 2006, p. 182)

Pedagogically speaking, this double relationship corresponds to a double responsibility. ‘In education’, Arendt argues, ‘[parents] assume responsibility for both, for the

¹Arendt’s well-known essay *The crisis in education* was originally published in German as *Die Krise der Erziehung*. The English translation of *Erziehung* as *education* might be slightly misleading if ‘education’ is taken in a narrow sense, i.e. as pertaining to the formal processes of education as schooling. However, *Erziehung* first and foremost applies to those informal processes, mostly within the family, by which parents bring up their children. So though we will be using the official English translation *education*, we want to note that we are also taking this in its broader sense of childrearing. This is justified, we think, at least in the sense that what Arendt says in this essay about *Erziehung* being in a crisis applies both to parents and teachers, both to childrearing and schooling.

life and development of the child and for the continuance of the world' (Arendt 2006, p. 182). As such, it becomes clear why it is so important to stress that the child is also 'a new human being', since it is this way of being which distinguishes us from 'animal forms of life' (Arendt 2006, p. 182). And this has clear implications for education, for, as Arendt says:

[i]f the child were not a newcomer in this human world but simply a not yet finished living creature, education would be just a function of life and would need to consist in nothing save that concern for the sustenance of life and that training and practice in living that all animals assume in respect to their young. (Arendt 2006, p. 182)

Education (bringing up children), conceived of as a *human* activity, is, then, in an important sense much more than only a concern for a developing human being. Education (bringing up children) is first and foremost also a concern for the world, a responsibility 'for the continuance of the world' (Arendt 2006, p. 182).

This responsibility for the continuance of the world is itself conceived of by Arendt in a double way. On the one hand, this responsibility entails that educators (parents, teachers) take a protective stance towards the world 'to keep it from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation' (Arendt 2006, p. 182). The responsibility Arendt has in mind here is a responsibility for the existing world. Educators (parents, teachers) are taking upon themselves here the role of those who are representing the existing world and passing this on to their children. This role and the responsibility that comes with it imply, minimally, that parents show a willingness to represent the world, and that they have at least some idea of what it means to pass on something of value to the next generation. 'In any case', Arendt argues, 'the educators here stand in relation to the young as representatives of a world for which they must assume responsibility even though they themselves did not make it, and even though they may, secretly or openly, wish it were other than it is' (Arendt 2006, p. 186). On the other hand, and simultaneously, responsibility for the continuance of the world also entails taking care of the newness of the child, of the 'something that has never been before' (Arendt 2006, p. 185), such 'that this new thing comes to fruition in relation to the world as it is' (Arendt 2006, p. 186). According to Arendt, it is only and precisely through this that the world can renew itself. Education is, for Arendt, one of those 'most elementary and necessary activities of human society' by virtue of which it becomes possible that the world 'continuously renews itself through birth, through the arrival of new human beings' (Arendt 2006, p. 182).

This 'newness' of the newborn consists not in those things that supposedly make him 'unique', 'his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings', but rather 'is implicit in everything somebody says and does', in his speech and action (Arendt 1958, p. 179). It is through these activities that someone discloses/reveals 'who' he is, contrary to 'what' he is. The newness of the newborn is not, thus, about 'what' he is because of birth, but is essentially about what is possible, what can happen because of what he says and does. 'In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world [...]' (Arendt 1958, p. 179). A human life is a *human* life only through this speaking and acting. What is so important, for Arendt, in relation to speech and action, is that these

are characterised by what she calls ‘to take an initiative’, ‘to begin’ (Arendt 1958, p. 177), something ‘from which no human being can refrain and still be human’ (Arendt 1958, p. 176). To enter the human world through speech and action is ‘to take an initiative’, and it is through speech and action, thus conceived, ‘that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before’ (Arendt 1958, pp. 177–178). Through speech and action something with the ‘character of startling unexpectedness’ (Arendt 1958, p. 178) can emerge.

When Arendt, then, says that education (also) entails protecting the newness of the child (against the world), this can be understood as: ensuring the possibility that children can act and speak, that they can disclose/reveal ‘themselves’, ‘who’ they are, and thus (possibly) start something (a)new. What this requires, importantly, is to relinquish our hold on the world. Drawing on Arendt, and in connection with schooling, Masschelein and Simons argue that ‘continuing and renewing the world’ also means ‘to put the world at the child’s disposal, to expose it, to deliver it’ (Masschelein and Simons 2010, p. 537). The possibility of continuance and renewal of the world hangs on exactly this, Arendt tells us:

Our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings; but precisely because we can base our hope only on this, we destroy everything if we so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look. (Arendt 2006, p. 189)

Crucially, then, although an educator’s responsibility for the world (also) entails representing that world and passing it on to the next generation, this does not mean that we, as educators, should then also ‘dictate how it will look’ (Arendt 2006, p. 189), for this will ‘strike from the newcomers’ hands their own chance at the new’ (2006, p. 174). Education, then, has everything to do with finding a delicate balance. Or, as Arendt puts this:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. (Arendt 2006, p. 193)

Coming back to childrearing and the parent-child relationship, we can see that the ways in which these are understood in contemporary predominant conceptualisations capture only in a very limited sense what Arendt conceives of as the ‘essence’ of education. What being a responsible parent means today, as discussed in Chap. 1, is increasingly narrowed down to a concern for one’s child’s proper development, to a focus on ensuring optimal developmental opportunities and to staying in control of one’s child’s developmental process – it is, in Arendt’s terms, narrowed down to responsibility ‘for the life and development of the child’ (Arendt 2006, p. 182), reducing childrearing to not much more than ‘just a function of life’ (Arendt 2006, p. 182), hence downplaying what makes us distinctly human. Parents are being mobilised (and are pressured to increasingly mobilise themselves) in the service of their child’s development. What parents do (or do not do) is modelled

according to and judged along the lines of this conception of responsibility. There seems to be little, if any, space here for that other part of what pedagogical responsibility also means, i.e. an educator's (parent's, teacher's) responsibility for the continuance of the world, and for what that might entail. Within the predominant understanding, the burden of parents' responsibility is the burden of correct execution, of being perfect or good enough performers. It is not the existential burden of experiencing the weight of having done something for which they have to take full responsibility, something Gordon calls, in elucidating Arendt's concept of freedom, 'the burden of responsibility for the decisions that we make' (Gordon 1999, p. 166), or something we could call, with reference to Cavell, the burden of a responsibility that is connected to a full realisation of what we mean.

To be sure, this is not to say that parents no longer represent anything. Our point is that parents are increasingly incapacitated when it comes to having even the possibility of asking the question of what could be meaningful to conserve and pass on, for the 'ends' of childrearing are already taken for granted, are introduced into childrearing with the very languages that have come to determine their conceptual outlook today. It is, then, small wonder that parents are increasingly held 'accountable' today for what their children do – no longer just responsible, but accountable. In contemporary constellations, in which the goal of childrearing is taken for granted in the very languages we use, parents are responsible for tomorrow's society, for the production of end products which are already defined for them. Responsibility in this sense is always conformist in nature.

What this comes down to is that parents are no longer allowed to be moral agents in a rich sense of the word. Here we understand 'agent' not as in agency, understood as a person's subjective sense of being the author of their deeds, but as closely related to what Arendt calls 'action'. Current attention to parenting and the many styles that are out there (on the shelves, on television, in policy decisions) are all focused on parents' agency. The compartmentalisation of human life, and in this case of childrearing, into manageable steps and parts, all of which are backed up by scientific research – toilet training, eating behaviour, emotional training and developing attachment – are all meant to help parents to gain a certain control over their child's behaviour and accordingly to enhance their sense of agency. In contrast to this, our emphasis on the inevitability of an evaluative and moral background against which parents have to operate alerts us to the fact that what is at stake is not parents' agency, but the very idea of parents as moral agents, i.e. as beings who cannot, in the words of Seyla Benhabib, 'withdraw from moral judgment' on pain of 'ceasing to interact, to talk and act in the human community' (Benhabib 1992, p. 126). Whatever it is that parents do in the process of childrearing (even if this is taken to be something like enabling their children to experiment with taking a safe distance from them), this always involves judgements and values, and these decisions made by parents always (or at least always potentially) involve tensions due to competing frameworks of judgements and values. The real threat posed by the languages we have been discussing in the preceding chapters to our understanding of childrearing and the parent-child relationship is that they reduce the experience of being the parent of one's own child to a more or less coherent and unified account that presents itself as

the correct way of raising children, and in doing so diminishes parents' capacity and range for action, in the Arendtian sense identified here.

This Arendtian account of moral agency and the associated notion of responsibility can also be instructively brought to bear on the first-person account of the experience of being a parent that we articulated in Chap. 2. We argued there that what characterises a parent as a moral agent is not just the fact that, as in Bernard Williams' concept of moral reasoning, she is engaged in actions that will bring about changes in the world that are, in an important sense, 'her own', but also the awareness that these actions and changes may or may not affect her own child. In other words, what is at stake is not only the awareness of a sense of action, but, crucially, the awareness of always being in a relationship with one's own child. It is this, we suggest, that intensifies one's sense of responsibility. And it is this that characterises the first-person account of being a parent. What Arendt's account allows us to see in this context is that although there has probably never before been so much attention to parenting, to the importance of a 'good' relationship with one's children, even to the 'experience' of parents (for the latter, see, for example van der Pas 2003, and Weille 2011), this only captures the experience of being a parent in a very limited sense, i.e. from a third-person perspective. For what is central in these narratives is responsibility for one's child as an exemplar of 'the child'. In contrast to this, we want to argue that the immensity and moral demandingness of a parent's responsibility – or, drawing on Bauman, the anxiety connected to the experience of being a parent – lies in the relation to the newness of her own child. What complicates the idea of being a moral agent is that it is not just *I* who is bringing about changes in the world, but that this may or may not affect my own child, i.e. it may or may not affect her own ability to insert herself into the world (by action and speech). For all its attention to children and parents, to the relationship and the interaction between them, the current situation regarding parenting is thus, paradoxically, that it in fact incapacitates not just parents' but also children's opportunities for speech and action.

Likewise, as we argued in Chap. 2, 'parenting' and 'being a parent' cannot be cut off from other parts of a parent's social and personal life, since it is not a separate area in which she happens to be in relation to a particular child. Yet what has happened in the current climate is that the parent-child relationship has in fact been confined to some separate area – an area where parents 'do' certain things with their children, 'interact' with them – hence confining our understanding of parental responsibility to an understanding solely in terms of a responsibility for life and development.

In the current predominant conceptualisations of childrearing, there is, then, not much space for 'preserving newness'. While discussing the possibility of teaching to preserve newness, Levinson draws our attention to 'the impatience of those educators who attempt to transform the world on behalf of their students or who teach as though their desired future were already a reality' (1997, pp. 442–443). In contemporary parenting conditions, parents are increasingly pushed to act in ways similar to these educators. What we have been stressing throughout, however, is that if being a parent is to be more than 'parenting', more, that is, than a preoccupation with the kind of 'product' a parent is supposed to deliver, or a preoccupation

with maintaining the 'right' kind of relationship, then this must have something to do with preserving a sense of parents as moral agents; it must have something to do with seeing parents not as finding themselves in an already predefined relationship in which it is already determined who is taking what particular position, and who is allowed to do what, but as finding themselves in a relationship with their children in which things can still start anew.

The 'Political' Aspects of the Family

By drawing attention to a kind of responsibility that is different from an understanding that situates it only within the scheme of one-to-one interactions between educator (parent, teacher) and child, we also want to bring to mind a political dimension to childrearing which has been relegated to the background in current conceptualisations of the parent-child relationship. This political dimension is, we argue, another way of understanding what Arendt conceives of as an educator's responsibility for the continuance of the world, i.e. the responsibility that is connected to the fact that a child also makes itself present as 'a new human being' (2006, p. 182). Put differently, within current conceptualisations of the parent-child relationship and within the understanding of responsibility that goes hand-in-hand with them, the importance of childrearing – its existential weight – has been unduly confined to the domestic sphere within the four walls of the family. To be sure, by explicitly invoking, as we do here, some connection between childrearing and society at large – a connection other than the one implied in current conceptualisations of childrearing, where parents are responsible for bringing up their children to become fully functioning citizens – we are not arguing for some kind of naive utopian account of the family. The claim we want to develop here is that in as far as parents also have a responsibility for the continuance of the world, as spelled out above, this essentially means that there is something of the nature of politics, in the Arendtian sense, inherent to childrearing (conceived of as something that normally takes place within the varied forms of what today counts as 'family'). We are not seeking to establish the idea of the family as a political institution in its own right, but rather suggesting that we try to understand the family as a space in which political experiences are possible. The family, on this conception, is not a public space in its own right, but it is, we argue more modestly, a space that inherently involves some kind of public orientation. If anything, we argue, the task Arendt sets for educators, i.e. 'to prepare [our children] in advance for the task of renewing a common world' (Arendt 2006, p. 193), is a task that has political implications for both educators and children, or at the very least, a task that necessitates that we conceive of the family as a site with some public orientation, and of childrearing as an activity that can offer political experiences.

We realise that it might be somewhat problematic to argue for this while relying so heavily on Arendt, since Arendt herself, in *The human condition*, not only makes a rather sharp distinction between the private and the public space, but argues that this distinction 'corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have

existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city state' (1958, p. 28). What makes our endeavour to understand the family as a site that has a public orientation so problematic is Arendt's insistence that the private sphere – as, she says, 'indicated in the word itself' (Arendt 1958, p. 38) – literally means 'a state of being deprived of something' (Arendt 1958, p. 38). What the private sphere is deprived of is the presence of others. 'The privation of privacy lies in the absence of others', as Arendt puts it (Arendt 1958, p. 58). On Arendt's understanding, this implies that the private sphere is not 'real', is not a space in which one can live a life that deserves to be called 'fully human' (Arendt 1958, p. 38). For what is 'real', what is 'fully human' is fundamentally dependent on whether or not it 'appears in public' (Arendt 1958, p. 50). This is clearly related to the importance Arendt attaches to action and speech. It is only in the public realm that action and speech play a role; thus, it is only in the public realm that someone can be seen and heard:

Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life, compared to which even the richest and most satisfying family life can offer only the prolongation or multiplication of one's own position with its attending aspects and perspectives. The subjectivity of privacy can be prolonged and multiplied in a family, it can even become so strong that its weight is felt in the public realm; but this family "world" can never replace the reality rising out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators. Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear. (Arendt 1958, p. 50)

The family, then, cannot have any political significance, since it is not, on this reading, 'real', that is, it is not public life. The family is denied, thus, a certain worldliness; it is excluded from action and speech (cf. Long 1998). This means no more and no less than that whatever someone does within the walls of the family 'remains without significance and consequence to others, and what matters to him is without interest to other people' (Arendt 1958, p. 58).

However, we want to argue that it still makes good sense to argue that the family can be conceived of as having, as we called it, a public orientation, and that childrearing can offer political experiences. It would go beyond the scope of this book to investigate the public/private distinction, as conceived by Arendt, and to develop its full significance specifically in relation to the family. We will limit ourselves to a number of sources (Benhabib 1992; Long 1998; Pitkin 1981) who have offered inspiring readings of the distinction between the private and the public realms and have challenged the corresponding distinction of household/family versus political realm.

Seyla Benhabib, for instance, distinguishes between an 'agonistic view' and an 'associational view' of public space (Benhabib 1992, p. 93). On the first view, 'the public realm represents', according to Benhabib, 'that space of appearances in which moral and political greatness, heroism and pre-eminence are revealed, displayed, shared with others' (Benhabib 1992, p. 93). It is essentially 'a competitive space' (Benhabib 1992, p. 93). On the second view, a public space is a space that 'emerges whenever and wherever, in Arendt's words, "men act together in concert"' (Benhabib 1992, p. 93). This is the space 'where freedom can appear' (Arendt, quoted by Benhabib 1992, p. 93). It is this second view that is helpful in reinterpreting the

family as a potential public space, or more modestly, as we have put it here, as a space that has a public orientation. For on this interpretation, a public space is not constricted to a particular place 'in any topographical or institutional sense' (Benhabib 1992, p. 93). Any place can, on this reading, become a public space:

... a private dining room in which people gather to hear a *Samizdat* or in which dissidents meet with foreigners become public spaces; just as a field or a forest can also become public space if they are the object and the location of an "action in concert", of a demonstration to stop the construction of a highway or a military base, for example. (Benhabib 1992, p. 93)

This also applies to the family. All these spaces can become public spaces in as far as they are spaces in which people 'associate'. They can, as Benhabib says, 'become the "sites" of power, of common action coordinated through speech and persuasion' (Benhabib 1992, p. 93). Importantly, then, if what constitutes public space has essentially to do with human beings acting together in concert, there is no reason to exclude the family from becoming a public site.

Benhabib's account of public spaces is closely related to (and partly draws on) Pitkin's understanding of the political and the public. While arguing that 'what distinguishes politics [...] is action', Pitkin, helpfully, defines action as 'the possibility of a shared, collective, deliberate, active intervention in our fate, in what would otherwise be the by-product of private decisions'. (Pitkin 1981, p. 344). There seems to be no *prima facie* reason why this could not apply to the family. It is important to note that Pitkin points to a real danger here. As we have been arguing, especially in Chap. 1, predominant conceptualisations of 'parenting' threaten to reduce the way parents perceive themselves and their children, and the way in which they relate to their children, to the frameworks that are offered to them. Parents risk becoming the executioners of what is handed down to them by styles of parenting. So there is a sense in which what parents do has not much to do with action (in Arendt's sense) but is in fact 'the by-product of private decisions', where 'private' here is taken to mean that somebody or something has claimed (exclusive) authority over childrearing and is then telling parents how to do it properly. Nevertheless, this does not preclude the family from actually being a site of 'shared, collective, deliberate, active intervention in our fate' (Pitkin 1981, p. 344) – something which resonates quite clearly with the tone of Arendt's essay *The crisis of education*.

That the private/public distinction as Arendt conceives of this is a distinction that unduly confines the family to its own private sphere, is something that is argued for by Long (1998). Though for Arendt the status of the family seems clear, i.e. being a private realm and thus excluded from action and speech, there is, Long argues, 'a certain, albeit always qualified, manner in which we may speak of a "family world"' (Long 1998, p. 86), thus granting the family some sense of worldliness after all. Importantly, Long's argument pertains to the second of Arendt's definitions of the public, i.e. the public as 'the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it' (Arendt 1958, p. 52).² Long criticises what he calls

²The first definition is: 'that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity' (Arendt 1958, p. 50).

Arendt's 'uncritical acceptance of the traditionally idealized model of the family', a model in which love is seen as 'the exclusive mode of self-revelation' (Long 1998, p. 94). Contrary to this, Long argues that 'the family is a realm in which not only love but also action and speech are essential modes of self-disclosure' (Long 1998, p. 94). Arendt, notoriously, argues that '[L]ove, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others' (Arendt 1958, p. 242). However, says Long, 'it is simply an idealization of the notion of love itself to attempt to argue that love destroys *all* distance and therefore the possibility of emergence of a world between lovers' (Long 1998, p. 93). As Long points out, 'there is never a complete destruction of distance between unique individuals' (Long 1998, p. 93). In this sense, then, 'the family always has a certain "worldly" character, because the space "between" its members is never completely abolished' (Long 1998, p. 93).

But even granted that the relationship between parents could be characterised by the 'worldlessness of love' (Long 1998, p. 95), Long points out that 'the birth of their child may be considered the destruction of this worldlessness and the emergence of a world between them' (Long 1998, p. 95). In fact, as he so eloquently emphasises, 'not only is a child born into a world, but this birth itself signifies the birth of a world' (Long 1998, p. 95). What is connected to this is his perceptive observation that the child is not just 'born into a world', but, relevantly, 'into a family' (Long 1998, p. 95). Thus, Long argues, '[t]he family itself is the site of the "startling unexpectedness" and "infinite improbability" which is inherent in the birth of a beginner and endemic to the "existential" of action' (Long 1998, p. 95).

Furthermore, Long points out that Arendt's understanding of the family as a limited sphere in the sense that it has only a 'certain number of members' and 'has a finitude unknown to the public understood in its widest sense as "publicity"' (Long 1998, p. 96; see also the quotation above) is true only to a certain extent. Arendt's position, says Long, 'echoes the idealization of the family so characteristic of traditional liberal political theory' (Long 1998, p. 97). In this understanding of the family, 'the distinction between unity and identity [is obscured]' (Long 1998, p. 97). That is, 'although the family may be unified by certain common goals and interests, the position of any one of its members can never be identified with another' (Long 1998, p. 97). It is, then, precisely because 'individuals in families retain their irreducible uniqueness' (Long 1998, p. 97) that action and speech can be applicable to the family. Long concludes that Arendt

on the one hand, idealizes the family, thus concocting it into a calm and peaceful sphere of rejuvenation, which it in fact often precisely is not, and, on the other hand, denies the true depth and significance of this sphere as a place of speech and action, a space of appearance in which reality unfolds. (Long 1998, pp. 97–98)

Given these critical reinterpretations, what emerges here, then, is a sense of how the family can be a place in which children learn to initiate speech and action, and of how learning to initiate speech and action is not an activity that exclusively belongs to (for instance) schools, but is something that can also be 'learned' in the 'private' sphere of the family. That is, the family can be seen as a site in which children (learn to) become 'political agents', in the sense of a site in which children, inevitably, learn to insert themselves, time and again, into the world; and also, as a

site in which it is not a priori impossible for something like a 'capacity to unsettle, disrupt, and deflect social processes' (Levinson 1997, p. 439) to come to fruition.

Beyond Politicisation

Given the above arguments, we can only go along so far with the criticisms raised by, for instance, Furedi (2001) and Bristow (2009) who argue that what is wrong with our contemporary arena of parenting is that it is being politicised. To be more precise, we agree with the diagnosis that parenting is all too easily used 'as a tool for social policy' (Furedi 2001, p. 180). The family and childrearing have often, perhaps always, been of interest to policy makers and powerful interest groups (as documented, for instance, by Apple 2006). In a sense, then, there is nothing new in this analysis, although a number of scholars and writers have identified important contemporary shifts in regard to this interest. Thus, for example, the sociologist of education Val Gillies rightly points to what she calls the 'political association between parenting and social ills' (Gillies 2005, p. 71), arguing that 'wider issues of poverty and injustice are sidelined through the construction of a culturally distinct minority [of parents] as the major focus of concern' (Gillies 2005, p. 85). Along similar lines, Schaubroeck criticises the fact that parents seem to be blamed for almost everything that goes wrong, at the same time being expected to help get rid of a number of societal problems by means of properly bringing up their children.³ The most straightforward of these criticisms is probably that articulated by Furedi. According to Furedi, within current political circles, the idea is 'that all forms of anti-social behaviour (...) – crime, drugs, teenage pregnancy, illiteracy, and poverty – (have) been linked to incompetent parenting' (Furedi 2001, p. 178). This idea is based upon an uncritical acceptance of what he calls 'the ideology of parental determinism', i.e. that 'parenting determines the behaviour of children' (Furedi 2001, p. 178).⁴ Within a climate of moral malaise, 'quick-fix solutions' are needed and, as Furedi puts it, '[p]arents provide an ideal target for those seeking a ready-made one' (Furedi 2001, p. 179). Furedi, therefore, criticises this kind of politics as opportunistic and sees the politicisation of parenting as 'an outcome of the failure of political imagination' (Furedi 2001, p. 184).

It is far more expensive to improve on the quality of education, health, and social services than to exhort parents to spend more time reading to their children, cuddling them, or breast-feeding them. No doubt sound parenting practices can have positive effects on children's lives. But these effects pale into insignificance compared to what can be achieved through an excellent public system of child care and education. (Furedi 2001, p. 188)

³See also the recent special issue of *Educational Theory*, 2010, and Bristow 2009, for similar discussions and criticisms.

⁴Cf. <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/9442/> for an example of Furedi's criticism of Nick Clegg, who states that bad parenting is more harmful to children than is poverty. See also <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/politics/7952977/Nick-Clegg-good-parenting-not-poverty-shape-a-childs-destiny.html>.

While we can agree with the critique that parenting is all too easily turned to as a means of tackling social issues, and especially with the critique that what lies behind this mobilisation of parents is, in Gillies' words, a 'value-laden vision of how responsible, competent parents should behave' (Gillies 2005, p. 77), we want to reject Furedi (2001) and Bristow's (2009) proposed solution to this 'politicisation' – which basically comes down to a de-politicisation of the family and parenting. As already mentioned (see, for example Chap. 3), parents, Furedi and Bristow suggest, should best be left to their own devices. Guldberg makes a similar suggestion when arguing that we should 'let parents be parents' (2009, pp. 129ff). The current parenting culture, Bristow argues, 'informs an individual identity crisis that sets individual parents against themselves, encouraging them continually to challenge their own instincts and judgement' (2009, p. 37). The implication is that in order to challenge this culture, parents need to learn to trust their instincts and their own judgements once more. We need to 'reclaim childrearing as a relationship based on spontaneous affection', as Bristow puts it (Bristow 2009, p. 80). A similar reasoning is used by Furedi. According to Furedi, '[s]tate policy is too crude an instrument to deal with management of the intimate emotional relations between parent and child' (Furedi 2001, p. 181), thus affirming a kind of naturalness of the bond between parent and child, the particularity of which stands in sharp contrast to the sweeping generality of policy measures. Since, as he argues, 'we actually know very little about the impact of parenting on children', the good news is 'that parents are no more ignorant than experts' (Furedi 2008, p. 163). So, he continues, 'we might as well ignore them and act on our instincts. Parents usually know better than anyone else what is the best way of bringing up their children' (Furedi 2008, p. 163).

Attractive though this view might be, this plea for a de-politicisation of the family first of all ignores, in a way very similar to the 'expert discourse', the fact that parents have to make, and are always already making, decisions against a backdrop of moral and political evaluations and judgements. Alongside this, in an important sense, it also effectuates exactly the same kind of result as that of an all-too-easy policy vision, i.e. it disempowers parents, or put more precisely: it strips childrearing of its potential for offering political experiences; it strips the family of the possibility of being a space that has, in the sense discussed above, a public orientation. What we would like to argue for here, then, is a kind of 'reversal' of the use of the concept of de-politicisation. That is, what the current 'parenting culture' (to stick with the terminology of Furedi and Bristow) is in need of is not a de-politicisation. De-politicisation is not the solution to the predicament parents find themselves in today, but is in fact one of the very ways of describing this predicament. If as we have argued, drawing on Benhabib, Long and Pitkin, the family can be a space with a public orientation and childrearing can be that part of a human life where members of that family are offered political experiences, then it is clear that within the current predominant conceptualisations of childrearing and the parent-child relationship (especially as outlined in Chap. 1), the family does not have a public orientation at all. That is, childrearing has been, in an important sense, de-politicised. This is a de-politicisation in the sense that it downplays the possibility of action (in the Arendtian sense) in the arena of childrearing, or alternatively, in the sense that it

downplays the role of what we have defined as the first-person perspective, and thus overemphasises the third-person perspective.

To develop this line of thought a little further, the observation that parenting has been put on the political agenda (through various policy initiatives, forms of government intervention in family life and so on) does not make childrearing into a public issue, in the sense Arendt gives to this notion. In fact, we argue, the way in which it is put on the political agenda today, within the current predominant conceptualisations of childrearing and the parent-child relationship that are so quickly taken on board by policy makers, is in fact anything but an acknowledgement of the fact that the family can offer 'the possibility of a shared, collective, deliberate, active intervention in our fate', in Pitkin's words (Pitkin 1981, p. 344). For the paradigms are already there, the answers these paradigms give are already there, as are the questions themselves. According to Pitkin 'something may be public in the sense that it is accessible to all, open to scrutiny by anyone, visible as a focus of attention' (Pitkin 1981, p. 329), and next to this, she states, 'something may be public in the sense that it affects all or most of us, public in its consequences and significance' (Pitkin 1981, p. 330). Given these descriptions of what public could mean, it is clear that the current policy attention to parenting is not making childrearing into a public issue. For within the current predominant conceptualisations on the basis of which these policy decisions are made, it is clear that there is not much left to scrutinise: the answers are already given – 'something should be done about this', where what the 'this' is that is worthy of our attention has already been decided on.

Conclusion

The form this de-politicisation takes is most clearly exemplified by what we have identified, in Chap. 1, as the scientisation of the parent-child relationship. But other languages too, as discussed in the other chapters, in threatening to take over the arena of childrearing, tend to de-politicise it to the extent that they downplay the importance of the first-person perspective, as we have identified this throughout the preceding chapters. Parents come to see themselves and their children through the lens of positions articulated in the languages that have increasingly come to dominate the arena of childrearing, through, that is, a third-person perspective. Our exploration, in the preceding chapters, has involved an attempt to open up the arena of childrearing in a way which allows the ethical and philosophical complexity of the terms in which we describe what parents want for and do with their children to come to the fore – i.e. an opening up which allows us to articulate first-person accounts of being a parent – so as to reclaim childrearing from disciplines which have come to dominate it and, by doing so, at the same time to reclaim some sense of what it means 'to introduce children into a common world'.

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