

REPRODUCTIVE AUTONOMY

Here is a fairly intuitive position:

It is up to the parents whether or not to reproduce. Indeed, this is why many of us, at least in the western world, take government policies such as the one-child policy in China to be an unwarranted invasion of liberty. Most of us feel that it simply is not for the government to decide whether or not people should have children.

But here is a question: Does this supposed right of the parents regarding *whether* to have children extent to *what kind* of children to have?

PARENTAL LIBERTY VS. CHILDRENS' RIGHTS

For example, do parents have the right to choose a child without *disability*? It is easy to frame such decision in terms of selfishness. However, it is probably a mistake to always brush off the considerations of parents that easily. After all, Some disabilities are so devastating that no one should be blamed for failing to cope.

Example: Julia Hollander's daughter Imogen was born with permanent damage to the cortex. As a result, she had recurrent fits, would never walk or talk, be able to smile, make eye contact or communicate in any other way than by crying, and had a life expectancy of twenty years.

Of course, this does not mean that the parent never have to take into account the rights of the child.

Coincidence of Interest

In some cases, the interests of the parents and child will probably *coincide*, such as in the following cases:

- Not smoking during pregnancy.
- Selecting an embryo.

Divergence of Interest

In other cases, we can imagine that the interests of the parents and the child will *diverge*, such as in the following:

- Aborting a fetus.
- Discarding an embryo.

How are we to think of the potential conflicts of interest in the latter case?

TWO DIMENSIONS TO REPRODUCTIVE ETHICS

According to Glover, there are two dimensions of reproductive ethics:

- (a) What we owe to our children.
- (b) Making the world a better place.

Now, think about the cases where the interest of parents and children potentially diverge. Unless we owe potential people life, then it seems that we are *not* doing anything wrong when discarding an embryo, as far as (a) is concerned. Similarly, many people would say, in the case of abortion. Nor are we doing anyone wrong by bringing a disabled child into the world. Again, the only option for that child is not a life without handicap but *non-existence*.

But what about (b), i.e., making the world a better place? Does that aspect of morality stop us from bringing disabled people into the world, since we are, thereby, creating a world wherein more people suffer than if we had brought other children into the world instead?

Consider two medical programs:

| | Description | Result |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Pregnancy Program: | Targets the risk in pregnancy associated with a particular disability, by treating those women that test positive. | Each year, 1,000 children who would have had the disability are born without it. |
| Conception Program: | Targets the risk at conception, by advising women intending to become pregnant to postpone pregnancy for at least two months if testing positive. | Each year, 1,000 women who would have had a child with the disability instead have a different child without the disability. |

Which program is preferable? Derek Parfit wants to claim that they're *equally* preferable. But he's making an important assumption, namely that, *if we opt for the conception program, those born with the disability do not know that they could have been spared, had we opted for the pregnancy program.*

However, Glover is not convinced by Parfit's argument. He points out that even if there will be no *actual* complaints from the people born with disabilities, since they are not *aware* of the fact that they could have been spared, there might still be *grounds* for reproach.

WHAT WE OWE TO OUR CHILDREN

But what would these grounds for complaint look like? That depends on what we owe our children in relation to reproduction. Here are three suggestions:

The Zero View

It is morally permissible to bring a child into the world, as long as it can be expected to live a life that is (at the very least) *worth living*.

Problem: This seems to be putting the bar far too low. Do we really not owe our children any more than an existence that is slightly above the bare minimum of an acceptable existence?

Perfectionism

It is morally permissible to bring a child into the world, as long as we do everything we can to assure that the child will have the *best* life possible.

Problem: How do we know what constitutes "the best life that possible" for the child? There seems to be a great risk that a variety of aspects to a good life may be overlooked in favor of a simplified account of happiness.

The Decent Chance View

It is morally permissible to bring a child into the world, as long as it has a decent chance of a good life, and cannot be taken to be exposed to any *serious risks*, just by virtue of being brought into the world.

This view seems to strike a nice balance between the previous two extreme views.

What would be the recommendations flowing from the Decent Chance View? In general, we can take it that parents' freedom to choose *whether* they want children or *what kind* of children they want can be constrained by the extent to which the children can be expected to have a decent chance to lead a good life. If that can't be guaranteed, then the parents' freedom does *not* overrule the rights of the child.

Here are a couple of scenarios:

Lesbian Parents: It does not seem that having lesbian parents would deprive one of a decent chance of a good life, nor put one in any serious risk, just by virtue of being brought into the world. So, on the Decent Chance View, there do not seem to be any good reasons to bar lesbian couples from having children.

Teenage Parents: Being a teenage parent is, undoubtedly, a hard thing. But it's not obvious—or, at the very least, it cannot be taken for granted—that it has to imply that the child in question will not have a decent chance of a good life, or is exposed to any serious risk just by virtue of being brought into the world.

Child Abusers: One case where it seems likely that the Decent Chance View would yield a negative recommendation is in the case of people with a history of child abuse requesting fertility treatment. Given that it's likely that the children in question will not have a decent chance of a good life, and might be exposed to serious risks, it might be morally appropriate to withhold such treatment.