
THE ETHICS OF CONFERRING PARENTAL ADVANTAGE:
A QUESTION OF PARENTAL LIBERTY VERSUS SOCIETAL EQUALITY

J. Kessa Roberts
The Ohio State University

In raising their children, parents confer certain advantages upon them. Harry Brighthouse and Adam Swift argue that because these parental advantages increase inequality, parents should have the right to confer only advantages that are integral to the core good of the parent-child relationship: building an intimate relationship between parent and child.¹ Inherent in this debate is a tension between family liberty and societal equality and begs the following question: do we prioritize the personal liberty of parents to confer advantages on their children regardless of whether it maintains or even exacerbates inequalities, or do we most value the promotion of societal equality even if it means restricting parents' liberties in the rearing of their children?

In order to argue for the limitation of parental advantage, we must use a criterion that is adequate for this intrusion into family life. For such a criterion, I turn to the arguments that Brighthouse and Swift present in their book *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships*. In order to apply Brighthouse and Swift's argument, one must consider several factors of the advantage conferral including who confers the advantage, why the advantage is conferred, and where the advantage is conferred. In my critique of Brighthouse and Swift's position, I consider the implications of each of these three factors in using their argument to limit the advantages parents confer upon their children. Upon evaluating these factors, I find their argument for the limitation of parental advantage problematic and, therefore, conclude the paper by proposing an alternative solution to reducing societal inequality.

WHO CONFERS THE ADVANTAGE

Brighthouse and Swift argue that who confers the advantage is of significant concern in determining whether parental advantage should be permitted. They maintain that "to allow parents to confer advantage on their children is to permit unfair inequalities between those raised in different families"² so these advantages should only be permitted if they contribute to the parent's fiduciary duty to care for the child. They note, however, that even this does not give parents free reign to confer any advantage. Brighthouse and Swift argue that the only advantages that parents should have the right to confer are

¹ Harry Brighthouse and Adam Swift, *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

² *Ibid.*, 115.

those integral to the core good of the relationship: building an intimate relationship between parent and child.³

Using Brighouse and Swift's position to analyze the criterion of who delivers the conferred advantage would suggest that this criterion is a valid one to consider. In order to apply their argument for limiting parental advantage, let us compare a parent directly conferring advantage upon her child versus a parent paying someone else to confer advantage. For example, we must determine if a parent who is a professor of ethics and desires to pass along her knowledge on this subject to her child should be considered differently than if the same parent were an engineer and wanted to hire a tutor to pass along information on the subject of ethics to her child.

From Brighouse and Swift's position, one would argue that a professor of ethics passing along knowledge of the subject she teaches is exposing her child to part of her life. Brighouse and Swift maintain that this sharing of one's life is integral to an authentic intimate relationship between parent and child. This is very different than an engineer who pays a tutor to pass along knowledge of ethics to her child. In this way, Brighouse and Swift maintain that permissible advantage conferral from parent to child enhances the intimacy between the two in a manner that paying a tutor for this act does not. Therefore, who delivers the advantage is a relevant criterion for determining if such an advantage should be permitted.

I find several problems with applying this criterion to limit parental advantage. First, finding fault with knowledge or skills passed directly to a child from an individual other than the parent of that child seems too restrictive. It seems to suggest that children should not learn from anyone other than their parents, which limits the value of raising a child within a supportive community. It also seems to devalue the work of those persons who, either as a means of employment or as an act of philanthropy, pass along the knowledge of their craft, which they have taken considerable time to hone. Restricting someone from passing on her knowledge or skill would also perhaps serve to limit a childless person from passing along her gifts or talents. People who choose to invest their time in children other than their own certainly should not be punished because they have made the choice to invest in others rather than in their own lineage.

Lastly, and most problematically for arguments of limiting parental advantage in order to promote equality, it may also serve to further limit the advantages that parents with lower socioeconomic status can confer to their children. Children whose parents both work outside the home and/or children whose parent(s) work(s) multiple jobs may spend more hours in the care of someone who is being paid to care for them than children who have one parent who does not work outside the home or whose parent(s) only work(s) one job. Brighouse and Swift maintain that parents have a "duty of care" in which they must provide the basic necessities for their children, which encompass intangible provisions such as love as well as tangible provisions such as food, clothing, and

³ *Ibid.*, 118–19.

shelter.⁴ If parents are already sacrificing time with their children in order to work to fulfill this “duty of care,” they should at least be allowed to place their children in the care of someone who can confer advantage upon them.

After considering the factor of who directly delivers the advantage, one recognizes several problems with Brighouse and Swift’s argument for limiting parental advantage. Not only does their argument restrict the contributions of community members who are not the child’s parent, this restriction may serve to further increase societal inequality rather than ameliorate it.

WHY PARENTS CONFER ADVANTAGE

Next let us turn our attention to why parents confer advantage. The need to consider this factor is bolstered by the caveat put forth in Brighouse and Swift’s argument: that only advantages that are integral to building an intimate relationship between parent and child should be permitted.⁵ For this reason, when one uses Brighouse and Swift’s position to determine if an action that confers advantage is permissible, one must determine what purpose the action serves. In determining this purpose, the question of why the parent chooses this action arises and should be considered in the application of Brighouse and Swift’s argument. Additionally, in order to adequately address the equality versus liberty debate inherent in the discussion of parents’ advantage conferral, it is necessary to consider the motivation behind parents’ actions. By examining these various motivations, one will have a better understanding of what is at stake in prioritizing family liberty or societal equality.

First, we must acknowledge that not all advantages are conferred consciously, nor are these actions always done with the intention to confer advantage. For example, a parent may be involved in his child’s school’s parent-teacher association not because he is trying to establish a network for his child to later access, but because he believes such involvement is part of his role as a parent or as a member of that community. A parent’s desire to adhere to his constructed role is a key factor in the choices he makes and cannot be discounted when assessing his motivation for making those choices.⁶

Another motivation behind an action that confers advantage without intent to do so is to share a common passion or experience.⁷ Indeed, this sharing of common experiences is of paramount importance in Warnick’s “right to

⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 118–19.

⁶ Katherine V. Hoover-Dempsey and Howard M. Sandler, “Why Do Parents Become Involved in Their Children’s Education?” *Review of Educational Research* 67, no. 1 (1997): 3–42; Annette Lareau, *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); and Sira Park and Susan D. Holloway, “No Parent Left Behind: Predicting Parental Involvement in Adolescents’ Education within a Sociodemographically Diverse Population,” *Journal of Educational Research* 106, no. 2 (2013): 105–19.

⁷ Brighouse and Swift, *Family Values*.

invite” in which parents “have the opportunity to expose their children to their preferred way of life and attempt to persuade—or invite—them to participate in that life.”⁸ Warnick argues that this right is integral to the raising of children and that parents are given this unique right due to the equally unique act of sacrificial labor that parents undergo in the rearing of children.

To illustrate this point in the context of parental advantage, let us consider a scenario in which a parent is motivated to share a passion, or more substantially, to invite the child into his preferred way of living. A parent who loves to travel may likely desire to share this passion with his child. He may believe that experiencing different cultures may strengthen the bond between them. It is for this reason that he spends his time and monetary resources traveling to various places with his child. Now consider that the child applies to several colleges and she is able to draw upon her rich travel history when writing her college application essays. This life experience could certainly make her a more desirable candidate and aid her in getting into more prestigious schools, but this was not the reason her parent chose to travel with her.

It is too simple, however, to consider every action as having a single motivation. It is far more likely that the travel-loving parent in the above example has multiple motivations for traveling with his child. The task of teasing out primary versus secondary motivations for this action is an unfeasible task as it is unlikely that the parent himself has a completely unbiased awareness of his own motivations. To further complicate matters, even if he were able to accurately determine that his primary motivation was to secure a more intimate relationship with his child and his secondary motivation was to help his child’s chances of college acceptance, this is insufficient knowledge because as a secondary motivation, the possibility that the parent was conferring advantage upon his child is on a continuum; at one end, he is completely unaware that this travel will help his child in any way other than forming a closer relationship with the parent, and at the other end, the parent is familiar with the types of candidates colleges desire and is quite aware that this travel has the potential to significantly strengthen his child’s college application for admission.

The preceding example illustrates the difficult (if not impossible) task one would need to undergo of determining a parent’s motivation(s) if the argument for the type or amount of advantage that parents should be permitted to confer upon their children hinged on the motivation for that conferral. This example also highlights the additional point that parents often have multiple motivations for their choices, with each motivation ranging in the degree to which it influences the parent’s choice. If one is using Brighouse and Swift’s argument, one must consider the reason why parents confer advantages on their children. To further investigate why multiple motivations are problematic for the

⁸ Bryan R. Warnick, “Parental Authority over Education and the Right to Invite,” *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 63.

application of Brighouse and Swift's argument, let us take the above travel-loving parent scenario one step further.

Let us assume that a parent's reasons for making a certain choice add up to 100%. If a parent were 100% motivated to travel with his child in order to strengthen their bond and 0% motivated to make his child more attractive to college admissions boards, we likely would not take issue with that parent's choice even if that choice meant that the well-traveled child was granted admission to college over a student whose parent did not (or could not) choose to travel with her. If the reasons for the parent traveling with his child were reversed and the travel served the sole purpose of making the child more attractive to college admissions boards with no regard for increasing the bond between parent and child, however, someone using Brighouse and Swift's argument might conclude that the advantage the parent gave to the child was unfair. As stated above, however, parents' choices are rarely that simple. If the parent was 90% motivated to strengthen the bond with his child and 10% motivated to secure her a college acceptance, how would that affect our feelings toward the advantage the parent conferred upon him? At what point would we begin to question whether or not the advantage should be permitted? The task of assigning a percentage at which our opinion of the travel-loving parent's action would change seems arbitrary, which demonstrates the problematic nature of using an argument to limit parental advantage that considers the motivation behind a parent's advantage conferral.

If one is not yet convinced that considering the "why" behind a parent's advantage conferral is problematic, however, let us consider one final point from the traveling parent and child example. Let us resume our (admittedly too simplistic) position that the parent travels with his child simply to strengthen their bond. This choice results in admission to a reputable college. Consider now a second pair, the parent of which travels with her child for the sole purpose of securing college acceptance for her child. This choice also results in admission to the same reputable college. One using Brighouse and Swift's argument may not object to the first parent's choice to travel with his child because his action served the purpose of building an intimate relationship between parent and child, but may object to the second parent whose choice to travel with her child did not have this goal. In terms of college acceptance, however, the outcome of the parents choosing to travel with their children was the same, despite the fact that each parent chose to do so for a different reason. It does not seem just for the college admissions board to accept one child over the other simply because the children's identical life experience resulted from different parental motives, over which the children had no control.

WHERE THE ADVANTAGE IS CONFERRED

In addition to considering who confers the advantage and why the advantage is conferred, someone using Brighouse and Swift's argument to determine if an advantage should be limited must consider where the advantage

is conferred. Some might frame this consideration as whether the advantage is conferred in the public or private sphere. Brighthouse and Swift believe this to be an inadequate distinction and argue that “the family is not ‘private’ in the sense that makes it beyond the reach of politics.”⁹ However, they clarify their position by asserting that their “view by no means implies that the state has authority over all aspects of children’s upbringings. In some areas it is important that parents exercise authority over their children.”¹⁰ So, although Brighthouse and Swift do not consider the family to exist as a whole in the private sphere, they do believe that there are some elements of family life that should remain private in the sense of being free from the state’s interference. This distinction that the family fits neatly neither in the private nor public spheres is further supported by looking at the impact of the advantages parents confer on their children.

To investigate the implications of where the advantage is conferred as well as the impact of that advantage, let us consider the same advantage conferred in two different settings to determine if one act is more permissible than the other. Consider a parent who reads a child a story. Although this could be considered an act of advantaging the child by fostering a love of or exposure to literacy, we typically do not take issue with such an act. Brighthouse and Swift assert that although the act of a parent reading to his child serves several simultaneous purposes building background knowledge that the child can later access and use, it also serves to build a more intimate relationship with the child and “the opportunities for realizing the familial relationship goods that justify the family would be severely limited” if we barred parents from acts like reading to their children.¹¹

Now consider the same child and the same book in the above scenario, only this time the parent takes the child to the local public library where a children’s librarian reads the child the story. Using Brighthouse and Swift’s criteria for limiting advantage conferral, one might assert that this act may confer advantage upon the child, but is not building the intimate relationship between parent and child so it does not need to be permitted. However, prohibiting such an act certainly infringes on the right of the librarian to do her job, thus moving the impact of the limitation of advantage conferral beyond the private sphere and into the public one. Within the parameters of the family, Brighthouse and Swift’s argument seems to be of some use in determining parental actions that should be limited. However, applying their theory to the above scenario points to the difficulty in using this argument when a parent’s action that may confer advantage spills into the public sphere.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO BRIGHOUSE AND SWIFT’S POSITION

I began this paper with the following question: do we prioritize the personal liberty of parents to confer advantages on their children regardless of

⁹ Brighthouse and Swift, *Family Values*, 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

whether it maintains or even exacerbates inequalities, or do we most value the promotion of societal equality even if it means restricting parents' liberties in the rearing of their children? In order to justify an intrusion into family life with the goal of reducing societal inequality, I turned to Brighthouse and Swift's argument for the limitation of parental advantage. After considering who confers advantage, why the advantage is conferred, and where the advantage is conferred, I found significant difficulty in using Brighthouse and Swift's argument for the limitation of parents' conferral of advantage to their children. In the face of the problematic nature of applying Brighthouse and Swift's position to limit parental liberty in order to reduce societal inequality, we are left without a sufficient argument to justify such an intrusion into family life. In the absence of such an argument, we might feel compelled to prioritize parental liberty over societal inequality, despite the awareness that doing so will likely perpetuate and even exacerbate existing inequality. However, we must be careful not to confuse an argument in favor of parental liberty with an argument for the status quo, for this conflict and resulting prioritization of values leaves us with what Judith Thomson calls a "moral residue," a resulting situation to which we must attend.¹²

In the attempt to address this "moral residue," I turn to an alternative argument for reducing inequalities put forth by Brighthouse and Swift. Although Brighthouse and Swift assert that societal inequalities should be reduced by limiting parental advantage, they do briefly discuss the state's role in reducing these inequalities.¹³ It is in this argument that I believe there is considerable merit and I will now briefly examine why pursuit of reducing inequality in this way is perhaps a more appropriate goal than doing so by limiting parental advantage.

Let us return to the discussion of where advantage is conferred and consider a scenario related to the story-reading parent and librarian. Let us consider that the story-reading parent in that scenario now has two children instead of one. To one child, he reads a story each night before bed and with the second child he plays a game of chess each evening. Although these actions may confer a different type of advantage, we would not consider the state to have a vested interest in forcing the parent to confer the same advantage to his children. Now consider that the parent, instead of playing a game of chess with his second child, watches an hour of cartoons. Despite unequal advantages conferred, we would not consider the state to have a vested interest in reducing the inequality of the advantages that are conferred within the family because we believe that parents have the right to some autonomy in raising their children as they so desire.¹⁴

If we move that inequality to the public sphere, however, our reaction would be quite different. Consider that the story-reading parent drove both

¹² Judith Jarvis Thomson, *The Realm of Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 79–104.

¹³ Brighthouse and Swift, *Family Values*, 128–29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

children to the library each week and asked the librarian to read stories to one child and watch cartoons on the library's computers with the other child. If the librarian complied, we might consider this inequality of conferred advantage worthy of intervention. Why does the librarian's action seem to necessitate intervention while the same action by the parent does not?

When we consider this distinction, it does seem as if there is some evaluative merit of considering the domain in which the advantage is conferred. Perhaps the major difference is not simply the location, but the degree to which the state assists in the unequal conferral of the advantage. The library is a public space and its resources, including the librarian, are funded through public means. The state has a special interest in sending certain messages or monitoring the ones that are sent. The issue we take with the librarian, then, is we believe she should have an interest in promoting a love for, or at least exposing students to, literature. So, it seems that although where the advantage is conferred poses a problem in using Brighouse and Swift's argument to restrict the rights of parents to confer advantages on their children, there does seem to be some utility to distinguishing between private and public spheres.

Perhaps this distinction between advantages conferred in the private sphere and those conferred in or facilitated by the public sphere aides us in determining how one might attend to the moral residue left behind after family liberty has been prioritized over societal equality. I applaud Brighouse and Swift for attempting to address societal inequality, but I respectfully disagree that the limiting of parental advantage is the solution. The impact of the family on societal inequality has certainly been given considerable attention in literature ranging from philosophy to sociology to education.¹⁵ This attention has not been misguided; there is ample support for the conclusion that families do perpetuate societal inequality. My disagreement with Brighouse and Swift's solution should not be confused with my understanding of the role of families in the perpetuation of societal inequality; I am not disagreeing with this point in the slightest. I am merely advocating for a different solution to the problem of societal inequality. Rather than intruding into family life by limiting parental advantage, perhaps the solution can be found in the public sphere by limiting not the advantage, but the impact of such advantage. Even Brighouse and Swift themselves assert that "there is plenty of room for governments to pursue egalitarian distributive goals

¹⁵ See Pierre Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," in *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change*, ed. Richard Brown (London: Tavistock, 1973), 71–112; Basil Bernstein, "Social Class, Language and Socialisation," in *Power and Ideology in Education*, eds. Jerome Karabel and A. H. Halsey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 473–86; Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–58; James S. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): 95–120; Annette Lareau, *Home Advantage*; and Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

while respecting parents' rights."¹⁶ It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine just how the state would do so, although I believe it would be wise to include in that conversation ideas such as Gutmann's democratic threshold¹⁷ and Warnick's modified democratic threshold with an external proviso for equal distribution of state resources once the threshold has been met.¹⁸ The mechanisms for achieving this end aside, limiting the impact of parental advantage might adequately address both sides of the debate in question throughout this paper. Not restricting the advantages that parents can confer upon their children respects family liberty and avoids limiting actions that may well contribute to the familial goods produced by the parent-child relationship. Limiting the impact of these advantages, however, does not give parental advantage the opportunity to perpetuate existing cycles of inequality, thus addressing the societal equality side of the debate. In addition to restoring the author's own reflective equilibrium, limiting the impact of parental advantage addresses the larger issues of our social institutions' roles in perpetuating the inequality in our country. This solution is one that respects parental liberty within the private sphere but limits the degree to which this liberty serves to advantage their children in the public sphere and, thereby, attempts to address the public sphere issue of societal inequality with a solution that focuses on the public sphere rather than the private sphere.

¹⁶ Brighthouse and Swift, *Family Values*, 130.

¹⁷ Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 136–37.

¹⁸ Bryan R. Warnick, "Taming the Conflict over Educational Equality," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2015): 63–64.
