TOUGH LOVE AND CHARACTER EDUCATION. REFLECTIONS ON SOME CONTEMPORARY NOTIONS OF GOOD PARENTING

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Abstract. In her paper the author points to the impoverishment of the popular and policy discourse on good parenting and highlights a glaring absence of the moral dimension and moral language in the debate. This fact unveils a somewhat flattened understanding of the process of child-rearing - devoid of moral reflection, moral choices, and moral concepts, thus giving the impression that modern parenting is solely a matter of skilful application of universal, neutral, scientifically verified procedures and tools. Such discourse promotes, so called, effective parenting conceptualized as a set of skills or 'the science of parenting' rather than the process that should assign moral meaning to the things parents and educators do with children. The paper reveals weaknesses of such conceptualization by unveiling some of its underlying assumptions that are questionable and yet determine the discussion on and approach to child-rearing and parenting in Britain today.

The Politics of Good Parenting and Character

The ongoing national debate about parenting was heightened by the London riots of Summer 2011, prompting the familiar refrain that bad parenting is at the root of our serious social problems. In his frequent references to 'broken Britain', Prime Minister David Cameron echoed the views of many politicians and commentators that 'feckless parents' and a lack of discipline and authority in the home are the main reasons behind these recent waves of anti-social behaviour.

Well before the London riots, the Coalition government, and the New Labour government before them, were already pursuing an agenda of active intervention in family life through a range of various initiatives designed to support and promote 'good parenting'. I will not focus here on the ideological aspects of this policy trend, although obviously it has significant political implications, some of which will emerge in the following discussion. I want, instead, to focus on an aspect of the debate on good parenting which has become increasingly prominent in policy and popular discourse and which raises deep philosophical questions about our understanding of morality and the moral self.

Although policy-makers constantly reassure us that the form and effectiveness of 'good parenting' has been established by 'scientific research', Cameron suggests that the science here is simply reinforcing an accepted and common--sense view: 'We all know what good parenting looks like. It means setting boundaries as well as providing love and offering security. These are things that help foster commitment, resilience, empathy – and everything else we associate with responsibility' (Cameron, 'Supporting Parents' 2010, http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/01/David_Cameron_Supporting_parents.aspx, accessed 17.12.2012). Yet, while 'we' all apparently understand this, the implication is that there are others – those feckless parents whose children ran amok on the streets of London, looting shops and destroying property – who have either failed to grasp this truth about good parenting, or are finding it difficult to implement. So if the government wants to address these kinds of social problems, its 'responsibility agenda' must, Cameron states, 'go beyond simply supporting families and helping them stick together, to the complex territory of helping to develop parenting skills' (ibid.).

Recently, the notion of character has been creeping in to similar statements by policy makers, and has attracted a great deal of public interest, not to mention public money. It also appears increasingly in the titles and contents of popular parenting books, e.g. '*Building character through setting boundaries*'; '*Parenting To Build Character In Your Teens'; 'Parenting for Character: Equipping Your Child for Life Positive Parenting'; 'Building Character in Young People'*. In May this year, the think tank Demos published *The Character Inquiry*, the culmination of an extensive research project investigating the meaning of 'character' and its importance in public and social life. David Cameron spoke at the project's launch last year. His central message, and one that has since been translated into a range of government policy initiatives, was that 'we have a whole host of severe social problems that are caused in part from the wrong personal choices, so who can seriously argue that the state should continue to just treat the symptoms of these problems instead of the root causes too?' The root causes, it is implied, can be understood in terms of personal character. And, Cameron went on, 'Of course the most important influence on the character we grow into is the family we grow up in' (...) 'When I talk about the importance of the home to character I don't mean the material architecture of the place. I mean the emotional architecture of what happens within it – the parenting that children receive.' (ibid.).

Many policy initiatives in this area that reinforce the centrality of the notion of character are based on the recommendations of Labour MP Frank Field, who holds the role of 'Poverty Tzar' in Cameron's coalition government. In December 2010, Field published 'The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults'; the report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances (Field, 2011).

Amongst Field's recommendations, all enthusiastically endorsed by the Coalition government, are that parenting courses should be 'offered as routine to new parents', a new Cabinet-level ministerial post should be created to oversee new early years interventions; and children should be closely monitored and their mental, physical and emotional development registered and reported. He also suggests that children should be taught parenting and life skills, and has proposed a cross-curricular qualification in parenting at GCSE level.

Parenting, in short, is more important than income or schooling to a child's life chances, on Field's view; a position that is welcomed by both Conservative and Lib-Dem politicians, chiming in as it does with their rejection of traditional welfare policies of wealth-redistribution. Indeed, both Cameron and Nick Clegg, in a joint letter to Field, praised the report as 'a vital moment in the history of our efforts to tackle poverty and disadvantage', with Clegg stating, in his Hugo Young lecture at the Guardian, that 'insufficient attention' had been paid by Labour to 'the non-financial dimensions of poverty' (Guardian, 2010).

Field refers enthusiastically on several occasions to the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, stating in his report: 'Geoffrey Gorer, the sociologist, noted in the early 1950s that the spread of a tough love style of parenting had been the agent that changed England from a centuries long tradition of brutality into what was remarked upon by visitors to these shores in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as one of the most peaceful European nations.' (Field, 2010, p. 18).

Connecting this work from over 60 years ago with current research into 'parenting outcomes', Field goes on: 'Research published much more recently on different kinds of parenting shows that the style most beneficial to a child's emotional and intellectual development is this particular style of nurturing. But that tough love tradition has recently been in retreat...' (ibid.).

Having recently read Gorer's 1955 book, *Exploring English Character,* I can say that it makes for a fascinating and often alarming read, and offers a snapshot of the attitudes of a cross-section of the English population towards such issues as crime, sexual morality, religious belief and discipline in childrearing. What it does *not* offer is any basis whatsoever for the claims made by Field about the causal relationship between a particular style of parenting and particular (national) character traits. The extracts from the questionnaires filled in by Gorer's 2,500 respondents, a sample of parents from amongst a self-selecting group who answered an ad placed in the Sunday paper *The People*, almost all include approving accounts of physical punishment of children, including beatings with belts or other implements, as well as deprivations such as locking children in rooms or withholding food. As Gorer sums up his reading of the questionnaires, the dominant view amongst parents from all social classes seemed to be that:

> The formation of a good English character depends on the parents imposing suitable disciplines as early as possible; the child's character will be spoiled if the discipline is insufficient or not applied soon enough.' [...] Implicit in this statement is the assumption, which quite occasionally becomes articulate, that there are innate tendencies of an undesirable nature in all newborn babies which will develop unless appropriate training is applied at the proper time. [...] one facet of English character which would appear to be fairly widespread: the preoccupation with the moral duty of punishing children and the pleasures of severity. (Gorer, 1955, p. 294)

In short, the kind of 'character education' referred to by Field in his rather creative reading of Gorer's work, seemed to consist largely of hitting children. All of which prompts one to ask whether 'tough love' – a notion which is becoming increasingly fashionable in policy and popular literature, urging parents to combine 'love and boundaries' – is an accurate description of the prevailing attitudes of 1950's Britain. Even more astonishing is the fact that, in spite of Field and Cameron's enthusiastic references to Gorer's 'research' and its purported support of the link between authoritative parenting styles and social outcomes, Gorer himself does not actually regard this type of parenting practice as the only, or even the main reason why the British 'national character' underwent the outward transformation that he so picturesquely describes, from one of the most aggressive nations in Europe to a peace-loving and congenial one. In fact, Gorer states quite unequivocally in his conclusion:

> On the basis of the evidence available to me, however, I should consider that the most significant factor in the development of a strict conscience and law-abiding habits in the

> majority of urban English men and women was the invention and development of the institution of the modern English police force. (ibid.)

Gorer's argument is that the recruitment and training of the police force in the historical period in question focused above all else on the nurturing of a particular brand of moral character, which served as a role model for people in communities across Britain.

While there are serious questions to be asked about the way in which rather dubious research findings of this type are taken up and used, or distorted, by politicians, my main concern here is that this way of presenting similar findings sustains and reinforces a completely instrumental view of parenting: certain parental behaviours and practices are to be adopted because they will lead to certain outcomes in children. The term 'character', in this case, serves as short-hand for a list of supposedly desirable outcomes, the emergence of which parental behaviour is supposed to ensure. Indeed the very idea of 'tough-love' as an approach to parenting that combines 'setting boundaries as well as providing love and offering security' is simply a repackaged version of what Diana Baumrind referred to as 'authoritative' parenting in her original and highly influential research into parenting styles in the 1960's (see Baumrind, 1966, 1967). I have discussed elsewhere (see Ramaekers and Suissa, 2012, pp. 83-88) the problems involved in mapping isolated instances of parent-child interaction onto pre-existing categories, independently of their context, and of implying that the 'best style' is that which produces the right kind of child. Not only do research and popular literature on parenting styles focus overwhelmingly on specific incidents to do with disruptive behaviour, bedtime, mealtimes or violence in the playground (see e.g. http://www.ivillage.co.uk/whats-your-parenting-style/121528#ixzz19nggS7Ys, retrieved December 2010), thus failing to capture the complexity of the experience of being a parent, but they also, in spite of frequent references to 'finding the style that is right for you', leave parents in no doubt as to what 'style' they should adopt. The report of The Good Childhood Inquiry (Layard and Dunn, 2009), for example, explains: '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' (ibid., pp. 16-17); thus reinforcing the instrumental view of parenting mentioned above.

The problem, in other words, is not the possibly dubious scientific basis for Gorer's observations: the un-representativeness of his sample; the tenuousness of the implied causal connection between the behaviour he observed and the supposed end-state, but the fact that we seem to have lost the ability to talk about either the behaviour or the end-state in anything but instrumental terms. The dominant discourse about parenting, at the policy level and in much popular debate, encourages a view of parenting that assumes a straightforward, simple logic whereby everything parents do is both causally related to and intentionally aimed at creating a certain kind of child. I have developed elsewhere (with Stefan Ramaekers) a sustained critique of this logic, and of the language of psychology and, increasingly, neuroscience, which informs and reinforces it. Likewise, there are important sociological critiques of classed, cultural and gendered assumptions behind dominant accounts of 'good parenting' (see e.g. Gillies, 2005; Edwards and Gilies, 2004). Our philosophical work (Ramaekers and Suissa, 2011a, 2011b, 2010, Suissa, 2006; see also Smith, 2010) explores the possibility of talking about the parent-child relationship in other languages, acknowledging that we can never be a hundred percent sure of how our behaviour will have an effect on our children, and that 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 succeeded. In one sense, as we discuss in our work, questions about whether or not we have succeeded as parents are meaningless because there is no obvious 'end' to parenting. Furthermore, the notions that feature as posited 'outcomes' or goals in the kinds of prescriptions for good parenting documented here, notions such as 'well-being' and 'resilience', are not neutral, empirically measurable scientific terms, but reflections of the kinds of values, beliefs and ethical commitments that themselves form a part of parents' ongoing interactions with their children. Being a parent means constantly asking questions about the meaning and value of what one is doing with and for one's children and why one is doing it; and the infinite variety of these questions is such that one could not possibly predict or articulate them in advance; the questions are themselves 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 dominant language of 'scientific' parenting, notions such as 'well-being' are presented as the unproblematic findings of empirical research (e.g. into the effects of different 'parenting styles'), and this more open-ended form of questioning is shut down; it is not just the answers but the very questions that are given to us in advance. The instrumentalism implicit in the scientific account of parenting sees parents as responsible for creating a certain kind of child.

Moral Character and Flourishing: The Disappearance of the Moral Domain

I want now to explore this idea of parents as seen as responsible for creating a certain kind of child in relation to the notion of character, looking more closely at how this notion is used in popular literature on (good) parenting, in light of some philosophical work on moral character and flourishing. Building on the general critique alluded to here of the instrumentalism implicit in many contemporary accounts of good parenting, what I want to focus on is the strange disappearance of morality – moral meaning, moral language, and notions of the moral life – from parenting advice and policy.

While countless books and magazines have advised generations of parents on how to produce happy or flourishing children, recent years have witnessed a subtle shift in the language used to describe just exactly what this means. As Rima Apple documents comprehensively (Apple, 2006), 'scientific mothering' has existed at least since the mid nineteenth century, when physicians began to take on the role of authorities on child-rearing. But whereas earlier accounts focused on practical advice for the early years (feeding, sleeping routines, weaning, etc), and tended to phrase their recommendations in terms of general notions like 'children's flourishing' or 'healthfulness', the messages of the current dominant accounts of 'good parenting' are far more explicit: it is not just about having 'flourishing children' but about 'emotionally stable', 'mentally healthy', 'emotionally literate' and 'resilient' children. Furthermore, and connected to this shift, while there has always been an instrumental, scientific logic to official accounts of good parenting, the science is now more explicitly presented, and often takes the form of the 'hard data' of neurological research (for a detailed discussion of this point see Ramaekers and Suissa, 2010, 2011a, 2011b).

While it is also true that the term ‘mental health. appears in childrearing advice books at least as far back as the 1930’s (see Apple, 2006), this term is now both made far more prominent as an explicit goal of good parenting, and given a very specific meaning, often drawing on theoretical paradigms and measurement tools such as those of positive psychology or some variant of cognitive behavioural therapy.

In some cases, the title alone indicates the theoretical paradigm informing the parenting approach recommended, as in for example Stephen Briers’ (2008) book *Superpowers for parents: The psychology of great parenting and happiness,* or Margot Sunderland’s popular book (2006) *The science of parenting. How today’s brain research can lead to happy, emotionally balanced children*.

Briers explicitly recommends that parents adopt the techniques of skilled therapists in ensuring that their child turns out to be a mentally healthy individual. Other authors are similarly clear about the parent’s role. Erica Etelson, for example, talks of parents having to ‘make a commitment to taking responsibility for their children’s mental health’ (Etelson, 2010, p. 289). In short, what good parenting is essentially about, as attested by the titles of several dozen parenting books on the Amazon bestsellers list, is producing flourishing children, where flourshing, in turn, is defined as ‘mental health’.

Behind every scientifically proven approach to ‘effective’ child-rearing is an implicit assumption about the desirability of the end-state, or the thing that we are, presumably, supposed to be effective *at*. In recent popular and policy discourse, this is a model of a ‘mentally healthy’ individual, with mental health defined in terms of specifiable and measurable traits, tendencies or behaviours. Central amongst these are, for example, ‘emotional literacy’, the control of ‘negative’ emotions; ‘resilience’, and ‘self-esteem’ (you may be interested to know that you can take the Resilient Mindset Quiz – ‘Are You A Parent Capable of Fostering Resilience?’ at http://www.raisingresilientkids.com/quiz/index.htm).

The overwhelmingly instrumental framing of the parent-child relationship within this psychological language is reinforced by the frequent citing of a range of research findings that demonstrate a correlation between parental behaviours (especially in the ‘crucial’ first three years) and the prevalence of a range of negative social phenomena (drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, violent crime), and by the fact that parenting is increasingly spoken of as a skill. When the ‘ends’ of good parenting are specified in a narrow, empirically defined terms, what gets ruled out of the discussion of parenting is the irreducibly moral dimension to questions about human flourishing; questions about what it means to live well, what we want for and with our children, and why. There is no room, in this discussion, for questions of meaning and value, for ambiguity and uncertainty. Such questions, though, are as central to our attempts to live well and our understanding of human flourishing as they are to our attempts to be good, or perhaps just good enough, parents.

In encouraging us to see parenting instrumentally, the dominant discourse encourages us to see good parenting as just another life skill that can be learned, and correspondingly, to see the 'outcomes' of good parenting – such as 'well-being' or 'character' – in purely empirical terms. In so doing, the parent-child relationship is cut off from the moral language about what it means to live well, in which discussions of human flourishing are more appropriately anchored.

A good example of how notions of flourishing, which are conceptually inseparable from questions of values and morality, have been cut off from this conceptual background, is Margot Sunderland's *The Science of parenting* (2006), a whole section of which is entitled: 'The Chemistry of living life well'.

Taking up the general theme of her book, Sunderland states: 'hormones and brain chemicals powerfully influence our feelings, perceptions, and behaviour, and your child's early life experiences have a direct influence on which emotional states will become common for her'. What is more, 'the way you are with your child has dramatic effects on her brain's key systems for drive, will, motivation, and zest for life' (Sunderland, 2006, p. 84).

An example of how this works in practice is the discussion of bad behaviour (e.g. tantrums) in children and the desirable parental response. 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 Sunderland 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 a causal, even deterministic, logic regarding child 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.

Likewise, there is no distinction drawn between the different moral significance of various kinds of 'bad behaviour'. The point is 'why your child behaves badly' – tiredness, hunger, sugary foods impacting the brain, and so on – not the meaning of the term 'bad'. But surely the moral meaning and salience of, for example, 'hyperactive behaviour such as rushing around and climbing up things' and 'persistent screaming and raging in reaction to a parent's stress, depression, anger or grief' (ibid.) are a significant and intrinsic aspect of how we describe these kinds of behaviour, and thus, in how we respond to them as moral agents? In thinking about the reasons for the behaviour, its moral significance, and the appropriate way to respond, we are not just identifying which form of interaction on our part will be more effective in bringing about a particular behavioural, cognitive or neural result, but engaging in action as moral agents, and expressing, in doing so, something about the significance and meaning of what Blasi (see below) calls 'the moral domain'.

A particularly striking example here is the section in Sunderland's book entitled 'joy juice for babies', which talks about the importance of 'activating joy' (Sunderland, 2006, p.21) as not just a behavioural but a neural process – without any acknowledgement of the point that parents presumably want their children not just to have 'intense feelings of joy', but to have intense feelings of joy about morally appropriate things.

A similar flattening out of our moral language runs through Bronson and Merryman's popular book for parents, 'Nurture Shock' (2009). The authors enthusiastically discuss Carol Dweck's research on praise, which suggests that 'People who grow up getting too frequent rewards will not have persistence, because they'll quit when the rewards disappear' (Bronson and Merryman, 2009, p. 24). Parents, the authors explain, need to take this insight on board and learn to give their children 'specific' or 'focused', rather than 'universal' praise. The problem here is not only that 'persistence' itself is assumed here to be a neutral, descriptive and universally applicable term, rather than a moral evaluation that only makes sense within a normative account of human flourishing, but that all discussion of parents' behaviour is focused on the distinction between the effective and the non-effective ways in which to guarantee the end result, namely, the achievement of persistence. The distinction between what is morally salient and what is not, between morally valuable behaviour and morally less valuable behaviour; the very ability to assign moral meaning to the things that we do with children, disappears in the face of the significance of choosing particularly effective forms of response over others.

The way in which 'the science of parenting' is presented as a neutral, empirical and descriptive project thus exemplifies the way in which our everyday moral language has been expunged from talking about parent-child relationships. The recent focus on the notion of 'character' in this context is further evidence of how notions which one would think have their home within a moral, humanistic discourse, are disembedded from this moral landscape. Character, a notion which, surely, derives its core meaning from an understanding of humans as moral agents, is conceptualized, in the context of recent research and policy on parenting, as a measurable end-state and a psychological descriptor, rather than an aspect of our moral lives.

A glance at some standard philosophical accounts of moral character should alert us to the problems with this conceptualization. If we acknowledge that character is an irreducibly moral and evaluative concept, and take on board the insight that 'morality requires action guided by moral intentions, providing the behaviour with moral meaning, within the framework of the agent's understanding of morality' (Blasi, 2005, p. 76), then it simply makes no sense to regard the formation of character as the creation of a set of objectively identifiable personality traits in a child. We cannot, connectedly, construe parenting as a neutral set of techniques designed to achieve a form of behaviour in children which we regard as optimal without any discussion of its moral and social significance.

This is not to say that we can or should aspire to capture the 'science of parenting' away from psychologists and reclaim it for philosophy. A philosophically informed moral psychology can help to identify what is lacking from the current dominant picture in the parenting literature. As Blasi explains,

> Cognitively, the child constructs categories of actions and experiences. For what concerns the moral domain, labels like ‘good’, ‘bad’, and ‘nice’, are extremely important, even if the corresponding concepts remain undifferentiated and motivationally confusing for some time. In the area of motivation, at some point the child begins to appreciate the intrinsic value – that is, independent of immediate self-interests – of certain aspects of the world: the harmony of music, the beauty of a picture, the sharing involved in playing with others, the goodness of giving, and so on. This expedience, no doubt socially and culturally mediated, is the foundation for the understanding of objective values and of their normativity: there are objects that one desires and wants, but there are also objects that are desirable and valuable, and should be desired and wanted also by other people. (Blasi, 2005, p. 81)

Yet it is precisely this central part of our understanding of what morality and moral development consists in that seems to have completely vanished from discussions of parenting. The very delineation of the moral domain – the distinction between the moral and the non-moral; the morally good and the morally bad; the valuable and the less valuable – is glaringly absent from a lot of popular parenting advice on how to behave with children in order to enable them to flourish, as illustrated by the above examples. This is evident not just in the way the ends of ‘good parenting’ – e.g. creating resilient children – are discussed as if the positing of these ends does not involve any evaluative exercise or any moral deliberation about how we want to relate to our child; it is evident also in the articulation of the advice to parents on how to behave with these ends in sight.

In short, discussions of parenting such as Sunderland’s, Bronson and Merryman’s and other ‘scientific’ approaches imply that our reasons for doing things as parents have to be backed up with scientific evidence that the appropriate behaviour will provide a certain result. What this approach glosses over and distorts is the fact that we live in a world of meaning, above all, perhaps, of moral meaning, and it is in this world of moral meaning that we act as parents. It is not just that our action as parents gets its meaning from being part of our moral lives, and thus that any coherent notion of what we want to achieve for and with our children cannot be cut off from our moral lives. What is more, coming to appreciate the world as one imbued with moral meaning surely forms a central part of moral education – whether or not one sees this as form of character education - on any robust account of moral development.

As Blasi notes, the classic philosophical conception of moral character identifies moral character with ‘a predisposition to experience certain emotions and to engage in ethically significant kinds of behaviours in response to more or less specific situations' (Blasi, 2005, p. 69). But the significance of identifying and alerting children and ourselves to what constitute ethically significant behaviours is lost when all we see is the effect.

Moral development and upbringing

If we want to go along with some notion of moral character as being at least a part of moral development and upbringing, we need to take on board the point that 'the moral attribute, of either action or character trait' is conceptually dependent on 'the person's moral intention and motive and therefore on some, perhaps minimal, grasp of what morality is and involves' (Blasi, 2005, p. 70).

This point seems to echo Vasilou's point, in his discussion of Aristotelian virtue ethics, that acquiring the virtues consists precisely in acquiring not just the 'that' but 'the why' of ethics (Vasilou,1996).

I have focused in the above discussion on the conceptual concern that glossing over or leaving out the moral language from discussions of good parenting has the danger of offering us an impoverished picture of the parent-child relationship, of failing to see parents and children as moral agents, and of conceptualizing 'parenting' as a set of skills rather than a part of broader discussions of human flourishing and the moral life. But while I cannot go into this in much detail here, it seems to me that this analysis also has important implications for the field of moral psychology, specifically, for philosophical work on moral upbringing. While most philosophical work on moral education is overwhelmingly focused on schools and formal education, there is a lot more still to be said about the role of parents in this regard, particularly in light of the instrumental conception of parenting that, as discussed, characterises much contemporary policy and popular literature on good parenting.

The prominence of discussion of the emotions in the popular parenting literature referred to above may give the impression that such work is compatible with Aristotelian insights about the connection between the emotions and moral character. Yet in fact this kind of work is distinctly un-Aristotelian in so far as there is no notion anywhere in it that 'living life well' is, above all else, a moral concept. As Vasilou notes, within this moral conception of flourishing, it makes no sense to view 'the cognitive and desiderative components of full virtue' as ‘aspects that can or should be developed independently’. Bringing up a child, he says, means that ‘developing its motivational propensities is the very same activity as the developing of its cognitive faculties.....When you punish your child and tell him that what he has done is shameful the motivational, desiderative portion of the lesson is inextricably interwoven with the reason captured in concepts like ‘shameful’ ‘not nice’ ‘bad’, etc. To believe that these capacities could be separated would be to understand Aristotelian habituation as the sort of process to which a dog would be susceptible.’ (Vasilou, 2006, p. 780).

Contemporary parenting science, which ignores the background moral and cultural context in which certain character traits are regarded as desirable (as opposed to just adaptive), fails to take on board this Aristotelian insight. Thus policy discourse on ‘character’ that is informed by this science effectively drives a wedge between the individual and society, implying a view of parenting in which parents’ relationship with their child(ren) is isolated from broader political and moral context, and in which it is thus possible to think of upbringing as a process of creating a certain kind of child with certain traits, without questioning the moral significance of either the supposedly desirable traits themselves, or the actions that parents perform within their relationship with their children. Indeed, the very prominence of the notion of ‘resilience’ within contemporary parenting literature encourages a view of parents as charged with creating a child who is resilient to the various unpredictable experiences thrown up by the outside world, rather than as moral agents living in the world and reflecting and conveying the moral meaning of these experiences in their relationships with their children.

The enthusiasm, in recent policy debates, for a form of character education as the basis for ‘good parenting’, and the psychological research to which it often refers, completely fail to take on board any of the insights arising from recent work in moral psychology, such as those articulated by Kwame Anthony Appiah, who points out that ‘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 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. In interacting 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 paraphrase 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 an alternative, morally-saturated 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.

Good parenting, in short, has been reduced, in the popular and policy discourse, to a recipe for creating a certain kind of child, with everything parents should and should not do framed as either contributing or detracting from this desirable end-point. As I have argued, this overwhelmingly instrumental language makes is increasingly harder for us to talk about parenting in moral terms. It is no longer enough to say that we shouldn't hit children because it shows a lack of respect for them as moral agents, or even simply because it is unkind: we need to look at evidence of the effects of these actions on the child's brain, or of a correlation between the use of physical punishment in certain population groups and the prevalence of anti-social behaviour. The disappearance of our moral language from discussions of parenting has the effect, I argue, of painting an impoverished picture of what it means to be a parent, and of the moral life in general. It also, I have suggested, may have worrying implications for our understanding of moral development and moral education.

To imply simplistically that 'good parenting' will produce 'good children' is not only to ignore the empirical complexity of any purported causal link between parental behaviour and children's traits or propensities, and indeed the sheer unpredictability and fragility of our lives and those of our children. It is also to ignore the complexity of any understanding of what makes for a good human life and why. This way of thinking amounts to a failure at what is surely a task of central significance for moral philosophers and moral educators.

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