A lost cause? Fundamental problems for causal theories of parenthood

**Abstract**

In this paper, I offer a critique of (actual and possible) causal theories of parenthood. I do not offer a competing account of who incurs parental obligations and why; rather, I aim to show that there are fundamental problems for any account of *who* acquires parental obligations and *why* by appeal to causal responsibility for a child’s existence. I outline and justify three criteria which any plausible causal account of parental obligation must meet, and demonstrate that attempting to fulfil all three criteria simultaneously will give rise to one or both of two potentially insurmountable dilemmas.

**1. Accounting for the *who* and the *why* of parental obligation**

There is currently no universally agreed-upon outline of the precise scope of parental obligations. However, the plausibility of any theory of parenthood will hinge to a certain extent on the way in which we characterise these obligations – the more extensive and weighty we consider them, the more that any theory has to account for in explaining *who* acquires (initial) parental obligations, and *why.* Some theorists have defended a narrow understanding of parental obligation as the duty to ensure that one’s child is provided with a certain standard of care, whether or not one provides that care oneself.[[1]](#footnote-1) Others have argued that parents have significantly more extensive and weighty obligations to their children, some of which may not be delegated, including the duty to provide nurture, emotional support, and guidance in identity-formation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Putting these disagreements aside for the moment, let us consider: what is the minimum that a theory of parental obligation must account for? Most philosophers in this field agree that parental obligations differ from what Brake describes as a ‘general duty of rescue’ that any adult (prima facie) owes to a child in danger.[[3]](#footnote-3) They are, as Millum puts it, “weightier duties than they owe other children.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Whilst all adults have a collective duty to protect children from abuse, and any adult might have an obligation to rescue a specific child from peril (for example, upon seeing that child drowning in the nearby pond) parental obligations are not fulfilled by merely keeping a child from danger. Parental obligations are also “not owed by every moral agent to every endangered patient, but by particular adults to particular children.”[[5]](#footnote-5) A plausible philosophical account of parental obligation must therefore, at a minimum:

1. Explain why parental obligations go beyond the general duties of rescue owed by adults to children;
2. Produce the result that only certain people incur these obligations, and only to certain children; and
3. Explain *why* it is (only) these people who incur parental obligations.

How have philosophers attempted to achieve this?

Theories of parenthood have fallen, broadly speaking, into two main camps: those holding that parental obligations are acquired *voluntarily* (that is, by virtue of consciously taking on those obligations, as one does when making a promise to *x* and thus acquiring the obligation to *x*), and those holding that parental obligations are acquired *non-voluntarily* (that is, by virtue of some action, behaviour, or relation, regardless of whether the individual in question accepts or is even aware of their obligations).[[6]](#footnote-6) Voluntarist theories, such as that defended by Elizabeth Brake, fall into the former category (as one might expect). According to Brake, parental obligations arise from assumption of responsibility for a child. She rejects the notion that we assume such responsibility through tacit consent if we undertake actions with the known possibility that a child might result; on this account, a man does not incur parental obligations to a child produced through sexual intercourse merely because he knew that conception was a possible consequence of this action.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Millum’s conventional-acts account is less permissive. On this account, acquisition of parental obligation is voluntary in that we can incur parental obligations only through voluntary behaviour, but we can incur these obligations without deciding to take on the parental role; social conventions determine which actions, behaviours, or relations result in someone incurring parental obligations. These conventions “make a difference by giving certain acts meanings, such that performing them is morally transformative.”[[8]](#footnote-8) If, according to the conventions of our moral community, “men are normally responsible for the biological children they beget because of the act of coitus that led to conception”, then according to the conventional-acts theory, voluntarily engaging in sexual intercourse “constitutes taking on parental responsibilities.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Causal theories fall into the second camp. Such theories have grown in popularity in recent years, in large part due to their intuitive appeal regarding the relation between biological parenthood and the obligation to care for children. A significant strength of such theories has been that they seem to provide a straightforward answer not only the *who* question, but also the *why* question. Causal accounts attempt to answer these questions by appealing to the notion that causing new life to exist involves either harming others or exposing them to the risk of harm, given the unavoidable vulnerability and neediness of children.[[10]](#footnote-10) Causal responsibility for a child’s existence gives rise to a moral obligation to care for the child in order to mitigate or compensate for this harm.[[11]](#footnote-11) These accounts are founded on a notion that Nelson describes as belonging to “common sense ethics”: that causal responsibility for harm, or the risk of harm, begets moral responsibility to make amends. He argues:

“If you’ve run over your neighbour with your motorcycle, smashed her Ming vases with your expansive gesticulations, or trapped his children in the old refrigerator left invitingly in your front yard, there doesn’t seem much question about who has a particular obligation to make matters as right as possible, to compensate for damage, and to remove existing risk.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

This is the principle underlying causal accounts of parental obligation (and which is supposed to answer the question posed in (a) above). Beyond this shared foundation, however, there has been significant variation in the formulation of causal accounts of parental obligation.

One way in which disagreement concerning the *why* question has manifested is debate over whether causing a person’s existence gives rise to the obligation *to parent*, or only to more general obligations. Porter suggests that “the moral force of causing someone to exist seems straightforward.”[[13]](#footnote-13) However, it may not be straightforward that causing someone to exist gives rise to obligations beyond general duties of rescue or of compensation for harm, or that these more extensive obligations land only on a few shoulders. If, on the one hand, contributing to causing someone’s existence results only in the obligation to mitigate or compensate for harm, then we need to go beyond a causal account of responsibility to explain why some people have specific *parental* obligations to their children (or else conclude that most parents go above and beyond the call of duty in educating, disciplining, and nurturing their children).[[14]](#footnote-14) But if, on the other hand, causing a child to exist does give rise to those obligations we ordinarily think of as *parental* obligations, a causal account will produce unintuitive results. For example, in cases of IVF treatment, many more people play a significant causal role in producing a child than we would ordinarily believe have parental obligations to that child. Where an IVF technician is the individual bringing together egg and sperm, we can plausibly say that she plays a necessary role not just in the existence of *a* child, but in the existence of *this specific child*, since her action determines the genetic make-up of the resultant embryo.[[15]](#footnote-15) However, as Prusak notes, “it is unlikely that we would want to call the embryologist and clinician parents of the child and say that they bear parental obligations.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Similar concerns have been raised by both proponents and critics of causal theories.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This leads us to the way in which the *who* question has troubled proponents of causal accounts. There has been significant debate concerning the reach of parental obligations: the extent to which playing any causal role in this existence gives rise to obligations (parental or otherwise). Some causal accounts face objections on the grounds that they result in ‘too many parents’: we generally wish to avoid the unintuitive outcome that the fertility doctor and the matchmaking friend end up with parental obligations by virtue of their roles in the causal chain leading to a child’s existence. However, attempts to overcome this problem may result in further difficulties for causal accounts, by failing to pick out anyone with parental obligation – if we weaken the connection between causal responsibility and parental obligation, so as to avoid the undesirable result that the matchmaker and IVF doctor incur parental obligations, we run the risk that (in some cases) we will identify no-one at all with these obligations.

Attempts to overcome the same problem may also go too far in the opposite direction, by producing moral obligations for non-parents which appear unreasonably demanding. For example, Porter argues that all those who contribute to causing a child to exist (including, she notes, IVF technicians) “have a duty to ensure the care of the child they cause to exist, and a *pro tanto* obligation to parent the child.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Most would assume that the IVF technician who helps to cause a child to exist has no obligation to ensure or protect the child’s welfare once they have completed their task. At most, we might hold them to account for their ‘procreative responsibility’ *before* the child is brought into existence. Bayne suggests that those institutions and individuals who play a role in producing children, such as gamete donors and fertility doctors, “should exercise their procreative role responsibly.”[[19]](#footnote-19) We might, then, expect doctors and clinicians to provide IVF treatment only to individuals meeting certain criteria; however, it would be strongly counterintuitive to suggest that those doctors and clinics incur obligations to ensure the care of resulting children if their parents were not able to do so.

Some philosophers have attempted to avoid the problem of ‘too many parents’ by advocating the use of specific definitions of ‘causes’ in their accounts of parental obligation. Porter, for example, favours Mackie’s “so-called INUS causation (Insufficient Necessary link in an Unnecessary Sufficient causal chain).”[[20]](#footnote-20) The genetic parents of the child will be captured as causes under this definition, since the fertilisation of *this* specific egg by *this* specific sperm is a necessary condition for *this* person to have been born. But if anyone’s intervention made it the case that this egg and sperm should be brought together, they will also count as INUS causes; Porter acknowledges that this will capture IVF doctors, even if not midwives, matchmakers and pushy grandparents.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Nelson, on the other hand, claims that genetic parents play a causal role more significant than the ‘but-for’ causal roles played by other agents: “the making available of one’s gametes is an act highly proximate to conception, and, in concert with the other parent’s actions, is jointly sufficient for it.”[[22]](#footnote-22) It is this proximity and sufficiency which (Nelson claims) allows us to characterise the act of conception as *the* cause, giving rise to parental obligations and rights only for genetic progenitors. However, while this constraint might allow his account to avoid the problem of ‘too many parents’, it produces unintuitive results in many common scenarios. The actions of a couple who use IVF to conceive are not jointly sufficient; they must be joined with their clinician’s actions. Consideration of the woman who conceives using a donor embryo makes clear that the making available of one’s gametes is jointly sufficient for very little, if not followed by implantation and gestation.

Despite the appearance of a straightforward ethical foundation, causal accounts of parental obligation have not yielded a straightforward answer to the *who* and *why* questions of parental obligation. Widely held beliefs about the nature of parenthood place one kind of constraint on the success of a causal account; other constraints, as I demonstrate in the next section, are inherent in the nature of causal accounts themselves. I will outline three criteria that a causal account of parental obligation must meet in order to coherently answer the *who* and *why* questions. I will then argue that a causal account cannot meet all three criteria without undermining the moral significance of causal responsibility and collapsing into another kind of account (for example, voluntarist or social constructionist).

**2. Criteria for a plausible causal account**

Let us assume that our aim is to explain *who* acquires parental obligations and *why* they acquire these obligations, by means of a causal account. That is, the aim of our account is to (1) identify those individuals who have parental obligations by virtue of their causal role in a child’s existence, and (2) explain why this causal role gives rise to parental obligations. In this section, I lay out criteria that a causal account of parental obligation must meet in order to be considered plausible. One of these criteria arises from the nature of a *causal* account, whilst the other two are pragmatic requirements for acceptability. I will explain why each of these criteria must be met for a causal account to be successful, and then demonstrate that these criteria, brought together, give rise to two significant dilemmas for the causal theorists. The first criterion I propose for a coherent causal account of parental obligation is:

*Identification:* The account must identify *at least someone* who has initial parental obligations regarding the child.

Given the presupposition that it is a causal account we wish to develop, it is illogical to reject *Identification*, since (unless through freakish coincidence children begin to pop into existence entirely un-caused) there will always be someone whose actions can be described as causing the child to existence.[[23]](#footnote-23) In the event that *Brave New World-*style artificial reproduction is developed, the question of parental obligation may simply be redundant. The possibility of tragic cases (in which, for example, the child’s father dies prior to the birth and its mother dies in childbirth) do not prove against this criterion, since a causal account consistent with these criteria could still tell us who *would* *have* had parental responsibility for the child, had it not been for their unfortunate demise. There are also pragmatic reasons for requiring that a causal account of parental obligation fulfils this criterion – one of the reasons for favouring a causal account, in Porter’s words, is that “it has teeth: it can hold negligent parents to account.”[[24]](#footnote-24) If the connection we make between causal responsibility and parental obligation is too tenuous, or parental obligations are too weak (for example, they do not go beyond general duties of rescue) then “it seems the causal account may lose those teeth.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

As stated in section 1, I presuppose (at a minimum) that parental obligation go beyond the general duties of rescue owed by adults to children, and are held only by certain adults with respect to certain children. An account of parental obligation must explain *why* this is, and *which* adults incur these obligations. However, plausibility further requires that the account identify only a small number of people as incurring parental obligations, in order to avoid the problem of ‘too many parents’ discussed in section 1. As several philosophers in this field have pointed out, parental obligations are generally considered to be such that they can only be held and carried out by a small number of people. Prusak, for example, claims that procreators have “a *prima facie* duty to develop an affective bond with the children whom they bring into being.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Weinberg likewise argues that parental responsibilities require one to nurture and guide a child within a “long-term, loving relationship.”[[27]](#footnote-27) As well as owing their children a “rich, intimate, daily personal relationship” Brake argues that parents “must personally supervise many aspects of their children’s lives.”[[28]](#footnote-28) This is something that, on a practical level, cannot be achieved by a large number of people. Parental obligation understood this way seems straightforwardly incompatible with any account that results in more than a handful of individuals acquiring such obligations. The second criterion I therefore propose is as follows:

*Limits:* The account must provide clear, plausible limits to the reach of parental obligations. These limits must further be independently justifiable (that is, they must not include or exclude people from the reach of parental obligation on arbitrary grounds).

Given that causal theorists of parental obligations understand these as moral obligations (rather than, say, legal obligations), we cannot accept arbitrary limits simply on the grounds that they allow us to more easily identify those who acquire parental obligation. An account may thus fail to fulfill *Limits* in one (or both) of two possible ways. Firstly, it may provide only vague limits, or implausible limits, to the reach of parental obligation – for example, Fuscaldo’s view that parental duties are acquired by “everyone whose actions reasonably foreseeably result in the existence of a child.”[[29]](#footnote-29) In many cases, the number of people who play a “but-for” causal role in a child’s existence will far outstrip the number who may be plausibly characterised as moral parents. Secondly, an account may fail to fulfill *Limits* by providing only arbitrary limits to the reach of parental obligation – for example, Weinberg’s account restricts parental obligation to those individuals who *produce* the gametes from which a child develops, despite acknowledging that the actions of genetic parents are often not causally sufficient to produce that child. If the moral force of the her theory is grounded in voluntary engagement in behaviour which risks causing a needy and innocent being to come into the world, it is arbitrary to claim that only the original owners of the hazardous material in question acquire initial parental obligations.

It seems clear that an account which justifies the limits on who incurs parental obligations by appeal to non-causal factors, is not genuinely a *causal* account of parenthood. Consider, for example, that we develop an account according to which those whose actions are INUS causes of a child’s existence, incur parental obligations. Such an account may capture the actions of both the genetic parents of a child *and* the clinician who combines their gametes through IVF. This result is undesirable – however, if the aim is to defend a causal account of parental obligation, we cannot then appeal to some non-causal factor such as the intentions of the relevant parties, or the proprietary relation of the genetic parents to the gametes used, in order to explain the belief that the genetic parents, but not the clinician, incur parental obligations. If playing *x* causal role is the reason that *y* incurs parental obligations, then any other agent who carries out *x* must also incur parental obligations.

Fulfilling the *Limits* criterion ensures that a causal account does not fall foul of the problem of ‘too many parents.’ However, plausibility does not only require that a limited number of individuals incur parental obligations to any given child, but that this number not include individuals to whom it seems highly unintuitive to ascribe these obligations (for example, the IVF clinician or the matchmaking friend). Further, as established in section 1, whilst we generally hold that “some obligations are owed *by* all *to* all children” (for example, the duty of adults collectively to protect children from abuse), only the bearers of parental obligations have the primary responsibility for the care of a given child.[[30]](#footnote-30)These considerations strongly suggest that, for an account of parental obligation to be compatible with (a) our ordinary conception of parental obligations, and (b) our more general views on the relationship between causal responsibility for harm and moral responsibility for compensation, it must fulfill this third criterion:

*Demandingness*: The account must not (a) place unreasonably demanding moral burdens on individuals who do not incur parental obligations; or (b) identify as incurring parental obligations individuals of whom this seems strongly unintuitive.

In order to fulfill the *Demandingness* criterion, a causal account must not give straightforwardly implausible results as concerns the specific individuals who incur parental obligations. It must further explain why causal responsibility for a child’s existence gives rise to such substantial obligations for parents, but does not produce nearly so heavy a moral burden for anyone else.[[31]](#footnote-31)

These three criteria (*Identification, Limits,* and *Demandingness*) clearly seem to be independently justified, given the general requirements for accounts of parental obligation outlined in section 1, and the existing criticisms which have been made of causal accounts. We must now ask whether it is possible for an account to meet all three of these criteria simultaneously. In the next section, I will explain the problems that arise when we attempt to do so.

**3. Two dilemmas for causal theories of parental obligation**

In this section, I will use Porter’s most recent defence of a causal account of parental obligation as an case study to demonstrate the difficulties in applying *Identification*, *Limits,* and *Demandingness* simultaneously. This analysis is not simply a critique of Porter, but aims to expose potentially fundamental problems for all causal accounts. Specifically, the three criteria I have outlined above give rise to two distinct dilemmas for such accounts:

*Dilemma 1:* A causal theory of parental obligation will either fail to fulfill *Limits* or will cease to be a causal theory (for example, by collapsing into a form of voluntarism or social constructionism).

*Dilemma 2:* A causal theory of parental obligation cannot satisfy both *Identification* and *Demandingness* simultaneously.

I will demonstrate how these dilemmas arise using Porter’s account as a case study.

Porter describes those who contribute to causing a child to exist (including gamete donors, IVF doctors, etc.) as ‘makers’, and presents a framework according to which ‘maker’ and ‘parent’ are distinct but connected moral roles, with different obligations attached to each. She argues that makers “have a duty to ensure the care of the child they cause to exist, and a *pro tanto* obligation to parent the child.”[[32]](#footnote-32) The child’s right to be cared for is then claimed against makers, but as long as someone takes on the role of parent, this right is met. Parental obligations are acquired by taking on the role of parent, and makers therefore do not incur full parental obligations purely by virtue of their causal role in bringing about new life.

The claim that a maker must first take on the role of ‘parent’ before incurring full parental obligations allows Porter’s account to avoid the problem of ‘too many parents’ (as long as we assume that the practical requirements of the parental role preclude more than a handful of individuals taking on this role). This also seems to solve another common problem faced by causal accounts, mentioned in section 1: explaining how one may acquire, in virtue of one’s causal role, obligations which go beyond mere harm mitigation/compensation. The suggestion that these obligations are acquired by voluntary commitment to the parental role removes the onus from *causal* responsibility to explain how these obligations are acquired. Porter’s account also avoids this problem by grounding maker obligations (which include the obligation to parent the child if no other person takes on the parental role) not in causal responsibility for potential or actual harms, but in the action of choosing, for another, that they exist - “this obliges [one] to make existence, as best they can, a good choice.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Porter thus presents us with a “broadly Kantian” causal account of parental obligation, aiming to fill the explanatory gap between causing a person’s existence and owing them care; in particular, she aims to explain why it is that causing a child’s existence gives rise to more than simply the obligation to minimize neediness. However, maker obligations still fall short of parental obligations, and so the voluntary aspect of acquisition of parental obligation acquisition in Porter’s account gives rise to *Dilemma 1.* Either:

1. The requirement that acquisition of parental obligations requires voluntary acceptance of the parental role is an arbitrary limit on the reach of such obligations, and the account thus fails to fulfil *Limits* after all;
2. This requirement that acquisition of parental obligations requires voluntary acceptance of the parental role is not an arbitrary limit, because this voluntary acceptance plays a morally significant role in determining the reach of parental obligations. However, Porter’s account then collapses into voluntarism and is no longer a causal account of parental obligation.

Is voluntary commitment to the parental role an arbitrary limit on the reach of parental obligations? I would argue that, if we presuppose that parental obligations are incurred non-voluntarily (that is, by virtue of our actions, behaviours, or relations to others), then voluntary commitment to the parental role as the determining factor for acquisition of these obligations must be considered an arbitrary limit. Of course, Porter does not share this presupposition, and argues only that maker obligations are acquired non-voluntarily. However, if one’s causal responsibility for the existence of the child in question does not determine one’s acquisition of *parental* obligations, then it is questionable whether we can reasonably describe this (as Porter does) as a causal account of *parenthood*.

The *Identification* and *Demandingness* criteria also present problems for Porter’s account, giving rise to *Dilemma 2*. If we grant enough moral weight to causation to justify the claim that some individual acquires parental obligation by virtue of their causal role in a child’s existence (*Identification*) we will struggle to justify denying that heavy moral burdens are also acquired by non-parents by virtue of their causal roles (*Demandingness*). For Porter’s account to fulfil *Identification*, it must be the case that the account identifies someone as non-voluntarily acquiring parental obligations, by virtue of their causal role in producing the child. However, in order to meet *Demandingness* we need to avoid the conclusion that all makers have the obligation to parent – or indeed, any obligations weightier than the general duty of rescue owed by all adults to all children. Makers, according to Porter, have “the obligation to make the child’s existence a good one to the extent that [they] can” whether or not they take on the parental role.[[34]](#footnote-34) It is one thing to say that makers have an obligation to be *careful* in helping others to reproduce, perhaps by ensuring that children are not caused to exist where the risk of harm arising from that existence is too great. It is quite another to say that all makers acquire an obligation to parent the child by virtue of their contribution, even if the likelihood that they will have to fulfil that obligation themselves is small. In order to meet *Demandingness*, then, we must avoid the result that all makers acquire such weighty moral obligations by virtue of their causal roles. But it is unclear how we can then ensure that the account meets the *Identification* criterion. If the *pro tanto* obligation to take on the parental role need not actually be fulfilled by any given maker, we cannot say of any individual that they acquire parental obligations by virtue of their causal role in bringing a child into existence.

Porter does note that the *pro tanto* obligation to take on the role of parent, incurred by all makers, is defeasible. She argues that “other factors” make some makers more obliged to take on the parental role. In the case of gamete donation, for example, she claims that the gamete donor’s maker obligation will, under normal circumstances, be “outdone by the rights and commitments of the intended parents.”[[35]](#footnote-35) We may interpret this claim in two possible ways:

1. All makers incur weighty moral obligations to ensure the care of children they contribute to causing to exist, but these obligations are defeated when some individual takes on the parental role and accepts parental obligations.
2. Makers do not incur weighty moral obligations if other factors determining acquisition of parental obligation (for example, voluntary commitment or intention to parent) are present.

Interpretation (a) causes problems for both *Identification* and *Demandingness*, by simultaneously identifying no-one who incurs *parental* obligations by virtue of their causal role (since Porter denies that maker obligations constitute parental obligations), and ascribing weighty obligations, beyond mere duties of rescue, to all involved in causing a child’s existence. It is strongly counterintuitive to suggest that IVF doctors, matchmaking friends, and pushy grandparents might all incur the obligation to ensure the care of children they contribute to causing to exist, *even if* those obligations are quickly defeated by someone else’s acceptance of the parental role.

However, if we accept (b) then we run once more into the jaws of *Dilemma 1*: if Porter’s account can only fulfil all three criteria by appeal to non-causal factors (such as intentions or voluntary commitments) as determining the acquisition of parental obligations, then it is no longer a causal account of parental obligations. It simply collapses into a different kind of account, such as a voluntarist or social constructionist account. Further, in the scenario where other morally relevant factors are not present (for example, where no individuals intend or volunteer to raise the child), we return by default to (a) and the concomitant difficulties for *Identification* and *Demandingness*.

This analysis exposes not just difficulties for Porter’s account, but more fundamental problems for causal accounts of parental obligation in general. If we grant enough moral weight to causation to justify the claim that some individual acquires parental obligation by virtue of their causal role in a child’s existence (*Identification*) we will struggle to justify denying that heavy moral burdens are also acquired by non-parents by virtue of their causal roles (*Demandingness*). Further, without appeal to non-causal criteria, it is unclear how we can avoid the conclusion that many more people than seems reasonable acquire parental obligations (*Limits*). To solve this problem, we must appeal to further conditions (such as tacit acceptance of parental responsibility when engaging in sexual activity), at which point we cease to have a causal account of parental obligation. Considering these difficulties, it seems that a purely causal account of parental obligation will inevitably be ‘leaky’: in attempting to plug one gap, we will create a new hole.

Where, then, should we go from here? The widespread belief that causal responsibility is relevant to moral responsibility seems to justify the view that causation is relevant to parental responsibility. However, the above analysis demonstrates that explaining parental obligation by reference to causal roles *alone* will produce unwanted results, one way or another.[[36]](#footnote-36)

**4. Conclusions: A lost cause**

The above discussion strongly indicates that a causal account of parental obligations is unlikely to succeed if we wish to maintain certain presuppositions about parenthood (in particular, that parents’ obligations to their children extend significantly beyond the responsibility to compensate for and/or mitigate harm; that they include the obligation to nurture those children within an intimate relationship; and that most individuals have minimal obligations to the children of others, even if they were involved in some way in the causal chain leading to their birth). These considerations suggest that the nature of parental obligations simply precludes our answering the *who* and *why* questions by appeal to the “common sense ethics” according to which causal responsibility for harm gives rise to the obligation to compensate for that harm. Even if we accept the presupposition that causing a person’s existence constitutes a harm, or exposes them to the risk of harm, the analyses I have given above demonstrate that a causal account cannot plausibly explain the acquisition of parental obligations, as long as we continue to understand these obligations in the way supposed here.

1. Ettinger, D. J. (2012). Genes, Gestation, and Social Norms. *Law and Philosophy* 31(3), 246; Archard, D. (2010). The Obligations and Responsibilities of Parenthood. In D. Benatar & D. Archard, *Procreation and Parenthood: The Ethics of Bearing and Rearing Children* (pp. 103-127). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brake, E. (2010). Willing Parents: A Voluntarist Account of Parental Role Obligations. In D. Benatar & D. Archard, *Procreation and Parenthood: The Ethics of Bearing and Rearing Children* (pp. 151-177). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press. 160; Velleman, J. D. (2008). The Gift of Life. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36(3), 258; Prusak, B. G. (2011). The Costs of Procreation. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 42(1), 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brake, op. cit. note 2, p.174. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Millum, J. (2008). How Do We Acquire Parental Responsibilities? *Social Theory and Practice* 34(1), 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Brake, op. cit. note 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It may be the case that non-voluntarily acquired obligations may be acquired only through *voluntary* actions, behaviours, etc. Several scholars have argued that rape is an instance in which the actions or relations ordinarily giving rise to non-voluntarily acquired obligations, do *not* do so, because those actions or relations are not undertaken voluntarily. (See for example Weinberg, R. (2008) The Moral Complexity of Sperm Donation. *Bioethics* 22(3), 171; Blustein, J. (1997). Procreation and Parental Responsibility. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 28(2), pp. 81–82.). The existence of initial parental obligation is also compatible with accounts of how such obligation may be relinquished, passed on, or acquired by other means, for example through adoption or foster care. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Brake, E. (2005). Fatherhood and Child Support: Do Men Have a Right to Choose? *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 22(1), pp. 55–73. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Millum, op. cit. note 5, p.79. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid: 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is a matter of significant debate whether causing a person’s existence can be described as *harming* them, but for the purposes of this paper I will presuppose that causing a child to exist does, at a minimum, expose them to the risk of harm. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See for example: Porter, L. (2014). Why and How to Prefer a Causal Account of Parenthood. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 45(2), 182–202; Shiffrin, S. V. (1999). Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm. *Legal Theory.* 5(2), 117–48; Velleman, op. cit. note 2; Prusak, op. cit. note 2; Nelson, J. L. (1991). Parental Obligations and the Ethics of Surrogacy: A Causal Perspective. *Public Affairs Quarterly* 5(1), 49–61; Weinberg, op. cit. note 7, p.166–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nelson, op. cit. note 13, p.50. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Porter, op. cit. note 13, p.182. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Brake’s case for voluntarism rests on precisely this argument. If parental obligations were incurred as compensation for the harms of having placed the child in a situation of neediness without reasonable assurance of a minimally decent life, this compensation (“procreative costs”) would stretch only to “ensuring mere survival to independence and a minimally decent life. However, this is far from equivalent to parental obligations, at least as we generally construe them. (Brake op. cit. note 6, p.160). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For a discussion of the impact of the timing and manner of conception on personal identity, see Parfit, D. (1987). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 351–55. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Prusak, op. cit. note 2, p.62. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See for example: Weinberg, op. cit. note 9, p.68; Brake, op. cit. note 15, p.158; Porter, L. (2012). Adoption Is Not Abortion-Lite. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 29(1), 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Porter, op. cit. note 5, p. 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Bayne, T. (2003). Gamete Donation and Parental Responsibility. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20(1), pp. 85–86. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Porter, op. cit. note 13, p.68. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid: 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Nelson, op. cit. note 4, p.54. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This criterion may still be fulfilled by causal accounts which allow for the acquisition of parental obligation voluntarily (e.g. by adoption). If we accept that I can acquire the obligation to take you to the hospital just as well by promising to do so as by being the one to drop a bucket of bricks on your toes, then it strikes me as common sense to accept that, even if we believe that certain causal roles give rise to parental obligations, these obligations could also be acquired by voluntarily taking them on. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Porter, op. cit. note 10, pp.193-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid: 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Prusak, op. cit. note 2, p.69. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Weinberg, op. cit. note 20, p.167. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Brake, op. cit. note 18, p.161. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Fuscaldo, G. (2006). Genetic Ties: Are They Morally Binding? *Bioethics* 20(2), 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Blustein, op. cit. note 7, p.79. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The discussion of Porter’s account in the next section will illustrate in more detail what we might understand as an unreasonably demanding moral burden. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid: 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid: 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid: 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid: 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. It may of course be possible to produce a successful hybrid account of parental obligations appealing to both causal and non-causal factors as morally significant in determining the acquisition of these obligations. However, if that account depends on causal responsibility for a child’s existence as the moral driving force of parental obligation, it seems clear that it will suffer from the same problems outlined here. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)