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The Blessing of Children

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In both the Morning and Evening Prayer services in *The Book of Common Prayer* there is a prayer, used for centuries, called simply "A General Thanksgiving." "We bless thee," it says in part, "for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life.... And, we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful...."

This conviction that it is a blessing to be alive and that life is a good for which we should be thankful was not, however, made without an accompanying sense of life's dangers and difficulties—not least among them the dangers women faced in order to transmit the blessing of life. The same *Book of Common Prayer* contained a rite of thanksgiving for women who had given birth (a rite known as "the Churching of Women"), in which the new mother, together with the congregation, offered to God "humble thanks for that thou hast been graciously pleased to preserve, through the great pain and peril of child-birth, this woman, thy servant, who desireth now to offer her praises and thanksgivings unto thee."

Why Have Children?: The Ethical Debate
By Christine Overall
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I thought of prayers such as these—rooted as they are in a richly developed way of thinking about human life and the relation between the generations—as I slogged my way through *Why Have Children?: The Ethical Debate*, a recent book by the philosopher Christine Overall. There is, in fact, a considerable body of recent philosophical literature examining this question, and Overall's contribution is clear, thorough, and in a number of places more persuasive than some other views that she discusses. Nonetheless, the book exemplifies a way of doing moral philosophy that is not very helpful. If we ourselves are grateful to be alive, there must be some instances (probably many) in which it would be good to transmit life to the next generation. And if, on the other hand, we are not prepared to affirm the goodness of our own existence, it's hard to know why we should take an interest in the question expressed in the title of Overall's book. If the simple fact that we are alive is good, should we not say of and to others also, "it's good that you exist"? This does not mean, of course, that my life or yours is everything that it could be.

Ours is not the divine being in which all perfections are conjoined. Our lives may change for the worse—or the better. But the starting point is life's goodness, which we presuppose when we say that it has changed for the worse, that it has been deprived of some of its goodness. There is, in short, something peculiar about this sort of philosophical inquiry, a matter to which I will return below.

The structure of Overall's discussion is not hard to describe, though the details of particular arguments are many and involved. Her starting point is to lay a burden of proof on those who want to have children. Bringing into existence "a new and vulnerable human being… whose future may be at risk" always, in her view, requires moral justification. Once again, this seems rather off key. We can grant that there may be special circumstances in which special vulnerability of one sort or another might give us pause. But as a general principle, applicable across the board in every instance, this is, as I suggested above, the end of inquiry. It might lead us to wonder whether it is wise to continue with our own life, vulnerable as we are in countless ways. And no matter how prudently we plan and calculate before seeking to give birth, we would be foolhardy to suppose that we had taken into account dangers that could lie just around the corner of our child's life—a speeding truck, for example. The formation of a family requires a kind of spontaneous confidence in the goodness of life, a faith and a hope that are at odds with the kind of confidence in our own powers of calculation that Overall's burden of proof seems to require.

From that starting point, Overall proceeds to examine different arguments we might give for having (or not having) children. Fundamental to her case is a claim that several kinds of "reproductive rights" must be acknowledged and protected as a necessary starting point for any decision to have children. There are, first, several kinds of liberty rights. We should be free *not* to reproduce; it is not incumbent upon all of us to have children. In addition, we have a liberty right to reproduce, if that is our desire.

Suitably explicated and qualified, we need not disagree, but the suitable qualifications are not provided. Thus, for example, in claiming a right not to reproduce Overall is not primarily concerned to defend the life of monks and nuns; her concern is, unsurprisingly, that there be reliable access to abortion. (Nor are we provided with arguments to show that a woman seeking an abortion has not, in fact, already reproduced and that the fetus she carries is not a living human being.) Similarly, her account of the liberty right to reproduce includes the freedom to do so both within and outside of marriage, both through coitus and through techniques that involve donated gametes.

In addition to such liberty rights, Overall also claims that we must recognize a right to reproduce in a "welfare sense"—that is, certain kinds of entitlements. Thus, those wishing to reproduce are entitled to health care services, to services (if a society is wealthy enough to provide them) that treat infertility or that bypass it through assisted reproduction—always assuming, of course, that a willing and consenting sexual partner or provider of gametes is available. If such services are available to some (for instance, married couples), then they should be available to all (for instance, same-sex partners or would-be single parents). The only acceptable ground for denying such service must be a purely medical one.

It is obvious how many disputed viewpoints are assumed (or simply asserted) even in this first stage of Overall's argument, but it is more important to note that her general way of thinking about procreation masks an underlying issue of great importance. Having children is for her an entirely individual project intended to deliver a product. It will require some collaborators, of course, but a parent is simply a person who undertakes and manages such a project. Hence, "why *have* children?" frames Overall's inquiry exactly right. To reproduce is to undertake and oversee a project, to exercise choice in ways that lead to ownership, which rather takes the steam out of Overall's rejection of "consumerlike activities such as buying and selling gametes or purchasing the services of a contract procreator." The fundamental shift from procreation to production has taken place. Will and choice are the engine motoring the project. It is unlikely that commodification can be that far behind.

There are many other aspects to Overall's discussion, and I will eventually note some of them more briefly, but here at the outset we take hold of the fundamental issue, and it is worth pausing to think it through in more detail. For to see what has happened, the shift in thinking that has occurred, is to see why there is so little real argument in the kind of philosophy Overall presents. At issue here are two entirely different ways of envisioning the relation between the generations. There are countless ways to "have" a child, but not all of them amount to "doing" the same thing.

The contrast between doing and making is at least as old as Aristotle's characterization of *praxis* and *poesis*. If we think in terms of making, we think about what is accomplished, and the product of coitus may be pretty much the same as the product of a reproductive project commissioned by a woman who uses as collaborators a sperm donor and a gestational surrogate (not to mention medical personnel). But if we

are to think in more spacious ways about the meaning of the presence of children, we need to open our minds to features of human action that are not simply "making." In particular, we should think about what we "do" when we procreate. Human action is not only goal-oriented, and there may be things that should not be done even if they produce results that are, on the whole, desirable.

Marriage as a basic form of life has both relational and procreative dimensions, expressing a connection given in human nature between the differentiation of the sexes and the procreation of children. In sexual intercourse the man and woman set aside their projects (even the desire to produce a child) in order to give themselves to each other. And if the (perhaps hoped for) child results from their embrace, that child is the natural fruition of their shared love, not a chosen project. The child is, therefore, a mysterious gift and blessing, and certainly not a possession.

It is true, of course, that we now have the ability to separate the relational and procreative dimensions of marriage, but simply to accept all forms of such separation as unproblematic will not do. It is another instance when we look to Overall for argument but find only assumption and assertion. To describe marriage as a basic form of life uniting procreative and relational dimensions, as I have done, taps into a larger vision of human nature—a vision whose roots are, of course, partly religious. But we should not suppose that Overall's angle of vision is free of any deeper metaphysical assumptions. As Paul Ramsey noted decades ago, when we dismember procreation into its several parts and combine them in new and different ways, we simply enact a new myth of creation in which human beings are created with two separate faculties—one manifesting the deepening of the unity of the partners through sexual relations, the other giving rise to children through "a cool, deliberate act of man's rational will." Such a metaphysic should not simply be assumed as if it were obviously correct.

Clearly, if we think about marriage and procreation not as Overall does but in the alternative way I have suggested, we will have a hard time entering into the spirit of a good bit of the rest of her discussion. Once we cease to think of "having children" as an individual project (for the sake of which we may enlist various collaborators), we will think quite differently about what is important and what is sensible. And because her metaphysic strikes me as singularly unpersuasive, I will not try to engage every question she takes up, even though, granting the angle of her approach, she often does so carefully and rigorously.

Suppose, for example, sexual partners disagree about whether they want to be parents. Overall believes

that "provided a man genuinely chooses to take part in sexual activity, the inseminator's desire and intention, even his clearly stated intention, not to be a parent is not…enough to release him from part of his role as a biological parent." This seems right to me, though when Overall goes on to argue that even were the man's sperm deceptively stolen, he should be responsible for contributing to the support of any child produced with that sperm, it's hard not to think that she is in the grip of a theory. By contrast, because reproduction is a "gendered" activity in which women bear by far the greater burden and vulnerability, they are never morally obligated to continue an unwanted pregnancy. Thus, the reasoning at the heart of Judith Jarvis Thomson's famous essay on abortion relieves women but not men from any obligation to "have" unwanted children (unless—the one exception—a man were "forced into ejaculating"). How different is this way of acknowledging the greater burden women bear in childbirth than the way it is acknowledged in that old prayer for the churching of women!

Overall considers and rejects a number of "deontological" reasons one might give for an obligation to have children—reasons, that is, that are based not on results accomplished but on the nature of what is done. Most of these do not strike me either as grounds for an *obligation*, though some of them seem like quite good reasons to want to have children. Some people, for example, think that carrying on the family line is a good reason for deciding to have children. It may or may not be, but Overall's response—"Is anyone's biological composition so valuable that it must be perpetuated?"—illustrates once again how having children is for her an individual project. Within marriage as a basic form of life, procreation does not just extend a family line; it enriches and renews it, since the child embodies the union of husband and wife.

Others will think that the need to preserve and pass on a way of life may obligate at least some of us to have children. To be sure, Christians do not hold such a view—though there is no evidence that Overall realizes this. For Christians, now that the Child, the promised one, has been born, one may choose a way of life that bypasses marriage and children in order to devote oneself to God. For Jews, however, there is an obligation to pass on their way of life—procreation is a *mitzvah*, after all—and it would have been interesting to see Overall address that case. She does take up a more general claim that we are obligated by God to have children, but she seems to think that a modified *Euthyphro* dilemma—whether God commands us to be fruitful and multiply because it is right (for some other reason) to do so, or whether it is right to do so because God (arbitrarily and despotically) commands

it—is sufficient reason for thinking that "procreative decisions should not be based on claims about what God allegedly wants." This, I fear, is the sort of argument given by folks who, from the outset, are not all that interested in what God wants. And it indicates clearly how "ad hoc" discussion of these questions becomes when it is taken up in a philosophical style that is not embedded in any richer tradition of discourse.

Overall discusses whether coming into existence can itself be characterized as either beneficial or harmful (and suggests that the answer is "no"). She examines and for the most part finds wanting some of the reasons that have been given by philosophers for an obligation *not* to have children—e.g., that one is too young, too old, too impaired. Later chapters in the book extend her discussion to more abstract issues that grow out of the general question she is examining. She confines her claims to what she thinks should be moral (rather than legal) obligation. While this is wise, it lends an ever greater air of abstraction to many of her proposals; for a reader is hard pressed even to imagine how some of her moral claims could possibly be implemented without the heavy hand of government dictating population and reproduction policies.

Because having children, especially in the developed world, results in depletion of scarce environmental resources, she finds it hard to justify. Still, given how strongly many people feel about having children, she believes that "an obligation not to have any children at all would be a huge sacrifice" that cannot be asked of most people. Instead, she suggests that adults in the developed countries have a moral responsibility to limit themselves to "procreative replacement." That is, "each one is allowed to reproduce herself or himself" (indicating yet again her way of conceptualizing reproduction as an individual project). I myself do not think she takes seriously enough current demographic data about age-imbalances in many developed countries, but clearly her concerns lie mostly elsewhere.

For all the questions she has raised, Overall does believe that "parenting" is of value, for it establishes a relationship that is "mutually enriching." To have a child is to create not only that child but also a relationship, and not only that relationship but also "oneself; one creates a new and ideally better self-identity." Thus, what should not, on her account, be thought of as in any way obligatory—neither an expression of gratitude for one's own life, nor fulfillment of a duty to one's community or to God—is recommended (when limited to "procreative replacement") as an act of self-creation and self-fulfillment.

In the end, though, Overall can find no persuasive reason for thinking that voluntary extinction of the human species would necessarily be bad. This brings us back to that

General Thanksgiving from *The Book of Common Prayer*, and it calls to mind a vignette G. K. Chesterton recounts in his *Autobiography*, recalling his maternal grandfather. When this man's sons were, "in the manner of all liberal youth," criticizing the *Prayer Book*'s General Thanksgiving on the ground that "a good many people have very little reason to be thankful for their creation," the old man, who hardly ever spoke at all, "said suddenly out of his silence, 'I should thank God for my creation if I knew I was a lost soul.'" In "the ethical debate" about whether to have children, he is the true philosopher.

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