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The Wisdom of Parenthood

An Essay

Michael Eskin

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For my sons,
Benno, Elias and Noah

In memory of Felix
Upper West Side Philosophers, Inc. provides a publication venue for original philosophical thinking steeped in lived life, in line with our motto: *philosophical living & lived philosophy.*
“Not in this world were such displays of affection between parents and children made.”

— Jack London

“I am the mother of your sons. Your sons? I am the mother, yes—but how do you know you are the father?’ … Adam closed his eyes and his head reeled … He opened his eyes and shook his head violently. ‘It wouldn’t matter at all—even if it were true … it wouldn’t matter at all’. And suddenly he laughed because he knew that this was so.”

— John Steinbeck

“A child must come from somewhere, after all …”

— Paul Auster

“What exactly do you mean by real? Surely there is such a thing as overvaluing the biological.”

— J. M. Coetzee
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I am often told, by strangers and acquaintances alike, that my two older sons look just like me. “They are your spitting image,” I will hear in the elevator, at school, standing in line at the local market, at passport control … I am also frequently asked whose child my youngest son is, for apparently he looks nothing like me—he is blond, I am dark-haired, he has curls, I do not. Once, in a hardware store, the checkout girl thought that my youngest son was my oldest son’s son, as he happens to be dark blond and was holding his little brother in his arms while I was paying. Our Filipino barber, however, thinks otherwise. Only recently, he marveled at how all three of my sons look exactly like me. “Really?” I asked. “But of course,”
he exclaimed, “they came from the same source—you!” Similarly, when my sons happen to succeed at one thing or another, I often get to hear, “But of course they would, having your genes!” You can imagine the surprise and embarrassment on the part of those who sooner or later find out that, although all three are my sons, the older two are adopted, while the youngest is not.

I have had equally memorable moments with some of those who have known me since before I became a father. Not long after my third, biological, son was born, an old acquaintance—himselt the adoptive father of a Honduran orphan, his only child—asked me casually over lunch one day, “How does it feel to be a father?” “But I have been a father for a while now,” I replied. “I mean, a real father,” he clarified, “you know, it’s different …” “How would you know?” I asked, struck by the obvious irony of the situation. Along similar lines, I have been given to understand on nu-
merous occasions—by well-meaning and not so well-meaning acquaintances, friends and relatives alike—that, “let’s face it, one doesn’t really love a stranger the way one loves one’s own flesh and blood.” And when, shortly after adopting my two older sons, whose biological father had passed away, I requested parental leave from the university I was then teaching at, my request was initially flatly denied because, as my department chair bluntly put it, “They’re not really your sons.”

Aside from being a constant source of bemusement for me and my family, these and similar incidents are significant in that they bespeak our deep-seated penchant to assume (and actually perceive) blood ties between members of the same ethnic group whom we (think we) know or believe to be parents and children, and, concomitantly, to distinguish between ‘real’ (loving, caring) parenthood and its ‘faux’ counterpart, depending on whether any given parent and child are actually related
or not. Clearly, this proclivity tacitly relies on a traditional notion of parenthood predicated on biological kinship (which presumably translates into physical resemblance, which in turn serves to validate our often misguided kinship assumptions).

Whatever evolutionary, anthropological and socio-cultural goals this biologically-based notion of ‘genuine’—affectionate, nurturing and protective—parenthood may serve, whatever it may ostensibly help some of us to explain and understand about our world and ourselves (if anything), whatever narratives that we construct about who we are, where we come from and where we are headed it may contribute to—its concrete validity and purpose reveal themselves as questionable at best in view of the ubiquity of child abuse on the part of biological parents throughout human history (from neglect to maltreatment to abandonment to infanticide). Why, then, should it matter at all, as far as the concept and
practice of parenthood are concerned, whether or not we are biologically related to our children, given that this in itself would seem to have little to do with how we treat them, with whether we do right or wrong by them? After all, is it not partly because procreation does not automatically translate into preservation, because biological kinship does not necessarily entail solicitude for our progeny that we have devised the institution of parenthood with its ever-evolving laws, statutes, regulations and practices?

Underlying this institution and breathing life into it, however, is an age-old human experience—the experience of protecting, loving, nurturing and raising the children whom we have been entrusted with and whose flourishing is our abiding concern: in short, the very experience of parenting—so complex, expansive and powerful that it overflows definition, defies preconception and enjoins the constant reinvention of self, ever pushing our
boundaries and challenging us to reach beyond our grasp.

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In writing this essay, it has been my goal to capture the pith of this experience, to think through and propose a meaningful—if perhaps unorthodox and provocative—answer to the question: What does being a parent truly mean? Or, put differently: What is the essence, the truth, or—what I like to think of as—the wisdom of parenthood?

For the sake of clarity and concision, and because axiomatic assumptions can never be argued or proved, I have chosen to present my reflections in the form of an interconnected series of propositions, each followed by a commentary. It should be understood, however, that the propositional form of my reflections notwithstanding, the most I can offer is an essay—something to think along with, inconclusive and open-ended, yet something that I, for one, firmly believe to be true. I
should also note that, while being a man I cannot but speak from the viewpoint of a man, the thrust of what I have to say about parenthood transcends gender and sex, aiming at human truth at large.