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That Many of Us Should Not Parent

LISA CASSIDY

In liberal societies (where birth control is generally accepted and available), many people decide whether or not they wish to become parents. One key question in making this decision is, What kind of parent will I be? Parenting competence can be ranked from excellent to competent to poor. Cassidy argues that those who can foresee being poor parents, or even merely competent ones, should opt not to parent.

Until recently, childbirth has been something that
has for the most part happened to women,
rather than something being chosen by women.

—Virginia Held

To have a child is to undertake a solemn obligation; if the
mother shirks this duty subsequently, she commits an offense
against an existent, independent human being.

—Simone de Beauvoir

Feminists have historically argued that in order for women to be free they must be free of the demands of compulsory motherhood. This is a tremendous philosophical insight that can be traced back to early feminist pioneers. For example, the Victorian “voluntary motherhood” movement urged sexual restraint in order to save women’s health from the burdens of childbirth and child care. This movement was a perhaps prudish way for “women to take control of the most basic condition of their lives” at the end of the nineteenth century (DeBerg 1990, 36–37). In the beginnings of the next century, Margaret Sanger’s “free love” movement advanced contraceptives as key to women’s liberation

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(Schneir 1992). By the mid-twentieth century, Simone de Beauvoir declared in *The Second Sex*: “The relation between parent and offspring, like that between husband and wife, ought to be freely willed” (Beauvoir [1952] 1993, 549).

The idea that motherhood should not be biologically or culturally mandatory still has not been wholly embraced by today’s American society. For example, there are significant legal pressures compromising motherhood as a truly free choice. The state gives people who have children certain advantages in the form of tax breaks, though pressures such as that are more symbolic than substantive as pressures. More significant is the fact that the availability and acceptability of abortion has been steadily undermined ever since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. In addition, federal sex education funds in the public schools may only be used for abstinence-only programs. Young women, poor women, and women of color are especially susceptible to the well-documented legal and economic tides that wash away their reproductive freedom (see, for example, work in Tong 1984; Bordo 1993; Fineman and Karpin 1995; Roberts 1995).

In addition to the legal pressures to procreate, long-held religious beliefs contradict the feminist position that motherhood is not a divine command for all women. By the 1970s, many feminists had identified and rejected the sexism present in the symbolic and material practices of many organized religions (Gross 1996). Feminists in this country have especially criticized the Catholic Church, which explicitly rejects all contraceptive methods, but does endorse abstinence and the rhythm method for married couples (for example, Daly 1985). Barbara Andolsen has concluded that even Catholic women “are asserting that an ability to control their fertility is essential to women’s equal participation in other aspects of communal life” and that “procreation is no longer an unambiguous good, if it ever was” (1996, 225–26).

There is also evidence that cultural pressures of pronatalism and patriarchy, in addition to legal and religious opposition to reproductive choice mentioned above, contradict feminism. Our pronatalist culture tells women that having children is the only way to become a real woman, a fulfilled person, a true adult, or a valued citizen (Gimenez 1984). Mandy Ireland has written: “Rather than viewing the woman who is not a mother as missing something, let us look instead for what is absent from our usual conceptions of womanhood. Only when the assumption that all girls must become mothers to fulfill female adulthood is challenged will a woman’s destiny truly be her own” (1993, 1). The existence of pronatalist pressures can compromise women’s ability to make truly autonomous decisions about having children (Meyers 2001). Beginning in the 1970s, we saw the emergence of the “child-free” movement to revolt against our child-centered culture (for example, essays in Peck and Senderowitz 1974).

Interestingly, this pronatalism pressure is not exerted uniformly across American subcultures. Indeed, it is telling that the very feminist pioneer who revolutionized women’s lives by fighting for contraception, Margaret Sanger,

was in her later life a proponent of the unarguably racist eugenics movement. Poor women and ethnic minority women historically have been torn between pressure to procreate and pressure to work. As Dorothy Roberts has written, “white middle-class women concern themselves mainly with laws restricting choices otherwise available to them. Poor women of color, however, remain primarily concerned with the material conditions of poverty and oppression restricting their choices” (1995, 242). For example, while white feminists in the 1970s demanded access to employment in the public sphere as a way to escape the demands of motherhood, black women (who historically had already been working outside the home) might have warmed to more time to at home (hooks 1984). I conclude that while the dominant culture in the United States is pronatalist, the pronatalist ethos does not impact every group the same way.

In this complex setting, where belief in individual freedom conflicts with long-held patriarchal demands for women, many of us choose whether we want to become parents. When I say “many,” I mean those people who live in a liberal society, such as the United States, where birth control is generally available and accepted.¹ Those of us who live in places where the options of birth control or abstinence from heterosexual sex hardly exist (because of legal, religious, cultural, or economic pressures) can certainly “choose” to procreate, in the sense of earnestly desiring to become parents, timing sex to coordinate with maximum fertility, adopting children when infertility is an obstacle, and so on. But if one lives in such a restrictive society that motherhood is nearly a forgone conclusion for almost all women, then it would seem strange to say that such women enjoy the kind of reproductive choice that most American women do.²

The slogan that might best describe the choice to become a mother in American society could be “free choice under pressure” (Peter Kramer, quoted in Bordo 1997, 44). Freedom of choice derives from the availability and acceptability of birth control and the option to refrain entirely from the heterosexual sex that might result in children. Pressures include the legal, religious, and culturally pronatalist emphases on having children. I think it is fair to say that since most American women do have children they have done so by making a free choice to parent under these well-documented pressures. Even though such pressures may subject many of us to emotional strain, it would be wrong to say the very existence of such social pressures wholly co-opts every reproductive we choice we make. Of course, this situation falls well short of the feminist vision to make motherhood truly free.³

WHAT KIND OF PARENT WILL I BE?

Though feminists have rightly concentrated on how women’s liberation is connected to eliminating compulsory motherhood, one issue that has gotten less attention in feminist literature is the ethical implication of procreation from

a child's perspective.⁴ Here, I argue that in a liberal society (where people can decide whether they wish to parent) becoming a parent is an ethical decision of paramount importance to one's potential children.

Feminist literature in large part focuses on the decision to parent as one that impacts the emotional, physical, economic, symbolic, and political conditions of women's lives. But while such analyses are often compelling on their own, they seem incomplete because there is another person (or potential person, in the case of not-yet-existent children) in that parental dyad. It is a curious conceit that of all the literature on becoming mothers, feminists have rarely considered the impact of motherhood on one's children. For example, the landmark collection of essays entitled *Mothering: Essay in Feminist Theory* (1984) is still fresh and exciting over twenty years after it was first published. However, a conspicuous omission is that in none of the essays do we find sustained analysis of how parenting impacts children. This speaks to a real oversight in feminist analyses of parenting, which has only been somewhat corrected in the intervening twenty years (for comparison, see Nelson 1997).

Much of the existing feminist literature answers the question: How will parenting impact me (or us as women)? While this is undoubtedly an important question, the too-often unasked question in feminist theory is, How will my parenting impact my child? The closest sustained discussion of the kind of moral reasoning I am speaking about within feminist theory occurs in Virginia Held's remarkably clear 1993 book *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics*. She wrote:

When women have more control over whether or not to give birth, and we have, as many of us now do, almost full control, the appropriateness of the questions [of what to live and die for] is even more pronounced. Any woman can ask herself: Why should I give birth? What should I create a child for? To what end should I give birth? In giving birth, to what shall I be giving human expression? . . . That women can give birth for reasons should make clear how very unlike a natural, biological event of human birth is. (116–17)

This provocative passage should be read in the context of her larger argument about the transformative possibilities of feminism. But notice Held's list of questions bears some resemblance to the question I argued we should ask ourselves when deciding to have children: How will my parenting impact my child? The resemblance in these questions is superficial. Held's point is that when women can choose otherwise we have to have reasons for giving birth. But her questions are directed at women themselves as agents and potential birth-givers, rather than directed at children or children's welfare. I consider Held here because her work on the importance of choice in birth-giving is illuminating, but also

because her work typifies the woman-centered, rather than child-centered, analyses of mothering that feminism has offered so far.

The very fact that parenting is an option makes the decision even more weighty and deserving of our full attention—aside from the already well-trod issue of what parenting does for or against women. First, very young children are particularly vulnerable before their parents, as parents are charged with providing for children's physical well-being, education, and moral development (Card 1996). Second, the vulnerability of young children to their parents is heightened when we remind ourselves that children's dependency makes them (for the most part) unable to seek alternatives to their parents, even if children did perceive such a need. Third, the lifelong emotional interdependence of most children with their parents means that even when (or if) one's children are able to make their own way in the world, the parent-child relationship usually continues (Robinson et al. 1997). Even if the relationship itself does not endure, the parent's influence on her child's personality and outlook certainly does. Finally, should a parent herself become in need of care (due to old age, for example) children are presumably obligated to provide at least some form of care for their parents. Ethical issues of dependency, power, vulnerability, and care are interwoven throughout the entire life span of the parent-child relationship (Kittay 1999).

To say that deciding whether to become a parent is an ethical decision is not to say that everyone will engage in moral reasoning before they procreate. Indeed, some of us may owe our very existence to our parents' unplanned passions! The normative claim I am making is that we as individuals ought to engage in moral reasoning to make the parenting decision, as parenting has paramount significance to our potential children. This moral reasoning should also include one's potential parenting partners. Moral reasoning need not exclusively be characterized as "self-examination"; moral reasoning here might weigh the interests or opinions of one's family, friends, therapists, social workers, clergy, or other members of support networks. Because of the ethical significance of bringing children into the world (or adopting already existing children to be one's own) one major consideration in this moral reasoning should be one's foreseeable parenting competence. It is not enough to ask: How will parenting affect my other important commitments, or people's perceptions of me, or society's expectations for me? Moral reasoning about procreation should also feature this question: What kind of parent will I be—an excellent parent, a merely competent parent, or an incompetent parent? This latter question is, I argue, just as important as the former one to which feminists have already turned their attention.

The story of my friend M. is instructive on how moral reasoning can lead one to make decisions about whether or not to become a parent. M. grew up in a middle class Jewish household in Long Island in the 1970s and 1980s. Her

parents were emotionally and physically abusive to M. and her siblings; they were domineering, exacting, controlling, and punishing. By the time M. was in college, she saw how damaging her relationship with her parents was and boldly struck out on her own, eventually severing most of the relationships with her siblings as well because those siblings would (against M.'s wishes) alert their parents to M.'s whereabouts. Through psychotherapy and by forming healthier relationships with friends and lovers, M. seemed to have come through her traumatic childhood—until one incident gave her the insight needed to examine her potential as a parent.

In graduate school, M. got a puppy. While M. read up on the correct techniques to train the dog, she would often lose control, screaming at the dog, rubbing its nose in its own feces, painfully holding it by its tail as punishment, and hitting it with newspapers. Such abusive behavior toward the helpless puppy distressed M. and sent her back into therapy, where she processed her experience training the puppy as replicating her experience of being poorly parented. Fortunately, M. eventually learned to control her worst impulses toward the dog, but she also learned something about herself: that there was a high likelihood she could not be a competent parent. Armed with this insight, M. was able to envision a life for herself that would be satisfying for her and would also not damage her potential children—because she decided never to have children.

I hope that few of us would have to have such traumatic childhoods in order to reach an answer to the question: What kind of parent will I be? M.'s case is dramatic because it illustrates how ethical decisions about whether or not to parent can be made. M. became convinced that she would indeed be a poor parent and the risk of replicating her childhood on someone else was too great. While she did go on to become a successful pet-owner, she did not interpret this as enough evidence to reverse her decision. When she concluded that her parenting would be far short of adequate, she was obliged to protect her potential children by not exposing them to her poor parenting.

THAT MANY OF US SHOULD NOT PARENT

People in a relatively liberal and free society have to decide whether they will become parents. Feminists have convincingly argued that motherhood as an individual activity or as a social institution has sometimes been disadvantageous for women. Yet feminists have given scant attention to how the quality of our parenting affects children, and what duties we must respect toward our potential children once we recognize the import of parenting quality. The decision to have children is fraught with tremendous moral weight because of children's vulnerability before, dependence on, and lasting influence from their parents. Since this is one of the most important ethical decisions we can make, we ought to engage in some moral reasoning to make it.

I want to make the case for two claims here, only the second of which I anticipate will be controversial:

Claim A: Those people who anticipate being incompetent parents should not parent.

Claim B: Those people who anticipate being averagely competent parents should not parent.

The upshot of this is that those of us who can predict being less-than-excellent parents should decide against parenting entirely. In fact, many of us should not have children, since I anticipate that many of us will not be excellent at parenting.

Before going on to develop claims A and B, it may be helpful to compare how feminists (in context of bioethics) have already analyzed what would-be parents owe their prospective children. Laura Purdy has proposed that people who will pass on Huntington's disease should elect not to have biological children (Purdy 1996). Those offspring with the Huntington's gene, she argued, will probably not lead a "minimally satisfying life" because of the distress that living under such a death sentence brings (1996, 45). This same argument also applies to having children who could be disabled, a point of disagreement between Purdy and Adrienne Asch. Asch argued that it is wrong to abort children that one knows will be disabled (Asch 1989). Many of the problems people with disabilities face, she posited, are remediable through social change, and future parents of these children should recognize the extent to which 'disability' is a social construct and not fall prey to stereotypes. Though it is not immoral, according to Asch, to refrain from conceiving children one knows will be disabled, she voiced "social" objections to such a program (1989, 321). Purdy, on the other hand, responded that "people are better off without disease or special limitations, and that this interest is sufficiently compelling in some cases to justify the judgment that reproducing would be wrong" (1996, 59).

The debate between Purdy and Asch is relevant here because both authors consider under what circumstances it is appropriate to have children. My own view is close to Purdy's—at least claim A is—but Asch's work also warrants attention. Asch's position reminds us that parental (and societal) attitudes toward the disabled greatly impact the lives and living conditions of the disabled. To the extent that Asch urges potential parents of disabled children to improve their attitudes regarding disability, she argues for improved parenting skills. I applaud Asch's emphasis on parenting as important for a child's future. Yet I think Purdy is correct in arguing that life without disease or impairment is better than life with them. Purdy's view stresses that potential parents have obligations to their would-be children to provide (insofar as it is possible) conditions for a minimally satisfying life. Purdy's stance is similar to mine in that we both believe that concern for the future welfare of children should sometimes override the desire to parent.

Though I suspect many people would agree with claim A (those people who anticipate being incompetent parents should not procreate) without much hesitation, it is useful to develop it in full, beginning with what marks parental incompetence. Sara Ruddick has outlined just what it is that mothers do in administering primary care to their children. She argued that good mothers first preserve their children by meeting their basic needs, then nurture them by meeting their psychological and emotional needs, and finally prepare them for inclusion in the social world in which they live (1989). Each of these three activities is more abstract and less universal than the one before, as Ruddick conceived them. Preservation, thus, is the first and most fundamental aim of mothering.

Incompetent parents are the ones who are physically or emotionally abusive to their children, and hence fail to preserve their lives. For example, recently in New Jersey two parents, Raymond and Vanessa Jackson, were arrested for starving their children; one of who, a nineteen-year-old boy, was found to weigh just forty-five pounds (Gohlke 2004). If these allegations of starvation are true, it is not controversial to say that the parents of these boys were totally and harmfully incompetent parents because they did not uphold the basic responsibility to preserve their children.

Claim A would dictate that those of us who anticipate parenting as the Jacksons allegedly did should take care not to become parents. Having engaged in moral reasoning on the subject, and performed some measure of self-examination, people who anticipate abusing their children have a duty not to have children at all. No matter what reasonable moral outlook one uses (for example, rights-based, utilitarian, or care), we have a duty not to harm others—particularly the weak who depend on us. The risks of being parented by an incompetent parent are palpable. In Purdy's terms, children whose parents are totally incompetent run a great risk of not having an even minimally satisfying life. Claim A holds that such risks must be avoided. It is true that this will mean some potential parents are morally obliged to give up their procreative plans, and it is no small thing to ask each other to give up an important project, such as being a parent. Yet demanding that predictably incompetent parents not have children is reasonable because of the damage they would inflict on their children's lives is so great.

Now we turn to the stronger claim B, that those who will be averagely competent parents should elect not to have children. Claim B holds that merely being a competent parent is insufficient. The backbone of this claim is the conviction that parenting is just too important to do in a way that is just good enough. I am not saying potential parents have duties to ensure their children's lives are maximally satisfying, so claim B is not an extension of Purdy's proposal. Rather, claim B takes the different line that all things considered, excellent parenting is markedly preferable to average parenting.

Some may immediately worry that the high standard of claim B robs many of us of procreative choice, a core feminist belief. Feminism's focus on choice is

philosophically and strategically justified, but exclusively emphasizing freedom has a troubling side effect. Stressing procreative freedom could obscure procreative responsibilities. As I already argued, we ought to decide for ourselves if we should have children, but this cannot be a complete moral account, for we need some reckoning with procreative responsibilities to future children. Accepting claim B puts feminists in dangerous territory because B demands that potential parents—women—shelf their own plans out of concern for their children who do not even exist yet. This may sound identical to a patriarchal agenda. Nevertheless, a balanced treatment should recognize the obligations to care *as best possible* for those beings who will be the results of and “innocent bystanders” to procreative choices: our children.

Inspired by care ethics, I argue that we have special obligations to our potential children, especially. The special obligation stems from our close and partial preference to take care of our own children before others (see Held 1993, 74). We are obliged to our future children especially because of the enduring power and influence we will have over their futures. Putting these two together, we find that we should do more for our possible children than love them and not abuse them (or be “capably and well intentioned,” as in Baylis and Downie 1997). Being an excellent parent goes beyond the negative duty not to harm; we have a positive duty to “do right” by our children. I think this obligation involves more than parenting in an averagely competent way. We ought to set higher expectations for parenting. If claim B sounds like it asks much of us, it does.

Surely, demarcating a merely competent parent, the middle ground between incompetent and excellent, is difficult. At an absolute minimum, merely competent parents preserve, nurture, and include their children (Ruddick 1989) in acceptable, though not outstanding, ways. Alas, I suspect many of us do or would fall into this category. Parents who are just competent do not regularly beat their children, though perhaps they lose their tempers and spank them. Competent parents do not psychologically torment their children, but they may be smothering, or selfish, or cold, or overly demanding, or uninterested, or have any other of those utterly mundane qualities that would make someone a less than ideal parent. Merely competent parents get the job done (the job of caring for and loving their children, of preserving, nurturing, and including their children) but not in an exemplary way.

Claim B is not that merely competent parents will cause direct harm to children or prevent their children from having minimally satisfying lives. The position is that, *ceteris paribus*, it is better to be parented by someone who is an excellent parent than someone who is not. Recognition of this truth should create in us a sense of obligation to do right by one’s potential children. Doing right can include not parenting at all if one will fall short of the mark. People always say that children are resilient, and in my experience this is true. (Why do adults repeat this so often? Is it reassurance that our mistakes are not as grave

as we fear?) Yet no one can be assured that a particular child will be resilient enough to bounce back from his particular parents' average parenting skills. And since that is the case is it not best to avoid risking a fragile child arriving into the arms of her merely competent parents?

I hope we all know someone who is an excellent parent, even if we ourselves were not lucky enough to be parented by them. Excellent parents truly preserve, nurture, and include their children in extraordinary ways. They are patient, giving, accessible, calm, fun, compassionate, strong, and otherwise have many, many other qualities that we all wish we had. To be parented excellently is to be fortunate. In an ideal moral world, all children would receive excellent parenting.

Occupying the role of parent may be like occupying other roles, such as friend, spouse, mentor, and lover. But there is one unalterable difference between parenting and other human relationships or endeavors that makes parenting so unique, and hence justifies the normative demand for excellence in parenting: very young children are utterly vulnerable before and dependent upon their parents. In usual circumstances, this vulnerability wanes as children mature, but the dependency relation never completely abates, although it does change. This raises the stakes for everyone involved, but most especially for children. A child's life is utterly infused with his parents' parenting skills, both their aptitudes as well as their inadequacies. Being someone's parent is such an important endeavor that it is too important to do badly, or even to do just adequately. If, upon engaging in moral reflection, one foresees parenting in a merely average way, the right ethical decision will be to refrain from parenting entirely. Parenting simply is not the kind of thing that morally speaking should allow for dabblers—those well-meaning, but rarely excellent “amateur” parents. Parenting should be for extraordinary people for whom parenting is a true vocation.

TEN OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

(1) *We cannot accurately predict the quality of our parenting in advance. People misjudge their skills and talents, for good or ill, all the time. Whether or not one will parent well is especially hard to predict, as it is not a static experience, but one shaped by another person—the child. So no one can say for sure ahead of time who will be an excellent parent. Should we expect people to scuttle their parenting plans based on a prediction of mere parental competence or even incompetence?*

Nonetheless, I maintain that there is reason to believe that introspective and informed moral reasoning can yield acceptably accurate results simply from the fact that in other arenas of life we regularly do make predictions of just this sort. For example, when choosing which courses to take in college, I predicted (alas, with too much accuracy!) that I would perform poorly in a required physics

class. Those of us who can reckon with ourselves can say with some authority how successful we will be in a certain endeavor, given our knowledge of our natural talents, past experiences, and preferred interests.

If the objection maintains that there can be no epistemic certainty about the quality of one's future parenting, I can agree and acknowledge that certainty is indeed hard to come by, especially because parenting necessarily involves a relationship with another whose personality will be incalculably unique. But to say that after some moral reasoning we still cannot predict with *any* accuracy how well we will parent surely dismisses much of our epistemic resources. It may be true that I could surprise myself and turn out to be a better parent than I thought, but I would have taken an enormous risk with that child's life. I urge we must err on the side of caution. We should be risk-averse in this way, especially as we have an obligation do what is right by our children.

(2) *This is just a new spin on an old racist, classist program. You are trying to get women who are young, poor, or members of ethnic minorities to stop having children because they are not members of ruling classes. Isn't this just a revival of eugenics?*

If this objection were supportable it would be serious indeed. Fortunately for me, I see no merit to it. There is nothing in my argument that would suggest that members of the most socially disadvantaged groups would not be excellent parents. Specifically, there is no mention here of a minimum salary that one must earn to be an excellent parent. It would also be the height of discrimination to say that only suburban, white, married, heterosexual, minivan driving couples can be excellent parents. My argument here is a moral one, not an exclusionary political one.

(3) *Even if this argument isn't exactly eugenics, it definitely contains the biases of a middle-class, white, American woman and so fails to have a global perspective. How can anyone know what parental excellence really is when the standards might vary widely around the world?*

Since I am a middle-class, white, American woman that is inevitably my perspective. And this objection has more to it than objection 2. Feminism has had built into it the class biases of the white and affluent; partly, this criticism stems from the historical tensions between white and nonwhite women. Similarly, this objection charges that my own class experiences (and biases) have slipped into my work. I certainly do write from my own experiences, which are not ahistorical or universal. And it has been documented that behaviors that mark parental competence in one society might be considered parental abuse and incompetence by another (Baylis and Downie 1997).

Following Sara Ruddick (1989), preservation, nurturance, and inclusion were offered here as the benchmarks of competence and beginnings of excellence. One can reasonably make the case that these benchmarks are fairly

cross-cultural because they have remained so general. That is, I have not specified the content of preservation, nurturance, or inclusion beyond what Ruddick has outlined. Consider this news item: lately I was fascinated to learn that most children around the world are potty-trained by age two, whereas most Americans would consider attempting to potty-train a six-month-old infant quite harmful (Kelley 2005). So, while in general it is important for a child's development that she eventually have control over her bodily waste (assuming she is physically capable of that) when and how this ought to be achieved are cultural variables. This example illustrates how there can be variety in what counts as preservation, nurturance, and inclusion among different societies. However, the existence of such differences does not preclude using the three general parenting concepts as standards for competence and then excellence.

In a similar vein, Laura Purdy has considered children's needs in the course of her refutation of the children's liberation movement (1992). Purdy offered, contra the liberationist position, that in general adults have "an adequate store of background knowledge about human psychology and the world, together with the requisite reasoning capacity" that allows most people to intelligently judge what is in their children's best interests (43). It is in a child's interests to develop "enabling virtues" (for example, hard work or self-control) that will allow her to develop into an adult capable of achieving her goals, thus leading a satisfying life (45). Ideally, parents will instill these enabling virtues in their children. Purdy continued on to defend the enabling virtues against the objection that such virtues are merely a repackaging of suspect "middle-class values," such as keeping up with the Joneses (46).

I will not compare Purdy's cultivation of enabling virtues with Ruddick's mothering activities though it would be an interesting digression. I only want to point out Purdy's response to the charge that self-control and the like are just "bourgeois values." She held that it is a mistake to associate values such as self-control and hard work with a certain social class or lifestyle. Hard work could enable socially progressive goals just as well as keeping up with the Joneses. Similarly, preserving, nurturing, and including children excellently are standards just as useful for Americans as they are for, say, Argentineans.

(4) There are plenty of children already in existence who are in need of parents. Your argument would discourage people from adoption or foster parenthood. How can you justify dissuading people from parenthood when so many already existing children need homes?

Any argument that specifically discourages foster care or adoption would of course be a poor one. I do not think what I have said here could be construed as discouraging adoption or foster care per se, but my claims do attempt to dissuade people from becoming parents if they will be less than excellent ones.

In a strict sense then, I would reduce the number of people who parent (either by biological or adoptive means).

However, push may come to shove. Is it better for a child to have no permanent parents at all or to have permanent parents whose parenting skills are average or poor? This is an empirical question about the psychology of displaced children, one to which I do not have the answer.

(5) This argument plays fast and loose with metaphysics. To say that we are obliged to nonexistent children takes a metaphysical leap of caring for entities that do not exist by ensuring those entities' nonexistence. How can you account for these metaphysical mysteries?

While it appears strange, we do in fact talk and act as if we have ethical responsibilities to nonexistent entities all the time. For example, conservationists urge we practice ecological restraint because of our obligations to ensure that people many generations from now will have adequate resources. Another equally prosaic example is one generation bequeathing a financial legacy to grandchildren that are still unborn. Often enough we do find ourselves behaving as if we have real and pressing duties to those people who do not exist, regardless of the seemingly sticky metaphysics.

(6) If people really believed this argument, it would result in fewer people having children since many people would decide against it. Granted it might be a better world if all parents were excellent, but at least Claim B is taking things too far. Many potential people would miss out on life even if that life would involve being raised by averagely competent parents. It's too pessimistic to say that no life at all is better than life with a less-than-excellent parent. How can this judgment be justified?

This objection is reminiscent of arguments, sometimes used in the context of bioethics, which pose that potential human life ought to be valued. Potentiality arguments often work by positing that denying or destroying potential human life is wrong because this potentiality ought to be valued (for any number of reasons).

But potentiality arguments are flawed in that they assume that the nonexistent people, whose potential existence has not been actualized, can be harmed simply by their failure to be brought into existence. This can be easily disputed. Potentiality arguments appeal because we tend to imagine *ourselves* as nonexistent (for example, the loved ones we would miss, the sunsets we would never see!) though, obviously, if we never existed at all we would not miss *our* lives. In short, the potential people who were never conceived for the reasons I have posed here cannot be harmed by their nonexistence. Nonexistence itself is not a harm.

(7) *The self-sacrificing mother is someone who denies her own personal fulfillment for the sake of her children. The myth that women need to sacrifice themselves in order to be good mothers has caused enough damage. Now you seem to be revising it with a twist—the self-sacrificing non-mother who has sacrificed having children for the children’s sake. Doesn’t this tap into dubious and punishing expectations of what makes a “good” woman or a “good” mother?*

In all, we can agree the myth of the all-powerful “good” mother is bad news for women. Yet notice that my arguments are carefully gender neutral. I direct my work to people who are contemplating parenthood, not women specifically. So, strictly speaking, the objection would have to be altered to speak to the myth of the “good” parent.

I can still, however, speak to the heart of this objection that we should not have to sacrifice our own personal desires. We all agree that moral life simply is not about achieving one’s own desires and maximizing one’s own good *at the expense of others*. We expect people to make sacrifices, cancel plans, revise goals, and the like simply because we cannot always get what we want without a cost to others. To impose one’s poor or average parenting on a child simply because one wishes to parent is untoward. Being a member of a moral community and caring for others (including one’s potential children) may involve certain sacrifices.

That being said, the belief that refraining from parenting is an undue sacrifice is a belief imbued with our culture’s pronatalist values. Our society is one in which “real” families are the ones that have children in them, and people childless by choice are perceived as deviant (Meyers 2001; Ireland 1993). But, of course, people who morally decide against children for the reasons I have outlined should celebrate their child-free lives by living richly.

(8) *Why does being an excellent parent matter so much, anyway? The fact is that we could comparatively rate all sorts of human activities. Just because I am an average ice-skater that by itself doesn’t mean I shouldn’t bother taking a spin on the ice, does it?*

Being an average or poor ice-skater (or gardener, or punk-rock guitarist, or lawyer, or aunt, or any number of roles) is fundamentally unlike being an average or poor parent. The most glaring difference is the inestimable power and influence one has over the life of another human being. While some occupations (for example, doctor or airplane pilot) have power over others’ lives this power is different from parental power in that children are wholly and unalterably dependent on their parents for at least part of their lives. Parents are responsible for the physical and emotional well-being of their children, and this weighty responsibility makes the role of parent unlike other roles. If one fails at parenting the stakes are simply higher because of the lasting impact that failure will have on someone else’s life. Falling on the ice, singing off-key, or even

misdiagnosing a patient could be serious indeed, and excellence does matter in these enterprises. But it does not matter as much as it does in parenting.

(9) *Even if parenting is unlike ice-skating, you still assume that being an excellent parent is the most important thing. But we can admit that not all children are excellent—some are patient, while others are snappish, some are funny, while others are boring. Since children as a class are not uniformly excellent, why should we expect parents to be?*

It is certainly true that children are no different from adults in this respect. People can range from excellence to incompetence in any role, task, or skill. The objection poses that since children are not excellent parents need not be so. Yet this objection hinges on ambiguous use of the term “children.” A child is not just a young human, who, of course, might be excellent, average, or poor at just about anything. Being a child also involves occupying the role of someone who is parented, which any given child’s parent might perform anywhere from excellently to poorly. This objection does not acknowledge these two different senses of “children.” The proper analogies then must be: adults to children, and parents to children who are parented.

If it is true that not all parents do an excellent job at parenting, then surely it is just as true that not all children do an excellent job of being parented. What can we deduce from this (more precisely formulated) observation? Not too much. Without leaning too heavily on sentimentality, it makes sense to say that children are the innocent participants in the parent-child relationship, as the children have no responsibility for becoming children to their parents. Moreover, we do not normally say that young children are moral agents fully accountable for their failings. These facts indicate to me that even if children sometimes fail in their roles as those being parented the children themselves bear no real responsibility for it. We should not punish children for being less than excellent by affording them similarly equipped parents.

(10) *This argument is just the first step in inviting the state into our bedrooms. There is not much distance between the normative argument that many of us should not have children to the political enforcement of that argument. Are you saying the state should judge who gets to have kids?*

The suggestion that parents should have to earn licenses was provocatively posed by Hugh LaFollette (1980). Briefly, his view was that since our society licenses all manner of activities that potentially pose great harm to others (for example, driving a motor vehicle or practicing medicine), and parents potentially pose great physical harm to their children, parents ought to earn parental licenses. Thus parenting is not an unlimited right, but a privilege that should not be extended to all. “The purpose of licensing is to prevent serious harm to children. Moreover, the prior restraint required by licensing would not be

terribly onerous for many people" (1980, 189). There are overlaps between his position and mine. Certainly, we both believe that parenting is not a casual endeavor, that some standards of competence must be enforced. I am not sure it would be a bad thing if parents had to be licensed. As Lafollette's essay implies, the state takes greater steps to ensure that we have quality hairdressers than quality parents.

But there are great differences between our arguments. Mine is a normative one about who ought to parent. I appeal to our moral sense. Lafollette's argument is a legalistic one about the state's legitimate role in determining who ought to have permission to parent. He appealed to the paternalism of positive law; the state can determine better than we who ought to parent. Arguably, his position has the advantage of not relying on our better moral judgment, but leaves that judgment to the state. Conversely, my point of view has the advantage of leaving parenting decisions up to potential parents themselves. Another significant difference is my focus on being an excellent parent. Lafollette was content to have the state weed out the incompetent parents, just as it weeds out incompetent drivers by refusing them automotive licenses—a proposition basically identical to my claim A, but not claim B. He worried: "We simply do not have the knowledge, and it is unlikely that we could ever obtain the knowledge, that would enable us to distinguish adequate from inadequate parents" (1980, 190), although he was arguing that we can with some reliability distinguish wholly inadequate. Contra Lafollette, I believe we can have good standards for evaluating the quality of parenting. Whether my view or Lafollette's is better on this point will depend on whether one judges it possible to demarcate who will be an excellent parent from a mere competent one, in advance of the experience.

NOTES

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1. Even as I state this, I acknowledge that the United States is, of course, not a uniform cultural setting. For example, women who belong to very religious subcultures within the United States probably do not "choose" to become mothers in the same way other American women might.

2. Virginia Held considered the possibility that women might kill themselves or their newborns rather than have children in unhappy circumstances—so weighty is the responsibility of having child (1989 and 1993). My claim will be less radical; it is merely that the choice to parent is monumental and requires moral deliberation, particularly for the sake of one's future children.

3. 'Mother' itself is a problematic category, in addition to the aforementioned matrix of pressures in which our choices to mother are made. Feminist proposals to revise, expand, or redefine what counts as motherhood hold liberatory possibilities (hooks 1984; Collins 1991; Rothman 1989), but here I only address parenting as we conventionally understand it.

4. While many feminists have tried to shift the language of motherhood to include "mothering" or "caretaking" as sex-neutral descriptions of being a primary caregiver (discussed in Peterson 1984), I will often instead refer simply to being a "parent," one who is legally and morally charged with the upbringing of his or her child. I am not addressing just those who are in the mother-role, but all those people, "parents," who we say are legally and morally obligated to their children in ways that godmothers, uncles, day-care providers, and othermothers are not.

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