

**Book Launch, *The Claims of Parenting: Reasons, Responsibility and Society*,
Institute of Education, London, Wednesday 2 November 2011
By Jan Macvarish**

Stefan Ramaekers of the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium and Judith Suissa of the Institute of Education, London, introduced their fascinating new book to a packed seminar earlier this month. I was delighted to be invited to offer some responsive comments, alongside Professor Ann Phoenix of the Thomas Coram Institute.

The book is likely to make a substantial contribution to contemporary parenting culture studies because it engages with some of the most difficult questions to emerge from the attempt to understand the particular character of child-rearing today. Written with passion and commitment, the book provides an exciting springboard for the further development of ideas about intergenerational relationships. Approaching the subject from a philosophical standpoint allows the authors to explore the nature of the parent-child relationship with an impressive sensitivity and depth while recognising the need to situate this relationship within the unique conditions of the present. The book draws across some of the key questions arising from the philosophy of education into an examination of childrearing within the more intimate context of the family: What does it mean to educate children? What is the nature of human flourishing? How do we introduce children into a common world? How do we prepare them for independence and fulfilment?

The authors' primary concern is to re-develop a moral understanding of the parent-child relationship, rescuing it from the tendency to deny its moral significance, most commonly expressed in the popularity of the scientific or pseudo-scientific language of developmental psychology, neuroscience, or bonding and attachment theories. Although not disputing that scientific knowledge may offer some insights into the developing child, Ramaekers and Suissa argue convincingly that scientific knowledge can never capture the infinite complexity of the relationships, understandings and moral decisions within which children are actually raised. Similarly, 'parenting' cannot possibly be reduced to acts which affect the brain of the child or to a set of recommended skills or methods of interaction, measurable in terms of inputs and outputs. As Suissa and Ramaekers put it, they aim to re-humanise the parent-child relationship and to explore what they describe as a relationship that is 'moral all the way down'. This is a direct challenge to the instrumentalisation of human intimacy and the 'increasing tendency in policy and popular literature to bypass this moral language about what parents do and to phrase notions of good parenting in terms of good results...' (page 89)

Claims made by 'the third-person', external to the parent-child relationship, whether articulated in scientific terms, through the authority of parenting 'experts' or via the putative 'needs of the child', can only reduce this most fundamental and profound of human activities to a technical set of tasks, judged by amoral criteria, external to the essentially moral responsibility of parenthood. As the authors argue,

Part of what the scientific account does, it seems, is to organise and make sense of this infinite, awe-inspiring reality, telling us which actions matter most, which mistakes we cannot afford to make; and what kind of person we will make if we do the right deeds and use the right words. The consequence of this process, however, is a loss of meaning. (Page 76)

One of the ways the moral character of parenting is defended in the book is through an argument for the 'priority of the particular and the first person'. The unique ethical significance of being a parent, the

authors argue, lies in the fact that each parent takes responsibility for their particular child, not 'the child' in an abstract sense:

What the first-person perspective in the parent-child relationship, as we see it, is intended to bring out is a sense of the fact that parents' decisions and action are always already embedded in a complex intertwining of a diversity of considerations. As parents, we are never just in ethical encounters with our children, intent on preserving the caring (or some kind of) ideal, but we are at the same time, within these very relationship aspects of our lives, making judgements on other and related matters. (pages 60-61)

The book successfully fleshes out the complexity of what parents do, taking it beyond overly simplistic frameworks of 'caring' or 'instinct'. In trying to explore what makes the parent-child relationship unique, the authors are particularly keen to challenge approaches that naturalise the caring aspect of parenthood, and in particular the romanticisation of motherhood or the 'maternal instinct'. By so-doing, Suissa and Ramaekers demonstrate how often those of us who seek to defend parental autonomy against encroachments by other claims to authority in the rearing of children tend to slip into the language of 'instinct', even if we wouldn't count ourselves as biological essentialists. They also challenge the tendency to fetishise the parental experience as separate from other human experiences. Mothers and fathers, they argue, do not simply relate to their baby in unmediated ways, but come to the relationship as moral beings and social agents with values, beliefs and knowledge derived from a common (adult) world. In this respect, as well as moralising the parent-child relationship, they also socialise it.

The book goes on to discuss why the parental role is so fraught with anxiety today in a way that takes seriously the existential problems that parenting inevitably throws up. They also tentatively suggest that the parent-child relationship has an inherent public orientation and therefore has potential as an area of political experimentation. This ambitious and passionate work raises some important questions that I am looking forward to discussing further with colleagues in the Parenting Culture Studies network.

The Claims of Parenting: Reasons, Responsibility and Society is published by Springer and is available as an e-book or in hardback.