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Do children have a right to be loved?

[This talk can be given in English or German, depending on the audience.]

There is an on-going debate whether children have a right to be loved (Liao 2006, 2012; Cowden 2012; Ferracioli 2014). While such a right is proclaimed in a number of bills and declarations, it is a challenge to specify what, if anything, could morally justify it. In this paper, I provide a brief overview of the core issues raised within this debate, including the issue of a limited enforceability of love, before discussing in detail an argument presented by Ferracioli (2014) in favour of such a right. Ferracioli's position is based on the view that children are owed the means to a *meaningful* childhood, which requires children to engage in projects of independent value. However, since children lack the epistemic abilities to recognise such value, whether or not they acquire meaning depends to a large extent on them having adults who take care of them, for instance by making value judgements on their behalf. According to Ferracioli, love, with its disposition to advance the loved one's good, and the tendency of loving parents to conceive of their children and their relationship to them as irreplaceable, is the only *reliable* source of such epistemic care. By contrast, she argues that professional caring relationships are fundamentally unreliable due to their essentially fungible nature. This, she concludes, justifies a right of children to be loved (and it is supposed to be the state's duty to implement various policies ensuring that only parents capable of love get children in the first place). Against Ferracioli, I argue that we should take seriously the possibility of love sometimes being harmful despite the parents' best intentions. In these cases, irreplaceability makes things worse, as it complicates things for the child having to escape its parent's bad influence. By contrast, the virtue of professional caring relationships arranged by the state directly may consist precisely in its fungibility, as carers can be replaced more easily in case of failure. I conclude that if there is a right to be loved, the argument from meaning cannot establish it. Perhaps it can be modified, however, to make a case for a significant extension of the content of a right to education.