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Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate by Christine Overall. Cambridge, MA; The MIT Press, 2012, US\$27.95. ISBN 978-0-262-01698-8

Christine Overall is one of the most under-appreciated feminist philosophers in North America and almost certainly the finest feminist philosopher in Canada. Overall, who is University Research Chair and Professor of Philosophy and Gender Studies at Queen's University, was the first feminist philosopher elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and has received a host of other accolades and honors, including the Royal Society's Gender Studies Award (2008) and both the Royal Society's Abbyann D. Lynch Medal in Bioethics (2006) and Canadian Philosophical Association's Book Prize (2005) for her monograph *Aging, Death, and Longevity: A Philosophical Inquiry* (University of California Press, 2003). A specialist in feminist bioethics, applied ethics, and social theory, Overall has also published several other academic books, as well as numerous articles, book chapters, and review essays on a broad range of topics, such as: reproductive technologies, feminist politics and practice, free speech, religious belief, disability, transgender, and heterosexuality.¹ In her recent book *Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate*, Overall brings many of these (and other) topics together in a series of critical reflections on the ethics of human procreation, reflections motivated by an unwavering feminist outlook expressed in relentlessly-probing philosophical argument. Written in non-technical, straightforward prose that welcomes a wide readership, Overall's arguments manage to carefully dismantle or at least compromise virtually every one of the philosophical claims about and positions on human procreation with which she disagrees or that she finds unsatisfactory in some way.

The question that Overall asks in the title of her book offers a case in point. The question suggests that the decision to have children requires philosophical justification. As Overall points

out, however, philosophers and bioethicists have seldom given the question the critical attention it warrants, that is, have seldom acknowledged the ethical import of procreative decision making. For example, although bioethicists have written a great deal about reproductive technologies, about procreation and disability, and about pregnancy and childbirth, they seem to assume that the decision about *whether* to procreate is itself a pragmatic and prudential judgement without moral repercussions. To take another example that Overall notes, although population ethicists discuss abstract utilitarian issues with respect to overpopulation, quality of life, and the ideal number of people who should inhabit the world, they have rarely considered the question “Why have children?” as a concrete moral issue for individuals. Overall thinks that these kinds of philosophical discussions are “radically incomplete” and, therefore, aims to show how this “large gap in philosophical thought can be filled” (13). As she puts it, “our specific reasons for procreating matter morally:” procreative decisions not only concern whether to take responsibility for a new life (or new lives), but rather are also connected to our own self-definitions, condition our interactions with our social and physical environments, have implications for our consumption of resources, concern fundamental institutions such as education and health care, and so on. Nevertheless, Overall remarks, many of the standard reasons people offer to explain why they procreate are mistaken. Thus, Overall’s main objective in the book is to show what should count as the *best*, that is, the most ethical reason to have children (12-17).

That Overall’s argument in the book derives from a resolutely feminist analysis is especially noteworthy, for she is concerned to underscore the *gendered* character of procreative decision making. Women remain largely defined in terms of their relationships with children, including their capacity to bear them; hence, the context of procreative decision making is

“imbued with differences in power, authority, prestige, wealth, and future prospects” (9). In other words, procreative decisions are made within a political context. Overall argues that because the context within which procreative decision making takes place is political, such decision making cannot be realistically discussed outside of a feminist framework, but rather *requires* a feminist analysis. In mainstream philosophical work on reproductive ethics, there is little recognition of the social, economic, and political differences that shape the context in which procreative decisions are made. Non-feminist bioethicists and moral philosophers have generally approached matters in this area of ethical inquiry as if they were gender-neutral, that is, as if the questions asked in the field of the ethics of procreation and the claims advanced in response to them do not have different practical implications and concrete consequences for the lives of women than they do from the lives of men. Overall emphasizes, however, that decisions—for women—of whether to have a child can be multifactorial, requiring negotiation of a variety of factors at various moments, which may include decisions about whether to conceive a future child or prevent conception, whether to carry the fetus to term or abort it if one has conceived, and whether to rear the child to adulthood or let others take up this task if one has borne a baby (8-11). Indeed, Overall also shows that in fact some of the allegedly gender-neutral topics that non-feminist bioethicists and philosophers discuss with respect to the ethics of procreation, and some (if not many) of the purportedly universal arguments they advance on these topics, rely upon sexist and even misogynistic presuppositions and premises or have sexist and misogynistic implications.

The scope of reproductive rights is one of the subjects associated with procreative decision making for which a number of non-feminist (or, mainstream) authors have claimed gender-neutrality; that is, these authors have argued that feminists often fail to adequately

account for men's reproductive rights. Men, they argue, have the same array of positive and negative rights to reproduce or not reproduce as do women and, furthermore, the recognition of these rights is as morally compelling as is the recognition of women's reproductive rights. To the contrary, Overall states, although no woman has the right to demand that a given man relinquish some of his sperm in order that she may conceive, because women become pregnant (she sets aside the issues that the potential of pregnancy for transmen raise) and cannot simply "walk away" from a pregnancy as a man can, women's reproductive freedom and autonomy are foundational in ways that men's reproductive rights are not. Women's bodily freedom (including reproductive freedom) and autonomy are the *sine qua non* for women's equality and full citizenship (21). No woman should be coerced or forced to carry a pregnancy to term against her wishes, nor should she be coerced or forced to terminate a wanted pregnancy (cf. Tremain 2006). But what about situations in which "inseminators" and "gestators" disagree? As I have noted, various authors have argued that under certain circumstances men's reproductive rights would be violated if women's reproductive rights were regarded as fundamental and unconditional to the extent that Overall contends they are. What if a given pregnant woman has deceived her inseminator for whom the pregnancy is unwanted? Why should a man be held financially or personally responsible for a future child he did not wish to conceive in the first place? What if a man wants his lover to carry to term the fetus that she wants to abort? Shouldn't the pregnant lover acknowledge the significant role that the male lover's gametes played in conception of the fetus by (for instance) carrying it to term and fulfilling his desire for a child that, if necessary, he will rear alone? "No," says Overall, who, in a chapter comprised of refreshingly pointed, no-nonsense arguments, shows why none of these or the other hypothetical

situations that her interlocutors propose provides a justificatory basis for the alleged gender-neutrality of positive and negative reproductive rights and freedoms (37-55).

Notwithstanding women's reproductive autonomy, is there an obligation not to reproduce? Is bringing another human being into the world ever inflicting harm on the one brought into being? David Benatar, in his "chillingly titled" (96) book *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, answers both questions in the affirmative. For Benatar, "coming into existence is *always* a serious harm" (Benatar 2006, 1, in Overall, 96; emphasis in Overall). The main argument behind Benatar's claim is this:

Although the good things in one's life make it go better than it otherwise would have gone, one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed.

Those who never exist cannot be deprived. However, by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms that could not have befallen one had one not come into existence" (Benatar, 1, in Overall, 96).

In a set of several arguments, Overall shows that Benatar's theory is "fatally flawed" (97) and does not establish the strong argument against all procreation that it claims to do. She also shows that Benatar's theory has negative implications for women and could have detrimental effects for women and girls were it to be accepted and widely adopted. Overall argues, for instance, that Benatar's theory implies that women's reproductive labor produces bad consequences. As she explains, "the idea that it is better in every case never to have been implies that women's reproductive labor in pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and even rearing children contributes to the accumulation of net harm on this planet" (Overall, 115).

Downgrading procreation in this way is unlikely to elevate women's status, she points out, especially in societies where women's status is centred primarily on their role as child-bearers.

Indeed, Overall is concerned to show that Benatar's theory relies upon misogynistic presuppositions insofar as it implies that one of women's primary social contributions is a liability. Would this view, if widely endorsed, lead to an increase in the rate of infanticide of girls or to assaults on pregnant women?, she asks.

Overall identifies the utilitarian Principle of Procreative Beneficence (PPB)—whose overtly ableist presuppositions would have dire consequences for the diversity of the human population were they widely endorsed and adopted—as another example of a mainstream theoretical approach to the ethics of procreation that has gender-specific negative implications for women who reproduce, although the principle has been promoted and discussed as if it were gender-neutral. Until now, that is, the adverse implications for women (including for women's autonomy) of the PPB have gone unrecognized and unremarked upon. Advanced by Julian Savulescu and Guy Kahane, the PPB articulates “the moral obligation to have the best children.” As Savulescu explains it, “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, in Overall, 125). Overall points out that despite the fact that Savulescu never refers specifically to women, but rather to “couples” or “single reproducers,” the PPB would put greater onus on women than on men to facilitate achievement of the ideal (or “best”) race of humans that the PPB is designed to ensure. As she notes, the achievement of procreative beneficence, in Savulescu's sense, necessitates the use of preimplantation genetic diagnosis after in vitro fertilization (Overall, 125). Every prospective mother would be required to undergo the expensive, invasive, and possibly fatal procedures that these technologies involve. Furthermore: “Procreative Beneficence implies couples should employ genetic tests for non-disease traits in selecting which

child to bring into existence, and that we should allow selection for non-disease genes in some cases *even if this maintains or increases social inequality* (Savulescu 2001, 415, in Overall 125-26; my emphasis). Who is the “we” to whom Savulescu refers?, Overall asks. And what non-disease traits are “we” to select against? Savulescu and Kahane have in fact supplied an incomplete guide of characteristics for “us” to select against that includes: clinical depression, autism, negative affect, Asperber’s syndrome, cognitive and physical abilities, personality traits, propensity to addiction, and sexual orientation (Savulescu and Kahane, 2009, 276, in Overall, 126). In short, the reach of the PPB, according to which certain allegedly natural characteristics should be selected (viz. as the consequence of de-selecting others) in order to produce the “best” offspring, is potentially limitless. Indeed, because the reach of the PPB is potentially without limits, it should never be advanced as the “best” reason to have children.

NOTE

¹ From 1993-2006, Overall also wrote a weekly feminist column entitled “In Other Words” for the *Kingston Whig-Standard*, the daily newspaper of Kingston, Canada, where she lives and works, and wrote a column entitled “It’s All Academic” from 2008-2011 for *University Affairs*, Canada’s academic magazine.

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