The Aims of Upbringing, Reasonable Affect, and Parental Rights:

A Response to Paul Hirst’s Autobiographical Reflections[[1]](#endnote-1)

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ABSTRACT

In a candid autobiographical chapter (2010) which numbers among his last writings, Paul Hirst subjects his upbringing within a fundamentalist Christian sect to searching moral appraisal. He concludes that his parents wronged him by religiously indoctrinating him, stifling his emotional development, and arbitrarily restricting his range of valuable morally permissible experiences. This upbringing undermined his autonomy and, more fundamentally on his account, kept him from living the life he had most reason to live. Surprisingly, however, Hirst suggests that his parents had a right to initiate him into this conservative religious life, though the wider community owed him a more non-directive form of religious education to temper it. This is a striking concession to the scope of parental rights, especially in view of Hirst’s complaint that the emotional repression required by his parents was to ‘distort [his] experience and understanding of [himself] and others in ways that persisted well into [his] adult life’. Engaging with Hirst's evaluation on his upbringing, I argue for a narrower range of parental rights than Hirst–one which excludes a parental moral right to religious initiation–and provide an account of the kind of emotional experiences to which children plausibly have a right.

INTRODUCTION

In a philosophical memoir entitled, *From Revelation and Faith to Reason and Agnosticism*, Paul Hirst recounts how his upbringing was centred around a ‘Meeting’ of fundamentalist Christian sect, the Glanton Brethren. His childhood was lonely, unstimulating, unaffectionate, emotionally inhibited, joyless, and marked by ‘strict discipline and severe punishment’ (Hirst 2010, 157). The Meeting taught that creation was ‘infected by sin and evil, and destined for final destruction’, that Salvation ‘was available only by the Grace of God for those who repented from sinful, natural lives’, and that people must devote their lives to the ‘spiritual service of God in obedience to his teachings set out in the New Testament’ (156); Hirst thought of himself as a ‘sinful child in an evil world,’ with whom, it seemed only natural, his ‘parents might often be displeased’ (158). His upbringing was lonely and unstimulating because outside of school he was not allowed to associate with children outside the sect who–along with all adults outside the Meeting–were considered ‘a danger’, and none of the children inside the sect were similar in age. It was unstimulating because, apart from prayer meetings, and reading scripture, there was nothing to do but schoolwork and play the piano, in particular, there was very little occasion for play. It was unaffectionate and emotionally inhibited because the Meeting taught that ‘love and affection’, and ‘feelings and emotions’ ‘should have no place in our daily lives’ (157), furthermore, his father’s main involvement in his life concerned religious activities and severe enforcement of strict discipline. Hirst reports that he was ‘rarely joyful or happy’ as a child (158).

Regarding the long-term impact of his upbringing, Hirst says that ‘the doctrines [his parents] understood as teaching the need to inhibit the expression, and thence the occurrence, of natural emotions, was in fact to distort [his] experience and understanding of [himself] and others in ways that persisted well into [his] adult life’ (174). Distorting his experience and understanding was not, I take it, an aim that his parents had. Plausibly they thought that it was the emotions themselves that would distort his experience and understanding. Evidence Hirst cites of his emotional repression include that he ‘was not personally as concerned … about moral and social issues’ as others, and that he ‘entered into no close personal relationships of any kind that might have disturbed or challenged’ him (163). By around 1962, eighteen years after leaving home and aged around thirty-five, Hirst says he ‘had slowly become much less emotionally inhibited and socially much more involved with many diverse groups, enjoying also a number of quite close personal relationships’ (65).

Evaluating his upbringing, Hirst says that his parents wronged him by blighting his prospects for flourishing across the whole life course from childhood to adulthood, including by restricting the development of capacities for practical reason through religiously indoctrinating him,[[2]](#endnote-2) and close relationships through stifling his emotions, and by arbitrarily restricting his range of morally permissible experiences. Surprisingly however, his final word in the chapter is that his parents had a right to bring him up in this way. Engaging with Hirst’s evaluation of his upbringing, I suggest an alternative assessment of Hirst’s upbringing. At the level of description I have just given, I think Hirst’s critique of his upbringing is quite right as far as it goes (i.e., Hirst’s parents wronged him by religiously indoctrinating him, stifling his emotional development, and arbitrarily restricting his range of valuable morally permissible experiences), though I think it should go further and I reject his explanation of the force of these objections. In particular, I take issue with Hirst’s account of practical reason and of the good life, and with his account of the significance of autonomy as merely instrumentally useful for securing individuals’ desire satisfaction. Paying special attention to the emotional deprivation he experienced in upbringing, I provide a rival account of the ways in which his childhood wronged him, including an account of the kind of emotional experiences to which children plausibly have a right. I argue for a narrower range of parental rights–one which excludes a parental moral right to religious initiation, and rights to wrong their children in the ways Hirst diagnoses his parents to have wronged him. I start by summarising Hirst’s deep explanation of the moral faults of his upbringing.

WELFARE, AUTONOMY, AND THE AIMS OF UPBRINGING

For Hirst, upbringing and education ‘should launch every child into the development of a good life, as a life structured maximally by the person’s own exercise of practical reason’ (174). As a pair, his upbringing and schooling failed him, he thinks, because they did not achieve this. Though as we shall discuss later, on Hirst’s view, his parents had a right to wrong him. Hirst’s rationale for raising children to structure their life through the exercise of practical reason is instrumental: ‘it seems that the maximum freedom of informed choice for each of us is the only way we can each hope to achieve a good life that matches our own individual capacities and desires’ (169). To understand Hirst’s views about the aims of upbringing and why these aims are morally required of parents, we must understand his view of the good life and of its connection with the requirements of morality. Hirst’s account of the content and justification of morality is interwoven with an account of the good life and of the value of social institutions, including the family.

Hirst thinks that moral principles (and social institutions and practices more generally) have an ideal function which is to satisfy, variously, ‘our desires’ (167, 170), ‘fundamental human needs, wants and desires’ (168), and ‘desires that we almost universally seem to develop’ (170). He emphasizes *natural* desires (167, 168).[[3]](#endnote-3) For Hirst, satisfying these desires is what the human good consists in. Furthermore, natural desires require no justification, instead it is these desires that enable the justification of e.g. moral principles, and social practices and institutions. As he puts it, ‘reason … is anchored firmly in the satisfaction of naturally given needs, wants and desires’ (167). I take it that the naturalness of a desire is partly evidenced by its being common to humans across diverse societies. I suspect that Hirst hopes to avoid any need to justify the aim of satisfying natural desires. As Hirst puts it elsewhere ‘rational choice can only be the development of the more adequate coherent satisfaction of important wants overall (1993, 193)’ and ‘practical know-how is developed in practice itself, its criterion of validity being success in achieving satisfactions’ (192).

Hirst recognizes that our natures are heavily and inevitably socialised, but contends that societies can be appraised by how far they enable people to satisfy natural desires, as well as how far they enable people to satisfy the desires they generate through socialization. Hirst’s specification that social arrangements should aim to satisfy natural desires enables him to rule out perverse arrangements that would seek to eliminate currently natural desires from our natures and, say, cultivate and enable people to perfectly satisfy strong desires to have short lives in which they divide their time eating a tasteless paste and watching static on screens. Indeed, in the concluding chapter of the Festschrift for Hirst, he interprets liberal democracy’s social principles as ‘strictly utilitarian in the service of individual wants’ (1993, 189). However, given that all manner of wants and desires may be socialised, including acquiescence in our own oppression, or less-than-equal importance, it seems that further constraints are needed to make the account welfare square with plausible moral intuitions.

There is a slight ambiguity in the claim that our welfare consists in the satisfaction of our desires. On one interpretation of the claim, we have reason to satisfy our current desires, whatever they are. On the other interpretation, we have most reason to cultivate the greatest number of desires we can satisfy. Since the second seems absurd, I take it that Hirst subscribed to the first version of this view.[[4]](#endnote-4) Still, I think that this version of desire-satisfaction is not a plausible account of welfare. Examples that put pressure on the view include the following. I might form the preference that one dinosaur ate another just where I stand. Suppose that it was true, and that I fully realised I would never know whether this were true. My preference would have been satisfied and my welfare thereby increased. But it is strongly counterintuitive to think that my welfare would have been increased. Equally, it would not seem to contribute to my welfare that I should prefer to turn on and off the light switch several times before entering or exiting the room and manage to do it. We can suggest that only informed preferences matter, but in making such a stipulation we may rule out many preferences and seem to presuppose that there is some more objective standard to which information (and ideal preference forming conditions) might help our preferences approximate.[[5]](#endnote-5) A better account of welfare is given by Brighouse (1998, 2006): lives are good for us when a) we identify with them ‘from the inside’ and b) they are objectively good.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Hirst invokes additional aims that social institutions should promote, that do not seem reducible to preference satisfaction–they seem more like members of an ‘objective list’ theory of wellbeing. He says, for instance, that a good life ‘is one in which our individual capacities … are exercised to provide the fulfilment of our potentialities and our fullest satisfactions across the whole of our individual natures and across our whole lives’ (169). Along with satisfying desires, the aim of religion is to enable people ‘to know about and come to terms with the ultimate and fundamental character and purpose of our own existence and that of our given context’ (170). It is a pity that Hirst does not say more to show how these are integrated into his view. It could simply be that people happen to naturally desire these things. Elsewhere he says that ‘only if we give recognition to the satisfactions, amongst all others, of pursuing and achieving true beliefs and justifiable actions can we ever give an adequate account of the good life’ (1993, 191). It seems implausible that this is all that makes them non-instrumentally valuable. Better integrated, is Hirst’s account of the value of autonomy (as a personal capacity) and of practical reason. These, he seems clear, are valuable because they are instrumental to the satisfaction of natural and socialized needs and desires. As he put it in his festschrift, ‘wants vary in specific detail, and their differentiation in terms of richly alternative satisfactions means that what constitutes the good life can in detail be determined only by that particular person’ (1993, 189). However, there is more to autonomy than this. Autonomy may be important to defeat ethical servility: it is often wrong to intervene in people’s lives even in ways that would benefit them, by failing to accept that their life is theirs to live, and nobody else’s.[[7]](#endnote-7) We return to explore the implications of this oversight in the last section.

Now to Hirst’s view of the relationship between the flourishing life and the morally good life. As we have seen, Hirst thinks that our individual good consists in the satisfaction of our natural and socialised desires. However, he is also at pains to undermine the individual attainability of our individual goods: he thinks of us as having reason to bring about the aggregate good, because our individual good resides in our collective good. He says, for instance, that ‘we are not fundamentally separate atom-like individuals for whom social relationships are secondary and of significance only because of their contingent value to us’ (167), and that a good life ‘is only possible if we fully recognize our necessary interrelatedness with and dependence upon others who are equally seeking their own good lives’ (169). However, I do not see how this gets us towards something recognisable as morality. Some people act morally wrongly not because they just fail to see that their desires, wants and needs are ones that are distributed over relationships. Some people privilege their relationships too much by doing harm to others for some small benefit to their loved ones. It seems that plenty of people can fail to have needs, wants and desires that align with satisfying the needs, wants and desires of others (by being unduly partial, selfish, self-aggrandizing, and duty-shirking): this can be so in how they comport themselves to out-group members, or members of their group they are able to exploit as second-class citizens. One can acknowledge, as Hirst presses in his 1993 chapter, that the options we have for harnessing our natural capacities and desires in satisfying ways are the results of long periods of cultural evolution, and often require social cooperation. But plausible moral principles like the duties to share the burdens and benefits of undeserved luck, to treat others as ends in themselves, and to do no harm are not derivable just from desires we happen to have. Moreover, what we owe to others is not plausibly contingent all by itself on who they are to us, or how their welfare helps constitute, enable, or enhance our own.

One can attempt to connect Hirst’s account of practical reason to something resembling morality by introducing the thought that, from an impersonal point of view, the satisfaction of others’ preferences is no less important than the satisfaction of one’s own.[[8]](#endnote-8) Call this the Impersonal Symmetry View. However, what separates any account of morality as an efficient means of maximizing aggregate welfare from more ordinary ideas of morality are the absent ideas of constraints, and options: constraints against violating people’s apparent rights in order to promote aggregate welfare, and options to make a life for ourselves that is not entirely devoted to maximizing aggregate welfare.[[9]](#endnote-9) Both constraints and options can take forms reflecting what seems like legitimate partiality: that I *must* seek to save a close partner over a slightly younger stranger who has longer to live (unless my partner tells me otherwise), and that I *may* treat my close partner to something nice rather than help a distant stranger in need. A philosophy without constraints and options would commend an asceticism with some similarity to the one Hirst’s parents enacted. Furthermore, it is hard to believe, as welfare consequentialism implies, that there is nothing wrong with violating apparent rights to promote aggregate welfare. Moreover, it’s not altogether clear that the Impersonal Symmetry View is available to someone who thinks that practical reason bottoms out in whatever desires, wants and preferences we happen to have by dint of nature or socialization. This is because it simply may not matter to us that others’ desires, wants and preferences are satisfied–and after all, on this view, reason’s only job is to secure the realisation of our own preferences. In order to avail of the Impersonal Symmetry View which tells us that ‘like desires are equally important’, we need to jettison the claim that what we have reason to do bottoms out in whatever we happen to want to do. On that view, if someone preferred to raise their child in ways that did not conduce to their child’s long-term prospects of preference-satisfaction, there would be no (non-instrumental) reason we could leverage to persuade them to change their minds.

In sum, we have seen that for Hirst, upbringing should equip people to satisfy their preferences and should promote their autonomy just because it enables them to better do this. I have argued that this view has three faults: it is morally suspicious, it underrates the importance of autonomy, and gives the wrong account of welfare. On the other hand, I think that Hirst is quite right to say that upbringing should equip children to lead good lives through the exercise of practical reason.

RATIONALITY, NEUTRALITY, FLOURISHING AND EMOTIONS

It is notable in Hirst’s story that, as he says, being brought up to ‘inhibit the expression, and thence the occurrence, of natural emotions was in fact to distort [his] experience and understanding of [himself] and others in ways that persisted well into [his] adult life’ (174). What are we to say about children’s rights to affection and emotional expression?

One way of thinking about children’s upbringings and rights against certain styles of parenting is in terms of Rawlsian ‘primary goods.’ To see the attraction of this way of thinking, we start by asking what claims each citizen has over others for assistance, and for non-interference. We then suggest that from the point of view of both social stability, and reciprocity we ought not to justify the claims we have over each other in terms others could reasonably reject. The scope of reasonable rejection is marked out by observing that on many aspects of the good life, questions of metaphysics, religion and so on, disagreement is inevitable even among people who think that people’s lives are their own to lead, that government should treat its citizens without favouritism (i.e. that are committed to freedom and equality). So, people would be motivated to define their claims over one another in ways that maximally avoid judging who is right on the various points of disagreement. Part of children’s claims for their upbringing might then be defined in terms of primary goods; ‘With more of these goods men can generally be assured of greater success in carrying out their intentions and in advancing their ends, whatever these ends may be.’ (Rawls 92). Elizabeth Brake (2010) argues that the capacity to enter close, caring relationships constitutes a Rawlsian primary good. This is because for many conceptions of the good–almost all in fact–intimacy and (attitudinal and material) care are constitutive features of flourishing. Without the capacity to enter close, caring relationships, one rules out pursuit of these conceptions of the good and consideration of whether they should form an important part of one’s own life. Exit rights will of course require that these relationships not nurture dependency, indeed having exit rights and the ability to exercise them are partly useful for motivating better treatment within relationships.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Separately, Martha Nussbaum has argued that ‘emotions’ and ‘practical reason’ number among ten capabilities ‘an ample threshold level’ of which are required ‘for a life worthy of human dignity’ (Nussbaum 2011, 32):

Emotions. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude and justified anger. Not having one’s emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (32-33)

Practical Reason. Being able to form a conception of the good and engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life. (33)[[11]](#endnote-11)

We need not decide between these approaches since they converge here so far.[[12]](#endnote-12) I will return to this thought shortly. It is worth noting that education for emotional rationality may require educating for a level of plasticity, for as Nussbaum writes, the area is fraught with uncertainty:

In asking what emotions it is good to have, what emotions form part of truly rational judgement, we are asking, in effect, what forms of dependence and affiliation with undependable items outside ourselves it is good for a human life to have. And this involves asking how much uncertainty and dependency a person can live with while retaining integrity and practical reason; how far trust in others is a good thing and at what point it becomes naïvety; whether, indeed, it is best to live a life of what Thrasymachus (speaking of justice) called ‘a very noble kind of naïveté’, or a life that consists in prudently maximizing one's own satisfactions; whether it is good to love anyone at all, given the depths of the pain that love can inflict; whether it is good to build a society on the basis of these needs, loves, and attachments, or rather on the basis of respect for the self‐sufficiency of reason. In short, it is the question of the human good. (Nussbaum 1995, 394).

Nussbaum’s point that asking what emotions it is good to have just is the question of what the human good is points in a distinctively perfectionist direction. I suspect that in the end cultivating emotional rationality may require taking a more perfectionist pedagogy than either the primary goods, or capabilities approach recommends. This is because emotional deprivation tends to undermine the capacity for practical reason, of which the wherewithal to enter and sustain intrinsically valuable relationships is one element. Emotions are a complex package of judgements–sometimes, but not always, associated with feelings and bodily states–which often provide motivational impetus towards action. Our emotions can be irrational by lacking consistency and proportionality in their strength and valence, and by being inapt. Emotional judgements can fail to ‘fit’: to fear something which is comforting is inapt, as is longing for something which is dangerous. Indeed, there seems to be a lack of understanding demonstrated in a failure to have the appropriate emotional response in the appropriate place, and these can lead to errors in action: not running away from the dangerous, and not seeking comfort. Additionally, individuals who lack ‘somatic markers’—bodily feelings such as anxiety, nausea, and disgust that are cued by emotions—fail to translate into action what they can recognize intellectually as being best (Damasio 2006). Practical reason requires having the rights sorts of feelings in the rights sorts of places, and these are the sorts of things we cultivate through modelling and praising appropriate motivations and feelings and criticizing inappropriate ones. Ultimately what is wrong is with Hirst’s parents’ requirements that he suppress his emotions is that he lost powerful motivators for the right kinds of responses, and that they did indeed distort his experience and understanding of himself and others and of the world by missing out on apt emotional responses and reasonable affect.

An exit right is a right to leave relationship, institutions, associations, and of course locations. Regarding locations, exit options presuppose options to enter some other place. Regarding relationships, exit options need not, but often will, since it is psychologically costly as well as materially demanding for most people to live outside of human intercourse. Exit rights can be merely formal, in that there may be no law preventing exit, or laws preventing others from taking of steps to prevent exit. For example, laws preventing a group one leaves from taking all of one’s wealth, making exit materially difficult. However, more effective rights may require some levels of assistance for exit. For instance, an unwaged, stay-at-home parent and domestic worker who chooses to exit a marriage has rights to their partner’s wages and wealth. In cases of abusive personal relationships, an effective right of exit may involve access to drugs that could help to break affectional bonds. Hirst, it seems, had managed to exit his religion. He says for instance, that ‘I had slowly become less emotionally inhibited and socially more involved with many diverse groups, enjoying also a number of quite close personal relationships’ (165). Indeed, he says that after he went to university, his father ‘saw [him] as inevitably succumbing to the worldly temptations of my academic life and career, but he said nothing, judging I am sure that this was now my own responsibility’ (165-166). Here little is done to exercise control and limit exit. But it is likely that too little was done to enable, or ensure positive capacities for exit of social arrangements, and to manage relationships outside of the group. It’s worth noting that beliefs are not something one exits, as one exits social arrangements. Exiting is a matter of decision and action, whereas changing one’s beliefs is a matter of judgement and is involuntary (one does not decide to believe). However, both one’s rational judgement, and capacity to effectively exit social arrangements, or mutually shape them, may require a capacity to resist (e.g.) charismatic leadership, and not to have one’s affections, allegiances, and loyalties bias one’s judgement. What I take Hirst’s case to show is that while his eventual exit demonstrates the possibility of exit, this was not enough to secure the permissibility of his upbringing–reasonable ease of exit is required. Had Hirst not gone to Cambridge gaining an unsurveilled opportunity to read widely and to find people with wider interests and level of religious commitment, he may not have found the resources to revise his views and develop alternative relationships and sources of meaning. As he says himself, ‘that in my later education and experience I could overcome some of these earlier deprivations was fortuitous–I was certainly denied certain choices and opportunities that I otherwise might well have had’ (174).

PARENTAL RIGHTS TO WRONG

Hirst says two things that may be in some tension. First: ‘My parents rightly sought, as all parents should, to bring me up within the web of moral and religious beliefs and practices which they held to be true, and within that web they sought the best formation of my life that they could’ (173). Second: that he regards his upbringing as ‘morally unsatisfactory … in certain very important respects’ (172), and more strongly ‘such a situation … I now judge to be morally unacceptable’ (173). How are we to understand this or resolve this tension? His moral complaints are interestingly undirected: is it the situation that is morally unacceptable, and his upbringing that is morally unsatisfactory. He refrains from saying that his parents wronged him.

In discussing his parents’ culpability for their approach to childrearing, Hirst comments that he cannot blame them since they acted in good faith and that, given their faith, they could not (either responsibly, or perhaps actually) have raised him other than they did (173). He says that the mismatch between the upbringing they gave him, and one he was more objectively owed was due to ‘limitations in their own rational capacities rather than any flaw in their deep commitment to the good of their children as they understood it’ (173). It is generally true that non-culpable ignorance can render moral wrongs excusable (as opposed to justified). The general idea is that our actions must be sufficiently attributable to us to be blameworthy, rather than to something beyond us (including unavoidable ignorance, credible threats of unacceptable costs, or force). Our actions and inactions, that is, are blameworthy when they fail to track what we have compelling moral reason to do, where we are aware of those reasons or should be aware of them. Some might look to people in similar situations to the parents and consider whether they made better choices, if so, the thought might be the failure to find a more morally justifiable path was culpable. I think we know too little about this case to make the appropriate comparisons and comment responsibly on this. Indeed, the more pressing questions concern what parents owe to their children and why, and what third parties owe to both parents and their children by way of interference, non-interference, and protection from interference.

As we have seen, while Hirst regards his parents as having acted unjustifiably, he makes the following surprising concession:

It was a pity that the upbringing I judge my parents had the right to give me was not complemented while I was at school by serious religious education, something I consider crucial within the education of all children in our present religion-dominated societies. (175)

Given that no other kind of upbringing is mentioned, it seems from the context that the upbringing Hirst judges his parents had the right to give him was the one they actually gave him. To make the idea of parents having right to do something other than they are morally required to do clear, I shall suggest that it be understood as consisting of 1) an injunction against others from interfering with or penalize their wrongful parenting (even if they may criticise it as being wrongful), and 2) a duty to facilitate their parenting where they would have a similar duty to facilitate non-wrongful parenting. To illustrate, if Bill has a right to spend his money parenting wrongfully, whereas Ben has moral permission to spend his money parenting in that same way, then if Tom has a duty to facilitate Ben’s transaction, Tom will have the same duty to facilitate the Bill’s transaction. Eamonn Callan gives an example in which it seems plausible that parents can have a right to do something morally wrong in the way they raise their child. In his example, some parents decide to go on an expensive holiday instead of buying a piano for their musically talented and interested child. Callan comments that:

I think scarcely anyone would think the parents were not within their moral rights in choosing as they did, although many might also say–I include myself here–that their choice was unfortunate, even stupid (1997, 145).

Whether the parents are ‘within their moral rights’ in this example depends partly on whether the child has a claim of justice to their parents’ resources being wisely used to promote their interests. If the money is the parents’ to spend however they see fit, including not on the child at all, then the parents have a claim to spend it in ways that do not optimize benefits to their child across their lifespan. If the money is the child’s, to be spent on them in ways that might reasonably be thought to respond optimally to their developmental and non-developmental needs, then the parents can be thought to have wronged their child in ways that give third parties reason to intervene and not to facilitate the transaction.

Generally, theorists who defend a right of parents to give their children a religious upbringing do so on the ground that such a right serves both the child and parents’ interests in shared intimacy with one another (Weinstock, Hand, Brighouse and Swift 2014). I argue elsewhere (Tillson forthcoming) that this argument is unpersuasive. However, even if arguments like it are persuasive in many cases, they hardly apply to the case of Hirst’s upbringing since intimacy is something that was notably lacking in Hirst’s childhood. It might be that there are many and various forms that intimacy can take. For instance, a family might cultivate bonding through creating shared experiences of mutual terror by sharing risky challenges which children are expected to rise to. Through overcoming fear together, intimacy may be fostered rather differently from other ways of fostering it. However, Hirst’s upbringing seems to fall outside the range of intelligible interpretations. His father’s involvement was restricted to leading prayer and enforcing strict discipline in severe ways, and precluded play of any kind. Hirst says, ‘affection figured hardly at all in my relationship with my parents or anyone else in my life until well after I left home’ (157).

Another reason we might think of Hirst’s parents as having a ‘right to do wrong’ might be that it is too demanding to expect them to act contrary to what they believe their duty to be, even where their beliefs are mistaken. In acting contrary to what they – even mistakenly – take their duties to be, people may experience a profound sense of alienation from their actions, or a tremendous sense of guilt, shame and regret. Certainly Hirst’s parents fit the bill of acting from their sincere conscience. If we were to add additional criteria for a right to do wrong, such as that the convictions were formed under sufficiently good epistemically conditions for their judgement to be epistemically reasonable, or that in so acting they do not sacrifice other people’s interests too much, then they may not meet these. It seems we have to add criteria like these since, for instance, Eichmann apparently sincerely believed that it was his solemn duty to murder various demographic groups he regarded as inferior, and it is extremely implausible that he had any kind of right to pursue this policy of wrongdoing. It is also not plausible to think that we should work out whether parents have a right to wrong their children, just by figuring out whether parents would suffer more by failing to wrong their children than their children would suffer when they managed to wrong them. This is partly because it may be the parents’ fault that they would suffer by failing to do wrong – it could be their fault for having the mistaken views they have.

If anyone had a right to non-interference in the case of Hirst’s upbringing, it is more plausible that would belong to the young Hirst who has a claim to be protected from losing a stable, loving care giver, who contributes sufficiently (or better than the next available carer) to his (developmental and non-developmental) welfare through his period of dependency. However, it is sadly seriously questionable whether Hirst had such a caregiver to lose.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Hirst suggests that education and upbringing are best seen as complementary:

Education I consider is best understood as continuous with upbringing, and to have the same overall aim-namely the development of each pupil’s good life. It is the formal institutionalization of initiating pupils into those practices, essential or desirable for most members of a given society on their journey to maturity, for which the home and parents alone cannot adequately provide (174).

However, it is not clear why this shared overall aim would warrant different aims for schools and parents when it comes to religious initiation. Insofar as religions offer comprehensive theories about the history and nature of the world and momentous claims about how we have most reason to live, and insofar as these are epistemically controversial, we have reason not to paint children into cognitive corners, and see the world through their prism. Given this epistemic controversy together with disagreement among religions about what makes for a good life, religious initiation would seem to risk a significant deviation from upbringing’s aim to increase child’s prospects for a good life. The more epistemically and prudentially appropriate attitude to cultivate is agnosticism. Indeed, Hirst says that ‘the only position that I think it now reasonable to take on all religious claims is one of skepticism or agnosticism, until such time as there is altogether more convincing evidence for their justification than we have been able to discover to date’ (170). It is simply not clear that any interest a parent could have would be outweighed or silenced by this more fundamental interest children have.

CHILDREN’S DISCRETION AND PARENTS’ WORLDVIEWS

Parents usually act in what they think is their children’s best interests. Where parents so act, the forms of upbringing they provide for their children can be objectionable because parents are mistaken about either what is in their children’s interests, or about how to achieve what is in their interests. They can also be objectionable because they unduly discount third party interests. However, objections to forms of upbringing need not take any of these forms – they need not focus on interests at all. This is because as they grow older, children ought increasingly to be considered as authorities over their own lives. This is not simply because they are increasingly better placed to identify and achieve their own flourishing or because being granted such latitude will increase their long-term prospects of doing so. It’s because each of us has a claim to rule our own lives even in ways which do not reflect the best conception of our own welfare. Such self-governorship as this authority affords them plausibly extends to allowing even quite young children discretionary time in which they may play as they prefer. If they want to play this game rather than that game, they ought to be able to, even if the other game would be more maximally beneficial for them. Being their discretionary time, they may spend it as they prefer, even if their choices comes at some opportunity cost to them.[[14]](#endnote-14) For this reason, we can sometimes object to aspects of parents’ styles of upbringing precisely because they *do* attempt to act in their children’s best interests. That is so even where parents are entirely *right* about what is in their children’s best interests and about how to achieve it. Such objections can bypass considering whether parents ideas about their children’s best interest are correct – since these questions are immaterial. However, in the case of Hirst’s upbringing, it looks like his parents’ justification for the kind of upbringing they gave him (i.e. ‘either Paul and his sister are brought up this way or they risk eternal damnation’) is morally compelling if it is sound. If Hirst seriously risked eternal damnation for spending his discretionary time in the ways his parents proscribed, then his parents were right to drastically limit his discretionary play in the ways they did. For this reason, to assess whether Hirst’s parents were right to limit his discretionary play, we need to consider whether their religious beliefs and ideas about their children’s long-term prospects are true.

Imagine we tried to persuade Hirst’s parents to allow to allow him freer rein in deciding who to play with and what games to play. We could try to persuade them, for strategic purposes on their own grounds: a closed life with no attempt to explore and respond to counter arguments, may not safeguard your child against faulty reasoning later. But if Hirst’s parents are altogether opposed to allowing their child or themselves to risk loss of faith due to overreliance on the fallible course of reasoning, then of course there can be no reasoning. In this case, it seems, we – as third parties - cannot but be drawn into an evaluation of the truth the faith under consideration. However, the Glanton Brethren’s theology simply lacks sufficient positive support to make hedging against its truth a sensible policy. Furthermore, the nature of the doctrines themselves strain credulity: it is not clear why incarnation and crucifixion would enable salvation, or why eternal damnation would be a proportionate response to any order of wrongdoing, or why God would not share moral responsibility for the wrongs he enabled people to perpetrate on one another and failed to prevent. Indeed, in general, for any theological position recommended on the basis of divine inspiration, since there are equally credible reports of divine inspiration reporting contradictory findings, we are rationally deprived of a basis for preferring one account to another, and most rationally withhold our assent from any.[[15]](#endnote-15) With this evaluation in hand, we would then have strong pro-tanto reason to protect the young Hirst’s discretionary time against infringements by his parents, since, as he correctly judges, his parents wronged him by arbitrarily restricting his range of valuable morally permissible experiences. Contrary to Hirst’s views however, this pro tanto reason was not trumped by any rights of his parents’.

CONCLUSION

Paul Hirst is right that his parents wronged him by religiously indoctrinating him, stifling his emotional development, and arbitrarily restricting his range of valuable morally permissible experiences. He is right that this upbringing damaged his prospects of rationality and of living the life he had most reason to live. However, Hirst was mistaken to have thought that his parents had a right to initiate him into this conservative religious life, and that he was only owed a more secular form of schooling to temper it. I have argued parental rights exclude parental moral right to religiously initiate their children. I provided an account of the kind of emotional development to which children plausibly have a right. I have taken issue with Hirst’s account of practical reason and of the good life that he uses to ground his moral analysis of his upbringing, and with his account of the significance of autonomy.

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2. Hirst sees indoctrination as ‘at least limiting consideration of the fundamental basis of justification of beliefs even if it does not intentionally inhibit such consideration’ (172) He suggests that this criterion was satisfied since ‘No attempt was made to introduce me to the legitimacy and importance of such questioning [of the doctrines on which our life was based]’ (172). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Hirst complains that lack of connection with them was a defect of his moral upbringing, which cast them as suspicious or corrupt symptoms of a ‘fallen nature’ (167). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. It is absurd because it says one’s welfare would be increased by developing a huge number of arbitrary but easily satisfied desires. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. These kinds of objections are pressed by Tadros (2016, chapter 10), Parfit (1984, appendix I), and Tillson (2019, 33-34). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Regarding the best account of welfare, I am torn between Mill’s view that we experience the good from within, and Korsgaard’s that it consists in setting ends we can will for all, in ways that maintain our functionality. What I find implausible about Korsgaard approach is that acts of will can make things valuable. It might be that acts of will should make us treat things as valuable, but it seems that if there was no reason to value things independently of our acts of will, our acts of willing would be in vain. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For similar points, see Clayton (2006, chapter 3) and Callan (1997, 152-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For Nagel (1986) objectivity requires ‘standing back’ from how things seem to us and from our personal commitments to think in more impersonal terms, to adopt ‘the view from nowhere’ in which we are just one more person with one more set of goals among other people with other sets of goals. For utilitarians such as Shelly Kagan and Peter Singer there is only a duty to maximise the good (e.g. welfare, or well distributed welfare) from this point of view so far as we can, where this (somewhat unstably) often means comporting with a system of rules that maximizes the good. This means that there are no constraints on what we do to maximize it–i.e. no claims against being treated in particular ways that might be thought of by deontic thinkers as right violations, and no permissions to do things that don’t involve maximizing the good, e.g. permissions to go on holidays and the like. Some theorists (like Judith Jarvis Thompson, and Christine Korsgaard) deny that the thought that state of affairs can be impersonally good is even intelligible. However, I am inclined to agree with Singer and Kagan that there is an impersonal point of view we can adopt from which can regard some worlds as impersonally better to produce than others, without having to say they are better from some particular point of view in both worlds. For instance, if we could choose between two initiating two separate futures, one in which plenty of people who do not yet exist has wonderful lives and another in which a different set of people have lives that are only just worth living, I think it seems clear that the first of these futures is impersonally better, and other things equal the one we should morally choose. (cf Derek Parfit’s non-identity problem in *Reasons and Persons*). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. I take these terms from Kagan (1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. One might be tempted to argue that developing the capacity for forming and maintaining close personal relationships makes it more likely that one is also capable of honouring one’s duties. Equally however, they may open one to moral risk exceeding the permissions of legitimate partiality. Furthermore, just as developing the capacity to form close, personal relationships opens the possibility of an attached life, it closes off the possibility of an unattached life by the same token. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. It may be helpful to identify a few capacities that might partly constitute and conduce to practical rationality: 1) distinguish, rank and combine goals in ways that honour and promote the values implicated in them, 2) identify efficient ways to achieve goals, 3) identify outcomes that constitute goal-achievements, identify whether goals 4) identify best fits between options and desiderata, 5) to see whether the facts fit the theory, and 6) to propose simple theories to explain the evidence. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. In general, where the capabilities and primary goods approaches to what claims citizens have over each other part ways is that the capability approach takes a stand on the range of features that a good life tend to have, whereas the primary goods approach avoids making such judgements on the grounds that it can wrong people by a) indicating that they have made a mistake about the value of their lives, and b) acting on their behalf in ways that are at odds with their own evaluation of the good. The capabilities approach tries to be as inclusive as possible, suggesting the range of good that can be realised in many ways across many different conceptions of the good and understandings of the world. I have argued elsewhere that in the end we cannot avoid taking a stand on things reasonable citizens disagree about–that principled neutrality ends up being self-defeating (\*reference removed\*). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Thanks to Tom Douglas for pointing this out. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Parents have duties to promote their children’s long-term interests, which might involve encouraging them to do something out of their comfort zone that they are not inclined to do, or that is not entirely pleasant to do. The reason is that children are not yet sovereigns of their whole lives–in part because they could be more fully rational, and we have some duty to help promote their welfare, including by promoting their degree of rationality. However, these duties exist alongside duties not to violate children’s authority over their own discretionary time. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Roger White (2005) and Richard Feldman (2007) argue this convincingly [↑](#endnote-ref-15)