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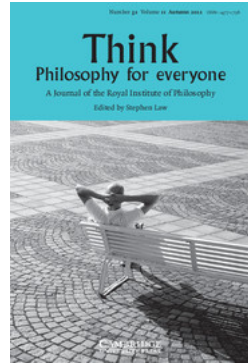
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THE IMMORALITY OF PROCREATION

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

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Many people hold that procreation is morally obligatory; one ought to bring children into existence because they benefit by being brought into existence. Often this line of thinking stems from the notion that procreation is intrinsically valuable; procreation should be pursued for its own sake. Other philosophers hold procreation is immoral because of the great harm it causes as a result of climate change, overpopulation, mental illness, and so forth¹. If current population growth continues, there will be an ever-shrinking supply of fresh water and food, leading to the suffering of future generations.

In this paper, I argue the practice of procreation is immoral regardless of the consequences of human presence such as climate change and overpopulation; the lack of consent, interests and moral desert on the part of non-existent individuals means someone could potentially suffer in the absence of moral justification. Procreation is only morally justified if there is some method for acquiring informed consent from a non-existent person; but that is impossible; therefore, procreation is immoral.

The Function of Consent

Consent explains why it is acceptable to interact with people in certain ways. The coffee shop barista is justified in swiping the credit card of customers if the customer consents to the transaction. Partners justifiably have sexual intercourse because of their mutual consent. A financial transaction without the consent of each party is fraud and

sexual intercourse without the consent of each individual involved is rape.

It is because an individual on the receiving end of potentially harmful action is the one who must suffer the consequences of such an action. She is the one who will suffer the financial loss or chronic pain, rather than the individual who inflicted such upon her. It is not the rapist, but the victim that must bear the suffering and potential of conceiving a child without her consent.

One might think consent is required only in cases in which an individual is likely to suffer deleterious consequences; this is why risky surgery requires the consent of the subject. Surely this does not capture every instance in which consent is required. It could be that Sam has a reliable method for making money on the stock market, but this reliability is not sufficient to justify his taking money from Sally to invest in the stock market even if she were to benefit from the gain in the absence of Sally's consent. Even if the probability of Sally making money on the stock market was high, there is a chance that Sally would lose the money taken from her. She must consent to the potential of losing that money and participating in the stock market before Sam can justifiably invest her money.

The goodness of an action cannot replace the lack of consent by the individual affected. Sam is not justified in taking money from Sally without her permission on the basis of the financial boon that she would likely enjoy. Even if Sally needed the money and did not mind risking the small amount that Sam would use to invest, it might be that Sally morally objects to investing in the stock market. Sam is not justified in taking Sally's money without her informed consent no matter how likely she is to receive a substantial financial return.

This reasoning is based on the principle of consent:

PC: One is justified in subjecting an individual to action A only if:

- (a) The individual gives informed consent to A; or in the absence of their ability to consent, either:
- (b) A is in the best interest of the individual and she is not in a position to consent, or
- (c) The individual deserves to be subjected to A.

It may be that an individual does not want to be subjugated to an action, even if that action would benefit them greatly, and the lack of consent renders such an action morally unjustified. The exception to this might be the lack of *informed* consent. If someone is acting irrationally, and if there is good reason to believe the person is irrational, then some action that would have significant benefits for the individual can be justifiably performed; for example, in the case of medicating someone who is suicidal.

Although someone may not consent or benefit from punishment for their crimes, such conditions are not necessary for the acceptability of punishment. For example, Bob robbed a bank, and it is not in his interest to go to prison; however, Bob committed a serious crime and deserves to be punished.

The Consent Argument

Children did not consent to come into existence. It is remarkable that there is a consensus that everything from sexual acts and financial transactions require consent of the individuals involved, but there is nothing morally questionable about bringing someone into existence without their consent. Actions require consent on the part of those involved especially if those actions have the potential to cause deleterious effects; existence is a pre-condition of deleterious effects. Non-existent individuals cannot suffer, but existent individuals can.

Suppose Bob rapes Sally and this action results in a pregnancy. Bob has seriously harmed Sally physically and

emotionally. Sally is not the only victim of the rape. Bob's actions have resulted in the existence of individual that did not consent to being brought into existence. But child that resulted from rape is no different in this respect. Any child faces the prospect of a life filled with suffering and misery; being brought into existence is potentially harmful.

Even in a world where everyone lives blissfully, it is not clear one would be justified in bringing individuals into existence without their informed consent. But there is good evidence that all lives in the actual world will contain at least some suffering, and that requires informed consent.

This is the consent argument:

1. An individual is justified in subjecting someone to potential harm only if either: (a) they provide informed consent, (b) such is in their best interests, or (c) they deserve to be subjected to potential harm.
2. Bringing someone into existence is potentially subjecting them to harm.
3. Individuals that do not exist: (a) cannot give their consent to being brought into existence, (b) do not have interests to protect, and (c) do not deserve anything.
4. Hence, procreation is not morally justified.

This argument holds that non-existent individuals do not have interests; someone cannot be harmed unless they exist. This assumption blocks the objection that one should proceed to kill infants and small children; allowing infants to live in the absence of informed consent is potentially subjecting them to suffering. Infants and small children exist, and thus already have interests. Those that do not exist cannot be harmed, but those that do exist can be harmed.

There is strong motivation to accept the first premise: it explains our moral convictions in a various scenarios. For example, it is because a passed out individual has interests that we feel compelled to stop and help. Such an individual

is not capable of informed consent, but stopping to help them is often within their best interests. Accepting premise (1) explains our refusal to allow someone to kill themselves. Although they may not give informed consent to intervening in their suicide, it is because such an intervention is in their best interests.

Goods such as falling in love, a walk on a beautiful sunny day and so forth can only be had by those that exist; one cannot suffer unless they exist. Although some individuals lead happy and fulfilling lives, there are counterexamples: war, famine, disease, poverty, deformities, homelessness and many other prospects potentially cause great suffering. There are those would have been better off had they not been born given the overwhelming suffering they endure on a regular basis. The point is not the life is always horrible, but rather bringing someone into existence potentially subjects them to harm.

You'll Thank Me Later

Someone might respond with the *retrospection objection*: although non-existent individuals do not have interests and cannot provide informed consent, most people are happy to be alive and would give their informed consent to being brought into existence retrospectively. Thus, even if non-existent individuals are incapable of giving consent and lack interests to, they would retroactively provide consent to being brought into existence. Thus, it is morally acceptable to procreate.

This objection holds retroactive consent is morally equivalent to consent generally, but that is not the case. It could be that bringing someone into existence would be something to which an individual would have consented, but there is still a risk that such is not the case. The only way of establishing that someone would prefer existence rather than non-existence is to bring them into existence; they must exist before they can consent to an action.

Additionally, the retroactive objection ignores those individuals that have decided that they no longer want to live and may not have consented to being brought into existence if they had the same information that led them to attempt suicide.

Suppose that everyone brought into existence is glad to exist. This precondition does not make such an action acceptable. There are numerous cases where actions that have potential for harm require the informed consent of the individual that could possibly suffer from such an action. Everything from risky surgery to buying a low price, quality house has the potential to cause suffering and thus often require the consent of those who will be most affected. And these are relatively minor compared to bringing someone into existence. The same could be said for a forced home mortgage; e.g. Bob loves to sit in the backyard drinking beer and shooting crows, and he would not have had such an experience if Sally had not forced him to take a mortgage.

Take another example, even if one of the partners having sex always consents after the action, this cannot justify the initial lack of consent. There are only a few cases where presumed consent is morally sufficient; assuming procreation is that sort of action begs the question. This is because the individual for whom consent is presumed has interests. Assisting an unconscious man in the absence of consent is morally acceptable given the man has interests worth preserving. That cannot be said of those who do not exist.

Conclusion

Although counterintuitive, there is a strong argument against the morality of procreation: non-existence individuals lack the ability to give their informed consent, and bringing someone into existence has the potential to harm them. Further, such an action cannot be justified on the

grounds of interests or desert, because only those who exist have interests and desert. Thus, it is immoral to have children. Contrary to the claim that one has a moral duty to reproduce, one lacks the informed consent of those who would be affected if they were brought into existence.

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Note

¹ Harrison, Gerald and Julia Tanner. 2011. 'Better Not to Have Children'. *Think* 10 (27): 113–121.