From the Parent's Point of View: The Moral Constraints of Parenthood

By Misha Strauss

It is a truism that technological innovation breeds moral confusion, and nowhere is this more evident than in the area of human reproduction. It is also frequently argued that the future suffering of a child can never count as a reason against bringing it into existence since—with respect to the child—any life is better than no life at all. The landscape of reproductive decision-making is already a morally complicated one, and I am hesitant to raise further concern about the moral culpability of persons, primarily women, who must often make difficult decisions with respect to childbearing. Nonetheless, I am concerned that certain philosophical contributions to bioethics have made it difficult to voice concerns about harms to offspring. Here I am thinking about a terminally ill person's decision to have a child, a couple's decision to undergo IVF to reduce the number of embryos in the woman's womb, a couple at risk for a genetic disease's decision to undergo testing. When making reproductive decisions, common sense suggests that the harms a potential child might suffer by being brought into the world can count as a reason either not to conceive that child or once conceived, not to continue the pregnancy. However, a widely accepted philosophical argument precludes this common sense suggestion: the Non-Identity Argument persuasively demonstrates that children are not made worse off by their parents' decision since the choice ultimately comes down to a disadvantaged life or no life at all.

What is attractive about the Non-Identity Argument is that its success preserves individual choice within the sphere of reproductive decision-making; however, this protection comes at too high a cost. There is still something intuitively important in the common sense approach that finds the harm that a future child will suffer in some way salient. The challenge, then, is to identify how it becomes salient and at the same time respect the importance of individual deliberation. In addition, such a solution needs to accurately reflect the complicated and emotionally charged nature of this decision-making process. I will argue that disregard for the impact of one's decisions on one's future/potential offspring constitutes a

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failure to deliberate from the perspective of a parent, and it is this failure that is the source of our unease. There may be no general principle that can antecedently predict what a person should choose; however, when the deliberation process proceeds without any regard for the impact of this choice on the resulting child, that constitutes a moral failing. In this article, I will briefly explain the Non-Identity Argument, describe and critique a consequentialist solution, and finally defend a solution that locates the wrong within the person’s deliberation process. This article is part of a larger project in which I defend the notion that identity-constituting commitments imply moral obligations for which a person may be held morally accountable.

The Non-Identity Argument

According to the Non-Identity Argument (Parfit 1986), it is impossible to criticize reproductive decisions on the grounds that they involve harm to a child. To understand why, consider the following example:

A woman is told by her physician that she should not attempt to become pregnant now because she has a condition that would be highly likely to result in mild mental retardation in her child. Her condition is easily and fully treatable by taking a quite safe medication for one month. If she takes the medication and delays becoming pregnant for two months there is every reason to expect that she will have a normal child. Because she is impatient to begin a family, she refuses to wait, gets pregnant now, and gives birth to a child who is mildly retarded (Brock 1995, 270).

If a woman refuses to postpone conception, knowing that her child will be born mildly retarded as a result, then it appears that she has harmed her child as surely as if she refuses to give her already conceived fetus appropriate care. This, however, is not true. The woman’s decision cannot actually be criticized on the grounds that she has harmed the child. While it may not be readily apparent, the child is not worse off for being born with mild mental retardation. The child would only be worse off if the choice were between being born now with mild mental retardation and being born later without the retardation. However, if the child were born later, it would not be the same child; in two months, a different child will be conceived. Therefore, the choice is actually between being born now with mild mental retardation or never being born. It can hardly be said that no life is better than a life with mild
mental retardation, which means that the child in our example was not made worse off by his mother’s decision not to wait. And so, the mother’s decision has not harmed her child.

**Consequentialist Solution**

Still, the sense remains that there is something wrong with the woman’s decision not to postpone conception. If the woman does not wrong her child (because it is not worse off), what wrong does the woman commit? Parfit himself proposes one solution, the principle Q, according to which: “if in either of two outcomes the same number of people would ever live, it would be bad if those who live were worse off, or have a lower quality of life, than those who would have lived” (Parfit 1984). This principle represents a modification of a general consequentialist principle of beneficence for special cases that compare outcomes involving not-yet-existing persons. Under Parfit’s solution, the identity of specific persons matters less than the number of persons. The underlying moral principle that justifies Q is the principle that “It is morally good to act in a way that results in less suffering and less limited opportunity in the world” (Brock 1995, 273). The advantage of this principle is that it does not require that a specific person be harmed by an action in order for it to count as wrong. It, therefore, no longer matters that the child is not specifically harmed by the woman’s decision. Instead, we can now say that the woman’s decision not to postpone conception is wrong because it increases the amount of suffering and limited opportunity in the world than the alternative, the decision to wait.

**Wrong Identity Question**

This proposal to circumvent the Non-Identity Argument by resorting to consequentialist justification finds fault with the would-be mother for violating a general obligation to avoid increasing amounts of suffering in the world. For those who find the cost of consequentialist reasoning too high a price to accept in order to legitimately voice concern about harm to future offspring, or find this solution oddly impersonal, I offer an alternate solution to the Non-Identity Argument. I propose that disregard for the impact of one’s decisions on one’s future/potential offspring constitutes a failure to deliberate from the perspective of a parent, and this failure is the source of our unease.

The Non-Identity Argument construes the problem as falling within the standard personal identity debate (which seeks necessary and sufficient conditions for reidentification over time) and hinges on the non-identity of the child that would be born now and the child that would be born later.

However, there is another way in which this question relies on the identity of a person: any person who contemplates procreation anticipates an important shift in identity from non-parent to parent. This shift from non-parent to parent implicates identity as a philosophical issue in a very different way than is typically understood when personal identity is conceived as a matter of reidentification. Philosopher Marya Schechtman has persuasively argued that there is a second personal identity question, the question of characterization; this question asks “what it means to say that a particular characteristic is that of a given person” (Schechtman 1996, 73). The characterization question comes into play “when we aim at self-understanding, when we attempt to engage
and understand others, and when we make judgments about character, worth, and responsibility” (Flanagan and Rorty 1990, 3). Here, then, we are interested in the meaning attached to such an important shift in identity when a person anticipates becoming a parent. I am suggesting that identity commitments constitute commitments to certain types of behavior for which a person can be held accountable. With respect to reproductive decision-making, a commitment to parenthood carries a commitment to deliberating as a parent, and being a parent involves a displacement of one’s own priorities in order to accommodate the well being of one’s children.

The Parental Stance

If someone were to make a decision regarding procreation without consideration for the impact of that decision, this alone should trigger concern about the moral adequacy of the would-be parent’s character. This approach to decision-making constitutes a failure to deliberate as a parent. The decision to procreate ought to be understood as a commitment to taking on the identity of parent, as well as the commitment to the moral obligations associated with that particular role. It thus becomes possible to evaluate that person’s actions with respect to the moral obligations that derive from their identity-constituting commitments. That a person should consider the impact of a reproductive decision on the potential offspring does not imply that any particular decision is thereby moral or immoral. All it implies is that this kind of reasoning should be part of the person’s deliberation.

There are several advantages to my solution. It does not matter that there is no child to assert interests since the requirement to consider the child does not require that there be a particular child. How a parent ought to be parental is not about relating to a specific child, but taking on an identity and the moral commitments associated with endorsing it. Also, it makes the specific decision the subject of moral scrutiny. Finally, this solution hews most closely to the moral complexities of reproductive decision-making than any alternative proposed thus far.

Misha Strauss, visiting instructor in philosophy at MSU, is a doctoral candidate at Georgetown University. Her dissertation, “Constructing Self-Understanding at the Crossroads of Identity and Agency,” examines the boundaries of the self and the impact of others on the construction of the self.

References

Endnotes
1 Special thanks to Scott Moore, Trisha Slavas, and Judy Andre for very helpful conversations while writing this article.
2 James Woodward makes a similar suggestion; however, he proposes that the parent fails to keep an implicit promise to the child. Even though the child is not harmed (the child is not worse off for being born under disadvantaged circumstances), the parent’s behavior is still subject to criticism on the grounds that the parent has failed to keep a promise. This presumes that parents make a promise to “provide their children with love, affection, and certain kinds of training and education” (Woodward 1986). While I agree with Woodward that the wrong is located within the obligations of the parent, I differ from his analysis in two ways. First, I do not believe that it is inherently wrong to reproduce under the conditions described here, and I only want to show that this decision is sometimes wrong. Second, I find the standpoint of the parent relevant as a matter of deliberation, not a matter of proper specification and adjudication of rights.
3 This claim is not one for which I have the space here to provide appropriate support. It is a central claim of my dissertation and expand it more fully there.
4 Susan Wolf used this phrase during a question-and-answer session at the 2001 ASBH annual meeting in Nashville. I have appropriated it for my purposes here because it captures the sense in which I am looking at the standpoint from which a person deliberates when making decisions.
From the Child’s Point of View:
The Moral Constraints of Having Parents

Misha Strauss’s lead article, “The Moral Constraints of Parenthood,” deals with the way moral demands arise from taking on the identity of “parent.” *InkLinks* this month reflects on a complementary question, the moral dimensions of being parents. No one chooses to have parents, let alone to have the particular ones they have; yet significant moral and ethical questions arise from the simple fact of being someone’s child.

*InkLinks* is a regular column in which readers reflect on issues related to the lead article. It is meant to tap the rich intellectual resources that this network provides. We welcome your contribution. —JA

A Camp Counselor: Even dying children feel obligations to their parents

Boggy is a special place hidden deep in the steamy swamps of central Florida. Boggy is a place where kids gather for one week of fun and freedom. On opening day of each session, 135 Boggy kids kiss their parents good-bye. Boggy parents are not accustomed to saying good-bye; most have never spent a single night apart from their child.

Week after week, I watch Boggy campers comfort their parents. I watch Boggy moms afraid to let go, afraid to leave in fear of not being there. I listen to Boggy dads repeat over and over again the specifics of their child’s condition while handing me a long list of phone numbers where they can be reached, while taking a “vacation” fifteen miles down the road at a run-down beach.

The Boggy parents finally leave as I sing and dance my Boggy campers down cabin row to the dining hall. One camper’s mother is running behind us, frantic for one more hug. My camper stops, hugs her mom, and sighs: “She worries even though I tell her I’m fine... I hope she’ll have fun this week with my dad at the beach.”

For three summers I have listened to campers express their concerns for their parents. Boggy kids are very sick and often, their biggest responsibility is to assure their worried parents that they are fine, and everything will be okay.  

Emily Hacker

Interdisciplinary Program in Health & Humanities

A Gerontologist: Adult children do not abandon their parents

Through my work, I have come to recognize the following three lessons about family relationships in later life. First, despite geographic mobility and busy lifestyles, adult children do not abandon their parents, and even if institutionalization is involved, it is often accompanied by much guilt, heartache, and remorse. Second, large families do not guarantee social insurance in old age. Although individuals with multiple siblings often share “filial responsibilities,” support for an aging parent can as easily fall on only one person, typically a daughter or even daughter-in-law. On the other hand, I have seen parent care of heroic proportions provided by adults without siblings, including devoted only-child sons. Finally, it is difficult to establish “affectional solidarity” among family members later in life if it was not established earlier. In other words, dysfunctional family relationships that are not worked out before the time we reach middle age will rarely get resolved once our parents are old and sick. Breaking down barriers within the family is crucial, as the support and attention we provide our aging

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parents is likely to mirror what we can expect
to receive during our old age from our children.

Maureen Mikes
Department of Psychiatry

An Ethnographer: People hold ideals
which they may find impossible to honor

My research focuses on relationships
between parents and children and on the
obligations each has towards the other. I am
particularly interested in how our culture
differs from both other cultures and from our
own cultural past.

In the United States today, the elderly
are living longer than ever before. This means
that an increasing number of adult children are
caring for frail, disabled, or chronically ill
parents. Our culture is also characterized by
high rates of geographic mobility, so elderly
parents and adult children often live far away
from each other. Obligations between the
generations become complicated as family
members try to maintain bonds across
distances, often over many years. My most
recent research addresses the use of virtual
and high-tech communication devices to
sustain these distant relationships.

Ambivalence may be the most
important characteristic of the elderly-parent/
adult-child relationship in America today.
People recognize, on the one hand, that the
expectations of their traditions are valuable
and ought to be meaningful in their lives. On
the other hand, people also recognize that it
can be impossible to behave according to
these ideals. As a result I have become an
“ambivalence theorist,” because I believe the
most important meaning of such obligations in
our culture lies in the resulting personal and
relational dilemmas.

Jacob Climo
Department of Anthropology

A Philosopher: Our obligations arise from
relationship, not indebtedness

What do we owe our parents? I had a
very good relationship with my parents and feel
very much indebted to them. I would like
nothing better than to be able to help my
mother out (especially financially) in the way
she helped me out when I was younger.
Unfortunately, it is taking me a lot longer to
become financially secure, so (for the moment)
the best I can offer is emotional support and
companionship. However, I know others who
were not as lucky in their youth. They do not
feel “close” to their parents and some have
even rejected the relationship they had with
their parents all together. What do they “owe”
their parents? When I see people who are far
more compassionate, sympathetic, and caring
toward their parents than the parents ever were
to them, I want to say this act is not obligatory,
but supererogatory.

For this reason, I think our obligations
to our parents stem from something besides the
fact that they gave us life and/or provided the
basic necessities (food, clothing, shelter, etc.)
to help us mature to adulthood. Instead, I am
inclined to think that these obligations come
from something in the nature of the
relationship itself and its development over
time. While I do not have a complete theory
mapped out, I am convinced this is a more
productive way to approach the question of
what we “owe” our parents because it allows
us to account for various levels of affection,
abuse, and ambivalence.

Sonja Charles
Department of Philosophy
Medical Humanities Report

Center News & Announcements

Judy Andre spoke on “Stem Cell Research: Ethics and Policy Issues” at the University of Caen, France (Mar. 1, 2002).

Howard Brody has submitted the final manuscript for the revised 2nd edition of Stories of Sickness to Oxford University Press, and the book is expected out this fall.

Tom Tomlinson presented “Patient Safety, the Blame Culture, and Responsibility” at the 30th Value Inquiry Conference, Milwaukee, WI (Apr. 5, 2002).

Judy Andre participated in a “Backtalk” session on end of life issues after a performance of the play “W!t” at the BoarsHead Michigan Public Theater, Lansing, MI (Feb. 17, 2002).


Judy Andre spoke on “Martin Luther King: A Man of Peace in a Time of War” for a MLK colloquium at MSU (Jan. 21, 2002).

Howard Brody was invited to attend a conference co-sponsored by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and the National Endowment for the Humanities, “Setting a Research Agenda for Health and the Humanities,” in Potomac, MD (Mar. 14-15, 2002).

Tom Tomlinson presented “Ethical Issues in Disability Determinations,” as part of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics Conference, Cincinnati (Mar. 2, 2002).

Barry DeCoste presented “The ‘Geneticization’ of Health: A Critical Examination” at the 30th Value Inquiry Conference, Milwaukee, WI (Apr. 6, 2002).

2002 MERN Annual Meeting

The Medical Ethics Resource Network (MERN) will hold its 2002 Annual Meeting Friday, May 17, 2002. The title of this year’s conference is “Conflict of Interest: Threats to Moral Integrity.” Serving as keynote speaker, Leonard Weber, Ph.D., University of Detroit Mercy, will present “Conflicts of Interest in Healthcare: Personal Integrity Is Not Enough.”

Among the various papers that will be presented are “Research Ethics/Conflict of Interest”; “Ethical & Legal Issues in Pain Management”; “State of Michigan: End of Life Commission Report”; and “Ethical Issues in Reporting Medical Errors.” There will also be an interfaith panel discussion focusing on “Genetic Frontiers: Challenges to Our Religious Communities.”

The registration deadline for the meeting is May 10, 2002. The conference will be held at the Doubletree Hotel, Novi, Michigan. For further details on the conference program and registration, please visit our web site at http://www.bioethics.msu.edu/, or contact Jan Holmes at 517-355-7550.

As an organization, MERN seeks to promote a closer collaboration between members who work in hospital or other healthcare settings and those who work in academic settings. Please visit the new MERN website at http://www.mern.org.
Coming Events

The Center for Ethics and Humanities
Spring 2002 Brown Bag Series

The Center for Ethics and Humanities in the Life Sciences at Michigan State University invites you to join us for our Spring 2002 Brown Bag presentations. An informal atmosphere invites students and faculty to participate in friendly discussion as well as interdisciplinary feedback following each presentation. We hope you’ll join us.

Elysa Koppelman, Ph.D., Department of Philosophy, Oakland University
12:00 Noon, April 10, 2002, C-102 E. Fee Hall (Patenge Room)
Research Misconduct and the Scientific Process: Towards a Model of Self-Regulation

ABSTRACT: The authority of science was called into question in the early 1980’s when a series of research misconduct cases were brought to public light leading some to wonder whether the scientific community’s internal mechanisms aimed at assuring integrity were still successful at weeding out “bad science.” Federal regulations governing research conduct seemed imminent. Various institutions offered different definitions of research misconduct and the debate over how best to assure scientific integrity began. On the surface this debate is about how much control government should have over the scientific process. But I believe it runs much deeper, for underlying many of the arguments are differing ideas about the nature of the scientific process itself. The attempt to find a single definition of research misconduct is currently at an impasse. This is good news for scientists who are better off if they can maintain the privilege of self-regulation. And yet it is imperative that scientists renew efforts to improve integrity, for if they do nothing it is likely that the privilege of self-regulation will again be threatened. In this paper, I argue that figuring out how to improve integrity requires a better understanding of the nature of the scientific process. I offer a model for improving scientific integrity based on this claim.

For CME information, as well as other other Center activities, please visit our website at http://www.bioethics.msu.edu/.