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Asymmetry Endures: A Response to Holt

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Abstract

Holt argues against my account of the moral disanalogy between the situation of a pregnant person having an abortion and a parent committing the infanticide of their newborn. I explain that this critique fails because Holt constructs a straw man of my account by misrepresenting its scope, misrepresents one of my arguments, and presents false equivalences between both, withdrawing consent for sex and withdrawing from parenthood, and the relationship between a homeowner and their property and the relationship between a parent and their child, which demonstrates misunderstandings of the notions of parenthood, obligation, and consent.

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Holt argues against my account of the moral disanalogy between the situation of a pregnant person having an abortion and a parent committing the infanticide of their newborn for the same reasons a pregnant person may have for abortion.[1] On my account, the former is morally permissible while the latter is not. I argue Holt's critique fails. Holt constructs a straw man of my account by misrepresenting its scope, misrepresents one of my arguments, and presents false equivalences between both, withdrawing consent for sex and withdrawing from parenthood, and the relationship between a homeowner and their property and the relationship between a parent and their child. This demonstrates misunderstandings of the notions of parenthood, obligation, and consent.

Holt states, “Yet Singh's account seeks to explain the wrongness of all cases of infanticide but still allows for late-term abortions.”[1] This is false. My account does not seek to account for the wrongness of all cases of infanticide. Mine is an account of the disanalogy between the situations of a pregnant person having an abortion and a parent committing the infanticide of their newborn such that it is morally permissible for a pregnant person to have an abortion but morally impermissible for a parent to commit the infanticide of their newborn. Insofar as Holt objects to my account as one that seeks to explain the wrongness of all cases of infanticide, Holt commits a straw man by misrepresenting the scope of my account, attributing to it a broader range than intended. This misrepresentation undermines Holt’s critique.

Holt reconstructs my argument from the wrongness of giving a fetus fetal alcohol syndrome for why the relationship between a parent and a child is not an extension of the relationship between a pregnant person and a fetus they carry that begins at conception as follows:

- 1a. If pregnant people are parents of any unborn human, then harming them by seriously impairing them is wrong.
- 2a. It is not wrong to seriously impair an unborn human if no future child will exist.
- 3a. Therefore, pregnant people are not the parents of any unborn humans.

Holt then takes this reconstruction to imply the following argument:

- 1b. If it is wrong to harm a born human by seriously impairing them, then you can be a parent to a born human.
- 2b. It is wrong to seriously impair a born human.
- 3b. Therefore, you can be a parent to a born human.

From here, Holt tries to argue that my argument fails because I uncritically assume 2b, and 2b cannot be defended on my account.

But this reconstruction misrepresents my argument, because I do not claim that it is seriously wrong to impair a born human. As mentioned, my account is one of a moral disanalogy between the situations of a pregnant person having an abortion and a parent committing the infanticide of their newborn. It is not an account of the wrongness of impairing born humans. What I actually claim is that it is wrong for a parent to commit the infanticide of their newborn, even if they cite reasons that may justify a pregnant person having an abortion. So, I do not need to defend 2b, as that is not a claim I make.

Further, I do not merely assume that parents can only be in a parenthood relation with born children because I do not merely assume that only born humans (i.e. not fetuses) can be children. Rather, I show this with my argument from the wrongness of giving a fetus fetal alcohol syndrome. This argument explains why parenthood does not pertain between pregnant people and the fetuses they carry. Fetuses are not children, for if they were, it would always be wrong for the pregnant people who carry them to seriously impair them, but it is not always wrong for the pregnant people who carry those fetuses to impair them, so they are not. I show this with the case of defective fetuses that will be stillborn. Because what would make an instance of a pregnant person impairing a fetus they carry by giving it fetal alcohol syndrome wrong is the fact that a future child will suffer harms. But in cases of defective fetuses, no future child will be harmed. Such cases show that impairing a fetus is not always wrong. Thus, it is not always wrong to impair a fetus. Therefore, fetuses are not children. If fetuses are not children, the pregnant people carrying them are not their parents. So, the pregnant people carrying them are not their parents.

This is why the parent–child relationship cannot be obtained between an “unborn human” and a parent, and this answer contains no circularity. I argue from what is entailed in parenthood, namely that parents have parental responsibilities that are moral responsibilities. It is central to my

account that parenthood is a moral relationship that entails moral responsibilities to take care of one's children, so my account has no problem explaining why it is wrong for a parent to seriously harm their children. Doing so violates the duty to take care of them, because to harm them is the opposite of taking care of them. To clearly illustrate:

1. Parents have a moral obligation to take care of their children. (A fact about the nature of parenthood as a moral relationship)
2. Taking care of something entails not seriously harming it. (The very concept of "taking care" entails acting in a way that, among other things, protects from serious harm)
3. If one has an obligation to take care of something, and taking care of something includes not seriously harming it, then one has an obligation to not seriously harm it. (A general moral principle)
4. If parents have a moral obligation to take care of their children, and taking care of something includes not seriously harming them, then one has an obligation to not seriously harm their children. (Application of the case of parenthood to the general moral principle)
5. Therefore, parents have an obligation to not seriously harm their children.

This argument is not circular because at no point do I presuppose the truth of my conclusion. Instead, I arrive at it from what logically follows from truths about parenthood and what it means to take care of something. It is a mistake to think that I somehow sneak my conclusion in via the first premise. The first premise says nothing about an obligation to not seriously harm one's children. This conclusion follows only when the conceptual claim about what it means to take care of something is added. So, the argument is not circular. Any circularity Holt identifies must be a

product of Holt's reconstruction. Thus, insofar as Holt refutes the reconstruction, Holt does not refute my argument, but only a straw man.

Holt further argues that my account "does not rule out a parent renouncing their parenthood and thereby committing infanticide by deprivation as parents can decide whether they will continue being a parent." [1] This criticism depends on the claim that parents can relinquish their role and obligations simply by renouncing them. Holt claims parenthood can be renounced as easily as withdrawing consent to sex. But this is a false equivalence. Consenting to do something does not imply that a person is obligated to do it. But to have an obligation to do something is exactly to have a duty to do it. Consenting to sex is voluntary. Choosing to pursue parenthood is also voluntary, but being a parent is not purely voluntary. This is for the simple reason that being a parent means one has parental responsibilities, which are certain moral responsibilities and are thus obligations. They are duties that parents are bound to fulfill in virtue of being parents. Consent to sex does not create a moral obligation to go through with the sex act. Parenthood, however, entails duties, and so cannot be renounced as easily as sexual consent can be withdrawn.

Holt's analogy of the tomato grower is similarly flawed. Unlike parenthood, the role of tomato grower is purely voluntary and does not entail moral responsibilities. The tomato grower may thus abandon their role simply by renouncing it. Being a parent, however, is an obligation-laden role, and so cannot be analogously renounced.

Holt contends that because I admit there are ways to relinquish parenthood, such as through adoption, I cannot explain why a parent cannot simply renounce their role and obligations. But this is a mistake. It does not follow from the fact that there are ways to relinquish one's role and obligations (such as a structured socio-legal process of adoption) that they can be relinquished in just any way (such as by merely renouncing them like someone no longer interested in engaging a

particular sex act or continuing to tend to the tomatoes in their backyard might). Such an inference is fallacious.

My account does rule out the moral permissibility of a parent simply renouncing their role and obligations and committing infanticide via abandonment because being a parent means being bound by parental responsibilities which are moral responsibilities and thus obligations. Moral obligations are duties, and even if there are ways to cease to be bound by particular duties, mere renunciation is insufficient to cease to be bound by them. To maintain otherwise is to fail to grasp the notion of a moral obligation. Thus, it is not the case that “such a parental obligation can only be mysterious and arbitrary under Singh’s model.”[1] There is nothing mysterious about the duty to not abandon one’s child and leave it to die. A parent that does this violates their parental obligations because doing so seriously harms their child, and they will have not ceased to be bound by their role and obligations merely by renouncing them.

But suppose Holt is right and mere renunciation is sufficient to relinquish one’s role and obligations as a parent. Even so, it still would not be the case that my account “does not rule out a parent renouncing their parenthood and thereby committing infanticide by deprivation as parents can decide whether they will continue being a parent.”[1] If parenthood can be renounced so simply, then the case Holt imagines would not trouble my account because it would fall outside the scope of my account. The person who renounces parenthood is no longer a parent. If they are no longer a parent, then they cannot be parent who commits the infanticide of their child. As mentioned, my account is not an account of the wrongness of infanticide in general. The case Holt imagines is one in which a person who is not a parent (because they have renounced parenthood) commits infanticide, and so is a case that falls outside the scope of my account. This further underscores that Holts’ critique depends on misrepresentation.

For these reasons, Holt's critique fails and my account endures.

References

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