Procreation and Projects

Elizabeth Brake denies that adoption is obligatory

Like many environmentally conscious people, I take steps to reduce my toll on the earth's resources. I conserve energy; I recycle; I bike instead of driving when I can. I take such steps because I believe it is wrong to use the earth's resources at a rate that will not leave enough for future generations to survive, let alone have as good a chance at a decent life as I did – or, indeed, at a rate that will threaten our own fragile arrangements with the hot desert here in Phoenix in the not-too-distant future.

For this reason, I resist – because I think I *ought* to – conveniences that would increase my consumption or pollution by 5 per cent or 10 per cent or more – using a clothes dryer, turning the thermostat down a few more degrees, plastic grocery bags. And yet, were I to procreate, I would effectively double my lifetime toll on the earth's resources. Were the child to later procreate, this toll would be compounded. (True, I would not myself be the one consuming; but my choice would directly and knowingly create a source of the consumption and pollution.) If I *ought* to resist increasing my consumption and pollution by even 5 or 10 per cent, how can it be permissible effectively to double my consumption by procreating?

Add to this another consideration. There are tens or hundreds of thousands of children waiting to be adopted domestically and internationally right at this moment. I have the resources to help at least one of them – and I believe there is a general moral duty to help a child in need when I can. Of course, not everyone is well-positioned to help such a child; that is, not everyone will make good parents or be able to provide a nurturing home. If someone isn't able to help a child in this way, they can't be obligated to.

But someone considering procreation likely believes they are equipped to embark on the project of child-rearing. If they are, then they are in a position to rescue a child from poverty, lack of medical care, and lack of a loving home – and there will always be more children waiting to be adopted. In such circumstances, intentionally creating a child rather than helping an existing child seems to flout the duty to help a child in need, when one can. A compromise solution of adopting one child and procreating another does not solve the problem: so long as the prospective parent can nurture and provide for an additional child, the same reasons to adopt rather than procreate apply. (Of course, this doesn't apply to those who cannot adopt – some policies make it more difficult for single people and people in same-sex relationships to do so. And it doesn't apply to those who do not want to rear a child – such an aversion would presumably disqualify someone as a good potential parent.)

The evident answer is that moral obligations to use resources fairly and to help others must leave room for us to pursue

our projects. Consider that, despite all my efforts, I likely still use more than a "fair share" of the earth's resources, however that standard is set. My home is air-conditioned, I fly occasionally, I drive rather than taking public transport. I could make significant further cuts. However, doing so would prevent me from carrying out projects important to my life: travelling to see friends and family and to give talks, having time and a comfortable environment for research, and so on. Like many ethicists, I think a morality which requires me to sacrifice my basic, rights-respecting projects would be too demanding.

How can it be permissible effectively to double my consumption by procreating?

Consider the duty to help a child in need. Someone who believes that our moral duty requires us to do as much good and alleviate as much suffering as we can might insist – or should, to be consistent, insist – that even adoption fails to satisfy our duty. After all, children in institutions are at least fed and sheltered and receive some medical care; the expense and effort involved in assisting one child in such a situation, moving her to a more comfortable lifestyle, could be better spent on assisting many more children who are truly worse off. That is, rather than adopting one child in order to pursue my project of child-rearing, thereby raising her to a standard of living enjoyed by relatively few in the global scheme, I could help many more children who are truly the worst-off, thereby alleviating the most suffering and fulfilling my duty. From the standpoint of such a demanding morality, adoptive child-rearing too looks like a selfish choice, putting one's own project above the needs of the worst-off. (And, of course, on such a demanding morality, my own standard of living and time devoted to less worthy projects should decrease considerably. Such a vision of what morality requires is associated with Peter Singer's utilitarianism.)

As Bernard Williams argued in "A Critique of Utilitarianism", such a demanding vision of morality undermines our agency. Pursuing my fundamental projects is part of what makes me a moral agent – as opposed to a utility-calculating machine. However, a moral vision expansive enough to allow commitment to individual projects does not get us off the hook entirely. Some projects will be just wrong (serial killing), and others can be morally criticised as frivolous, selfish, narcissistic, likely to harm children, or guided by stereotypes which a morally aware person should guard against. And this is just how the project of creating a genetically related child has been criticised.

This sort of challenge to procreation has been articulated, although unintentionally, by critics of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs), who often question the motives of those who seek to have a genetically related child. If the project of child-rearing can be pursued through adoption rather than through procreation, choosing to pursue it through procreation does often reflect a desire for a genetically related child. (Al-

though it could also reflect a desire to gestate or to avoid the bureaucratic hurdles to adoption; the following arguments apply to the desire for a genetically related child.)

Is wanting a genetically related child narcissistic?

One criticism raised regarding the use of ARTs to create a genetically related child is that their use is narcissistic: the potential parent wants a child like them and cannot accept an adoptive child who is unlike them. Such a self-regarding project might be morally criticised as valuing the self too highly, failing to recognise the equal worth of potential adoptive children. And this leads to a second concern: how will the parent react if the child turns out to be nothing like the parent? If the use of ARTs aims at creating a child with certain traits – whether reproducing the parents' own traits or, through genetic testing or gene therapy, enhancing or eliminating certain traits – the concern is that prospective parents who seek to control these traits may not accept a child lacking in such traits. They may lack the openness to the unexpected which should characterise parents' unconditional love for their child. They might even treat the child as a commodity, to be rejected if it does not turn out as specified.

Prospective parents might respond that they want a genetically related child to improve the quality of the parent-child relationship. But this runs up against another line of philosophical argument. Many procreative ethicists have questioned the moral significance of the genetic tie: certainly, a genetic tie is neither necessary nor sufficient for someone to have parental rights or responsibilities. A step-parent or adoptive parent can be a parent with no genetic tie – and a genetic parent may be relieved of rights and responsibilities under certain conditions. And parents who are not genetically related to their child can have as good a relationship as those who are.

On the last point, philosophers – notably Sally Haslanger – have argued that the genetic tie should not be taken to be especially important for the child's identity. Beliefs about significant heritable family traits may be based in myth rather than reality. And such illusions may not be benign: pride in one's Anglo-Saxon stock, for example, could be directly related to racist beliefs. There is a line from valuing genetically heritable family traits to racism and eugenics.

The challenge such arguments, taken together, pose is to articulate reasons for procreating, as opposed to adopting, which are not self-centred or rooted in dubious assumptions about the control and value of heritable traits. To put it another way: if a prospective parent is open to accepting her child as she is, no matter what, and her love does not depend on the child resembling her, why not extend this openness to an adoptive child? If criticisms of valuing a genetically-related child *more* are accurate, they seem to apply to many choices to procreate rather than adopt.

To be honest, arguments criticising the use of ARTs as narcissistic surprise me, as they may have surprised the reader. Surely, what many procreators want is not to reproduce their own traits, but the traits of people they love – their partner, or their bi-

ological family. While this may involve misguided assumptions, it need not be self-centred or narcissistic. Unless one thinks – as some philosophers do – that we have no discretionary room to give any preference to those we love, reasons based in love of others are not in themselves morally dubious.

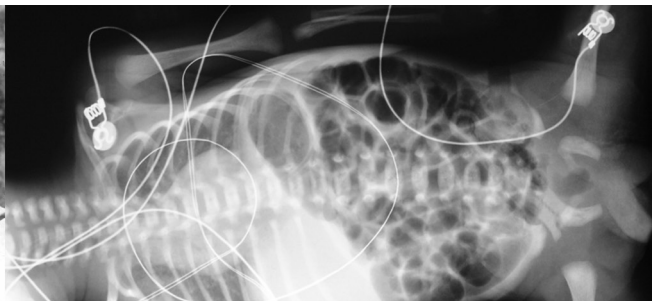
But any expectations that a genetically-related child will have certain traits seems to trigger the control objection. What if the child *doesn't* resemble the partner, parents, siblings, or whoever? Will the parent accept it? However, this objection again seems to surprisingly impute unreasonable views to agents. Surely prospective parents recognise that any child will present heritable traits in new combinations or new degrees, and very few traits if any will certainly be inherited. (This is indeed the basis of Wittgenstein's category of a family resemblance concept!) Procreators may hope that a child will resemble family members in some, non-specific ways – and this is consistent with an openness to the inevitable surprise of the new combinations in the particular child.

But the critic may press the objection that the project of reproducing family traits, or a partner's traits, is too uncertain and too slight a good when weighed against the great, certain good of adoption. Thus, it may merit moral criticism as frivolous. If, instead, I were to create a massive artwork to reproduce my family members' traits, and the making of this doubled my lifetime toll on natural resources, moral criticism might seem apt. Particularly for the committed environmentalist, the question might arise whether the project of procreation can be compatible with the project of environmentalism. The value of the goal matters in justifying an environmental cost: this is why I resist increasing my energy consumption by even 5% for a dispensable luxury, but would increase it by much more for a truly important project. And a frivolous project might not be valuable enough to outweigh a duty to help a child. Above I said that reasons of love are not in themselves morally dubious; but what if I withheld life-saving aid from a child in order to give a lollipop to my own, loved child? (The point, of course, is not that this is analogous to procreation – but that the value of different options must figure in our moral decision-making.)

What if the child doesn't *resemble the partner?*

Responding to this point lands the prospective procreator in another moral bind. On the one hand, if such traits are simply valuable to the procreator, or subjectively valuable, they might still lack significant objective value. I might have a preference for a certain hair colour, but it's difficult to see how hair colour could have much moral weight. On the other hand, asserting that certain heritable traits are objectively valuable lends itself to morally troubling eugenicist reasoning – insofar as it could ground ranking genetic groups along a spectrum of value. (To the extent that genetic groups allow for variation in traits, such a project would be misguided – but then, so would the assumption that one's genetic offspring will display family traits.)

However, perhaps there is a way out. If we see the moral best in our family mem-



bers and procreative partners, we may hope that their fine-grained, specific virtues are heritable – and believe that they are rare. Of course, virtues require individual practice and so aren't heritable; but personality traits conducive to virtue may be. And there may be a range of such traits among family members, so that the hope that at least one will be reproduced is not deluded. (This is really a question for the geneticist!) This provides a characterisation of the project which is weightier than, say, reproducing hair or eye colour.

Everyone *might have personality traits conducive to certain virtues*

This might also, with a little subtlety, escape the eugenics charge. For if there are heritable personality traits at all, *everyone* might have personality traits conducive to certain virtues. I assume many traits can be trained into virtues (and those same traits might also develop into vices; for example, patience might develop into self-control or apathy). What the prospective procreator seeks is to reproduce and rear a child with some of a range of familiar traits (whose appearance in the child is admittedly unpredictable), the value of which they learned to appreciate in their own families. Of course, an adoptive child would also have personality traits conducive to certain virtues. But this characterisation of the procreative project as seeking to reproduce familiar traits conducive to virtues – and not, narcissistically, to reproduce oneself or, deludedly, to control the offspring – suggests how such a project could be justifiable, even in the face of some significant costs.

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For a longer version of this paper, including references to the views described here, see "Creation Theory: Do Genetic Ties Matter?" in Permissible Progeny, *edited by S. Hannan, S. Brennan, and R. Vernon (New York: Oxford University Press 2015).*