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**Birth’s Transformative Shift: A Response to Waleszczyński**

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**Abstract**

Andrzej Waleszczyński critiques my argument for why the relationship between a pregnant person and any fetus they carry is not a relationship between a parent and a child. I argue Waleszczyński does not show that my “argument from potentiality” is inadequate, and I provide further justification for why birth marks a transformative shift into a moral relationship.

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Andrzej Waleszczyński critiques my argument for why the relationship between a pregnant person and any fetus they carry is not a relationship between a parent and a child.[1] On my view, this is because birth is the significant point at which the parent-child relationship would emerge.[2][3] My aim here is to address Waleszczyński’s rejection of what he calls my “argument from potentiality”, and his claim that I do not give sufficient justification for my claim that birth marks a transformative shift into a moral relationship. I argue that Waleszczyński does not show that the argument from potentiality is inadequate, and I provide further justification for why birth marks a transformative shift into a moral relationship.

Waleszczyński takes issue with the analogies I employ concerning potentiality. I say that just as a potential judge or potential homeowner is not an actual judge or actual homeowner, a potential child is not an actual child. On my view, fetuses are only potential children but not actual ones. This depends on two claims: First, that a potential *X* is not an actual *X*, and second, that fetuses are potential children. The first claim is irrefutable, so if Waleszczyński’s rejection of my argument from potentiality is to work, it is the second claim that must be rejected. Waleszczyński attempts this by claiming that while a law student or prospective home buyer is a potential judge or homeowner because they have the capacity to become these things, they are not inherently destined to take on that role. But fetuses, Waleszczyński contends, are unlike law students and prospective home buyers because fetuses “possesses the potential to evolve into a newborn child while being inherently destined to manifest as such.” But this is false. Fetuses do possess the potential to become newborn children, but this is not something fetuses are inherently destined to manifest or evolve into. Destiny refers to that which will necessarily happen. For a thing to be destined is for some particular fate to certainly be met. It is not necessary that fetuses manifest as or evolve into newborn children. Miscarriage is one thing that can prevent a fetus from becoming a newborn and abortion is another. Waleszczyński recognizes that abortion can impede a fetus’s progression toward becoming a newborn child, but states that such considerations are beyond the scope of the current argument. But the opposite is true. Such considerations are exactly the ones that show fetuses do not have the inherent destiny Waleszczyński claims they do. Thus, the analogies I employ remain apt, meaning Waleszczyński has not shown my argument from potentiality to be inadequate. Consequently, the rest Waleszczyński’s critique loses some force, for I can employ the conclusions of the argument from potentiality to defend what I say about the nature of the parent-child relationship.

Waleszczyński raises concerns about my view of the parent-child relationship. Waleszczyński claims that I transition “to characterising the relationship between the newborn and the individuals who facilitate its birth as a parent–child relationship, despite its purely biological nature” and that I readily bestow “a moral status on this relationship, despite the newborn being in the developmental stage towards adulthood, akin to the fetus progressing towards newborn status.”[1] The supposed problem here is that I neglect to delineate a birthgiver-child relationship from a parent-child relationship. Failure to do so means that I have not “sufficiently justified why the moment of a child’s birth, essentially a biological event, undergoes a transformative shift into a moral relationship.”[1] Brith, Waleszczyński claims, “merely represents a stage in the process of development toward adulthood and independence, as well as toward death”[1], rather than a morally significant and transformative point I argue it does.

However, there is sufficient justification for why birth marks a transformative shift into the moral relationship that is parenthood, and thus into a parent-child relationship beyond a birthgiver-offspring relationship. It is because birth is the earliest point at which the moral responsibilities of parenthood could begin and the point potential parents and their potential children become actual parents and actual children, thus actualizing a parent-child relationship. I show this with an argument that I have made elsewhere on the topic,[4] which goes as follows: Parents have responsibilities to take care of their children’s well-being such that harming them by seriously impairing them is wrong. If pregnant people are parents to any fetuses they carry and those fetuses are their children, then they have parental responsibilities toward those fetuses. If they have parental responsibilities toward any fetuses they carry, then it would be wrong for pregnant persons to harm any fetuses they carry by seriously impairing them. Consider the responsibility to refrain from consuming alcohol during pregnancy. We might think that it is wrong to consume alcohol during pregnancy because doing so seriously impairs the fetus by giving it fetal alcohol syndrome. But such harm to the fetus is not what makes giving a fetus fetal alcohol syndrome wrong. Instead, it is wrong because it will cause detrimental harm to the future child. But, if there is no harm to a future born child, then giving a fetus fetal alcohol syndrome is not wrong because it is the harm to a future child that constitutes its wrongness. Imagine a scenario where a fetus is, for some reason, unviable and will die before it reaches term. This means that there is no future child. Suppose the pregnant person consumes enough alcohol during the pregnancy to give that fetus fetal alcohol syndrome. In this case, the pregnant person has not done something wrong because they do not do anything that causes harm to a future child, as there will never be any future child to suffer harms. So, it would not be wrong for a pregnant person to consume enough alcohol during a pregnancy in which they carry an unviable fetus that will die before it reaches term to give that fetus fetal alcohol syndrome because, while doing so seriously impairs the fetus, it does not harm a future child.

If a pregnant person is a parent to any fetus they carry, then, in cases of pregnancy where the fetus is unviable and will die before it reaches term, the pregnant person is the parent of that unviable fetus they carry. If pregnant people are parents to the unviable fetuses they carry, then they have parental responsibilities to take care of the fetus’s well-being such that they are doing something wrong if they seriously impair them. Giving an unviable fetus fetal alcohol syndrome seriously impairs a fetus. If a pregnant person has parental responsibilities to any unviable fetus they carry, then it is wrong for them to harm any unviable fetus they carry by giving it fetal alcohol syndrome. But, as explained, giving a fetus fetal alcohol syndrome is wrong because it causes harm to a future born child, not because it harms the fetus. Because in the case of an unviable fetus there is no future born child to suffer harms, the criterion for wrongness cannot be met and so it is not wrong for a pregnant person to give an unviable fetus they carry fetal alcohol syndrome. If it is not wrong, then pregnant people do not have parental responsibilities to any unviable fetuses they carry. If pregnant people do not have parental responsibilities to any unviable fetuses they carry, then they are not parents to any unviable fetus they carry. If the relationship between parents and born children is an extension of a relationship that emerges at conception, then the relationship pregnant people have with any unviable fetuses they carry is parenthood. But pregnant people are not parents to any unviable fetuses they carry. Therefore, the relationship pregnant people have with their fetuses is not parenthood, meaning it is not the case that the relationship between parents and born children is an extension of a relationship that emerges at conception.

Because the relationship pregnant people have with their fetuses is not a parent-child relationship, fetuses cannot be the moral patients of the moral responsibilities of parenthood. Thus, contrary to Waleszczyński, the moral responsibility associated with the parent–child relationship, as I posit them, does not extend to the fetal stages of development because it does not extend to fetuses. The moment of birth is thus not purely biological in nature but also moral and social in nature.

Furthermore, while responsibilities such as the responsibility to refrain from consuming alcohol during pregnancy are toward a future child and its well-being, they are not parental responsibilities because they are toward a future child and not an actual one. A future child denotes potentiality, so the pregnant person is still only a potential parent and so does not have parental responsibilities.

Due to children, and not fetuses, being the moral patients of the moral responsibilities of parenthood, birth does not merely represent a stage in the process of development toward adulthood as Waleszczyński claims, but really does mark a morally significant and transformative shift because it is at birth where children come into the world and the earliest point parental responsibilities can begin. Birth is distinguished as not merely a stage in a process of development because birth creates the moral patients of parental responsibilities. Birth serves as a determining factor for the onset of parental responsibilities for those who have committed to raising the child because birth is the point at which they go from being the potential parents of a potential child to the actual parents of an actual child.

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