

THE QUESTION

Say that you are genetically predisposed for a certain hereditary disease. Can it be morally wrong for you to have a child, given the risks of passing on that disease? Take a particular example:

**Huntington’s disease:** A hereditary disease marked by degeneration of the brain cells. Symptoms typically begin between the ages of 30 and 50, and starts out with jerky, involuntary movements that develop into a shuffling gate. Paranoid reactions are common, as is poverty of thought and impairment of attention, memory, etc. Eventually, walking becomes impossible, swallowing difficult, and dementia profound. The illness terminates in about 15 years.

If you have the gene associated with Huntington’s, there’s roughly a 50% chance of you passing it on to your children. Until recently, this was especially problematic, since most affected didn’t know whether they had the gene until well into child-bearing age. However, since 1993, the defective gene itself has been discovered, and it is now possible to test the potential parent as well as fetuses.

THE NUMBERS

What are the implications of this? For one thing, we can eliminate the risk of having children suffering from Huntington’s by aborting any fetus carrying the defective gene. This, of course, assumes that abortion is morally permissible. But assume that abortion is *impermissible*—then, having a child when the parent has the defective gene amounts to a 50% chance of passing it on. More specifically, here are the numbers:

	<i>Conceive</i>	<i>Don’t conceive</i>
<i>Abortion permissible</i>	0% chance of passing on the gene, given screening and abortion, if gene is inherited.	0% chance of passing on the gene, but also no children.
<i>Abortion not permissible</i>	<b>50% chance of passing on the gene.</b>	0% chance of passing on the gene, but also no children.

Here, we are concerned with the bottom left box. That is, if someone carrying the defective gene associated with Huntington’s were to go ahead and have a child, knowing full well that he or she has a 50% chance of passing it on to my child, is he or she doing something morally wrong?

HOW BAD IS HUNTINGTON’S?

The first thing we would want to know here is, how bad is Huntington’s? That is, how grave a scenario am I setting my potential child up for by the mere fact of conceiving him or her? Judging by the description above, it would seem that it’s a pretty bad one. Here are two takes on it, though:

*The Pessimistic View*

A child who inherits Huntington’s disease has a much greater than average chance of being subjected to severe and prolonged suffering.

*The Optimistic View*

Even if afflicted, someone with the defective gene will probably enjoy some thirty years of healthy life before symptoms appear.

On either view, it would seem that we would have to say that a life with Huntington’s is, in general, worse than one without Huntington’s. But is it bad enough to not make life worth living at all? What do you think?

## POTENTIAL CHILDREN

Now that we know a bit more about the risks associated with conception for parents suffering from Huntington's, and the quality of life for someone born with the affliction, let's return to our original question: Can it be morally wrong for you to have a child, if there's a risk that you'll be passing on a disease like Huntington's?

Here is what Purdy has to say:

“Of primary importance is the judgment that we ought to try to provide every child with something like a minimally satisfying life. I am not altogether sure how to best formulate this standard, but I want to clearly reject the view that it is morally permissible to conceive individuals so long as we do not expect them to be so miserable that they wish they were dead.”

She attributes this latter view to Derek Parfit. What would Parfit say about the present case? The following:

### Parfit's Position

Say that you go ahead and have a child, who then inherits your defective gene. There is no way in which you could have had that child *without* Huntington's. Think about it this way:

*Scenario 1.* Conception on date and time  $x \rightarrow$  Transmission of defective gene  $\rightarrow$  The eventual birth of child  $x$ .

*Scenario 2.* Conception on date and time  $y \rightarrow$  No transmission of defective gene  $\rightarrow$  The eventual birth of child  $y$ .

*Scenario 3.* Conception on date and time  $z \rightarrow$  No transmission of defective gene  $\rightarrow$  The eventual birth of child  $z$ .

...and so on.

Each scenario involves a combination of sperm and egg, and, hence, a different genetic make-up and, in effect, a different child. That is, any different *conception* would have resulted in a different *child*, so the only way for child  $x$  to exist is (unfortunately) with Huntington's. Consequently, you cannot do *this* child wrong by conceiving it—assuming that its situation would not be so bad that he or she would choose death over life.

Purdy takes Parfit's position to be absurd. Parents should try to ensure something like normal health for their children, and to conceive them in a manner that puts them at high risk for Huntington's is to ignore this duty of parenthood. It's not enough that conception guarantees a life that is better than non-existence.

## TWO ASPECTS OF MORALITY (REVISITED)

At the same time, it's not so obvious that Purdy is in disagreement with Parfit here. After all, remember that Parfit also argues that there are two aspects to morality:

- (a) Giving what we owe to *other human beings*.
- (b) Contributing to the good of the *world* by not realizing a worse scenario than necessary.

Only if we were to ignore (b) would it follow that there can be nothing morally wrong with ignoring the risk of passing on a hereditary disease. Why? As we've seen, each scenario involves a different child, which is why we can't hurt the *same* child—i.e., *this* child—by conceiving him or her in a way that transmits the defective gene. After all, that's the *only* way in which she can be conceived, and the only alternative is non-existence. This is Parfit's point.

But now consider (b). If we don't only owe things to other human beings, but also to the world, then it might still be the case that we should not conceive someone suffering from Huntington's, not because we're *hurting* him or her, but because we are realizing a worse scenario than necessary. This is what Purdy wants to say. What she fails to mention, however, is that she, thereby, is in full agreement with Parfit.