

## PARENTAL GENETIC SHAPING AND PARENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL SHAPING

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*Analytic philosophers tend to agree that intentional parental genetic shaping and intentional parental environmental shaping for the same feature are, normatively, on a par. I challenge this view by advancing a novel argument, grounded in the value of fair relationships between parents and children: Parental genetic shaping is morally objectionable because it unjustifiably exacerbates the asymmetry between parent and child with respect to the voluntariness of their entrance into the parent–child relationship. Parental genetic shaping is, for this reason, different from and more objectionable than parental environmental shaping. I introduce a distinction between procreative decisions one makes qua mere procreator—that is, without the intention to rear the resulting child—and procreative decisions one makes qua procreator-and-future childrearer. Genetic shaping is objectionable when undertaken in the latter capacity: Both selection and enhancement are objectionable because they introduce an unnecessary and avoidable inequality in the parent–child relationship; in the case of enhancement, this also results in harm to the future child.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

To decide to rear a child, especially if you become a parent by means of voluntary procreation, is like inviting a stranger about whom you know nothing to move in with you for two decades or so. You have a choice whether or not to invite the stranger. Like you, she or he knows nothing about you, yet has no choice but to accept the invitation—and accept you. This has been always the case. But in this day and age technology makes it possible to choose some of the features of those who will be our children, or to choose one’s partner in procreation based on features they are highly likely to pass on to one’s offspring.

Of course, parents have always been able to use their prerogative in order to intentionally shape the minds and bodies of their children *after* birth. They

have been doing this by controlling the environmental conditions in which their children were brought up—call this ‘environmental shaping’; education is the most obvious instance of parental environmental shaping. Today, parents can achieve a similar end by genetically engineering their yet-unborn children—call this ‘parental genetic shaping’<sup>1</sup> Genetic shaping comes in two forms: parents can either choose to implant an embryo on the basis of its genetic characteristics—call this ‘selection’—or they can genetically enhance an embryo with the help of technology—call this ‘enhancement’. In the future, parental genetic shaping might become easily available and the scope of parental choice with respect to children’s characteristics might widen. Is there a normative difference between parents exerting influence over their existing children by means of socialization—including, most obviously, education—and parents exerting influence over their future children by means of genetic engineering—whether in the form of selection or in the form of enhancement? And if the answer is yes, which of the two is more objectionable?

This paper compares intentional environmental shaping and intentional genetic shaping. Much shaping of both kinds is, of course, non-intentional and some is unavoidable; one’s choice of partner, for instance, or parents’ feeding routines, cannot but shape the children. My focus is on shaping with the specific intention of instilling particular features in the child. Some philosophers deny the existence of a normative difference between parental environmental and parental genetic shaping. Nicholas Agar, in particular, defended a plausible and influential principle stating that the two are normatively on a par:

if we are permitted to produce certain traits by modifying our children’s environments then we are also permitted to produce them by modifying their genomes. (Agar 2004: 113)

Agar’s principle is often relied upon in order to explain why parental genetic shaping is morally permissible and, in some cases, required. But, of course, the principle can just as well indicate the impermissibility of parental environmental shaping.

Yet, Agar’s principle goes against many peoples’ intuitions. Various normative bodies and some philosophers have been critical of genetic shaping of certain features of the future child, but not of environmental—and, in particular, educational—shaping for similar features. And bodies such as the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority<sup>2</sup>—a UK regulatory body—and, in the USA, the Presidents’ Council of Bioethics (2003, 54–5) expressed significant moral worries about parental genetic shaping without at the same time

<sup>1</sup> In the same category of genetic shaping fall natural ways of attempting to determine genetic features of one’s future offspring—for instance by way of choosing one’s procreating partner; I will set these to one side in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> See quotation in Harris (2007: 156).

calling into question the permissibility of (existing and widespread) parental educational and environmental shaping.

This paper sides with the latter in being critical of Agar's principle. I do not aim to provide, in this paper, a comprehensive account of the normative differences between parental environmental shaping and parental genetic shaping. Nor can I offer an all things considered assessment of how each practice is objectionable. Instead, I indicate a reason why the use of (genetic) technology to shape one's future child is, in one important respect, more objectionable than the shaping one's child through environmental factors such as education. This amounts to a *pro tanto* reason to be even more critical of intentional parental genetic shaping than of intentional environmental shaping.

The paper unfolds as follows: in the next section, I explain the scope of my enquiry, the nature of the argument—that is, what I take it to be an argument for—and draw some necessary distinctions. In the subsequent section, I discuss several likely reasons why individuals may engage in deliberate parental genetic shaping and how these reasons bear on the normative status of parental action. Here I also explain the typical philosophical arguments that question the moral desirability of parental genetic shaping. It is not my purpose to evaluate the merits of these criticisms of genetic shaping. Rather, I contend that, by themselves, they do not show that parental genetic shaping is normatively different from parental environmental shaping. In the last section, I point to a feature of parental genetic shaping that parental environmental shaping does not display (or, rather, displays in a normatively different context). With the help of an analogy, I explain why this feature is morally objectionable.

## II. SET-UP

Several up-front clarifications are in order. The first is about the features which make the object of parental shaping discussed here. The scope of this paper is restricted to features that are medically unnecessary and morally neutral. By morally neutral features I mean features that are unlikely to influence whether or not child lives up to the demands of morality. It is hard to see why one kind of environmental shaping—education—is at all objectionable when it is aimed at instilling morally required features (though of course particular ways in which shaping can take place may be objectionable). Genetic shaping with respect to such features may also be permissible or even mandatory<sup>3</sup> though it is a matter of debate whether decision concerning such shaping is best left to parents or to the state (Fowler 2015). Similarly, good parents try to avoid their children coming to harm, and therefore to prevent and cure disease or other

<sup>3</sup> For a recent review of reasons advanced in the debate on moral enhancement, see Specker *et al.* (2014).

malfunctioning—for instance with the help of medicine and health education. By contrast, genetic shaping with respect to medically necessary features is not beyond criticism (nor is the distinction between medically necessary and medically unnecessary features crystal clear). Some people believe that parents are morally permitted to choose an embryo that is likely to develop the same disability as the parent; others think that it is objectionable to choose an embryo on the basis of its genetic predisposition to a particular disability, while yet others think that parents should choose the embryo whose generic make-up is likely to result in the best possible life for the future child (Savulescu 2001). But the most divisive issue is over the moral status of the genetic shaping of morally optional and medically unnecessary features of one's future children. Therefore, the scope of the present discussion is restricted to parental shaping of morally neutral and medically irrelevant attributes such as sex, height, hair and eye colour, other elements of physical appearances, personality (e.g. extroversion), abilities (e.g., musical ability) and intelligence.

Second, I rely on the usual distinction between:

- a. deeming a behaviour, or attitude, morally objectionable,
- b. deeming a behaviour, or attitude, morally impermissible  
and
- c. the belief that it is permissible to interfere with the agent who displays the behaviour or attitude.

A behaviour or attitude may be morally objectionable yet permissible because one may not be in breach of any duty by engaging in it, for instance when one fails to display certain virtuous behaviours. Also, a behaviour or attitude may be morally objectionable yet permissible because, although one is in breach of some duty by engaging in it, one does not thereby violate anybody's right. The so-called right to do wrong illustrates this situation.

The focus of my enquiry is on whether parental genetic shaping is morally objectionable and, if so, more objectionable than parental educational shaping. The conclusion may or may not determine the question of the moral permissibility of parental genetic shaping, and even less so the question of whether it is permissible to interfere with parents who engage in genetic shaping. By the end of the paper, you may agree with my reasons to deem parental genetic shaping objectionable in a way in which parental educational shaping is not, yet think that this reason is not enough to make it morally impermissible. This is because you may deem some morally desirable effects of parental genetic shaping—for instance, gains in the child's welfare—sufficiently important to offset its moral costs.

You may also believe that parental genetic shaping is in fact morally impermissible, but on *other* grounds than the ones I discuss here. Several philosophers brought arguments against parental embryo selection as well as against enhancement of already existing embryos. Against the latter there may be weighty

prudential reasons having to do with inherent risks related to available technologies, which may render enhancements in general morally impermissible (Buchanan *et al.* 2000: 191–6). Genetic shaping for medically and morally neutral features may also be morally impermissible because it imposes on children the parents' particular conception of the good (Clayton 2006: 104). Finally, all genetic shaping of features that confer competitive advantage to the future child may be impermissible on egalitarian grounds (Buchanan *et al.* 2000: 187–91; Daniels 2001; Fowler 2015). Below I engage more extensively with the last two arguments.<sup>4</sup>

Alternatively, you may get to the end of the paper believing that it is morally impermissible for parents to engage in genetic shaping for the reason I provide, yet that it would be wrong for society to interfere with them coercively: For instance, in cases when such interference would amount to serious violations of privacy or bodily autonomy.

The third point concerns a less common distinction. I introduce it in order to explain why and when both kinds of genetic shaping—selection and enhancement—are morally objectionable. I suggest that it is important to distinguish between actions that one undertakes *qua* mere procreator and actions that one undertakes *qua* procreator-and-future childrearer<sup>5</sup>. By 'mere procreator' I understand here an individual who does not intend to rear the child she or he procreates; all they do is to bring a child into existence. By 'childrearer' I understand the person who brings up a child, independently from her or his procreative relationship with the child. When I refer to individuals who are both the procreator and the (intended) childrearer of a child, I speak of 'parents'. When they decide to engage in genetic shaping, they act *qua* procreator-and-(future) childrearer. As I explain below, my account of what makes genetic shaping objectionable, for which I argue in the last section of this paper, concerns only actions that an individual undertakes *qua* parent—that is *qua* procreator-and-future childrearer.

Some actions one undertakes *qua* mere procreator, such as embryo selection, have to be evaluated in light of the non-identity problem; such evaluation is complicated by the controversial question of whether one can benefit individuals by bringing them into existence: when a procreator chooses an embryo on the basis of its genetic characteristics, that person thereby decides to bring into existence a particular individual, rather than the individual that would have developed from any other, non-implanted, embryo. When it takes the form of selection, parental genetic shaping is a necessary condition for the existence

<sup>4</sup> There are more arguments to the conclusion that selection and enhancement are impermissible but, like the argument from risk, they are not specific to parental selection and enhancement and, unlike the argument from risk, they are unconvincing.

<sup>5</sup> I do not consider, in this paper, the third term of comparison, that is, the moral evaluation of actions one undertakes *qua* (future) childrearer when one is not also the procreator of the child in case.

of that particular future child. Selection then cannot harm the resulting child unless being brought into existence is itself harmful for her or him—that is, if her or his life is such that it is not worth living. It is hard to see how an individual can have a legitimate complaint against an action of their procreator, action which was necessary for their coming into existence, and on the assumption that they have a life worth living.<sup>6</sup> And, in particular, if one thinks that an individual can be *benefited* by being brought into existence, it is difficult to see what that complaint may be.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, we sometimes do speak as if being brought into existence can be a benefit—for instance by suggesting that people have reason to be grateful to their procreators for their very existence. Some philosophers believe that this is a sound assumption (Holtug 2001). I assume that embryo selection undertaken *qua* mere procreator is not objectionable.

But the procreators I consider in this paper are not mere procreators, that is, people who do not intend to rear their offspring; they are individuals who procreate with the intention and expectation that they will rear the child they brought into existence.<sup>8</sup> They do not merely create another human being, but also a particular social relationship. By contrast, mere procreators do not create a particular social relationship. The evaluation of the procreative decisions undertaken *qua* procreators-and-future childrearsers should thereby be more complex than the evaluation of actions undertaken by mere procreators (for example, than the actions of individuals who procreate with the intention, and expectation, that other people will adopt and rear the child the procreator brings into existence).

Actions undertaken *qua* procreator-and-future childrearsers ought to be evaluated not only by reference to the well-being of the child they create but also in light of the relationship that they create with that child. Thereby, even when the resulting child cannot have a complaint against genetic shaping undertaken by her procreator *qua* mere procreator—as it is the case with embryo selection by a mere procreator—she and the rest of us can have a complaint against the procreator *qua* future childrearser. The complaint is against the creation and endurance of an objectionable relationship. In this case, the child

<sup>6</sup> A complaint, of course, can be generated from within a non-person affecting view of morality, according to which a state of affair may be morally worse than another state of affairs even if the first is not worse than the second for any particular individual.

<sup>7</sup> But for an account of what it is to harm somebody that is compatible with such a complaint, see Shiffrin (1999). On her account, however, it is difficult to see why procreation is ever permissible. One must assume that it is, for the present enquiry to make sense.

<sup>8</sup> There is a debate on the deontic status of bringing into existence children whom one does not intend to parent. The prevalent view is that all that procreators owe their progeny are lives worth living; for a plausible expression of this view, see Vallentyne (2002). Yet, some philosophers follow O'Neill (2003), as well as common morality, in the belief that parents owe their children a lot more than lives worth living. Here I do not take a position on this debate; but I think that a distinction between the duties of individuals *qua* mere procreators who do not intend to rear and their duties *qua* procreators and (future) childrearsers may be useful in dissolving the debate by doing justice to the truth in each side.

is harmed by being locked into an authoritative relationship with a person who has defaulted on some prima facie duty or virtue attached to the parental role. If it is objectionable for a procreator *qua* future childrearer to engage in genetic shaping, then the wrong can be rectified only by allowing somebody else to rear the respective child.

Therefore, when the parental genetic shaping takes the form of selection, the possible complaint against it—as I shall argue—is that it creates an objectionable relationship and it is not aimed at the parent *qua* mere procreator. As already explained, *qua* mere procreator the selecting parent merely creates a child who cannot be harmed by selection. However, *qua* future childrearer, the parent who decides to select can do something objectionable by creating an objectionable relationship. The creation of an objectionable relationship, as I argue in Section IV, would not happen if, by chance, the same embryo was implanted in the absence of a parental decision to choose it based on particular genetic features. Nor would it happen if an individual other than the procreator were to become the childrearer of that particular child.

When the parental genetic shaping takes the form of enhancement, the possible complaint against it is more straightforward and it is also brought against the procreator *qua* future childrearer. The complaint concerns both the creation of an objectionable relationship and possible harm to the future child. This is because the child who develops from the enhanced embryo may be worse off than she or he would have otherwise been by dint of being subject to an objectionable relationship with her or his parent. Indeed, some of the arguments against selection and enhancement have pointed to the connection between parental genetic shaping and the parent–child relationship (Clayton 2006; Habermas 2003; Malmqvist 2011).

### III. IS PARENTAL GENETIC SHAPING NORMATIVELY DIFFERENT FROM PARENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL SHAPING?

This section looks at the most persuasive lines of criticism against parental genetic shaping in order to determine whether or not they apply with the same force against parental environmental shaping.

Good parents wish their children well, and take steps to ensure that their children do in fact fare well. Formulated in such a general way, the statement seems uncontroversial. But there is no consensus about the level of well-being that one's child must reach before parents stop having duties of beneficence towards their children or, indeed, a permission to benefit their children. It is disputed whether parents have a duty to maximize their children's well-being and whether parents have a permission to invest resources in advancing their children well-being beyond what justice requires them to have. Julian Savulescu has defended a principle, which has become influential in discussions about

procreative decision making: the principle of Procreative Beneficence. It states that ‘couples (or single reproducers) should select the child, of the possible children they could have, who is expected to have the best life, or at least as good a life as the others, based on the relevant, available information’ (Savulescu 2001: 415). Presumably, the principle applies not only to selection proper, but also to determining, via enhancement, some of the features of the future child.

Several lines of criticism can be levelled against the principle of Procreative Beneficence. Some of them are independent from parental motivation and have to do exclusively with the welfare of the future child. Jonathan Wolff pointed to the following worry (which he doesn’t endorse): people in general may be poor judges of what features are truly beneficial for their children (Wolff unpublished). He invokes the dystopian vision of a TV show called ‘Stepford Children’, where robots replaced real children. They ‘were polite, obedient, hard-working, truth-telling, intelligent, good at sports, and energetic, with no time for television or junk food. They were also deeply dull’ (Wolff unpublished). If procreators really had a tendency to misjudge what characteristics would be beneficial for their offspring, this would be a reason to reject genetic shaping as well as environmental shaping for medically and morally neutral features.

But most philosophers who found parental genetic shaping objectionable have focused on the reasons for which future parents may want to use genetic technology to choose their future children. Medically unnecessary and morally neutral enhancements may be undertaken by future parents for several reasons.

Some enhancements may be sought, and some embryos may be chosen, because parents want their children to have competitive advantage over other children. The conferral of competitive advantage entails that, by dint of making one’s child better off, one also makes other people’s children worse off (Brighouse and Swift 2006); therefore, it raises a strong distributive objection which is independent from the shape of the parent–child relationship and which applies equally to parental genetic and environmental shaping.

Genetic shaping aimed at competitive advantage can also be criticized because it expresses objectionable parental attitudes, rather than aims. Parental genetic shaping can express the expectation that the child will engage, voluntarily or not, in competitive situations and that she or he ought to succeed in these competitions. In the most benign form, this expectation may be a mere realistic prediction that the child will not be able to avoid competitions, combined with a hope that she will not (always) lose out in social competitions. When genetic shaping is likely to be necessary for the child’s life to go no worse than others’, the parental desire to confer competitive advantage does not seem objectionable. But in the case of enhancements—or grounds for selection—that we consider here, and which are medically unmotivated, it is more likely that the parental attitude expressed goes beyond the permissible



desire that one's child fares no worse than others. The parental attitude is therefore likely to involve a burden of expectation—that the child succeeds in social competitions—which is unfair to the child and out of line with the theory of ideal parental attitudes recently defended by several philosophers. Some philosophers are concerned with how easy it is to misuse parental power, given the particularities of the parent–child relationship in which children are asymmetrically situated and unusually vulnerable to their parents and, at the same time, incapable to afford to exit the parent–child relationship (Brighthouse and Swift 2014; Clayton 2006). Fox (2008) and others (Wolff unpublished) argued that good parents exhibit, as a parental virtue, moderation in how much control they try to exert over their children and I have argued for an ideal of parental love in light of which selection and enhancement look objectionable (Gheaus 2014). In short, the expectation that a person will be more competitive than others may be an attitude fit for a coach whose services one has requested oneself; but not, in this view, for a parent. This argument, if correct, will cut against parental attempts to confer competitive advantage by either genetic or environmental shaping—as both Fox (2008) and Clayton (2006) acknowledge.

Then, some parental genetic shaping may be undertaken in order to confer non-competitive advantage to the future child. Presumably, some parents wish to make use of existing technologies to make their children better off without thereby making anyone else worse off. But, to the extent to which the features chosen by parents expresses a particular vision of the good life, genetic shaping for non-competitive advantage remains open to the charges of failing to respect the child's future autonomy and of being unduly psychologically burdening. The conferral of non-competitive advantage looks more acceptable on traditional egalitarian grounds than the conferral of competitive advantage, but faces the objection of undue use of parental power. Clayton, in particular, stressed that children's future autonomy is violated by parental behaviours that stir the children's lives towards particular (morally non-required) life goals (2006: 104–5). In this view, an adult looking back at her parents' attempts to instil certain traits or values in her has reason to complain that, as a child, she had once been enrolled in a conception of the good life that she is now rejecting. Moreover, children whose parents try to intentionally stir them towards particular goals are likely to face unwarranted psychological costs in reassessing their commitment to the goals in question (Clayton 2006: 106–7). Just as above, the cases against parental environmental and parental genetic shaping appear symmetric.

Finally, parents may want to use genetic shaping in order to express, via the child, some of their dearest values and commitments or to extend themselves through their children. Several philosophers believe that parents have a prerogative to shape children as an act of self-extension, in order to perpetuate their own (parental) values and commitments, or in order to accomplish a unique sort of creative act, or for both aims. In this view, parental

shaping—whether for the sake of passing on values and commitments or for the sake of creation—contributes essentially to the value of parenting. Macleod, for instance, writes that:

The recognition that valued features of one's own sense of self have been extended to one's children and form part of their sense of self can be a profound sense of satisfaction. We can see ourselves carried forward in another self we played a significant role in creating. (2010, 142)

Just like the conferral of advantage, parental self-extension is open to the above criticism: attempts to perpetuate one's values, or some of one's features, through one's children are clear cases of attempting to enrol children in one's idea of a good life. They are incompatible with the demanding ideal of parental neutrality endorsed by Clayton.

Yet, one need not endorse Clayton's extremely restrictive view in order to be critical of self-extension. Brighouse and Swift (2014) objected that parental self-extension amounts to using one's child as a means to one's ends. Moreover, the value of self-extension through parenting is exaggerated as long as individuals have other ways of perpetuating their values and commitments and of engaging in significant creative acts. Indeed, it seems that childrearing always have access to the latter, since *any* successful childrearing is a highly creative act even in the absence of any *intentional* parental shaping (Brighouse and Swift 2014: 101–4).

Another possible line of objection to self-extension comes from a plausible ideal of love in general and, in particular, from an ideal of love—understood as affectionate care—for one's children.<sup>9</sup> Children need care and affection from the people who raise them, and continuity in the relationship with their rearers. For liberal egalitarians, this generally undisputed fact serves as the main ground for justifying the existence of the family in the first place (Brighouse and Swift 2014). But one may wonder whether love in general is compatible with seeing the beloved, or the relationship with the beloved, as a project of, for instance, self-expression. In particular, Brighouse and Swift (2014) argued that parental love has unique value in virtue of the child's unconditional and spontaneous affection towards and trust in her parents. Adults may be unable to match children's affection on these counts. Yet, if mutuality in loving relationships is desirable, and if spontaneity contributes to the value of love, adults should not limit, for self-serving reasons, their own ability to experience spontaneity in relationship with their children. There seems to be some tension between the aim of parental self-expression through shaping the child and the aim of making room for certain forms of spontaneity in the relationship: for instance, for spontaneous appreciation of one's (future) child. The more procreators exercise their power to determine who the future child will be, the less they

<sup>9</sup> I attempt to do some of this in Gheaus (2014), where I argue that parental love for a child is not supposed to be conditional on morally neutral characteristics of the child.

will have to discover about the individuality of the child—and, thereby, the more they will restrict how much spontaneous delight they can take in such discovery. Of course, parental self-expression need not involve a complete scripting of the parent–child relationship, but it does go into the direction of scripting and it can, for this reason, be objectionable. Again, if the objection holds, it applies to both genetic and environmental parental shaping.

#### IV. AN UNNECESSARY INEQUALITY

The objections to parental shaping explored above apply in similar ways to environmental and genetic shaping. They do not give any reason to doubt Agar’s principle that both genetic and environmental shaping are on a par. Yet, genetic shaping may be more objectionable than environmental shaping in a way that I explain in this section.

When procreators engage in the genetic shaping of children they intend to rear—that is, when they shape *qua* procreators-and-future childrearsers—they exercise some choice with respect to who one’s future child will be. Many critics of enhancement and selection find the exercise of such choice intuitively objectionable, yet it is not easy to explain what exactly makes it so without raising the question of whether similar worries apply to, for instance, parental educational choices. Opponents of genetic shaping sometimes appeal to the ideal of unconditional parental love to criticize the act of choosing one’s children: this consideration is central to the concerns expressed by The Presidents’ Council of Bioethics (2003: 54–5).<sup>10</sup> Yet, as Wolff (unpublished) noted, this line of criticism is unconvincing since parents who engage in genetic shaping can, and often do, love their children even in cases when their attempts to control the future child’s features prove unsuccessful. This response seems both apt and unlikely to fully dispel the worry that procreators’ choices in some way corrupt the relationship between parent and child.

Behind the intuition that choosing one’s children is incompatible with unconditional love may lay the belief that love can only be unconditional if the attachment to the beloved occurs independently of that object’s characteristics.<sup>11</sup> This, however, is not obvious. In her response to Michael Sandel’s criticism of genetic shaping, Kamm notes that particular characteristics are in

<sup>10</sup> Which reads: ‘The attitude of parents toward their child may be quietly shifted from unconditional acceptance to critical scrutiny: the very first act of parenting now becomes not the unreserved welcoming of an arriving child, but the judging of his or her fitness, while still an embryo, to become their child, all by the standards of contemporary genetic screening’.

<sup>11</sup> It is in itself an interesting question whether parental love ought to be unconditional. I engage with this in Gheaus (2014), noting that parental love may be conditional on certain moral features of the child.

fact an appropriate basis for choosing those to whom we become emotionally attached:

Before we love someone, we may be interested in meeting a person who has various properties, such as kindness, intelligence, artistic ability . . . etc. When we meet such a person we may be interested in him rather than someone else because he has these properties. However . . . it is the particular person that we wind up loving, not their set of properties. For if another person appears with the same set of properties, that does not mean that we could . . . substitute him for the person we already love. Even if the person we love loses some of the properties through which we were originally led to love him (e.g. his beauty) and another person has more of the good properties that originally interested us, we would not necessarily stop loving the particular person we love . . . [B]efore a particular person exists whom we love (just as before we find someone to love), it is permissible to think more boldly in terms of the characteristics we would like to have in a person and that we think it is best for a person to have. (2005)

Kamm thinks that loving one's child is analogous to loving a partner with respect to the permissibility of choosing the object of one's love. If she is right, all that is morally required for someone to qualify as a loving parent is that (a) once the child exists, she or he be non-fungible to the parent and (b) that parental love survives the loss of some of the child's features that may have triggered the love in the first place. I do not dispute here Kamm's claims about the nature of love, or the belief that a parent who fulfils (a) and (b) simultaneously is a loving parent.<sup>12</sup> My interest is instead in how the conditions in which the forming of a loving parent-child relationships can impact on its moral quality.

Kamm's analysis may be more or less persuasive when applied to the formation of loving relationships between adults. Yet, relationships between children and adults are structurally different from relationships between adults in an important way. The difference between the two types of relationships is that relationships between adults are mutually voluntary: adults can choose whether or not to enter a relationship with each other and both adults in a relationship have an exit choice. The relationship between parent and child lacks these features. The relationship is not voluntarily entered on the side of child, and it is only in part voluntarily entered on the side of the procreating parent. As noted in the beginning of the paper, procreators can choose whether or not to procreate-and-parent but traditionally they had no choice with respect to the characteristics of their future children. It is also a 'no exit' relationship

<sup>12</sup> But others do. Fox, who also relies on this long citation from Kamm as a foil to help him criticize genetic shaping thinks that 'it is intelligible for a parent to express love for her future offspring even before a particular child, with her particular qualities, comes into being ... This is a love that properly takes hold before parents learn anything about the sort of person the child is or will become. It is fitting for parents to embark on love for a child in a manner that is not contingent on the particular characteristics about her that we value'. (2008: 258).

for the (minor) child, for whom the costs of exiting are too high.<sup>13</sup> That exit costs are so high for children also puts very strict limits on the conditions in which parents ought to be permitted to exit the relationship. Adults have some limited exit possibilities: a procreative parent may put a child up for adoption at birth and, more difficultly, later on (and, in fact, some parents abandon their children with impunity, especially after separation from another parent). So, unlike loving relationships between adults, the parent–child relationship is:

- (1) a lot less voluntary at both entry and exit for both parties  
and
- (2) displays a deep asymmetry of voluntary entry and exit between the two parties.

Here I contend that the first feature of the parent–child relationship—its non-voluntariness with respect to who is one’s child or parent—has moral value because it mitigates, to some degree, the child’s complete lack of choice concerning both entrance into and exit from the relationship with their parents. Selection or enhancement threatens the symmetry that exists in this respect in the relationship between child and parent.

Consider the following analogy, meant to tease out intuitions concerning what would be morally problematic about undermining this symmetry: think of a community that practices the (illiberal) custom of arranged marriage. This custom can take one of the two forms:

- (i) The marriage is fully arranged by the spouse’s parents and neither bride nor groom has any say with respect to whom they will marry. Only men have a say on whether to marry.  
Or
- (ii) The marriage is largely arranged by the spouse’s parents and neither bride nor groom can decide whom they will marry, yet there are two differences between bride and groom: only men have a say on whether or not to marry and, if they decide to marry, they can have a say between a few numbers of partners pre-selected for them by their parents, on the basis of their known characteristics. The women have neither choice.

I contend that the first case is preferable to the second in at least one respect: it honours, to a larger extent, spouses’ moral equality to each other. Therefore, the relationship between future spouses embodies, other things equal, more equality in the first kind of case than in the second. This imaginary case is not meant as a perfect analogy with the case of parents and children and

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes social services take children away from parents; this gives children some exit power only if they can trigger the process in a reasonably reliable way. Also, children sometimes have a say concerning (partial) exit from the relationship with one parent when parents separate. I am grateful to anonymous referee for these qualifications.

it holds better in the case of embryo selection rather than in the case of enhancement—when the object of parental choice is a number of features of the future child. The analogy is merely intended to highlight the *prima facie* moral importance that individuals who are equal have the same level of choice when they enter an intimate relationship with each other. In an ideal intimate relationship, nobody has more freedom to choose one's partner—whether the choice regards who the partner will be or (merely) some of their features.<sup>14</sup>

Now, when it comes to parents and children, most people do not think that the lack of equality between them with respect to entering and exiting their relationship is objectionable—at least not all things considered. But inequalities between parents and children are legitimate only as long as they are unavoidable, or avoidable only at very high moral costs, or necessary for satisfying children's rights and other important interests. Concerning inequalities at entry, it is unavoidable that children come into the world—and hence into the relationship with their parents—involuntarily. And while it is possible for adults to relinquish their freedom concerning whether to become parents, making parenthood non-voluntary is likely to involve an enormous loss of well-being for parents and for their children.<sup>15</sup> Many inequalities in the relationship between parents and children are necessary to protect children's most important interests—including their rights. In these cases, it is easy to see why they are all things considered justified. For instance, inequalities at exit between parents and children are permissible to the extent to which children need parents to ensure that their most important interests are respected. Similarly, children's lack of full autonomy legitimates much asymmetrical power of parents over them; it is legitimate that parents decide on children's diets and not the other way around; for the same reason, genetic shaping aimed at preventing disease or disability does not come under the purview of my criticism.

But introducing additional, easily avoidable, inequalities seems, at least *prima facie*, objectionable on grounds of fairness as long as they do not serve any of these purposes. The objectionable unfairness regards the distribution of power between parent and children. The ideal that guides this objection is one of relationships not displaying easily avoidable inequalities that are not necessary to protect the most important interests of the more vulnerable, dependent party, that is, of the child. It seems possible to recast the objection in the republican language of domination: genetic shaping that takes the form of enhancement allows the parent to choose the child's features, thus making the child dependent on her parent's will in yet another way. In the case of genetic

<sup>14</sup> For further elaboration on this analogy, and on the argument of this section, see Gheaus (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Although note that in a world of non-voluntary parenting most likely different people would be born than in a world of voluntary parenting. This means that the real reasons for upholding voluntariness with respect to whether and when one becomes a parent concerns parents' well-being and autonomy and impersonal goodness.

shaping that takes the form of selection, the republican objection applies in a less straightforward way; a decision to select creates a more dependent relationship than would have existed in the absence of selection. Note that the relationship might, but need not, be with the same individual child that would have otherwise existed, in the case in which the same selected embryo would have been conceived and carried to term by non-selecting procreators. And the dependency in question could be avoided if another individual than the person who decided to select was to raise the child (assuming this other prospective parent did not choose the child based on any knowledge of the child's features.)

This is not to say that there cannot be *any* moral appeal to allowing some choice to at least one party, both in the case of spouses-to-be and in the case of parenting. Consequentialists interested in maximizing autonomous acts may welcome that at least the groom, if not the bride and at least the parent, if not the child, comes closer to making their own decision. Further, for utilitarians it will be relevant that the second kind of marriage may stand better chances to happiness (if the groom is wise). Utilitarians will then have to factor in the likelihood that the bride's resentment at being treated as less than equal to her groom will poison marital bliss. Just like in the case of spouses, parents who choose their future children on the basis of some characteristics may stand a better chance to family happiness—either because they have their wishes met or because they may be better able to enjoy relationships with children who display certain features than with other children. This, in turn, would benefit both parents and children. Again, these considerations will have to be balanced against the possibility that children of design may doubt the grounds of their parents' love, whether or not for philosophically sound reasons. In addition, to those interested in maximizing utility it will clearly be relevant that parental genetic shaping may result in an increase in well-being for the child.

An all-things-considered evaluation of parental genetic shaping will require commitment to a particular position in normative ethics and, possibly, sufficient empirical information to decide whether genetic shaping will result in a net gain in well-being. Whatever that final evaluation, enhancement and selection introduce an additional, avoidable inequality to the already very unequal parent-child relationship. This inequality is, by assumption, not necessary for the normal functioning of the child. A parent's decision to love an unchosen child contributes towards a parent-child relationship that is as equal as possible without jeopardizing the child's well-being and future autonomy.

The moral importance of maximizing equality at the beginning of the parent-child relationship distinguishes genetic shaping for morally and medically irrelevant features from environmental shaping. For example, one could reject the anti-perfectionistic ideal of childrearing defended by Clayton and think that it is permissible to engage in some environmental shaping of one's

child for the sake of conferring advantages. So, one may think that there is nothing wrong with encouraging medically and morally neutral features in one's child that are meant to make her life better, at least as long as these will not result in competitive advantage and are not cultivated for the sake of parental self-extension. Take, for instance, the case of a humourless parent who is cultivating her child's sense of humour in order to make the life of the child (non-competitively) better. Is this behaviour open to the same objection of unnecessarily increasing the inequality in an already very unequal relationship? It seems not. It is true that this parent, by shaping her child, is partly determining who is the person whom she is going to continue to raise. But the decision takes place *within* a relationship that is already as equal as it can be with respect to voluntary entry and exit for both parties.

Whatever normative importance you may attach to equality between parties at the point of entry in relationships in general, there is a reason to think that this kind of equality is especially important within the parent–child relationship. In relationships between two or more adults, or between two or more children, parties are usually equally able to shape each other within the relationship. In contrast, children have less power to shape their parents than parents have power to shape their children. Once the parent–child relationship exists, children do exert some influences on their parents. This influence is at first unintentional and therefore entirely uncontrolled by the child and then, gradually, increasingly intentional. Over time, a child partly determines who is the person who is parenting them, and part of this shaping can be intentional. After the parent–child relationship has been established, both participants to it inevitably shape the other's features—slowly but continuously. But, absent special circumstances, the power of the child to shape her parents remains inferior to the power of the parent to shape the child. This fact may bear on the special importance of equality at entry in relationships between parents and children and hence on the reason why parental genetic shaping is objectionable. Shaping the child before the relationship exists exacerbates the already existing overall inequality of 'voice' in parent–child relationship:

The exacerbation of inequality at the entry point into the relationship is more problematic than the one introduced by parental environmental shaping of morally neutral and medically unnecessary features—features which, by assumption, are not necessary for protecting the child's rights. Attempts to environmental shaping also exacerbate the inequality between parents and children, but at least they are likely to be met with an expression of children's approval, or disapproval, of the attempted shaping. Malmqvist (2011) has argued that environmental shaping unfolds over time in the context of the parent–child relationship and this makes it easier for the parent to assess its impact on the child's well-being. That children have at least a chance to be heard makes environmental shaping less problematic than genetic shaping. Even more importantly, unlike genetic shaping, environmental shaping



happens in a context in which the child can already—albeit to a lesser extent than the parent—shape the other individual in the relationship. Genetic shaping allows parents to influence children even before children have any power to shape parents—either intentionally or unintentionally—and to react to their attempts at shaping. It introduces, in the history of the relationship, a phase when the child had no possibility to shape the parent either intentionally or unintentionally. Whereas the parent had such a chance and used it.

Therefore, for reasons of equality, and other things equal, parental genetic shaping is more objectionable than parental environmental shaping.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

I have argued for two claims in this paper: first, that genetic shaping is morally objectionable because it exacerbates the asymmetry between parent and child with respect to the voluntariness of their entrance into the parent–child relationship. Secondly, that parental genetic shaping is, for this reason, different and more objectionable than parental environmental shaping; but I did not attempt to say anything about how (much more) objectionable. As far as the present argument shows, genetic shaping is objectionable when undertaken by a procreator *qua* future childrearer; my account says nothing about the normative status of genetic shaping undertaken by mere procreators.

Depending on the weight one attaches to avoiding morally unjustified asymmetries between parents and children with respect to their voluntary participation in the parent–child relationship, one will see the argument against environmental shaping that I present as more or less decisive. In particular, one may think that the value of equality between parents and children must be balanced against the gains in child’s well-being that may result from genetic enhancement. As I note in the previous section, the case for gains in well-being is an ambiguous ground for evaluating parental genetic enhancement: on the one hand, parental environmental shaping may be used to confer advantage on children and improve the prospects of the future relationship between parent and child. On the other hand, children may resent their status as ‘designer babies’ and feel less securely attached; in the latter case, the relationship with their parent may be detrimentally affected as well.

If the argument of this paper is correct, it has some implications for intentionally shaping one’s future child by ways other than genetic technology—for instance, by choosing one’s procreative partner based on looks or intelligence in the hope that these features will be passed on to their child. The argument also bears on the ethics of adoption, telling something against permitting prospective adopting parents to choose the child they adopt based on that child’s features.

Finally, for those who already believe that all parental shaping of morally neutral and medically unnecessary features is illegitimate, the argument I offer in this paper provides a *pro tanto* reason for radical changes in the allocation of the right to parent in some cases. Assume that, like Clayton, one thinks that all avoidable enrollment of a child in the parent's conception of the good is impermissible. One may still support some genetic—as well as environmental—shaping as a source of benefits for the future child, if the choice to shape does not belong to the parent. If it is undisputed that a particular feature, the likelihood of which can be genetically controlled, will benefit a child, then there is a good case that the child should get the genetic treatment. For instance, it may be clearly better for a child to have a genetic set-up that precludes teeth decay. But in this case the genetic treatment should, in the interest of fairness, be thought of as a matter of general, state regulated policy and equally available to all children. If, by contrast, it is controversial that a particular genetic treatment will advance the child's well-being, then parents overstep their prerogatives by genetically (or environmentally) shaping their children. If a procreator who intends to rear the child nevertheless does engage in genetic shaping, the argument of this paper provides a *pro tanto* reason to allow another willing individual to rear the child in question. And, in a society in which people routinely engage in genetic shaping, it provides a *pro tanto* reason to shuffle babies amongst various prospective parents.<sup>16</sup>

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