

What Should Parents Do for Their Children —A Philosophical View of Parental Obligation

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Abstract

Parental obligations are the obligations acquired by parents to their young children. It is believed that parents have special obligations to their children. However, what are the contents of such obligations? Are parental obligations limited to meeting children's basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter? Do parents have an obligation to best promote children's welfare? What are the requirements of the children's right to an open future? And is it possible for parents to meet such requirements? In this article, I try to address these issues by appealing to a philosophical view of parental obligation, according to which parental obligations require parents to ensure their children have a reasonable expectation of a decent life. Thus, parents are obligated to protect their children from abuse and neglect, help their children to become autonomous agents and provide their children with an adequate moral education. In addition, although the children's right to an open future imposes given obligations on parents, it does not indicate that parents are obligated to expose children to as many activities and much experience as possible. Such an understanding of the children's right to an open future is incorrect.

Keywords

Parental Obligations, Decent Life, Maltreatment, Autonomy, Moral Education

1. A Decent Life View of Parental Obligation

Parental obligations or the obligations of parents indicate the obligations possessed by parents to their young children. Over the last four decades, relevant issues like what is the foundation of parental obligations (Millum, 2008), is it morally defended to license parents (Lafollette, 1980), and is it morally wrong to bring a child with a given genetic disease into existence (Archard, 2004) have at-

tracted philosophers' attention. In this article, I try to address the issue of what should parents do for their children based on a view of parental obligation, according to which parental obligations require parents to ensure their children have a reasonable expectation of a decent life. In the following sections, I shall argue that in order to achieve it, parents should protect their children from abuse and neglect, help their children to become autonomous agents and provide their children with an adequate moral education. Then, I try to respond to a couple of challenges.

The decent-life view is supported by many philosophers (Austin, 2016; Blustein, 1982; Narveson, 2007; O'Neill, 1979). It is also reflected in the discussion of the so-called "wrongful life". The term "wrongful life" is used by philosophers (Archard, 2004; Steinbock, 2009) who argue that it would be morally wrong for parents to deliberately bring children who cannot have a reasonable expectation of a minimally decent life into existence. The reason it is morally wrong is that the life of such a child can reasonably be expected to be of very poor quality. Following this logic, these philosophers usually claim that people's right to procreate should be restricted until they can guarantee that their future children can have a reasonable expectation of a minimally decent life. As David Archard says:

"I maintain that the right to procreate is internally constrained and in the following manner. An adult may exercise his or her reproductive powers to bring a child into being only if the child in question has the reasonable prospect of a minimally decent life (Archard, 2004)."

Bonnie Steinbock also claims that:

"It is wrong to create a person in circumstances: when the person is likely not to have a minimally decent life, one in which certain important interests cannot be satisfied. Although we must be very cautious about concluding that any particular impairment precludes a minimally decent life, there will be circumstances in which a future life is unlikely to hold a reasonable promise of containing the things that make human lives good. In these circumstances, and if reproduction is avoidable, we are required to forego reproduction altogether (Steinbock, 2009)."

It seems that a decent life is important because only such a life can guarantee a person's important interests to be satisfied. And only such a life can be regarded as a good life. Thus, parents are obligated to provide given provisions to their children to ensure them have a reasonable expectation for such a life. Here, two things need to be pointed out. First, a parent's obligation is to ensure that his or her children have a reasonable expectation of a decent life, not to guarantee that they have a decent life. A child's life could be affected by many unpredictable things. So, it is beyond the parents' power to guarantee a decent life for their children. Second, a decent life includes both a child's present life and his or her future life as an adult. Although it is believed that the main parental obligations

such as providing food, shelter, and clothes will be discharged after children become fully autonomous agents, parents are still obligated to take their children's future life into account when they make decisions for their children. Hence, strictly speaking, the content of parental obligation is both to ensure their children have sufficient opportunities to have a decent life when they are children, and to have a reasonable expectation of having a decent life when they become adults.

The following question is what does it require to ensure such an expectation? Generally, a child's expectation of a decent life cannot be ensured until some important rights are enjoyed. These rights might include the right to be protected from abuse and neglect, the right to health care, the right to education, and the right to "a standard of living adequate for physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development

(<https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>).” Roughly, these rights can be divided into negative rights and positive rights. For example, the right to education is one positive right and the right not to be abused is one negative right. This distinction will help the following discussion. The satisfaction of such rights paves the way for a decent life. As C. M. Macleodo writes:

“A rough approximation of what is involved in securing the condition of a minimally decent life includes satisfaction of basic nutritional needs, access to adequate shelter and clothing, access to health care sufficient to secure normal biological development, provision of basic education, protection of the security of the person, access to a living culture, and having affective attachments with members of the family and/or community (Macleodo, 2007).”

As argued above, parental obligations are to ensure children have a reasonable expectation of a decent life which in turn means that some important rights must be protected and respected. Actually, the important rights mentioned above do not just impose duties on parents, they also impose duties on institutions like the government. Considering this article's aim is to work out what parents should do for their children, I will concentrate on the obligations of parents. In my view, what parents should do for their children are as follows: protect their children from abuse and neglect, cultivate their children to become autonomous agents, and provide their children with basic moral education.

2. Protect Children from Abuse and Neglect

Firstly, children have a right not to be abused and neglected. Child abuse and neglect are forms of child maltreatment¹ which usually either seriously harms or has the potential to seriously harm children. This right actually implies two further rights. One is the right not to be abused which is a negative right since it maintains that something should not be done to the children. By contrast,

¹Child maltreatment can be defined as “all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power (Butchart, 2006).

another right is the right not to be neglected which is a positive right since it requires some provisions to be given to ensure children's situation is good enough. Both rights impose corresponding obligations on parents.

First, parents have a parental obligation not to abuse their children as well as a parental obligation to protect their children from abuse which might be caused by others. Similarly, parents have a parental obligation not to neglect their children and a parental obligation to protect them from others' neglect. Parents have such parental obligations because abuse and neglect may seriously harm children which should be avoided if children are to have a decent life. In this section, I will begin by explaining child abuse and how it harms children before discussing several issues related to child neglect. There are three types of child abuse: physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional (or psychological) abuse. According to the report from the World Health Organization (WHO):

“Physical abuse of a child is defined as those acts of commission by a caregiver that cause actual physical harm or have the potential for harm. Sexual abuse is defined as those acts where a caregiver uses a child for sexual gratification. Emotional abuse includes the failure of a caregiver to provide an appropriate and supportive environment, and includes acts that have an adverse effect on the emotional health and development of a child (Runyan et al., 2002).”

As mentioned above, the aim of protecting children from abuse and neglect is to keep children from suffering serious harm. Two questions arise here: what harms are usually caused by abuse, and to what extent do harms caused by child abuse reduce children's reasonable expectation of a decent life? Harms caused by abuse are not limited to direct physical injuries, pains, and negative feelings. An enormous amount of research (Dubowitz, 1999) has shown that child abuse can cause many problems connected to the child's safety, health, and development. For instance, some research shows that physical abuse may cause neurobiological problems (Perry, 1997), intellectual problems (Alessandri, 1991; Coster et al., 1989), and attributional problems (Dodge et al., 1990) to the victims. Some surveys find strong connections between sexual abuse in childhood and some psychological problems (De Bellis et al., 1999; Fergusson et al., 1996). Although not all abuse would definitely cause serious harm to children, it is still reasonable to claim that child abuse increases children's risk of experiencing health and developmental problems. These health and developmental problems not only stop the victims from acquiring normal capacities during the developmental progress of childhood but also reduce the quality of the victims' life in their adulthood. Avoiding such harms seems critical for a decent life. Therefore, protecting children from abuse must be one component of parental obligation. However, not all harms parents cause their children are labeled as abuse. For instance, some accidental mild injuries caused by parents are not regarded as abuse.

Compared with child abuse, child neglect is much more difficult to define. Typically, neglect is viewed as an omission by parents rather than a commission

by them. Thus, child neglect could be defined as parents' omissions in caring for their children that cause serious harm (or the risk of serious harm) to the children (Cowen, 1999; Dubowitz, 1999). This definition implies that in order to prevent children from suffering serious harm, parents are required to provide adequate care for their children. However, whether behavior can be labeled as child neglect is influenced by elements such as the child's age, cultural background, and the understanding of adequate care. For instance, leaving an infant in a bathtub responsibility, trust or power (Butchart, 2006)."

Alone would be dangerous but letting a ten-year-old boy play with his toy alone in a bathtub seems fine. In terms of the cultural element, in some cultures but not others, leaving a three-year-old child to sleep in his or her own bedroom is believed to be neglect (Korbin, 1980). Another case related to the cultural background is that some Spanish parents refuse to use car seats for their infant because they believe that an infant would feel abandoned if she is left out of her parents' arms (Garbarino, 1991).

Here, I attempt to determine what types of omissions should be regarded as child neglect on the basis that parental obligation is to ensure children have a reasonable expectation of a decent life. As illustrated above, child abuse should be forbidden because of the harm it causes to children's safety, health, and development. The same is true in the case of child neglect. Parents should avoid omissions which would probably be harmful to their children's safety, health or normal development. Many researchers have shown that certain omissions in providing care would cause mental (Garbarino, 1991), language (Katz, 1992), social (Galdston, 1971), intellectual (Morse et al., 1970) and emotional (Crosson-Tower, 1999) problems for the victims. These omissions occur in areas like safety, nutrition, shelter, clothes, health, emotion, and education (Cowen, 1999). These problems would reduce children's reasonable expectations of a decent life. Thus, care provided by parents can be viewed as adequate if it efficiently prevents their children from experiencing these problems. For instance, in order to prevent nutritional neglect, parents should offer their children adequate food and nutrition. That will ensure that their children would not suffer developmental and health problems caused by inadequate nutrition. But parents are not required to ensure their children have luxurious dinners every night. In order to avoid neglect parents should also provide shelter for their children both to meet their children's need for a sense of safety and to ensure that their children do not experience developmental and health problems caused by a bad living environment. But parents are not required to build a palace for their children. In order to prevent educational neglect parents should teach their children to write and read or send them to school to receive a formal education. By "formal education", I mean the compulsory education provided by the state. Here, on the one hand, parents have an obligation not to prevent their children from getting a formal education. On the other hand, parents also have an obligation to teach their children basic skills of writing and reading if public education is inaccessible. This is because the skills of writing and reading are necessary for normal

communication and expression in modern society. To some degree, whether the skills of writing and reading and formal education are necessary for one's expectation of a decent life depends on the culture of a given society. For example, hundreds of years ago, only elites could read and write. For average people, requiring parents to teach their children to acquire these skills would have been unrealistic. But at least in modern society, these skills and formal education are required to ensure that a person can communicate with others effectively. Of course, parents are not required to ensure their children get PhDs or to cover their children's tuition fees for university.

There are two more things I want to emphasize at the end of this section. First, parents' occasional omissions, which don't cause serious harm to their children's safety, health or development, should not be viewed as failing to fulfill the parental obligation. Although some omissions can immediately bring serious harm to children, such as parents' failure to stop their child from drinking a poisonous liquid, many are not so serious. For example, parents who on only one occasion omit to provide lunch for their children would cause their children to suffer hunger. But it seems that the harm of hunger, in this case, is too mild to cause serious developmental and health problems to the children. Hence, in this case, the parents' omission might be understandable and acceptable especially if there is a reasonable excuse for the parents. However, repeated omissions in providing food should not be acceptable because these frequent omissions over a long time can cause serious harm, or risk serious harm, to children, including the many developmental and health problems mentioned in the research referenced above. Second, it is a feature of child neglect that parents are able to provide adequate care to their children but fail to do so. Child neglect usually occurs in cases where parents have reasonable resources but fail to offer their children adequate care. In other words, in cases of neglect, the omission of care to children is not because the children's parents (or caretakers) are too poor to provide it.

3. Help Children to Become Autonomous Agents

Parents should help their children to become autonomous agents. Generally, (personal) autonomy can be understood as the capacity to make a certain decision or to choose a particular lifestyle based on one's own needs, desires, and will (Christman, 2008). As mentioned above, parental obligations are to ensure children have a reasonable expectation of a decent life. Here, the first important thing is that the decent life should be the child's own life.

However, to what extent a person's life is his own life? Or how do we know that a person is living his own life? One probable answer is that a person's own life is the life the person chooses depending on his own views. It usually reflects on a series of important decisions the person made and will make in his life such as what kinds of job he selected and whom he will marry. Obviously, the capacity of autonomy is needed to make these decisions. If it is believed that a person's decent life should firstly be a person's own life, then autonomy becomes super significant considering it is one's autonomy that makes life become one's own

life. By contrast, if a person's life is controlled by others, it seems really sad for the person. In this sense, no autonomy is no decent life. Therefore, that parents have a parental obligation to help their children to become autonomous agents seems not unfair.

The next questions that need to be addressed are what kinds of capacities are needed for an autonomous agent, and what parents should do for their children. As stated above, the notion of autonomy mainly implies the capacity to be self-determining. But definitions of autonomy vary across contexts. For example, according to Joel Feinberg (Feinberg, 1986), there are at least four understandings of autonomy, which are "the capacity to govern oneself", "the actual condition of self-government", "an ideal of character derived from that conception", and "the sovereign authority to govern oneself". Gerald Dworkin also expresses the similar idea that autonomy is used "in an exceedingly broad fashion": "It is used sometimes as an equivalent of liberty (positive or negative in Berlin's terminology), sometimes as equivalent to self-rule or sovereignty, sometimes as identical with freedom of the will (Dworkin, 1988)." Although there are different interpretations of autonomy in this sub-section I try to focus on the capacity of self-determination to interpret autonomy. As Dworkin claims:

"A certain idea of persons as self-determining is shared by very different philosophical positions. Josiah Royce speaks of a person as life led according to a plan. Marxists speak of man as the creature who makes himself; existentialists of a being whose being is always in question; Kantians of persons making law for themselves. At a very abstract level, I believe they share the same concept of autonomy (Dworkin, 1988)."

In my view, the capacity of self-determination imposes two kinds of obligations on parents: a positive obligation to provide children with given things and a negative obligation not to prevent children from accessing certain things.

Firstly, helping children to become autonomous agents usually requires parents to provide their children with training or/and developing their children's capacities to make their own plans of life. The capacity of self-determination requires sub-capacities like a clear sense of self, understanding of the consequences of one's decisions, the capacity to plan for the future, and the capacity to rethink one's decisions. These capacities are learned rather than inherent. As Blustein says:

"...we should not be so eager for our children to attain autonomy that we fail to give it adequate developmental support, Autonomy does not develop magically ex nihilo. Children need to learn to be autonomous, and this can happen only if they are not autonomous to begin with. Some principles, and in particular the commitment to autonomy itself, must be implanted in children if they are to grow in the proper direction (Blustein, 1982)."

In addition, helping children to become autonomous agents usually also requires parents not to prevent their children from accessing certain things, which,

according to Joel Feinberg, is children's right to an open future. Feinberg writes:

“When sophisticated autonomy rights are attributed to children who are clearly not yet capable of exercising them, their names refer to rights that are to be saved for the child until he is an adult, but which can be violated ‘in advance’, so to speak, before the child is even in a position to exercise them. The violating conduct guarantees now that when the child is an autonomous adult, certain key options will already be closed him. His right, while he is still a child, is to have these future options kept open until he is a fully informed self-determining adult capable of deciding among them (Feinberg, 2007).”

According to Feinberg, a child's future self's right of autonomy could be violated if certain things are done to the child now. These things usually make the key options already closed when the child becomes an adult. Thus, in order to respect for the child's future autonomy, it is a parental duty to leave their children's future open as much as possible for their own selves to determine. Feinberg explains that: “It is the adult he is to become who must exercise the choice, more exactly, the adult he will become if his basic options are kept open and his growth kept ‘natural’ or unforced. In any case, that adult does not exist yet, and perhaps he never will. But the child is potentially that adult, and it is that adult who is the person whose autonomy must be protected now (in advance) (Feinberg, 2007).”

Based on this view, Feinberg believes that a child's right to an open future should be weighed over the parents' right to organize the child's life in some cases. In these cases, Feinberg particularly maintains that children's right to an open future on the religious and educational aspect has priority to parents' right to organize their children's lives. In the case of Amish community, Feinberg claims that the Amish should let their children have access to compulsory state education to ensure their children's right to an open future is appropriately protected. In the traditional Amish society, children are deliberately provided limited knowledge which is only enough for Bible study and simple commercial transactions. The Amish try to prevent their children from attending state-accredited schools to let children stay in the local community. It seems that in Feinberg's view, children's right to an open future imposes a negative parental duty on parents, such that they are obligated to ensure that nothing is done that might exclude their children from as many teachings as possible. Thus, parents are not obligated to provide their children with teachings of philosophy, mathematics, and so on. Rather, they are obligated not to close their children's options to different kinds of knowledge. Similarly, parents should also guarantee their children's right to diverse religions.

If the argument above makes sense, then helping children to become autonomous agents not just requires parents to do something to their children like providing given training, but also requires parents not to do something like preventing children from public education. The view of open future triggers criti-

cism over the last decades. I try to defend it in the fifth section by responding to some objections.

4. Provide Children with an Adequate Moral Education

Parents should provide their children with an adequate moral education. As I am using the phrase “moral education” here this means educating children to know the basic moral rules in a given society and what kinds of actions are morally acceptable. The main distinction between formal education (including things like teaching reading and writing) and moral education is that the former emphasizes guaranteeing children obtain sufficient knowledge and skills to create a plan of life and to know how to achieve it. By contrast, moral education pays attention to providing children with the information necessary to act in ways that are morally accepted in a given society. For example, children would be taught that making a false promise is morally unacceptable. Several philosophers hold that moral education is a necessary component of parental obligation (Austin, 2016; Narveson, 2007). They maintain that one aim of children’s moral education is to ensure that children will not harm other members of society. For example, Austin writes:

“This is because parents ultimately release their children into society, and if those children do not affirm and seek to live by the moral values required for the common good, the results will be quite negative for other members of society (Austin, 2016).”

It seems that the aim of providing children with a moral education is to ensure that their behavior will be morally acceptable by their community. That’s why Austin and other scholars regard this obligation as an obligation that parents assume to the society rather than to their children (Austin, 2016; Narveson, 2007). However, the following questions arise here: first, is it just obligation parents undertake to society to ensure their children’s behavior will be socially acceptable? Second, if it is also an obligation that parents have to their children, then how does moral education affect the children’s chances of having a decent life? And third, what are the requirements of moral education?

In my view, sufficient moral education can benefit children by making them aware that some kinds of acts are morally unacceptable and that people who always act in morally unacceptable ways would be condemned and unwelcome. Hence, ensuring their children’s behavior is morally accepted by their society is a duty that parents assume to their children. As mentioned above, parental obligations are to ensure their children have a reasonable expectation of a decent life. Human beings are social animals and persons always build, keep and stay in different relationships with others. The life of a person who is always alienated and abandoned by other members of society would be quite tough. While, creating and keeping a relationship usually requires the parties involved to behave in morally acceptable ways. As Macleodo says:

“A rough approximation of what is involved in securing the condition of a

minimally decent life includes...the access to a living culture, and having an affective attachment with members of family and/or community (Macledo, 2007).”

Take friendship as an example. It is believed that friendship is based on mutual respect and trust. Suppose I'm an inveterate liar and always break my promises. It would be very difficult for me to develop a friendship with others considering my behavior doesn't deserve others' respect and trust. In contrast, if I'm a person who always obeys moral codes, like do not lie and keep your promises, the situation would be totally different. Thus morally unacceptable behavior might negatively affect the development of, and the ability to keep, relationships especially close relationships with others. That seems to get in the way of having a decent life. Some would disagree by arguing that a person can choose a lonely lifestyle which does not need to develop relationships with others at all. However, although a person can live alone without entering any relationship with others, the morally accepted behavior is still required. Suppose Ham is a philosopher who is not interested in developing any relationship with others. What he wants is just to enjoy his philosophical reading and thinking. One day, he buys bread from a shop but forgets his wallet. Ham wants to take the bread by promising that he will return later with the money. The dealer trusts Ham and agrees. However, Ham thinks that it is good to have free bread after bringing the bread back home. Then, he decides not to return with the money. If Ham usually acts like this, then he will be unwelcome in his community. The possible result would be that when Ham needs help everyone is reluctant to help him, which seems not to be what Ham wants. Hence, no matter whether it is developing and keeping relationships with others or avoiding interference and punishment, morally acceptable behavior is required.

In terms of how to make children's behavior morally acceptable to the society, or what the content of moral education should be, two ways are usually mentioned in the literature (Carter, 1984; Downey & Kelly, 1979). One is to help children possess moral virtues such as honesty, loyalty, courage, justice and so on. The other is to persuade children to obey moral codes like do not steal, do not lie, keep your promises, respect others and so on. Each of these two methods has a long tradition in moral education in the west (Downey & Kelly, 1979). From my perspective, these two approaches are not incompatible. Actually, both methods of moral education could effectively help children to avoid immoral behavior and have something in common in practice. For example, some parents prefer to encourage and cultivate their children to become honest persons. Some other parents like to educate their children to obey the moral command “do not lie”. We can expect these parents to do the same sorts of things in the process of moral education, such as explaining to their children why lying is morally bad and what kinds of behavior should be regarded as telling a lie. Regardless of which method of moral education, as a parental duty, moral education's aim should be to make children's behavior be morally acceptable by the society.

In contrast, a different view is that the aim of educating children to possess moral virtues is to cultivate children to become virtuous persons (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2016; Prior, 2001). If a virtuous person is defined as a person who possesses almost all virtues and never acts immorally (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2016), then helping children to become virtuous persons would be beyond parental obligation. As mentioned above, the parental obligation's aim is to ensure their children have a reasonable expectation of a decent life, which should include a number of rights that are usually believed to be possessed by all human beings. A virtuous person described above seems to be a moral saint in which the virtuous person uses his (or her) practical wisdom to make his (or her) every performance morally right and become a moral example for other people. Although this lifestyle sounds attractive, it is not necessary for a decent life. A decent life is one in which people can enjoy their rights which are believed to be possessed by all human beings. It implies that based on these rights (e.g. right of health, safety and normal development), a person can choose his (or her) life which is not necessarily a moral saint lifestyle.

5. Objections and Responses

In this section, I try to discuss a couple of objections to the position I have argued for. The first is that the requirement of parental obligation is to maximize children's well-being (Archard, 2004; Narveson, 2007). The second relates to the view of the child's right to an open future mentioned above. The view is too demanding and impossible according to philosophers like Claudia Mills (Mills, 2003).

Obligating parents to maximize children's well-being seems to fit the requirement of ensuring children have a reasonable expectation of a decent life. But I will show that this claim has some problems. The requirement to maximize children's well-being is sometimes grounded on considerations of the best interests of the child (Archard, 2004). If this objection makes sense, then it seems that no benefits provided by parents can be beyond the call of parental obligation since whatever benefits parents provided to their children are ones they had a moral obligation to provide. In this section, I will argue that it is a mistake to define children's best interests as maximizing their well-being. More importantly, it might be impossible to require parents to do what is best for their children in many cases.

Firstly, it is a mistake to think that doing what is in children's best interests requires maximizing their well-being. The principle of doing what is in children's best interests appears in many important global and local acts and declarations. For instance, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) rules:

“In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration (Article 3,

Part 1) (Assembly, 1989).”

The question is does the principle of doing what is in children’s best interests require us to maximize children’s well-being? In my view, the interpretation which treats the best-interests principle as the requirement to maximize children’s well-being seems to misunderstand the real meaning and aim of the principle. In fact, the principle of taking the child’s best interests into account implies that a child would have his (or her) own interests which are not always in accordance with the child’s caretaker’s claim (Archard, 2004). A case involving the child of Jehovah Witnesses can show this. In 2014 Birmingham Children’s Hospital carried out cardiac surgery and gave blood transfusions to a child whose parents are Jehovah Witnesses. The child’s parents did not consent to their child having a blood transfusion on religious grounds. However, the court ordered that this child can receive blood based on the best-interests principle (Gibb, 2014). In such cases, the court usually appeals to the principle of the child’s best interests to require the parents who have committed child abuse or neglected their children to transfer their parental rights to those qualified to be the child’s foster parents (Mnookin, 1973). Whether in the case of a medical decision or the case of child abuse and neglect, the principle of best interests of children is used for protecting children’s core interests such as the right to health rather than maximizing children’s well-being. As Archard writes:

“It is probably most sensible to interpret the ‘best’ of the ‘best interests principle’ as serving, rhetorically, to emphasize that the child does have interests of her own, and that these have an importance and weight that should not, when set beside those of adults, be discounted or ignored (Archard, 2004).”

Secondly, it is impossible for parents to always do what is best for their children in many cases. Although the principle of best interests of children does not necessarily require the maximization of children’s well-being as stated above, some readers might still insist that parents should always do what is best for their children. However, in my view, it is impossible to meet this requirement. Suppose a couple has a child and they plan to have the second one. If it is believed that the second child would unavoidably take part of the resources that the first child already has (because the couple will have to divide their resources into two to take care of both children), then according to the requirement to maximize children’s well-being the couple should not have the second child. This seems unacceptable for most people. Supporters of the best interests principle might defend their view by claiming that the birth of the second child would promote the first child’s well-being since the first child has a sibling who will love her and bring happiness to her. If that is correct, then the couple is obligated to have the second child, in order to promote their first child’s well-being. That also seems unacceptable for most people, given that we usually regard reproduction as a right rather than a duty.

As claimed above, the child’s right to an open future imposes a parental obli-

gation for parents. Such a parental duty requires parents not to violate their children's particular rights in advance so that they have no chance to exercise them when they become autonomous adults. These so-called "rights-in-trust" require parents to let certain key options kept open until children become fully informed adults. This view is criticized by Mills who claims that it is both impossible and undesirable to provide children with as many open opportunities as possible (Mills, 2003).

It is impossible because, in the case of religion, it is unreasonable for parents to keep religious neutrality to introduce their children to a wide range of religions. In addition, even in some other cases, it is inevitable to close some options when we make decisions to do things this way rather than that. Mills uses the case of religion to show that it is impossible to respect children's right to an open future to require parents to provide their children with as many religious teachings as possible. Firstly, parents have the right to organize their lives based on their own belief system. For a Christian, it seems unreasonable to require him to provide Buddhist teachings to his children. Secondly, as Mills claims, although parents can send their children to different religious services or schools to experience different religious beliefs, and then let children decide which religion they are likely to belong to themselves, it is reluctant to declare that doing such things protects children's right to an open future on religion. Mills writes:

"You can't get a 'take' on Christianity or Buddhism in a month. This is like coming to understand European cultures by going on a two-week 'grand tour' with a day in Paris, a day in Rome, a day in Madrid. 'If this is Tuesday, it must be Belgium' is not a formula for deep cultural understanding; 'If this is January, this must be Hinduism' is likewise not a formula for deep spiritual understanding.

...we have to allow some room for spiritual growth and awareness. And again, spiritual growth and awareness take time (Mills, 2003)."

In terms of religion, it seems impossible to let the options kept open until children become fully informed adults. Thus, compared with keeping religious neutrality, Mills encourages parents to educate their children based on their own religion system. Namely, in a Christian family, parents do not need to give their children many other religious teachings. Rather, they can only provide their children with the Bible. Then, Mills criticizes that in the case of talents and careers, it is still impossible to keep the options open until children become autonomous adults. According to Mills, one strategy to keep options open in the case of talents is to let children learn all musical instruments and sports available in the community or school simultaneously until they become adults. However, it is unrealistic to expose children to "as many activities and experiences as possible" because they do not have so much time. In addition, "to open one door is to close another". When a child selects one musical instrument as his major talent, other options have to be closed. Hence, as Mills concludes, it is impossible to pursue an open future for children.

However, Mills views the parental obligation of protecting children's right to an open future as a positive obligation, which seems not to fit Feinberg's argument. As mentioned above, for Feinberg, the child's right to an open future imposes a parental obligation which requires parents not to prevent their children from accessing given things rather than requires parents to provide their children with particular things. Feinberg divides rights into three categories. "A-rights" are the rights belonging only to adults.

"C-rights" are the rights characteristic of children. Those rights can be further divided into two subclasses: "dependency-rights" and "rights-in-trust". According to Feinberg, "dependency-rights" are the rights "that derive from children's dependence upon others for the basic instrumental good of life—food, shelter, protection (Feinberg, 2007)." Parents are obligated to provide given things to meet children's such rights. By contrast, "rights-in-trust" seems to impose negative obligations requiring parents not to prevent children from accessing given things. For instance, in the case of Amish community, Feinberg mentions that the Amish tried to insulate their communities from external influences, including the influence of public schools. He criticizes this by appealing to the child's right to an open future. Namely, the Amish should let their children have access to the compulsory state education to ensure their children's right to an open future is appropriately protected.

Based on Feinberg's view of such rights, in terms of religion, parents do not need to introduce their children to a wide range of religions, but should not prevent their children from having access to other religions. Or at least, parents should not prevent their children from knowing that there are many religious beliefs. What they hold is one of them. Similarly, a vegetarian mother does not need to provide her daughter with meat meals. But she should allow the daughter to know that people living in other communities eat meat. In terms of the criticism of "to open one door is to close another" posted by Mills, what Feinberg really concerns about is protecting children's capacity of exercising future autonomy. Feinberg writes:

"In that general category it sits side by side with the right to walk freely down the public sidewalk as held by an infant of two months, still incapable of self-locomotion. One would violate that right in trust now, before it can even be exercised, by cutting off the child's legs (Feinberg, 2007)."

Children will have no chance to exercise some rights when they become adults if these rights are violated in advance. In the case of Amish community, an Amish child may not expect to have a normal life in the modern society when he becomes an adult considering he has been isolated by the community over the last ten or twenty years. The insulation destroys the child's capacity to survive and then to have a decent life in modern society. By contrast, in the case of talents mentioned by Mills, even parents do not let their children learn, let's say, playing the piano, they still have a chance to learn to play it when they become

adults. Thus, the door has not closed. At least, the door to enjoy a decent life has not closed.

6. Conclusion

If the arguments above make sense, then parental obligations are to ensure children have a reasonable expectation of a decent life which should include some significant rights. Such obligations have three aspects: protecting children from abuse and neglect, helping children to become autonomous persons, and providing children with adequate moral education. Even though maximizing children's well-being seems to fit the requirement of the parental obligation, as argued above, this is not an obligation of parents. Lastly, the child's right to an open future should be protected by parents.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

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