The best available parent

Abstract

Children are owed parents – that is, people who control their lives in numerous ways. Children’s moral status makes it generally impermissible to sacrifice their interests for the sake of advancing other individuals’ interests. Therefore, the allocation of the moral right to parent should track the child’s, and not the potential parents’s, interest. This is the doctrine of the best available parent. This doctrine is at odds with universal practices and laws. Liberal philosophers attempted to explain why mere adequate parents can hold the right to parent. I examine, and refute, two kinds of attempts: one that seeks to partially ground the right in a fundamental interest to parent held by would-be adequate parents; and a second one explaining why procreators have the right to parent if they can do so adequately.

The best available parent doctrine is deeply revisionary. However, two additional qualifications moderate it. First, while parents may exclude others from exercising certain forms of authority over their children, they do not have the moral right to exclude others from associating with the child. Therefore, the most important goods of childrearing can be made available to a large number of adults. Second, children usually come into the world as part of an already existing relationship with their gestational parent; this relationship deserves protection.