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# Parental Love and Filial Equality

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## Abstract

It is widely accepted that parents have a fundamental moral obligation to consider and treat their children as *each other's equals*. Yet the question of what grounds the equality of status among children in the eyes of their parents has so far been largely neglected in the literature on the philosophy of childhood and the ethics of parenthood. This paper fills this gap by developing a novel theory of the basis of filial equality: it argues that parents ought to consider and treat their children as equals by virtue of loving them. Parental love is the basis of filial equality.

**Keywords:** children; ethics of parenthood; family; filial equality; moral equality; love

## 1. Introduction

Philosophers working on the philosophy of childhood and the ethics of the family have paid great attention to the morality of parent–child relationships. In particular, much has been written about the obligations that parents have toward their children. And, although many different accounts of parental obligations have been proposed,<sup>1</sup> one assumption is widely shared in common sense morality and the literature: parents ought to consider and treat their children as *each other's equals* in some basic sense.

Practices of unequal treatment of children by their parents are, however, still very common. For example, research evidence shows that American parents express a preference for their sons over their daughters, which has negative income and educational consequences for the latter (Dahl & Moretti, 2008). Moreover, they invest more time, attention, and educational resources in their high-ability children, thereby enhancing differences in child cognitive ability (Frijters et al., 2013). Studies also suggest that birth order correlates with significant advantages for older children because parents devote more resources to their upbringing (Kantarevic & Mechoulan, 2006).

Although parents' unequal consideration and treatment of their children are still widespread, we find it intuitively morally problematic. But why exactly is that so? Why should children be considered and treated as equals by their parents? The question of *the basis of filial equality*—that is, the question of what, if anything, grounds the equality of status among children in the eyes of their parents—has so far been largely neglected in the literature on the philosophy of childhood and the ethics of parenthood. In this paper, we aim to address this lacuna.

The paper is structured as follows. **Section 2** introduces the question of filial equality. **Section 3** draws on the literature on the basis of moral equality to outline the challenges that any theory of the

<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, Archard (2004), Blustein (1982), Brighouse and Swift (2014), and Millum (2017).

basis of equality of status must face. Section 4 argues that the most prominent accounts of the basis of filial status fail to overcome these challenges. Section 5 develops an *attitude-based account of the basis of moral equality*. According to this account, the basis of moral equality lies in a (i) fitting, (ii) basic, and (iii) independent moral attitude that provides a plausible explanation for why the different degrees to which the status-conferring property (or properties) is held above a minimum threshold do not generate differences in degrees of moral status. Building on this, we argue that parental love is the basis of filial equality. Section 6 shows that parental love satisfies (i) and (ii), and Section 7 argues that it meets (iii). Our main contention is that parental love offers a compelling explanation for why, when assessing the degree of children’s filial status, what matters is that children hold a status-conferring property (or properties) within a certain range, regardless of the degree to which such property (or properties) is possessed above a minimum threshold. Section 8 concludes by addressing a pressing objection to our theory of the basis of filial equality.

## 2. The Question of Filial Equality

In this section, we introduce the question of filial equality to clarify what it means for children to be considered and treated as (un)equals with respect to their *filial status*.

To start with, it will be helpful to examine the notion of status. A status is a “normative profile” that defines the set of entitlements that someone has by virtue of holding that status and that is granted to them in virtue of the possession of some morally significant property. Persons have different statuses. Consider, for example, Sara who has a status *qua* a human being and a status *qua* Tom’s friend. Two points are of particular relevance here: first, each status is characterized by a set of distinctive entitlements. What Sara is owed by Tom and all moral agents in virtue of her status *qua* a human being is different, at least to some extent, from what she is owed by Tom *qua* his friend. Second, each status is grounded in a salient property, which is at least partially different from the property that grounds the other status. For instance, Sara’s status *qua* a human being is based on the fact that Sara is a human being, whereas Sara’s status *qua* Tom’s friend is grounded in a special property that Sara has in Tom’s eyes or in the special relationship in which Sara and Tom stand to one another. The difference in the status-conferring property explains why Sara has two distinct statuses, which in turn generate two different sets of entitlements.

Similarly, then, we can say that children have a moral status *qua* children and a filial status *qua* “their parent’s children.” Moral status and filial status are two distinct normative profiles that generate different sets of entitlements and that are granted to children by virtue of the possession of different morally significant properties.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is widely accepted that, while non-parents have some duties toward children *qua* moral status-holders—such as duties to rescue them from dangerous situations and contribute to public services necessary to satisfy their basic needs—parents have a wider range of more demanding special duties toward their children *qua* *their children*: For example, parents have a special obligation to provide their children with adequate upbringing conditions, display affection and care toward them, and ensure that they have access to the “intrinsic goods of childhood,” such as play and unstructured free time (Gheaus, 2015).

At this point, it is important to observe that the possession of a status *simpliciter* neither entails nor amounts to the possession of *equal* status. This is because while the former defines the set of entitlements that someone has *qua* a status-holder, the possession of *equal* status entails having the same set of equally stringent entitlements *qua* *equals*. For example, from the fact that human beings and nonhuman animals have at least some rights *qua* moral status-holders, it follows neither that they all have the same rights, nor that their rights are equally stringent, by virtue of being *moral equals* (Arneson, 2015; Floris, 2023a).

<sup>2</sup>We will return to the question of the basis of filial status in Section 4.

This distinction between status *simpliciter* and *equal* status allows us to put the question of filial equality into sharper focus. If filial status defines the set of entitlements that children have by virtue of their status *qua* a “parent’s child,” then children have *equal* filial status if and when (i) they have the same set of entitlements *qua* a “parent’s child”; and (ii) these entitlements are equally stringent, other things being equal (Floris & Spotorno, 2024). To illustrate this, consider the following case.

Bob has three children, David, Claire, and Eveline, who display a strong interest in practicing a musical instrument. Bob does everything he can to ensure that David can attend piano lessons: he hires the best piano teacher in the area and drives him to all his lessons. Bob, instead, cares much less about Claire’s violin classes: he spends considerably less money on her lessons, and when, due to some financial straits, he can no longer afford to pay for both David’s and Claire’s lessons, he decides that only David can keep taking music classes. Finally, Bob forbids Eveline from attending trumpet lessons.

This case illustrates two distinctive violations of a child’s *equal* filial status. A child is considered and treated as unequal with respect to their filial status if and when (i) they have not been ascribed the same entitlements *qua* a “parent’s child” as their siblings, like in the case of Eveline who, unlike David and Claire, is denied the opportunity to take music lessons; or (ii) their entitlements count less than the comparable entitlements of their siblings, like in the case of Claire whose right to attend music lessons is considered less stringent than David’s comparable right.

To summarize, in this section, first, we have explained that “filial status” is the status that defines the set of entitlements that children have against their parents by virtue of being “their children.” Second, we have argued that a parent considers and treats their children as equals if (i) they ascribe to them the same set of entitlements *qua* “their children” and (ii) consider their entitlements as equally stringent, in cases of scarce resources and conflicting claims.

### 3. The Problem(s) of the Basis of Moral Equality

In this paper, our aim is to develop a theory of the basis of filial equality that offers a coherent and compelling explanation for *why* children ought to be considered and treated as equals by their parents. To assess the plausibility of a theory of the basis of equality of status, however, we must first understand the challenges that such a theory must face. In this section, then, we bring insights from the literature on the basis of moral equality to bear on this issue. Theories of the basis of moral equality seek to explain why human beings have equal moral status and thus ought to be considered and treated as moral equals.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on the literature on moral equality will allow us to bring to light the challenges that are faced by any theory that aims to justify the equality of status. In this paper, we want to take these challenges seriously, show that they also apply to theories of the basis of filial equality, and offer a solution to them.

The principle of moral equality is a common premise in contemporary moral and political philosophy. Yet, philosophers have had a hard time developing a principled and compelling explanation for it. But what exactly makes it so difficult to provide a convincing justification for such a fundamental and widely shared commitment?

Here is the first challenge: if human beings are each other’s equals, presumably this must be because there is something about them that makes them equals (Carter, 2011; Rawls, 1971; Waldron, 2017). However, the morally significant properties that are typically considered to be the basis of moral status—such as the capacity for rational agency or the capacity to care—are held by human beings to an *unequal* degree: Some humans are more rational than others, and some are better at caring for others. But if the possession of a morally significant property is what grounds the moral status of human beings, then it is reasonable to hold that the degree of human beings’ moral status should vary according to the degree to which they possess the status-conferring property.

<sup>3</sup>See, for instance, Carter (2011), Sangiovanni (2017), and Waldron (2017).

Therefore, it seems to follow from this that human beings should be considered and treated as *unequals*, in virtue of the *unequal* possession of their status-conferring property. This is the so-called *variations objection* (Arneson, 2015; Christiano, 2015; Floris, 2019).

The second challenge is that even if we identified a status-conferring property that human beings possess equally, this would still leave open the possibility that there is a further status-conferring property, which is held only by some human beings—or by all but to an unequal degree—that therefore compromises their moral equality. To appreciate this, consider the view, defended by some environmental ethicists, according to which human beings and natural entities ought to be considered and treated as equals because each living being is “a teleological (goal-oriented) center of life” (Taylor, 2011 [1986], 45). As critics have noticed, even if we concede that “being a teleological-center-of-life” is a status-conferring property, which is equally possessed by all living entities, this simply entails that all living entities have moral status, but it hardly follows from this that their moral status is *equal*. This is because human beings hold a wide range of further morally significant properties—such as rationality and the capacity to care—which other natural entities lack. But why should we consider as morally relevant *only* the status-conferring property that is held by all living entities, while ignoring the other status-conferring properties that are possessed only by human beings (Floris & Porro, *Forthcoming*)? This is known as the *differentiation objection* (Floris, 2023a; Husi, 2017).

In conclusion, any plausible theory of the basis of equality of status must face two significant challenges: First, it must identify a status-conferring property that is equally possessed by the beings whose status is said to be equal. Second, it must explain why the possession of further morally significant properties does not compromise the equality of status of the beings in question.

#### 4. The Problem(s) of the Basis of Filial Equality

In this section, we consider some of the most prominent theories of the basis of *filial status*. We argue that none of them provides a plausible theory of the basis of *filial equality* because they are either under-inclusive—that is, they fail to ascribe filial status to some children of a parent—or unable to avoid the variations objections and/or the differentiation objections.

Let us start with the biological account of the basis of filial status. On this view, children’s filial status is grounded in a biological tie between children and their parents (Page, 1984). Biological accounts of the basis of filial equality face two major problems. First, it is unclear that “biological tie” is a plausible candidate for the basis of filial status. After all, what moral relevance do biological ties have in and of themselves? Why should a mere biological fact—that is, the genetic or gestational tie between parents and children—generate the set of entitlements that children have against their parents (Austin, 2005)? Second, and more importantly, biological accounts are unable to justify the filial equality between two adopted children, or between a biological child and an adopted child. However, few would maintain that it is morally permissible for a parent to consider and treat their biological children and their adopted children as unequals.

According to causalist views of filial status, parents are primarily responsible for satisfying their children’s needs because they are the primary cause of children’s existence and consequently of the existence of their needs (Austin, 2007; Blustein, 1997). Such accounts, however, fail to provide a convincing theory of the basis of filial equality because they are unable to justify the filial equality between children whose existence parents are the primary cause of and children whose existence parents did not contribute to. For example, consider Emily who is sterile and wants to have a child. She receives the gametes from two donors, and then, a gestational surrogate carries out the pregnancy for her. Emily, then, decides to adopt a second child. Although Emily has no biological connection to the first child, she is the primary cause of their existence. By contrast, she did not causally contribute to the existence of her adopted child. Hence, a causalist view cannot provide a coherent rationale for why Emily should consider and treat her children as equals.

Voluntarist accounts of parental responsibilities, instead, maintain that parents have special duties toward their children because they have chosen to assume the parental role and the duties attached to it (Brake, 2010; O'Neill, 1979). Such accounts, however, are vulnerable to both the variations objection and the differentiation objection. As to the former, one might notice that parental choice is not a binary property, for the degree of voluntariness of a person's choice depends on their circumstances.<sup>4</sup> For example, consider Kate who had her first child when she was 16. Although she initially wanted to give the child up for adoption, she ultimately decided to parent the child due to family and social expectations. Several years later, Kate and her partner plan meticulously to have a second child. It seems plausible to maintain that Kate's choice to parent the second child has been more voluntary than her choice to parent her first child. But if the filial status of Kate's children is grounded in "being the object of a voluntary parental choice," then it is unclear how the *unequal* degree of voluntariness of Kate's choice can be the basis of her children's *equal* filial status.

It might be objected that what matters is the choice to *continue* to parent a child over time, which might be equally voluntary for both children in Kate's case. But, even if we assume that "the choice to continue to parent the child over time" is a binary property, it is difficult to deny that other properties are relevant to determining children's filial status. For example, as we will see below, many believe that filial status is grounded in the parent–child relationship or in other significant properties that children have *qua* children, such as the capacity to flourish or the potential to become autonomous beings. Voluntarist accounts, therefore, must reject the differentiation objection by explaining why the possession of other status-conferring properties, which might be held only by some children, or by all but to an unequal degree, does not undermine children's filial equality.

Let us now consider relational views of the basis of filial status, according to which parents have special duties toward their children if and because they stand in a special relationship toward them. For example, Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift argue that the intimate and affective relationship that parents share with their children grounds a set of parental duties (Brighouse & Swift, 2014; see also Hannan & Vernon, 2009). The main problem with relational views of the basis of filial equality is that the strength of the parent–child relationship can vary in degrees. For example, a parent might have a stronger relationship with the child whose character resembles most theirs or with whom they share more interests and spend more time. Furthermore, children are not necessarily equally capable of participating in the parent–child relationship. For instance, a four-year-old child might be a more active participant in such a relationship than a one-year-old child. But if the filial status is grounded in the parent–child relationship and the strength of such a relationship varies in degrees, then relational views must explain why a parent may not accord preferential treatment to the child with whom they stand in a stronger relationship. In other words, relational accounts must offer a convincing response to the variations objection by providing a plausible explanation for why different degrees of strength in the parent–child relationship do not generate different degrees of filial status.

Finally, pluralist views of the basis of filial status maintain that filial status is grounded in a set of morally significant properties. We can distinguish between "pure pluralist" views and "hybrid pluralist" views. Pure pluralist views ground filial status exclusively in a set of significant *filial properties*—that is, properties that children have *qua* a "parent's child"—such as "being the object of parental choice" or "being a participant in the parent–child relationship" (Bayne & Kolers, 2003).<sup>5</sup> Hybrid pluralist views, instead, ground filial status in a set of significant filial properties and

<sup>4</sup>Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for instructive comments on this point.

<sup>5</sup>Archard (2010) has proposed a pluralist account of the basis of parental obligations, which distinguishes between (i) the parental obligation to ensure that a child has a parent and (ii) the parental responsibilities of acting as a parent. Archard argues that, while a causalist theory successfully accounts for the basis of parental obligation, other theories, like voluntarist views, can justify parental responsibilities. In this paper, we focus only on what Archard calls "parental responsibilities."

morally significant properties that children have *qua* children.<sup>6</sup> An example of a hybrid pluralist account is a view that holds that parents have parental duties toward their children if and because (i) they are the object of their voluntary parental choice and (ii) they have the capacity to flourish.

Of course, different pluralist views will be subject to different objections. However, the salient point here is that any pluralist view is vulnerable to either the variations objection or the differentiation objection, or both. More specifically, on the one hand, the wider the set of properties that are taken to ground filial status, the more difficult it is to rule out that there is at least a scalar status-conferring property that is not possessed by all children of a parent, or that is possessed by all but to an unequal degree. For example, consider a hybrid pluralist view that grounds filial equality in the possession of the following set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient properties: (i) being the object of a parent's voluntary choice; (ii) being a participant in the parent–child relationship; and (iii) having the potential for full autonomy. This view must explain why the degree of filial status does not vary along with the degree to which children possess (ii) and (iii) and why those children who lack any of these filial status-conferring properties—or possess them to a lower degree—have equal filial status.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the narrower the set of properties that are taken to ground filial status, the more difficult it is to explain why the possession of further status-conferring properties is morally irrelevant when assessing children's filial status. For example, consider a pure pluralist view that grounds filial status in the possession of two significant properties: (i) being the object of a parent's voluntary choice and (ii) being caused by one's parent. Even assuming that both (i) and (ii) are binary status-conferring properties, this pluralist view must offer a convincing explanation for why other morally significant properties, such as “being a participant in the parent–child relationship,” are irrelevant and therefore do not undermine filial equality. For this reason, we conclude that it would be preferable if we could find a theory of the basis of filial equality that can provide a more compelling response to both the variations objections and the differentiation objections.

To summarize, in this section we have argued that the most prominent accounts of the basis of filial status are unable to offer a convincing justification of filial equality. Some are under-inclusive, while others are either based on scalar status-conferring properties the *unequal* possession of which cannot account for *equal* filial status, or they fail to explain why the possession of further significant properties does not undermine filial equality.

## 5. An Attitude-Based Account of the Basis of Moral Equality

In the previous sections, we have outlined the challenges that are faced by theories of the basis of moral equality, in general, and by theories of the basis of filial equality, in particular. In this section,

<sup>6</sup>For an overview of the accounts of the basis of children's moral status, see Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2019).

<sup>7</sup>It might be objected that a pluralist view might ground filial status in a set of significant properties the possession of which is disjunctively sufficient. For instance, consider a pure pluralist view, according to which filial status is grounded in either (i) “being the cause of a child's existence” or (ii) “being the object of a parent's voluntary choice.” Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this possibility and for the example.

This disjunctive view offers a more inclusive account of filial status, as the possession of either property is sufficient for having filial status. However, it is hard to see how it can provide a convincing theory of the basis of filial equality. This is because if both (i) and (ii) are filial status-conferring properties, then such an account must explain why children who only possess either (i) or (ii) and children who possess both have equal filial status. That is, disjunctive pluralist views must offer a convincing rationale for why the possession of a further status-conferring property is morally irrelevant when assessing the degree of filial status. By analogy, consider a disjunctive pluralist view of moral status, which maintains that human beings and nonhuman animals have equal moral status because all entities that are either sentient or autonomous have moral status. While it is plausible to hold that the possession of either sentience or autonomy is sufficient to have moral status *simpliciter*, why do those entities (like human beings) that hold *both* status-conferring properties not have a superior moral status than entities that hold only one status-conferring property? A compelling theory of the basis of equality must provide an answer to this question.

we develop a theory of the basis of equality of status that overcomes these challenges. This will provide the basis for our theory of the basis of filial equality.

To do this, let us begin by introducing what is widely considered one of the most promising views of the basis of moral equality: the range property view. According to this view, persons are each other's equals because they hold some relevant properties up to a minimum threshold, and the different degrees to which these properties are held above the threshold are morally irrelevant. For example, John Rawls famously argued that persons' equal moral status is grounded in their moral personality, which is the property of holding the subvenient scalar capacities for a conception of the good and a sense of justice within a specific range (Rawls, 1971, 505–512).

Critics, however, have pointed out that the range property view runs up against two pressing objections. First, it is unclear why variations above a minimum threshold do not matter morally. As Geoffrey Cupit puts it, “[w]hy should we suppose that our status is determined by our passing a particular threshold, whilst our possessing more than the minimum required to pass that threshold is entirely redundant?” (Cupit, 2000, 110). Unless an answer to this question is provided, the range property view seems to beg the question against the variations objection.

Second, even assuming that we can explain why the degree to which a status-conferring property is held above the minimum threshold does not matter, why should this entail that there are no further status-conferring properties which are possessed only by some—or by all but to an unequal degree—that might therefore undermine the moral equality of the beings in question? For example, from the fact that moral personality is morally salient, why should it follow that the subvenient capacities for a conception of the good and a sense of justice are morally irrelevant (Carter, 2011, 550)? As it stands, the range property view is vulnerable to the differentiation objection.

To account for persons' moral equality, then, it is not enough to simply stipulate that what matters is that persons hold some relevant properties up to a minimum threshold and that the different degrees to which these properties are held above the threshold are morally irrelevant. Rather, it is necessary to offer an independent explanation for *why* all that matters is that persons hold some significant properties within a certain range.

In what follows, we argue that such an explanation is to be found in the mode of valuing the property (or properties) that grounds moral status. Specifically, we argue that any moral status-conferring property is a valuable property, which therefore must be valued in one way or another. The mode of valuing the moral status-conferring property—that is, the moral attitude that is owed to moral status-holders by virtue of holding the status-conferring property—provides an explanation for why that property must be considered as a range property and why only the range property is morally salient when assessing the degree of moral status. On our view, then, moral equality is entailed by a commitment to a moral attitude that is owed to moral status-holders. Call this *the attitude-based account of the basis of moral equality* (Floris, 2023b).<sup>8</sup>

We argue that a moral attitude must satisfy three individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions to be a plausible candidate for the basis of moral equality:

(i) *Fittingness*. Fittingness is “the relation in which a response stands to an object when the object merits – or is *worthy of* – that response” (Howard, 2018, 2). An attitude, therefore, is fitting when there is an appropriate relation between it and its object. For instance, care is a fitting attitude toward children because it is an appropriate response to them as vulnerable beings, whereas neglect

<sup>8</sup>The most influential attitude-based view of the basis of moral equality has been proposed by Ian Carter. According to Carter, persons' moral equality is grounded in a duty of “opacity respect” that requires refusing to evaluate persons' varying agential capacities above the relevant threshold for moral personality (Carter, 2011). As it will become clearer below, our theory of the basis of filial equality is indebted to Carter's view. However, our account differs from Carter's in an important respect. This is because, as Carter himself observes, opacity respect is not an appropriate attitude (i) toward beings that are not moral agents (ii) and in contexts of intimate relationships (Carter, 2011, 557; 560; see also Floris, *Forthcoming*). It follows from this that opacity respect cannot be the basis of filial equality because parents should not—or at least do not have a moral obligation to—treat their children as opaque.

is not. Accordingly, a theory of the basis of moral equality must rest on a fitting moral attitude—namely, an attitude that is an appropriate response to the status-conferring property—which can provide a plausible normative basis for a moral obligation to consider and treat status-holders as equals.

(ii) *Basicness*. If a moral attitude is fitting, it means that it is *an* appropriate response to the status-holder. But an appropriate response need not also be a *basic* response, that is, a fundamental requirement of what is owed to the status-holder. For example, admiration might be an appropriate attitude toward a friend who has accomplished a significant achievement. However, unlike other attitudes—for example, trust and loyalty—we do not owe admiration to our friends simply because they are our friends. Admiration, therefore, is not fundamental to what we owe our friends *qua* our friends. A plausible theory of the basis of equality must rest on a moral attitude that is basic to what is owed to status-holders and, as such, cannot be easily overridden by other conflicting moral requirements, so as to have enough normative weight to provide a justification for a *solid* commitment to moral equality.

(iii) *Independence*. Finally, a moral attitude must provide an *independent* reason—that is, a reason that does not presuppose a commitment to the ideal of equality, thereby begging the question of its justification—for why the different degrees to which the status-conferring property (or properties) is held above the minimum threshold for moral status do not generate differences in degrees of moral status.

## 6. The Duty to Love One's Child

In what follows, we develop an attitude-based account of the basis of filial equality. We argue that parental love is the (i) fitting, (ii) basic, and (iii) independent moral attitude that provides a coherent and compelling rationale for the moral salience of the range property that grounds children's equal filial status. To defend our theory of the basis of filial equality, we proceed as follows. In this section, we argue that parental love is a (i) fitting and (ii) basic moral attitude that parents owe their children *by virtue of their filial status*. In the next section, we argue that parental love is also (iii) an independent moral attitude, which justifies children's filial equality without presupposing a commitment to it. The upshot is that parental love is the basis of filial equality.

To begin with, it seems reasonable to observe that, whatever conception of the basis of filial status one subscribes to, hardly anyone denies that parents ought to love their children. Put differently, any plausible account of the basis of filial status holds that loving one's child is a—if not the most—fitting attitude that parents ought to have toward their children.<sup>9</sup> Thus, parents who express and act only out of attitudes that are appropriate when displayed by non-parents—such as respect or general care—fail to respond appropriately to their children's filial status. By contrast, parental love is not a fitting attitude when expressed by non-parents: not only do strangers not have an obligation to love someone else's children, but it might also be inappropriate for them to express such an attitude.<sup>10</sup>

Parental love is not only a fitting attitude but is also one of the most basic requirements of what parents owe to their children. First, children who lack a loving relationship with their parents are likely to experience negative consequences on their emotional and cognitive development (Liao, 2015, Chapter 3). Second, experiencing unconditional parental love is crucial for children to acquire and develop a robust sense of self-worth and self-respect (Spotorno, 2024). Finally, parental love is an intrinsic element of a good childhood, independently of its later effects on children's lives (Gheaus, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Any theory of the basis of filial status discussed in Section 4, therefore, can subscribe to our love-based theory of the basis of filial equality.

<sup>10</sup> Consider, for instance, the kind of physical closeness and the breaches of the child's privacy that parental love entails.



It might be objected that although parental love is one of the most fitting and basic attitudes that parents *can* display toward their children, parents do not have an *obligation* to love their children because love is an emotion, or a feeling, and, as such, cannot be the object of a moral obligation (Kant, 1996, 161; Taylor, 1970, 252–253). But if this is true, then an appeal to parental love is unable to account for parents' *moral obligation* to consider and treat their children as equals. Rather, if successful, it simply shows that parents ought to consider and treat their children as equals *if* they love them. This, however, is not a satisfactory justification of filial equality.<sup>11</sup>

In response, it is important to note that love is not only an emotion but also an attitude, that is, a mode of valuing someone (Kolodny, 2003; Velleman, 1999). Thus, on the one hand, parental love is characterized by a set of emotions, such as affection toward one's child, a sense of amazement and happiness toward their development and achievements, and apprehension about the potential dangers they might face. On the other hand, parental love is constituted by a range of attitudes toward one's child: loving parents value their children for their own sake, have special concern for their children's well-being, and are particularly attentive to their specific needs. But, unlike emotions, displaying certain attitudes, such as respect and care, and acting upon them can be the object of moral obligations (Raz, 1994, 11).

The emotional and attitudinal dimensions are therefore two distinct dimensions of parental love,<sup>12</sup> and while parents might not have an obligation to feel loving emotions toward their children, it is hard to deny that they have an obligation to express a loving attitude by valuing their children in a particular way. For example, take a parent who cannot feel loving emotions for their child. Although the lack of loving emotions might not be morally objectionable in and of itself, the parent still has the moral obligation to display the array of attitudes that characterize parental love, that is, valuing their child for their own sake, being particularly concerned about their well-being, and being attentive to their specific needs. Accordingly, while a parent might not have an obligation to have loving *emotions* toward their children, they do have a moral obligation to display a loving *attitude* toward them. Hence, an appeal to the morally required attitude of parental love satisfies the first two conditions for a plausible candidate of the basis of filial equality.

## 7. Love and Equality

In the previous section, we have argued that parental love is a fitting and basic attitude that parents owe their children. In this section, we argue that parental love provides an independent explanation for why, when assessing the filial status of one's child, what matters is that they hold a status-conferring property (or properties) within a certain range, thereby being the basis of filial equality. We proceed as follows. First, we develop an account of parental love. Second, we explain how this account offers a coherent and compelling solution to the variations objections and the differentiation objections.

As many have observed, loving someone involves a certain way of perceiving or seeing the beloved. According to Iris Murdoch, love is an "exercise of really *looking*"—in this sense, love is knowledge of the beloved (Murdoch, 2014 [1970]; see also Velleman, 1999). Similarly, Susan Wolf maintains that "the best love is an attentive love, that sees its object as it really is" (Wolf, 2014, 169), and Troy Jollimore argues that "loving a person constitutes a specifically moral way of seeing insofar as it is an attempt to recognize a person in her full individuality and involves a kind of generous attention" (Jollimore, 2011, 26). Parental love is no different from other forms of love in this respect: loving one's child requires an effort to really "look inside" them, that is, to see them for the being that they are in their particularity.

<sup>11</sup>Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

<sup>12</sup>This is not to deny that these dimensions are closely related: presumably, parents feel certain loving emotions about their children because they have loving attitudes toward them, and loving attitudes are fostered by loving emotions.

Yet, it is also often said that there is a sense in which “love is blind.” At first, this may seem paradoxical: How can love be an exercise of really looking and, at the same time, involve a kind of blindness? To see how “looking” and “being blind” are two consistent dimensions of love as a “particular way of looking at” the beloved, we need to understand what exactly we must be blind to, as a matter of love.

Love can make us blind in different ways. Love can make us focus exclusively on our beloved, thereby being blind to other persons—one’s beloved is one’s whole world (Jollimore, 2011, Chapters 2–3). Or, love can make us blind to some of our beloved’s character traits: in this sense, love involves an epistemic blindness that makes us see our beloved in a better light (Wolf, 2014, 166–167). Clearly, however, these kinds of blindness cannot ground a justification of children’s filial equality: the fact that parental love entails (i) focusing only on one’s child and/or (ii) being *epistemically* blind to some of one’s child’s character traits are not plausible reasons for why parents have a *moral* obligation to consider and treat their children as equals.

But love makes us blind in another way. When we love someone, we refuse to take “perfection” as an appropriate standard for our love (Wolf, 2014, 171). Thus, when A loves B, A refuses to measure the degree to which B holds some significant properties—for example, intelligence and empathy—against an absolute scale to determine the degree to which they love B. How much A loves B does not depend on the degree to which B is intelligent or empathic, provided that B is intelligent and empathic to a sufficient level. Put differently, A loves B because B holds a set of significant properties up to a sufficient threshold, regardless of the degree to which these properties are held above the threshold. Love, then, involves a kind of *normative* blindness: a loving person is blind to the variations in the degree to which the beloved holds significant properties above a minimum threshold. Therefore, love offers an independent explanation for the moral salience of the range property: what matters is that the beloved holds some valuable properties within a certain range, whereas the variations within the range are irrelevant to determining how much they are loved.

It might be objected that not all forms of love entail this normative blindness. For example, one may think that how much someone romantically loves another person depends on the degree to which the latter possesses a set of significant properties. A loves B because *and to the extent that* B holds some valuable properties; hence, A would love B more (or less) if B were more (or less) intelligent or more (or less) empathic.

However, whatever the merits of this view of romantic love,<sup>13</sup> it is hard to see how this can be true of parental love. A loving parent refuses to measure the degree to which their child holds a status-conferring property (or properties) above a minimum threshold and to consider that information as relevant when reasoning about the appropriate consideration and treatment of them. Loving one’s child, then, consists of being blind to the variations above the minimum threshold when deliberating about how they should be considered and treated. Parental love, therefore, explains why, when assessing the degree of filial status, what matters is that a child holds a status-conferring property (or properties) within a certain range, whereas the variations above the threshold to which that property (or properties) is possessed are morally irrelevant.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>For further discussion, see Keller (2000) and Howard (2018).

<sup>14</sup>It is important to note that parental love is not an “exclusionary reason,” that is, “a second-order reason to refrain from acting for some reason” (Raz, 2002, 39). What we are arguing is not that variations in the degree to which children hold a status-conferring property (or properties) above a minimum threshold are genuine reasons that are blocked by a second-order reason (i.e., parental love). Rather, we are arguing that the kind of normative blindness entailed by parental love consists of refusing to let the variations above the threshold enter a parent’s moral radar as factors to be taken into account when determining the degree of their children’s filial status. In other words, then, parental love explains why the degree to which children hold a status-conferring property (or properties) above the threshold for filial status is *morally irrelevant* for the sake of assessing the degree of their status. Hence, the variations above the threshold are not reasons in the first place. Therefore, parental love is not an exclusionary reason. For further discussion of why appealing to an exclusionary reason might not be a convincing way to ground moral equality, see Miklosi (2022, 376–377). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging us to clarify this.

Parental love, thus, satisfies the third condition of a plausible candidate for the basis of equality, namely, independence. It offers an independent explanation for why, when reasoning about their children's comparative filial status, the only information that is relevant to parents is that they hold a status-conferring property (or properties) within a certain range. Therefore, children are each other's equals from the standpoint of their parents by virtue of possessing the range property. Filial equality, then, is an implication entailed by—rather than a premise of—a commitment to parental love. Hence, an appeal to parental love provides a coherent and compelling solution to both the variations objection and the differentiation objection.

We can now come full circle. Our theory of the basis of filial equality can be formulated as follows:

1. A morally significant property (or properties) grounds filial status.
2. If a child has filial status, then they are entitled to be loved by their parent(s) *qua* “their child.”
3. Parental love consists of being blind to the degree to which one's child holds the status-conferring property (or properties) above the relevant threshold when evaluating the degree of a child's filial status.
4. Hence, parental love provides an independent explanation for why the different degrees to which children hold the status-conferring property (or properties) above a minimum threshold should be considered irrelevant for the purposes of assessing their degree of filial status.
5. Therefore, parental love is the basis of children's equal filial status.

Let us now conclude this section by clarifying further how our account of parental love offers a compelling justification of filial equality, as well as illustrating what kind of equality is entailed by a commitment to parental love. To do so, consider again the case of Bob and his children. Suppose that David, Claire, and Eveline hold a set of status-conferring properties to a different degree: David has a stronger relationship with his father, and he possesses higher cognitive abilities than Claire and Eveline.

As explained in Section 5, to offer a principled justification of the filial equality between David, Claire, and Eveline, we cannot simply stipulate that they have equal filial status because they hold some significant properties up to a sufficient degree. Rather, we must supply an independent explanation for why the variations in the degree to which David, Claire, and Eveline hold the status-conferring properties above the minimum threshold do not generate differences in degrees of filial status. We have argued that such a reason is to be found in a duty of parental love. As a parent, Bob ought to display an attitude of love toward his children *qua his children*. Expressing parental love, in turn, is incompatible with a certain kind of normative assessment: in particular, loving David, Claire, and Eveline entails refusing to consider the degree to which they hold the status-conferring properties above a minimum threshold as relevant when determining the degree of their filial status. Put differently, loving David, Claire, and Eveline implies that they do not matter more or less in the eyes of Bob depending on the degree to which they hold some significant properties above a minimum threshold. Therefore, Bob ought to consider and treat them as equals, as a result of loving them.

However, parental love does not entail refraining from looking at one's children's varying capacities *for all purposes*. Indeed, as we have argued above, love is also an exercise of “really looking” at one's children and seeing them in their individuality and particularity. Therefore, parental love is compatible with—indeed it may require—looking at children's varying properties for the sake of ascertaining what they need to be considered and treated as equals. For instance, David, Claire, and Eveline should have equal educational opportunities by virtue of their equal filial status. Accordingly, precisely because Claire and Eveline have lower cognitive abilities than David, Bob should devote more resources toward Claire's and Eveline's education to ensure that their opportunities are equal to those of David.

Our theory of the basis of filial equality offers a principled explanation for when and why children's varying status-conferring properties matter morally and when and why they do not. On the one hand, parental love entails a normative blindness that explains why the degree to which children hold a status-conferring property (or properties) above a minimum threshold is irrelevant for the purposes of assessing the degree of their filial status. Hence, it supplies a principled justification for *why* children should be considered and treated as equals by their parents. On the other hand, parental love is consistent with—indeed it may sometimes require—taking into account children's varying status-conferring properties to work out *what* considering and treating one's children exactly requires. Loving one's children, therefore, consists of really looking at them in their individuality and particularity so as to attend to their specific needs, while at the same time turning, normatively, a blind eye to the degree to which they hold significant properties above a certain threshold for the sake of determining the degree of their filial status.

## 8. The Reductionist Challenge

In this paper, we have developed a theory of the basis of filial equality that explains why parents ought to consider and treat their children as equals *qua* their children. A critic, however, might object that parents' duty to consider and treat their children as equals is derivative of a more general duty to consider and treat *all* children as equals. According to this view, children have a set of needs that the moral community has an obligation to satisfy. Special duties must, therefore, be assigned to different specific agents (e.g., parents) on the basis of factors and circumstances relevant to the satisfaction of the general duty to satisfy children's needs. If so, we do not need a specific explanation for why children ought to be considered and treated as equals by their parents. Instead, we only need an explanation for why children ought to be considered and treated as equals by everyone. Therefore, the question of filial equality can be wholly reduced to and explained by the question of moral equality between children *qua* children. Call this, *the reductionist challenge to the basis of filial equality*.

Two points can be made in response to the reductionist challenge. The first insists that parents have at least some special duties toward their children *qua their children* over and above those that everyone has toward all children *qua children*. Hence, a theory of the basis of filial equality is necessary to explain why parents ought to consider and treat their children as equals with respect to that set of non-derivative special duties. To illustrate, consider the following case.

It is widely assumed that public institutions and parents should provide children with adequate, or sufficiently good, upbringing and educational conditions (Shields, 2017, Chapters 4–5; Gheaus, 2017). But, once this threshold of sufficiency is reached, institutions and parents have different duties. Take, for instance, the case of children's entitlement to practice extracurricular activities. Suppose that two siblings live in a school district where there are two schools: the excellent school offers a wide range of high-quality extracurricular activities, whereas the adequate school offers fewer and lower-quality, yet sufficiently good, extracurricular activities. Suppose further that there is only one place available in the excellent school and one in the adequate school. On the one hand, if the admission decision is up to the members of the school board, it seems at least permissible for them to assess the degree of children's cognitive abilities and grant the child with greater abilities the opportunity to attend the excellent school. On the other hand, if the decision is up to the parents, it seems reasonable to maintain they ought to be blind to the level of cognitive ability of the children and grant them an equal chance to attend the excellent school, in virtue of the duty of parental love that they have toward their children *qua* their children.

Few would deny that parents have at least some special duties toward their children *qua* their children that do not simply derive from the general duties that the moral community has toward children *qua* children. Therefore, children's filial equality cannot be conceived of as a mere specification of children's moral equality. The former is an independent question that yields

distinctive normative implications for the equal treatment of children in virtue of their status *qua* a “parent’s child”; hence, it must be addressed in its own right.

The second point in response to the reductionist challenge consists of observing that, even if we assume that parents do not have any non-derivative special duty toward their children, this does not entail that what explains why moral agents ought to consider and treat children as moral equals can also explain why parents ought to consider and treat their children as equals *qua* their children. This is because, as discussed in Section 6, the fitting and basic moral attitude that parents should display toward their child is different from the one that non-parents should express toward a child. Put differently, even if parents and non-parents should consider and treat children as equals in the *same* set of cases, they ought to do so *for different reasons*. Indeed, as we argued above, a non-parent who treats two children as equals because they (pretend to) love them as a parent fails to display a fitting attitude toward them. Conversely, a parent who considers and treats their children as equals out of mere respect or general care expresses, and acts out of, an inappropriate attitude toward their children, as they fail to love their children *qua* their children. In short, they do the right thing for the wrong reasons.<sup>15</sup> Hence, even if we assume for argument’s sake that the question of filial equality can be reduced to the question of children’s moral equality, this does not entail that the justification for the latter can also be the justification for the former.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, we conclude that the reductionist challenge fails to undermine our theory of the basis of filial equality.

## 9. Conclusion

Hardly anyone denies that parents have a fundamental moral obligation to consider and treat their children as each other’s equals in some fundamental sense. Yet, little attention has been devoted to the question of what grounds children’s equal filial status. In this paper, we have attempted to fill this gap. We have first shown that the most prominent accounts of the basis of filial status are unable to offer a convincing justification for filial equality. This is because they are either under-inclusive, or they are based on scalar status-conferring properties the *unequal* possession of which cannot account for *equal* filial status, or they fail to explain why the possession of further significant properties does not undermine the equality of filial status among children.

Second, we have developed a theory of the basis of filial equality capable of overcoming these challenges. We have argued that filial equality is entailed by a commitment to parental love, which entails a normative blindness toward the degree to which children hold morally significant properties above a minimum threshold. An appeal to parental love, therefore, offers a coherent and compelling explanation for why, when assessing the degree of children’s filial status, what matters is that they hold a status-conferring property (or properties) within a certain range, regardless of the variations to which such property (or properties) are possessed above a minimum threshold. Hence, parental love is the basis of filial equality.

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<sup>15</sup>For further discussion of the “wrong kind of reasons problem,” see Gertken and Kiesewetter (2017).

<sup>16</sup>For a view of the basis of children’s moral equality in the eyes of the state that does not appeal to a duty to love children, see Floris (forthcoming).

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