Part III

Scope:

Inclusion and Marginalization

Abstract

Much of the literature on basic equality has focused on the question of what grounds the equal moral status of persons, typically understood as fully competent adults. However, less has been said about what justifies the equal moral status of those human beings who do not hold a wide range of sophisticated cognitive capacities, such as severely cognitively disabled human beings and children. This chapter contributes to filling this gap by developing a novel theory of the basis of children’s moral equality. Specifically, I argue that children’s moral equality is entailed by a commitment to a kind of respect which requires providing children with those social conditions that foster their development into well-adjusted adults who hold a proper and stable capacity for moral personality. This is because unequal consideration and treatment precludes, or at least is a significant obstacle to, the provision of some goods that are crucial to the cultivation of a proper and stable capacity for moral personality. Children’s moral equality, then, is a constitutive requirement of what is owed to them qua moral status-holders.

Keywords

children, friendship, moral attitude, moral equality, moral inferiority, moral superiority, range property, respect, self-respect
The Basis of Children’s Moral Equality

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1. Introduction

In recent years, moral and political philosophers have paid increasing attention to the question of the *basis of moral equality*, namely, the question of what makes human beings fundamentally each other’s moral equals, such that it is appropriate to consider and treat them accordingly. However, much of the literature has focused on working out a theory of the basis of *persons’* moral equality—typically understood as fully competent adults who hold sophisticated cognitive capacities—whereas less has been said about what grounds the equal moral status of those human beings who are not fully competent adults, such as severely cognitively disabled human beings and children. The aim of this chapter is to contribute to filling this gap by providing a novel theory of the basis of children’s moral equality *with respect to one another.*

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3 See, for example, Carter (2011), Christiano (2015), Miklosi (2022), and Rawls (1971).

4 For notable exceptions, see Kittay (2005; forthcoming), Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2014), and Waldron (2017).

5 Two points are worth noticing. First, for the purposes of this essay ‘children’ refers to those non-disabled human beings who do not possess the relevant agential capacities up to the threshold for moral personality. For reasons that will become clearer below, my argument does not apply to those children who are severely cognitively disabled and, as such, do not have the potential to
The chapter is structured as follows. In Section 2, I argue that the basis of moral equality is to be found in a fitting, basic, and independent moral attitude which provides a coherent and plausible explanation for why the variations in the degree to which the status-conferring property (or properties) is held above the threshold for moral status do not matter. Next, I offer a critical discussion of what is arguably the most influential attitude-based account of the basis of moral equality: Ian Carter’s (2011) opacity respect view. I argue that while Carter’s view provides a plausible explanation for persons’ moral equality, it does not have the theoretical resources to account for children’s equal moral status. This is because either opacity respect is not a fitting response to children’s moral status, or it is not a basic requirement of what is owed to them qua moral status-holders. Instead, I contend that the basis of children’s moral equality is to be found in another kind of respect—what I call positive respect—which requires providing children with those social conditions that facilitate the acquisition of a proper and stable capacity for moral personality (Rawls, 1971: 505). In brief, this is because unequal consideration and treatment is a significant obstacle to the provision of some goods that are necessary to obtain a proper and stable capacity for moral personality; hence, it is incompatible with what is owed to children as a matter of respect for their moral status.

The positive-respect-based argument for a positive conception of children’s moral equality—which does not only demand the avoidance of inferiorizing consideration and treatment become moral persons. Second, it is important to observe that the question of the equality of moral status among children themselves is different and independent from the question of the equality of moral status between children and adults, for the former neither amounts to, nor entails, the latter. In this chapter, I focus only on the former; I address the latter in Floris (2023a), and Floris and Spotorno (forthcoming)
of children, but requires considering and treating them as equals—is elaborated in Sections 3 and 4. In Section 3, I argue that moral inferiority is detrimental to the development and maintenance of a robust sense of self-respect, the possession of which is a necessary precondition for holding the capacity for moral personality. Therefore, the avoidance of moral inferiority is a fundamental social base of a child’s sense of self-respect. In Section 4, I contend that moral superiority is also a significant obstacle to the cultivation of a proper and stable capacity for moral personality because it precludes, or at least obstructs, children’s access to those social conditions that favour the formation of integrated friendships, which are essential to their developmental process into well-adjusted adults capable of moral personality. In Section 5, I conclude by addressing two objections so as to clarify and strengthen the argument.

2. Moral Equality, Respect, and Children

Hardly anyone denies that (nearly) all human beings have equal moral status and therefore are entitled to equal consideration and treatment. But if human beings ought to be considered and treated as equals, this must be because there is something about human beings which makes them equals in some fundamental sense. However, as many have observed, when we look at the valuable properties that are shared by human beings—such as the capacity for rational agency (Christiano, forthcoming; Kant 2002 [1785]) or the possession of a subjective perspective (Sher 2015)—they appear to be held to unequal degrees. Human beings, in fact, are more or less capable of acting rationally, and some have a richer subjective perspective on the world.

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6 For a prominent example of a negative conception of moral equality, see Sangiovanni (2017: Ch. 2). For a critique of Sangiovanni’s negative conception of moral equality, see Floris (2020: 413–414). See also footnote 18.
than others. This then generates the following problem: if human beings’ moral status is based on the possession of a status-conferring property X, then it seems reasonable to maintain that the degree of their moral status should vary according to the degree to which they hold X. But if this is true, then why do those human beings who possess X to a higher, or lower, degree not have a superior, or inferior, moral status? This is known as the ‘variations objection’ or the ‘variation problem’ (Floris 2019; Kirby and Floris forthcoming).

To overcome this challenge, we need a principled and compelling explanation for why the variations in the degree to which the status-conferring property is held above the relevant threshold do not generate differences in degrees of moral status. And, as I argue elsewhere, such an explanation is to be found in the proper way of valuing the valuable property that grounds moral status. More precisely, the basis of moral equality lies in a (i) fitting, (ii) basic, and (iii) independent moral attitude owed to some beings qua moral status-holders, which offers a coherent and plausible rationale for why what matters is that they hold some valuable properties within a certain range, regardless of the unequal degree to which these properties are held above the threshold for moral status. I have called this the attitude-based account of the basis of moral equality (Floris 2023b).

My aim here is to develop an attitude-based account of the basis of children’s moral equality. To do this, it will be helpful to start by analysing what is arguably the most influential

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7 For a different approach to the question of moral equality which grounds human beings’ equal moral status not in the equal possession of a status-conferring property, but in the wrongness of treating others as inferiors, see Sangiovanni (2017). For a critique of this relation-first approach, see Floris (2019).

8 The idea of the range property as the basis of moral equality was first developed by Rawls. See Rawls (1971): 505–512.
attitude-based view of the basis of moral equality: Ian Carter’s opacity respect view.\(^9\) According to Carter, moral persons—that is, individuals who hold the capacity for a conception of the good and the capacity of a sense of justice up to a sufficient minimum—are entitled to opacity respect. This kind of respect requires avoiding to ‘look inside persons’, thereby preventing us from evaluating any of the variable capacities on which moral personality supervenes’ (Carter 2011: 551; emphasis in the original). In other words, respect for persons consists in refraining from taking into account the degree to which they hold the subvenient agential capacities above the threshold for moral personality. Therefore, opacity respect is an independent moral requirement that explains why what matters is that persons hold some agential capacities within the range of moral personality, regardless of the different degrees to which these capacities are possessed above the threshold for moral personality. Accordingly, persons’ moral equality is entailed by a commitment to a particular kind of respect that is owed to them qua moral persons.

In my view, Carter’s theory offers a plausible explanation for persons’ equal moral status (at least in certain contexts).\(^9\) However, in what follows, I argue that it does not have the theoretical resources to account for the equal moral status of children. In brief, this is because opacity respect is neither a fitting nor a basic moral attitude that is owed to children qua moral status-holders. Let me explain.

To begin with, it will be instructive to say something more about why it is appropriate to treat persons as opaque. To explain this, Carter invokes Strawson’s distinction between the ‘participatory’ perspective and the ‘objective’ perspective (Carter 2011: 559; forthcoming).

\(^9\) For another account that grounds moral equality in the appropriate response to the status-conferring property, see Miklosi (2022).

\(^{10}\) For criticisms of Carter’s view, see Arneson (2015: 44–48) and Christiano (2015: 57–58).
where the former consists in taking one’s agency as given, whereas the latter amounts to viewing a human being as someone ‘to be managed or handled or cured or trained’ (Strawson 2008: 9). According to Carter, opacity respect is the appropriate response to the possession of agential capacities because it expresses a particular form of the participatory perspective towards persons qua agents: it entails ‘assuming [a person’s] integrity (in the sense of wholeness or completeness), not measuring [their] capacities or dismantling them into so many reactions to stimuli’ (Carter 2018: 828). Respect for persons, therefore, requires abstaining from looking inside them, thus refraining from questioning their status as fully competent agents by regarding them as beings who need to be ‘managed, or handled, or cured or trained’.

But if this is why opacity respect is a fitting or appropriate response to the moral status of persons, we can see that there are at least two reasons to maintain that an appeal to opacity respect is unable to justify children’s moral equality. First, it seems reasonable to hold that opacity respect is not an appropriate attitude towards children simply because children are in some fundamental way not yet developed agents, but they are in the process of developing (Schapiro 1999: 716). Accordingly, it is hard to see why we should take children’s agency (in the sense of wholeness or completeness) as given by showing opacity respect towards them when in fact children are not fully realized moral agents and, as such, their agency is not yet fully developed. Indeed, precisely for this reason, an ‘objective’ perspective is usually considered appropriate in the case of children: children are particularly vulnerable beings, and adults have a duty to satisfy their basic needs by nurturing, protecting, and educating them.

It might be objected that a form of opacity respect is owed to those (older) children who have developed agential capacities up to at least some degree, despite not having reached the threshold for moral personality. However, even if we concede that some children are indeed entitled to a form of opacity respect, it is difficult to see why this should be considered a basic requirement of what is owed to them. On the one hand, there are very limited circumstances, if
any, in which we might have a duty to assume that children are capable of elaborating coherent plans and forming and acting on a sense of justice, without inquiring into whether they in fact hold the necessary cognitive and emotional capacities up to a sufficient degree. On the other hand, and most importantly, it seems reasonable to maintain that there are other more fundamental obligations that are owed to children which would often trump the requirement of treating them as opaque. For example, it is hard to deny that the duty to promote children’s welfare or the duty to foster their development into well-adjusted adults are more fundamental requirements of what is owed to children than the duty to take their agency as given. Accordingly, in those cases in which opacity respect is incompatible with the fulfilment of these more fundamental duties, the latter should take priority over the former. Therefore, even if opacity respect is sometimes an appropriate response to the moral status of children, it is not a basic requirement of what is owed to them. Hence, it does not have enough normative weight to ground a significant commitment to children’s moral equality.

Opacity respect is thus neither a fitting nor a basic moral attitude that is owed to children qua moral status-holders. Accordingly, an appeal to opacity respect is unable to account for children’s moral equality. Therefore, we need to identify another moral attitude which is a fitting and basic response to children’s moral status and that can offer a coherent and convincing rationale for why when assessing children’s moral status what matters is that they hold a status-conferring property (or properties) within a certain range.

Now, moral philosophers disagree about what significant property (or properties) grounds children’s moral status: some suggest that children have moral status because they are self-conscious beings; others contend that children’s moral status is grounded in their capacity to flourish; still others maintain that children’s moral status is based on their being in relation with
other human beings.\footnote{For overviews on the question of the basis of children’s moral status, see Floris (2023a) and Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2019).} However, whatever conceptions of children’s moral status one subscribes to, few would deny that one of the most basic requirements of what is owed to children consists in assisting them in becoming well-adjusted adults who hold a proper and stable capacity for moral personality.\footnote{For different justifications of a child’s right to be assisted in acquiring the capacity for moral personality, see Brighouse (2002), Eekelaar (1986), and Schapiro (1999).} Hence, \textit{at least part} of what is owed to children as a matter of respect for their moral status is to provide them with those social conditions that \textit{foster} the developmental process of obtaining a proper and stable capacity for moral personality. Doing this, however, does not require maintaining a proper distance and refraining from assessing any of the variable properties upon which children’s status-conferring property supervenes. On the contrary, it requires ‘looking inside’ children—thus violating opacity respect—to ascertain what they need to become capable of moral personality. Call this form of respect for children, \textit{positive respect.}\footnote{A critic may observe that the moral imperative to provide children with the social conditions that facilitate their developmental process into well-adjusted adults is not a matter of respect, but concerns other modes of valuing, such as care for children’s welfare. In reply, I believe that respect is the appropriate mode of valuing because this positive duty is justified \textit{not only if and because} it is compatible with and entailed by a commitment to care for children’s welfare. That said, my argument does not hinge on the nature of the mode of valuing underpinning the duty to ensure that children have access to the social conditions that promote their developmental process: what matters is that this is a fundamental requirement of what is owed to children simply by virtue of their moral}
In what follows, I argue that positive respect is a fitting and basic moral attitude owed to children *qua* moral status-holders, which offers a principled and compelling explanation for why the variations in the degree to which children hold their status-conferring property (or properties) above the moral status threshold should be considered as irrelevant when assessing their moral status. In short, this is because unequal consideration and treatment is a significant obstacle to the provision of some goods that are necessary to acquire a proper and stable capacity for moral personality and, therefore, it is incompatible with the fulfilment of the duty of positive respect. Children’s moral equality, then, is a *constitutive* requirement of what is owed to them *qua* moral status-holders.

3. Moral Inferiority and Self-Respect

Consider a fundamental right that children have *qua* moral status-holders: the right to health care. As we saw earlier, children’s standard status-conferring properties—such as the capacity to flourish or self-consciousness—are scalar. The challenge, therefore, is to explain how any of these *scalar* status-conferring properties can ground children’s *equal* moral status and, thus, justify their equal right to health care. For instance, suppose that there are two groups of children, A and B, and that the children of group A hold a scalar status-conferring property X to a

status and, as such, it has enough normative weight to ground a significant commitment to children’s moral equality.

14 In this chapter, I do not directly address the question of the scope of positive respect, that is, the question of *who* owes positive respect to children. I assume that positive respect is an appropriate attitude especially in the relationship between political institutions and children as citizens. Therefore, the positive-respect-based argument justifies children’s moral equality in the eyes of the state, at least.
lesser degree than the children of group B. What reason do we have to maintain that the children of groups A and B have equal moral status and, thus, an equal right to health care, if the former hold X to a lesser extent than the latter?

In this section, I argue that the principle of positive respect can help us explain why we ought to ignore the variations of the degree to which the status-conferring property X is held above the relevant threshold when assessing children’s moral status. This is because moral inferiority is detrimental to the development and the maintenance of a child’s robust sense of self-respect which, in turn, is essential to obtain a proper and stable capacity for moral personality. Therefore, considering and treating children as moral inferiors with respect to one another is incompatible with the fulfilment of a duty of positive respect to ensure that children have access to those social conditions that facilitate the acquisition of the capacity for moral personality.

Let us then begin by examining what self-respect is and why it is an essential precondition of the capacity for moral personality. Following Rawls, self-respect is commonly defined as ‘a person’s sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out’, as well as ‘a confidence in one’s ability, so far as it is within one’s power, to fulfil one’s intentions’ (Rawls, 1971: 440).\(^\text{15}\) Having self-respect, then, is

\(^{15}\)To be precise, the Rawlsian notion of self-respect encompasses both recognition self-respect and evaluative self-esteem, where the former involves recognizing one’s moral standing in relation to others, whereas the latter consists in a positive evaluation of one’s life plan as well as confidence in one’s ability to carry it out (Dillon 1997: 229–231). In this section, I argue that inferiorizing consideration and treatment is a significant obstacle to the development of recognition self-respect and evaluative self-esteem, which are both necessary to hold a proper and stable capacity for moral personality.
clearly a prerequisite for the possession of a proper and stable capacity for moral personality. On the one hand, a person who believes that nothing is worth doing—or that, even if something is worth doing, they are not capable of pursuing their own intentions—holds an impaired capacity to formulate and revise their conception of the good, and to carry out their life plan: either they are unable to elaborate a conception of the good, or their set of possible conceptions of the good is unduly limited due to a lack of confidence in their ability to pursue a wide range of life plans. On the other hand, as Thomas E. Hill Jr. observed, a person who does not respect himself ‘fails to acknowledge fully his own moral status because he does not fully understand what his rights are, how they can be waived, and when they can be forfeited’ (Hill Jr. 1991: 9). Accordingly, a lack of a robust sense of self-respect constrains persons’ capacity to recognize and face the challenges against their own moral worth. This, then, makes them less prone to stand against the injustices that they are victims of, and therefore less able to contribute to the cause of those who suffer from the same injustice (Schemmel 2019: 635).

Once we have clarified why the possession of a sense of self-respect is necessary to hold a proper and stable capacity for moral personality, the question that needs to be addressed is the following: what do children need to develop and maintain a robust sense of self-respect that can be retained even in the event of adversity? In other words, what are the social bases of children’s sense of self-respect?

While a detailed answer to this question goes beyond the scope of this chapter, for our purposes it is sufficient to observe that being considered and treated as a moral inferior in the upbringing is widely recognized to be a significant obstacle to the development of a robust sense of self-respect. For instance, feminist scholars have powerfully argued that a male-dominant society—which rests on a socio-political construction that conveys the message that

16 For further discussion, see Ryan (2023) and Spotorno (2021).
women are dominated by, and dependent on, men—greatly impedes women’s development into adults who are self-aware of their moral worth and their abilities to execute their life plan (Okin 1989). As Robin Dillon puts it, ‘where the basal framework codes inferiority due to deep and longstanding forms of social oppression, the result of self-construction is a diminished self: women become the lesser beings the dominant worldview defines us to be’ (Dillon, 1997: 246).

Racial segregation is another paradigmatic example of how inferiorizing consideration and treatment is detrimental to children’s sense of self-respect, for it imposes an overwhelming obstacle on children—who belong to the race, or ethnic group, considered morally inferior—to become adults with a strong sense of what is owed to them qua moral status-holders and a resilient confidence in their agential abilities to fulfil their life plan. As the US Supreme Court in Brown vs Board of Education famously declared: ‘To separate [black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone’ (Brown vs Board of Education 1954).

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17 See also Benson (1991) and Meyers (1987).

18 To be sure, I am not suggesting that all women or persons of colour who have not been brought up as equals do not have a robust sense of self-respect. Rather, the point is that since moral inferiority is a significant obstacle to the development and the maintenance of a robust sense of self-respect, it is incompatible with the fulfilment of the duty of positive respect to provide children with the social conditions that facilitate the acquisition of a proper and stable capacity for moral personality. Therefore, the validity of my argument does not rest on empirical evidence about whether children end up acquiring a robust sense of self-respect in adulthood despite having been considered and treated as moral inferiors in their childhood.
The avoidance of inferiorizing consideration and treatment, then, is a fundamental social base of children’s sense of self-respect: to assist children in acquiring a robust sense of selfrespect, a just society ought to ensure that children have access to those social conditions that reinforce in them the awareness that they are not morally inferior to others as a fundamental motivational and epistemic resource to the development and maintenance of a proper and robust sense of self-respect.

I began this section by presenting the case of two groups of children who possess a status-conferring property X to an unequal degree. The challenge, I have observed, is to provide a coherent and compelling answer to the variations objection: if children of group A hold X to a lower degree than children of group B, what reason do we have to maintain that they have equal moral status and, therefore, an equal right to health care?

We are now in the position to better appreciate why the principle of positive respect offers a powerful response to this question: considering and treating children as moral inferiors with respect to one another is incompatible with the duty to provide them with those social conditions that facilitate the acquisition and maintenance of a robust sense of self-respect. Hence, it is inconsistent with what is owed to children as a matter of respect for their moral status. In particular, a society that considers the children of group A as moral inferiors, thereby (i) denying them a right to health care, or (ii) ascribing them a less stringent right to health care than children of group B—by, for example, granting the former access to worse hospitals and less comprehensive patient care services, or prioritizing the latter’s right to health care in cases of scarce resources and conflicting claims—imposes a significant obstacle to the development and maintenance of a robust sense of self-respect for the children of group A. For this reason, then, a just society ought to abstain from considering the variations in degrees to which children of groups A and B possess a status-conferring property X above a significant threshold as relevant for the purpose of assessing their moral status, as a matter of positive respect. The
principle of positive respect thus supplies us with a plausible moral requirement that explains why, when reasoning about how children ought to be considered and treated, what matters is that they hold a significant property within a certain range, regardless of the variations above the relevant threshold. In other words, the avoidance of moral inferiority is a constitutive requirement of what is owed to children qua moral status-holders.

4. Moral Superiority and Friendship

In the previous section, I have argued that moral inferiority is incompatible with the fulfilment of a duty of positive respect towards children because it hinders the development and maintenance of a robust sense of self-respect, which is a precondition of a proper and stable capacity for moral personality. While this is sufficient to justify a negative conception of children’s

It is important to notice that this is not to say that children’s level of status-conferring properties should be considered irrelevant for all purposes. On the contrary, the level of a status-conferring property may be relevant when determining what is required to satisfy a right. Here is an example. Assume that children’s moral status is grounded in the possession of developmental agential capacities, and consider Luke, a child whose developmental agential capacities are impaired due to some mental health issues, and Stephanie, a child who does not suffer from any internal impairments. A commitment to positive respect entails that Luke and Stephanie ought to have an equal right to health care, regardless of their unequal level of developmental agential capacities. Presumably, however, society must allocate more resources to Luke than to Stephanie to satisfy their equal right to health care, precisely because Luke’s level of developmental agential capacities is inferior to that of Stephanie. Accordingly, while positive respect justifies ignoring children’s level of the status-conferring property when assessing the degree of their moral status, it allows indeed it may demand considering children’s levels of the status-conferring property as morally relevant when determining what the satisfaction of their equal rights requires.
moral equality that demands the avoidance of inferiorizing consideration and treatment, it is insufficient to ground a positive conception of children’s moral equality whereby children should be considered and treated as moral *equals*. To justify the latter, an argument that explains why superior consideration and treatment is wrong in its own right is necessary.\(^{20}\) Thus, in this section, I argue that moral superiority is also detrimental to the development of the capacity for moral personality, thereby being incompatible with the satisfaction of a duty of positive respect.

To begin with, it is important to observe that having access to relational resources is necessary to develop and exercise the capacity for moral personality. On the one hand, relational goods, such as trust, emotional support, care, friendship, and social influence are crucial for persons to maintain and develop a stable capacity for a conception of the good. On the other hand, the opportunity to establish social relationships and participate in associations is of

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\(^{20}\) To be clear, I am not suggesting that the superior consideration and treatment of some can occur without the inferior consideration and treatment of others. Rather, what I am suggesting is that moral superiority is *also* bad for those who are considered and treated as superiors, independently of, and in addition to, being bad for those who are considered and treated as inferiors, as a result of it. This is important for two reasons: first, because only an account of positive equality allows us to capture all the wrongs *qua* violation of equal moral status ([Floris 2020](#): 143–144). Second, because one may object that if considering and treating children unequally is only bad for the allegedly morally inferior children but good for the allegedly morally superior children, then either (i) we do not have conclusive reasons to claim that children ought to be considered and treated as *equals*, at best, or, (ii) we do have conclusive reasons to maintain that children ought to be considered and treated as *unequals*, at worst, for the interests, or the claims, of children with superior moral status should count more. By showing that unequal consideration and treatment is bad for *all* children, a positive conception of moral equality avoids this pressing objection.
particular importance to acquire a sense of justice as well as to discharge one’s duties of justice (Cordelli 2015b).

Now, at least some of these relational resources play a fundamental role also in children’s developmental process into becoming healthy adults. Hardly anyone, in fact, would deny that trust, emotional support, care, and friendship are necessary to foster the acquisition of a proper and stable capacity for moral personality. Most importantly for our purposes here, it is generally held that friendship is an essential motivational and epistemic resource for the cultivation of proper and stable capacities for a conception of the good and of a sense of justice. Indeed, besides being an invaluable source of emotional support, friendship facilitates the development of the capacity for a conception of the good in three different ways: first, it allows broadening the range of ends that are regarded to be worth pursuing and therefore enriches the set of conceptions of the good among which one can choose (Friedman 1993: 207). Second, it promotes the ability to collaborate with others by justifying one’s solutions, and elaborating and criticizing others’ proposals (Azmitia and Montgomery 1993). Finally, being a source of social criticism, friendship also contributes to the development of the capacity to engage in critical deliberation with others who have a different perspective about what constitutes a flourishing life (Friedman 1993: Ch. 8). In short, then, friendship is an essential resource for the cultivation of the capacity to formulate, carry out, and revise one’s conception of the good.

The developmental value of friendship in relation to moral growth has also been widely defended. First, as Rawls pointed out, ties of friendship are essential to generate association guilt, namely, the guilt that one feels as a result of failing to do their part in a scheme of cooperation. More specifically, friendship promotes moral sensibility to engage in fair cooperation by fostering a disposition to promote others’ interests—rather than exploiting others for one’s own benefit—and a sense of reciprocity and commitment to others (Rawls 1999: 103). Second, friendship also enables the widening of the range of moral perspectives, thereby enriching the
set of reasons worth considering when assessing the validity of a specific moral principle (Friedman 1993: 200).

Since friendship is a crucial motivational and epistemic resource for the acquisition of a proper and stable capacity for moral personality, a just society has a duty to ensure that children have access to those social conditions that facilitate establishing relationships of friendship, as a matter of positive respect. This has significant implications for the wrongness of moral superiority because a well-functioning friendship is a paradigmatic instance of an egalitarian relationship: a genuine friend, in fact, does not claim to have power over their friend, thus wielding greater authority concerning decisions made within the context of this relationship. Nor do they assert that their interests are worthy of special consideration—or that they are entitled to a special treatment that their friend does not have an equal claim to—by, for example, expecting their friend to be supportive of their projects while being indifferent towards their friend’s efforts to pursue their goals. More generally, a well-functioning friendship is an egalitarian relationship wherein the participants do not place a higher or lower moral value on themselves, thereby showing equal respect and concern towards each other (Aristotle 1984: 3925; Scheffler 2015: 32–33; Viehoff 2019: 10).

Accordingly, if friendship is a relational good the lack of which obstructs children’s developmental process to obtain a proper and stable capacity for moral personality, and if friendship is accessible only among moral equals, then it follows that moral superiority is a significant obstacle to the acquisition of a proper capacity for moral personality. Hence, positive respect requires the avoidance of moral superiority as a fundamental social base of children’s access to establish relations of friendship.

At this point, however, it might be objected that, even if this argument against moral superiority is correct, it is unable to justify a general prohibition against superior consideration and treatment. To appreciate this, consider the following example. Imagine a society that takes
intelligence as a parameter to evaluate the degree of children’s moral status and assigns a superior moral status to the group of the ‘most intelligent’ children. If the wrongness of moral superiority lies in being an obstacle to children’s access to relations of friendship, then it is not clear what is wrong with equal moral superiority. After all, if the ‘morally superior’ children are each other’s moral equals, then they can be one another’s friends. Hence, the positive-respect-based argument against moral superiority, so the objection concludes, does not have the theoretical resources to justify a society in which no child is considered and treated as a moral superior; at best, it can condemn the superior consideration and treatment of very few children.

In response to this objection, however, it should be noticed that friendship segregation along the lines of moral superiority is detrimental to children’s development into healthy adults capable of moral personality. The reason for this is twofold: first, as Emily Buss pointed out, interaction with a wider range of peers fosters ‘a more thorough exploration of [one’s] identity which, in turn, could produce a sense of self-understanding and self-authorship associated with more autonomous decisionmaking’ (Buss 2000: 1275). More generally, a diversified group of friends facilitates the development of the capacity to revise one’s conception of the good in light of social criticism and the capacity to critically engage with established social norms that influence one’s sense of justice (Cordelli 2015a; Moody 2001).

Second, and most importantly, it is widely recognized that friendship segregation along the lines of moral superiority promotes significant epistemic vices, such as epistemic laziness and close-mindedness: specifically, by incentivizing ‘morally superior’ children to maintain their privilege, moral superiority hinders their willingness and ability to discover and critically question those social norms that underpin their privileged position in society (Medina 2013: 33–36). For example, as feminist scholars have forcefully argued, the inequality of gender that dominates the family poses a serious obstacle to the development of children’s ability and
willingness to engage in fair deliberation with individuals of the opposite gender when they become adults (Okin 1989: 237). As a result of superior consideration and treatment during childhood, some adult men believe that their sense of justice need not be revised in light of feminist criticism. In addition, they are epistemically lazy insofar as they are not interested in critically engaging with patriarchal norms, and they are close-minded in that they are not open to being challenged by those values that may destabilize their own privileged position.

Not all forms of friendship nurture children’s developmental process into well-adjusted individuals. In particular, friendship segregation along the lines of moral superiority prevents children from exploring a wide range of conceptions of the good and moral values, and obstructs the cultivation of important epistemic virtues—such as awareness and criticism of one’s own privileged position, epistemic curiosity, and open-mindedness—which are crucial to the possession of a proper capacity for moral personality. Accordingly, the positive-respect-based argument has the theoretical resources to condemn moral superiority as such: superior consideration and treatment is incompatible with the fulfilment of the duty of positive respect because it precludes, or at least is a significant obstacle to, having access to that kind of friendship that is an essential motivational and epistemic resource for the acquisition of a proper and stable capacity for moral personality, namely: integrated friendship.

To conclude, a duty of positive respect towards children requires providing them with those social conditions that facilitate the acquisition of a proper and stable capacity for moral personality. In this section, I have argued that superior consideration and treatment is irreconcilable with this duty because it is a significant obstacle to children’s access to integrated friendship, which plays a crucial role in their development into well-adjusted adults capable of

21 For further discussion of how moral superiority is bad for the moral superiors, see also Fourie (2022).
moral personality. Hence, a just society has a duty to avoid superior consideration and treatment as a fundamental social base of children’s access to integrated friendship.

5. Objections

If children hold their status-conferring property (or properties) — for example, the capacity to flourish or the potential for rational agency — to an unequal degree, how come they should be considered and treated as each other’s equals? I have argued that the answer to this question lies in a fitting, basic, and independent moral attitude which is owed to children qua moral status-holders and that provides a coherent rationale for why the degrees to which children hold the status-conferring property (or properties) above the threshold for moral status are morally irrelevant. In particular, the basis of children’s moral equality lies in a duty of positive respect, which requires providing children with the social conditions that foster their developmental process into healthy adults who hold a proper and stable capacity for moral personality. This is because unequal consideration and treatment precludes, or at least obstructs, children’s development of a robust sense of self-respect and their ability to form integrated friendships. Hence, moral inequality is incompatible with what is owed to children as a matter of respect for their moral status. Therefore, an appeal to a duty of positive respect offers a coherent and convincing explanation for why when reasoning about how children ought to be considered and treated what matters is that they hold some relevant properties within a certain range. In this final section, I consider two objections that can be raised against this argument.

5.1 The question-begging objection

A critic might object that a commitment to positive respect does not offer an independent explanation for why variations above the threshold for moral status are morally irrelevant. On the contrary, the positive-respect-based argument begs the question of the basis of children’s moral
equality, for a commitment to children’s moral equality comes before a commitment to a duty of positive respect for children. Thus, for instance, in Section 3 I have argued that inferior consideration and treatment is incompatible with the duty of positive respect because moral inferiority hinders the development and maintenance of a robust sense of self-respect. But a critic might observe that this is true only if one presupposes an egalitarian conception of self-respect, whereby a person respects themselves as an equal in society. After all, it seems plausible to maintain that members of inegalitarian societies can have a sense of self-respect according to which they understand their ‘station’ and their ‘duties’, and fully carry out their duties in that role, come what may. If this is true, so the objection goes, then the argument against moral inferiority rests on an implicit commitment to moral equality which grounds a duty to consider and treat children as each other’s equals. Hence, the positive-respect-based argument fails to provide an independent explanation for children’s moral equality.

In reply, I argue that a commitment against inferiorizing consideration and treatment of children need not presuppose an egalitarian conception of a child’s sense of self-respect; rather, it rests on an assumption in favour of an egalitarian conception of an adult’s sense of self-respect. Hence, the positive-respect-based argument does not beg the question of the basis of children’s moral equality. To see this, let us briefly recall the argument against moral inferiority:

(1) Children are entitled to be provided with the social conditions that facilitate their developmental process into well-adjusted adults capable of moral personality, as a matter of positive respect.

(2) Inferiorizing consideration and treatment is a significant obstacle to the development and maintenance of a robust sense of self-respect.

(3) A robust sense of self-respect is a necessary precondition for holding a proper and stable capacity for moral personality.
(4) Hence, inferiorizing consideration and treatment is incompatible with the fulfilment of a duty of positive respect.

We can now see that there is no need to appeal to children’s moral equality to justify a duty to avoid treating children as moral inferiors with respect to one another. This duty is entailed by (i) a commitment to a form of respect that is owed to children qua moral status-holders which requires assisting them in becoming well-adjusted adults capable of moral personality, and (ii) the claim that a robust sense of self-respect is necessary for holding a proper and stable capacity for moral personality. What I am arguing therefore is not that children should be respected equally because they are moral equals, but that they ought to be considered and treated as equals because this is part of what is owed to them as a matter of respect for their moral status.

An example may help to illustrate this point. Consider a person, John, who grew up into being a servant—that is, he has been considered and treated as a servant throughout his childhood—and, as a result of this upbringing, he respects himself qua a good servant who fulfils his duties in all circumstances. Now, it seems reasonable to hold that, far from having a robust sense of self-respect, John has a broken sense of self-respect, insofar as he is incapable of considering himself as an equal in society, who has the right to revise his conception of the good and to challenge the kind of treatment that society deems him to be worthy of. Crucially, however, the wrongness of treating John as a moral inferior throughout his childhood need not rest on a prior commitment to the equality of moral status between John and the other children. Rather, the impermissibility of inferiorizing consideration and treatment is entailed by (i) the claim that John as a child is entitled to have access to those social conditions that foster his developmental process into a well-adjusted adult capable of moral personality, and (ii) the claim that inferiorizing consideration and treatment is incompatible with the satisfaction of (i) because it constrains the development of a robust sense of self-respect, whereby John is aware
of his own moral worth and his own basic rights. For this reason, then, I conclude that the positive-respect-based argument for children’s moral equality does not beg the question: children’s moral equality does not entail but is entailed by a commitment to positive respect. The former is a requirement of the latter. An appeal to a duty of positive respect, therefore, provides an independent explanation for children’s moral equality.

5.2 The sidestepping objection

Even if one accepts that the positive-respect-based argument for children’s moral equality does not beg the question, one may suspect that it merely sidesteps the problem rather than solving it. If we accept the positive-respect-based argument, so the objection goes, then we cannot conclude that children are each other’s moral equals, but we must simply adopt an agnostic attitude towards this question. This is because this argument only supplies us with a reason to maintain that society ought to ignore the unequal levels of children’s status-conferring property (or properties) when assessing their moral status, but it is unable to justify the claim that children are one another’s moral equals.

The positive-respect-based argument, however, does not merely entail that society cannot ascertain the levels of children’s status-conferring property (or properties) and therefore it is compelled to consider them as moral equals even if they may not be. Rather, society ought to regard and treat them as such because this is a constitutive requirement of what the principle of respect for children demands. In other words, the positive-respect-based justification is not an epistemic argument about the impossibility of determining the level of the scalar properties that ground children’s moral status. Rather, it is a normative argument about the impermissibility of considering the level of the scalar properties above the threshold for moral status as

22 A similar objection has been raised against Carter’s opacity respect view. See Arneson (2015: 45).
morally relevant when assessing children’s moral status, because this is inconsistent with what is owed to them *qua* moral status-holders. Thus, the principle of positive respect offers a coherent and plausible rationale for why when reasoning about how children ought to be considered and treated what matters is that they hold a relevant status-conferring property within a certain range, regardless of the variations in degree to which this property is held above the moral status threshold. Therefore, it explains why children *are* equal in the possession of the range property, thereby providing a normative basis for their equal moral status. Hence, the side-stepping objection fails to undermine the positive-respect-based argument for children’s moral equality.

6. Conclusion

Much of the literature on the basis of moral equality has focused on what makes persons—understood as fully competent adults—one another’s equals. Less attention, instead, has been given to the question of the equal moral status of those human beings who are not fully competent adults. In this chapter, I have contributed to filling this gap by developing a novel theory of the basis of children’s moral equality. I have argued that the basis of children’s moral equality lies in a fitting, basic, and independent attitude of positive respect which is owed to children *qua* moral status-holders. This kind of respect requires providing children with the social conditions that foster their developmental process into well-adjusted adults capable of moral personality. But unequal consideration and treatment precludes, or at least is a significant obstacle to, the provision of some goods that are crucial to the cultivation of proper and stable capacity for moral personality, namely: a robust sense of self-respect and access to integrated friendship. Therefore, it is inconsistent with a duty of positive respect towards children. Hence, children’s
moral equality is a constitutive requirement of what is owed to children *qua* moral status-holders.\(^{23}\)

**Bibliography**


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