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BOOK REVIEW

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Why Have Children?

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Christine Overall, *Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012, 272 pages).

Christine Overall is a professor of philosophy, holding the Queen's University Research Chair, Kingston, Ontario. She specializes in Feminist Philosophy, Applied Ethics, the Philosophy of Religion and the Philosophy of Education. Publication of *Why Have Children?* by the prestigious MIT Press confirms the view of many that she is "one of the greatest feminist scholars of our time." Not being a philosopher, I approached her book with respect. Nevertheless, my first and continuing problem with her book is philosophical: her imprecise use of the term "procreation" and its confusion with "reproduction."

Collins English Dictionary (HarperCollins, 2003) derives the origin of the term "procreation" from the Latin *pro* and *creare*, which together mean "to bring forth." It gives two English definitions: (1) to beget or engender offspring, and (2) to bring into being. The word "beget" means "to be the father or sire of" (*Webster* and the *New American Heritage Dictionary*), and secondarily to procreate or bring into existence. A phrase like "bring forth" implies that something is brought forth from somewhere. In human procreation this means a child is brought forth from the union of a man and a woman in conjugal embrace. Of course, when the child is prevented from "coming forth" as a result of abortion the process cannot be called procreation. Furthermore, the word "reproduction" is used when the child is conceived through assisted reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization or assisted donor insemination.

In this review I shall examine how Prof. Overall's basic philosophic premise as well as her anthropology are flawed from this confusion. Her basic premise is that the decision (in her terms) to "procreate" a child rests only with the woman, because it is part of her body as a fetus until it is brought forth, when it becomes a child with a life and identity of its own. There is almost no mention of the father's role in engendering the child. In fact, she explicitly states

that the book is not about a father's relation to his child. In the few instances when a father is mentioned it is as a financial provider, nothing more.

Right at the beginning Overall says that: "A woman's choice whether to procreate can be made independently of being in a relationship with a man – indeed with the assistance of insemination, it can be made independently even of sexual interaction with a man" (p. 10). Yet she terms it a "procreative decision," in which women can be "self-determining decision-makers." With access to contraception she does not think this at all far-fetched. She aims to focus primarily on the choice to procreate through heterosexual intercourse or assisted donor insemination (AID), but not other reproductive technologies. While this limitation would seem to make a major distinction between a reproductive technology and "procreation," in reality, as stated above, it simply obscures the true difference. In a true procreative act, the man and woman make a decision together to engage in sexual intercourse from which the child is the superabundant fruit – a gift. Instead, what Overall is talking about is a unilateral decision on the part of the woman either to produce a child or not, and the means, i.e. heterosexual intercourse or AID, are immaterial, as is the presence of the father, except for his sperm and later possibly his financial support. The father is treated as a means to an end and the child ceases to be a gift.

In Chapter 2, Overall discusses moral reproductive rights. She defines a right as "an entitlement that we have good reason to accept… that is an expression of one's humanity and belongs to an individual by virtue of his or her being a human person" (p. 20). Reproductive rights fall under such a foundational category. Along with the right to reproduce comes the right not to reproduce. It is significant that Overall does not talk about procreative rights. Rather she affirms that reproductive rights provide the foundation for the ethics of procreation (p. 21). In other words, what she is really talking about is not true procreation, where the child is a superabundant gift of sexual intercourse, but about a situation where he/she is the product of a self-interested individual decision in the Lockean manner. In fact, she says that reproductive rights are grounded in general human interests (p. 32). Yet at some level Overall recognizes that procreation per se is not a matter of rights and never can be. She actually says that "the right to reproduce does not guarantee a baby to anyone" (p. 32).

In Chapter 3, Overall deals with other philosophers' solutions to prospective parents' disagreement on having children. Here she attempts to tackle head on the problem of men's "procreative asymmetry" (the fact that the man plays such a different role in procreation to that of the woman). In order to reduce the asymmetry she posits that the fetus inside the womb is not a child but merely an appendage of the woman's body that she can dispose of at will. When it is born it becomes a child and is entitled to a father's financial support. She holds men financially responsible even when their sperm has been stolen (p. 46)!

Chapters 5 and 6 deal in turn with deontological and consequential reasons for having children. Here, as in later chapters, her confusion on whether the child is a gift and wanted for its own sake is on display. She wants to say both that the child is and is not a gift, and has intrinsic value but cannot exist for its own sake. Countering the argument that the child cannot be a gift because a gift needs a recipient and the child did not exist to receive the gift of life before the parents created him, she grants that not all gifts have a specific target in mind. Charitable donations are an example. Yet she argues that since the parent creates the child, it cannot be brought into existence for its own sake. From that she concludes that child-bearing is not intrinsically worthwhile, but has worth from other values – in her view, from the developing parent-child relationship.

Based on these premises Overall dismisses most deontological arguments. With regard to

religion she rightly holds that philosophy cannot know what God wants (p. 67), but in her rejection of any religious argument she comes down on the side of the non-existence of God instead of leaving it open. She rightly calls consequentialist arguments utilitarian. In opposing "savior siblings" she comes closest to seeing the child as a disinterested gift. Since savior siblings are inseparable from the reasons for their existence, "the needs of others pre-exist and generate the child's interests" (p. 84). "No child," she concludes, "…should be a means primarily to his parents' and siblings' ends" (p. 86). Here again we see Overall's ambivalence flowing from her faulty logic as well as deficient anthropology. She argues that while the child cannot be created for its own sake, after birth it can be valued for its own sake.

From these considerations Overall regards it as very difficult to justify having a child that passes three moral tests: (1) concern for women's and children's well-being, (2) respect for women's autonomy, and (3) refusal to use the child for another good, i.e. as an instrument. Note again that the father is absent. This brings her to argue for the decision and even the obligation not to have a child if the proper circumstances do not exist for its flourishing. But she refuses to consider single- or same-sex parenthood as not conducive to a child's flourishing or that of the woman. With regard to impairments from disease or disability, she says that "it is sometimes evident that not existing is sometimes better," but she does not discriminate against persons with impairments across the board, considering rather their competence to mother (p. 170).

On the question of "overpopulation," Overall advocates one child per adult as the ideal, but insists it must be voluntary. She does not see "a moral duty to resist human extinction… founded on the basis of our collective happiness or the alleged intrinsic value of human life" (p. 199). Paradoxically she sees human cultures as worth preserving, but questions whether the continuing existence of human beings is necessary to preserve them. "I have not found adequate reasons to show that the extinction of the human species – provided it is voluntary – would inevitably be a bad thing." Since it is a burden on women to have to reproduce, Overall hopes that the human race will gradually evolve into a higher species, one that presumably does not involve women in child-bearing.

In the final chapter, Overall sheds her academic identity and reaches into her role as a mother, which she acknowledges is not wholly rational. Being a parent has been a profoundly satisfying experience and it has brought her face to face with seeing her child as an end in himself, not as a mere artifact. She describes it as a transforming experience, in which the parent grows and changes along with the child. It is this that has counteracted at every turn her unequivocal endorsement of reproductive rights, and shaped her ambivalent and ambiguous arguments. The one reason she finally gives as the best reason for choosing to have a child is the parent-child relationship. "The lifetime of parent-child interactions," she says, "is key to understanding what is good about procreation" (p. 212). Yet in the final analysis her feminist academic self prevails. It is morally risky to have children, and the burden of proof must always rest on those who choose childbearing. In her own case, judging by the pronoun "I" not "we," it was a unilateral decision arrived at without the father's input.

It is disturbing to find so much muddled thinking on the nature of the human person and the ethics of procreation from a philosopher who has obviously devoted years wrestling with the topic and influenced countless students in the process. A healthy antidote is the philosophic writings of Karol Wojtyla, especially his book, *Love and Responsibility*. Only after understanding the true nature of the person as an incommunicable spiritual being composed of a unity of body and soul can one treat of the communion of persons, of which the conjugal relationship between a man and a woman is a unique form.

In the marital sexual relationship, the body of the other is an object of desire, but the object of desire is not just a body but an incommunicable person. Thus the person can never be treated simply as a mere means, say to sexual pleasure or even to the conceiving of children, although conception is the natural (superabundant) end of the sexual act. (In theological language sexual intercourse is by nature ordered to procreation.) Wojtyla agrees with Overall that there is an asymmetry in the sexual relationship between a man and a woman, but this cannot be overcome through unilateral actions that violate the integrity and personhood of the man, woman, or child. Rather the man is called to respect the woman in all her bodily uniqueness as well as the relationship of love between them. This he does through espousing a true ethics of procreation, one which places his own sexual desires at the service of life and love and honors their joint fertility.

This does not always happen, as Overall points out, with great detriment especially to the woman, but the remedy does not lie in so-called reproductive rights, which guarantee that the child, the man, or the woman will be ultimately an object of manipulation and not a person valued in his or her own right. Her prescription for the human race contrasts vividly with the Christian ethic of hope for the future, expressed in the child as a superabundant gift of the love between a man and a woman.