



# Potential Parenthood

ON MORAL CONDITIONS FOR HAVING CHILDREN

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## Preface

These past few months I have considered having children. Not right now, nor in the near future, but someday. I am sure many people do this at some point in their life, and some people have an immediate answer to the question of whether or not they want children. I am not one of those people. Some of my doubts are whether or not I would be a good mother, whether or not a person should ever take responsibility over another persons' life, and more egoistically, whether or not I am able to achieve my own life goals while simultaneously raising a child. And there is this one, really pressing, question: "Why would I?" Would I really lose something by deciding not to have children?

But a day might come, as many have (pedantically) predicted, on which instincts and hormones take over and I would crave for nothing else but to procreate, to have a child of my own. So why think about the matter now? My answer is this: any child brought into this world deserves to be wanted for. And not just because of some hormonal spree, but for itself. Therefore the matter ought to be considered seriously. As I am probably not the only one left undecided, I thought it worthy of a bachelor thesis.

I was glad therefore, that on the list of proposed books for the bachelor thesis, I found a book named "*Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate*" by Christine Overall (2012). In this book Overall writes about many ethical issues tied to having children, such as what to do if potential parents do not agree on whether to abort or not and what to think of overpopulation and the possibility of human extinction?

In this bachelor thesis I will focus on the question; "Under what conditions is having a child morally justified?" I discuss this matter with a very particular and unrealistic hypothetical couple in mind. My couple is healthy, heterosexual, of childbearing age and has somehow acquired the knowledge that if they choose to have a child, they will gestate one perfectly healthy child without needing reproductive assistance. The decision they make will be mutually consensual. I have chosen this hypothetical couple to rule out any discussion related to same-sex parenthood or other big topics deserving of their own thesis.

Therefore I will discuss only certain parts of Overall's book. Of the introductory chapter I will render the part in which Overall discusses why having children is an ethical decision. The whole of chapter 6 will be rendered, in which it is discussed whether or not being born is disadvantageous. Next is chapter 7, of which only the parts not applicable to our hypothetical couple will be left out. This chapter is concerned with the question whether or not there might ever be a moral obligation not to procreate. Lastly there is chapter 10, of which I will render what Overall says concerning the parent-child relationship. The summary of each chapter is followed by a commentary in which I discuss Overall's arguments and point of view. This will be followed by a conclusion in which I hope to have identified at least some conditions under which having children is morally justified. By then I also hope to be more certain about my own position towards having children.

## 1 - Introduction

In her introductory chapter (1-17)<sup>1</sup>, Overall is mainly concerned with defending the position that having children is an ethical issue (2-8) and that having children has a gendered nature (8-13). She also introduces her main questions (14) and looks ahead to the rest of the book (14-17).

Her main questions are as follows:

1. *“What are good reasons for having a child?”*
2. *Under what conditions is having a child morally justified?*
3. *Do women ever have a moral obligation to have a child?*
4. *What are good reasons for not having a child?*
5. *Under what conditions is having a child not morally justified?*
6. *Do women ever have a moral obligation not to have a child?”*

(14)

As said in the preface, I am mainly concerned with question number 2, which is tangled with question number 5. Therefore, of chapter 1, I will only render the part in which Overall defends why having children is an ethical issue. In this part, she examines the assumptions behind having children as default position. By “default position” Overall means that not having children is what requires justification instead of having them (3). Overall writes that in contemporary Western culture, this seems to be the case. People that do not have children seem to have to answer for that more often than those who do (2).

As an example of a philosopher who holds this view, she renders Rosaline Hursthouse (1987, 309). To Overall, Hursthouse’s view holds that it does not make sense to inquire into reasons for having children, just as one does not inquire into the reasons of wanting health (3). Overall opposes this by saying that having children requires careful justification because you bring a new and vulnerable being into the world. Therefore, the burden of proof should rest on those who have children, instead of those who do not (3). I think that for Overall, wanting health is rightly so a default position because it ensures a certain quality of live, while being born does not ensure the same.

She then continues by attacking those positions that appeal to a supposed human nature to maintain that having children is a default position. Whether the appeal is that having children is a part of human life, or that women have a biological clock, this does not make our desires immune to moral evaluation. It can still be asked whether or not we should give in to our supposed nature (3-4).

Neither can we appeal to our instincts when choosing to have children, Overall thinks, because we are social beings and we see and interpret the world as we have learned to see it. How we perceive is part of our experience and our learning. This is subject to interpretation. All human behaviour is a reaction to the world as we perceive it. These interpretations also apply to our inner environment and therefore instincts always contain a social message. Because of the inevitability of interpretation we cannot appeal to instincts for having children (4-5).

Another hazard of failing to acknowledge having children as ethical issue is that we will continue to see having children as something that happens, and therefore is natural,

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<sup>1</sup> When referring to Overall’s 2012 *Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate*, only page numbers shall be referred to, for the readers convenience.

instead of something that people do. Since we have control over our fertility, this would be a misrepresentation. Having children therefore is a choice (5).

Overall then considers a counterargument against her claim. Given the unknowability of the outcome of (not) having children, it might seem unfair to elevate this decision to the level of ethics. However, many ethical decisions are exactly like that and it does not relieve us from considering the moral aspects of our decision. Moreover, we can observe the effect of the decision on those who have already made it (5).

Additionally, Overall argues that the decision is not merely prudential, like whom to marry. To her, virtually every area of human life touches upon the life of another and almost all aspects are ethical. She agrees that having children is in part prudential, but it is also ethical, in the least because it brings a new person into the world. This will very likely affect not only you, but also those in your surroundings and people that do not yet exist (5-6).

The decision also has implications for the community we live in. The interest of the community requires us to relinquish our preoccupation with procreation as a private matter. With Lotz (2008, 294), Overall suggests that our reasons for having children might be predictive of the quality of the parenting. Our motivations might also have a signalling effect to other people. For example, a woman who is being abused and decides to become pregnant might want the child because she hopes it will stop the abuse. One's motivation might signal to friends and family and even to the child itself. Even if effects would be small, our motives for procreating remain significant for all other reasons above (6-7).

## Comments on Chapter 1

Now what does the above tell us about the conditions under which we can have children in a morally justified way? The reasons Overall gives to consider having children as ethical can be summarized as follows:

1. Children are vulnerable when they come into the world.
2. We cannot appeal to our instincts or supposed nature to justify our decision, because it can be asked whether we should give in to them and instincts always contain a social message that can be questioned.
3. We have control over our fertility and therefore we can choose to procreate. The unknowability of the outcome does not relieve us from considering the moral aspects of the decision.
4. Our choices reflect on others and affect our community.

The first argument Overall offers relies on an assumption. The assumption is that we have a moral duty to care for the vulnerable. If this duty is not presupposed, the fact that children are vulnerable would not make a demand on us. Then, children being vulnerable would not work as an argument against having children as default position.

I do not wish to oppose this moral duty to care for the vulnerable. I merely want to show what this duty would mean in terms of conditions for having children in a morally justified way. A duty to care for the vulnerable can also be applied to the sick and elderly. As hospitals and retirement homes have shown, a duty to care for the vulnerable need not rest on those genetically related to the individual in need of care. So the duty to care for a child need not lay with their procreators. Children could, for example, also be held in common as Plato suggests in his *Republic* (2017, Book V, 449A-472A) or be introduced in a system of institutional child-care as Anca Gheaus (2017) proposes in *Children's vulnerability and legitimate authority over children.* Gheaus argues not only that children are vulnerable, but also that there are special goods that can be enjoyed exclusively or mainly during childhood. Such special goods are experiencing caring affection from adults whom the child can trust and love wholeheartedly and unstructured time during which it can engage in fantasy play, experimentation and undirected exploration of the world and their minds (Gheaus, 2017, 7). These goods are best provided for in communal context, Gheaus says, because parents cannot make the mistake of allowing their child to have too little time for unstructured play in order to train them for future competition. Second, all children are guaranteed playmates. Third, the special goods of childhood are more likely to be available if they benefit from long-term engagements with adults who have knowledge of science, arts and philosophy. Lastly, childcare institutions are more likely to distribute children's access to loving and trustworthy adults equally (Gheaus, 2017, 11). Therefore good institutional care should be part of every child's upbringing. This does not mean that parents would play no role in the life of the child, but that children gain the possibility of (temporarily) exiting relationships with harmful adults, because they can turn to other adults (Gheaus, 2017, 5). This is not something Overall can object to, if she grounds procreation as ethical topic in the vulnerability of the child. So if we accept children's vulnerability to place a moral demand on us, a duty to care, it would be morally acceptable to procreate away, as long as societies' resources and care-taking systems allow for it.

With her second argument, Overall effectively counters the appeal to human nature and instincts as justification for procreation with Hume's law (Cohon, 2010). Hume's law holds that if things are in a certain way, it does not mean that they ought to be that way. Therefore childrearing urges should be questioned. Following this logic, everything that is could be questioned to be the way it ought to be. This is not something Overall would oppose to, since she suggests that virtually every area of our life is ethical, even those that seem personal or pragmatic, since all aspects of life are connected.

This poses an incredibly difficult condition for having children in a morally justified way: if one decides to have children, one should consider critically at least all those aspects of one's life from conceiving until the moment of birth that might affect the development of the child and, if no care-taking system exists in the given society, one should continue to do so while raising the child yourself. I think it would be save to say that merely considering these aspects would not be sufficient, if one has the ability and opportunity to change them. Otherwise one can be said to be negligent. I think Overall would agree with this very strict condition since she adheres to a very high standard of parenting capacity, as I will argue in the commentary on Chapter 7.

The third argument is more complex if we want to translate it in terms of morally justified conditions for having children. Overall recognizes that it is impossible to know the outcome of the decision of becoming a parent. It is possible that if you decide not to have children, you might end up miserable without knowing it beforehand. In such a situation, one would have to deal with grief. If you do decide to have children, however, you might still end up miserable. However, then you would not only have to deal with grief, but also with your responsibilities toward a new human.

As said, merely based on the vulnerability of the child, it would be justified to place the child in a care-taking system, if an acceptable one is provided for. In order to know whether or not Overall would think such a decision to be justified, we would have to know more about which philosophical account of parental rights and obligations she holds. I will come back to this in the comments on chapter 10. For now, any conditions for having children in a morally justified way that depend on such an account are suspended.

Lastly, Overall states that our choices concerning having children affect others around us and have an impact on society. Here again, the idea that almost all aspects of life are ethical prevails. I am convinced however, that Overall does not mean that our decision to procreate should depend on society's wishes. She explicitly argues against the idea that the good of society should be the deciding matter when it comes to procreation in Chapter 5 (71-75). Additionally, in Chapter 9 she states:

*"Given the centrality of childbearing and child-rearing to human existence, and obligation not to have children at all would be a huge sacrifice, one that is too much to expect of anyone who wants to have children."*

(181)

Therefore I do not think Overall requires potential procreators to obey to the demands and desires of the society they live in. If a condition can be deduced, it is that one should consider how their choices reflect on and influences the society they live in.

## 2 - Not "Better Never to Have Been"

Chapter 6 is concerned with the question whether or not children are harmed by coming into existence. This question is relevant to the question I am trying to answer in this thesis, because if children are harmed by being brought into being, then we might have an obligation never to procreate. The fact that children are not able to consent to being born would make that obligation even stronger, since we would be the cause of their misery.

The chapter (95 - 116) is concerned with David Benatar's statement that "coming into existence is always a serious harm" (Benatar, 2006, 1). Benatar's main argument is clear:

*"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, 2006, 1)

Against those who point out that coming into existence almost always brings with it

Scenario A	Scenario B
X exists	X never exists
Presence of pain (Bad)	Absence of pain (Good)
Presence of pleasure (Good)	Absence of pleasure (Not bad)

Figure 1

benefits that outweigh the harm, Benatar brings forth the so called "asymmetry of pleasure and pain" as shown in figure 1 (after figure 2.1 in Benatar, 2006, 38). The asymmetry relies on the idea that the absence of good things is good even if no one can enjoy that good, whereas the absence of good things is bad only if someone is deprived of those good things. This suggests that if procreators want to avoid the bad for their potential child, it benefits by never coming into existence, whereas it does not lose anything by the absence of pleasure since it

does not experience this absence if it never comes into existence.

Overall believes that Benatar's theory is flawed and formulates three criticisms to show why and a fourth showing that if Benatar were right, his idea could have dangerous consequences. For her first criticism (97 - 103), Overall accepts the assumption that value can be ascribed to the absence of pleasure or pain, even when there is no entity to experience the absence. Overall proposes a thought-experiment. We imagine a nation of ten million people. Five million of them are suffering from chronic illness and unremitting pain. The other five million are free of illness and pain and are able to experience joy and fulfilment. One of Gods angels sees this and asks God to do something about the suffering of the five million sick people.

There are three things God could do in response to the angel's request. He could roll back time and re-create all 10 million, but this time no one is vulnerable to the sickness that



the unfortunate five million suffered before. In this case, Overall suggests, the angel would be pleased.

Then God could also roll back time and not recreate any of the ten million people. The angel would be appalled, because the non-existence of the happy five million would be too high a price to pay for the absence of the suffering five million. This shows, according to Overall, that the absence of pleasure can be bad.

Lastly, God could roll back time and only recreate the five million happy people. Once again, the angel is appalled, because non-existence is also too high a price to pay for the avoidance of suffering, for the same reason as in the second case, being that the absence of the (little) pleasure the unfortunate five million would have enjoyed, is bad.

Overall stresses that her thought experiment is fair (99-100), because she does not compare the continuation of life with starting a life. Instead, just like Benatar, she compares existence to non-existence because time is rolled back each time and in each scenario, God has to decide on the (re)beginning of the lives within the nation. She

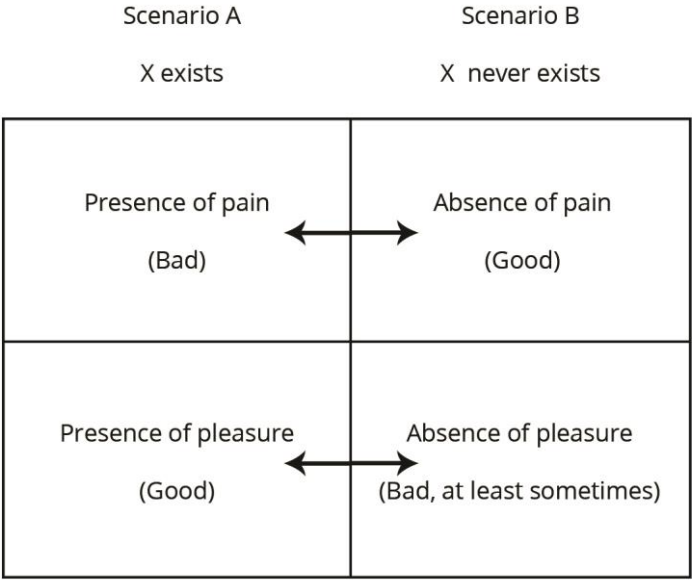


Figure 2

also points out that God and the angel are not necessary to the thought experiment, since we could also imagine a godless universe that time-lapses backward and produces the same scenarios. Overall thinks we would still feel that non-existence is too high a price to pay for the avoidance of suffering. Therefore, the absence of pleasure is bad, at least sometimes, as seen in figure 2 (after Figure 6.2, 103).

When we think of suffering people around the globe we usually do not think they live a life not worth living, unless the suffering is severe, unremitting and unavoidable, she suggests. Most of the time we deal with suffering by trying to heal or prevent it, not by not bringing people into the world that might suffer harms (100-101). In general, if we would have been able to choose to come into existence we would have chosen it, because most often the happiness outweighs the harm. But Benatar advises us not to risk it, Overall says (101).

The second criticism (103-106) questions the idea that it is meaningful to say that absence of things can have value when there is no entity to experience that absence. Overall opens up the possibility that Benatar is abusing moral language. She thinks evaluative terms only have meaning in reference to persons. Therefore the avoidance of the bad cannot be an advantage to the non-existent, since they cannot experience that advantage. Benatar cannot claim that never existing can be preferable over existing since non-existencing entities cannot have a preference (104-105).

Benatar's response to this would be that of the pain of an existing person, the absence of pain would be good even if this could only be achieved by the absence of the person who suffers it (Benatar, 2006, 31). For Overall this is begging the question. There is no entity that would benefit (105). However, if we cannot say that avoiding pains is good even if there is no one to enjoy this good, we could not say that it is good to avoid bringing suffering children into existence, Benatar would reply (2006, 34). Overall counters

this by saying that it is good on the part of the individual that made the decision not to bring such a being into the world (105). This criticism can be summarized by Figure 3 (after Figure 6.3, 107).

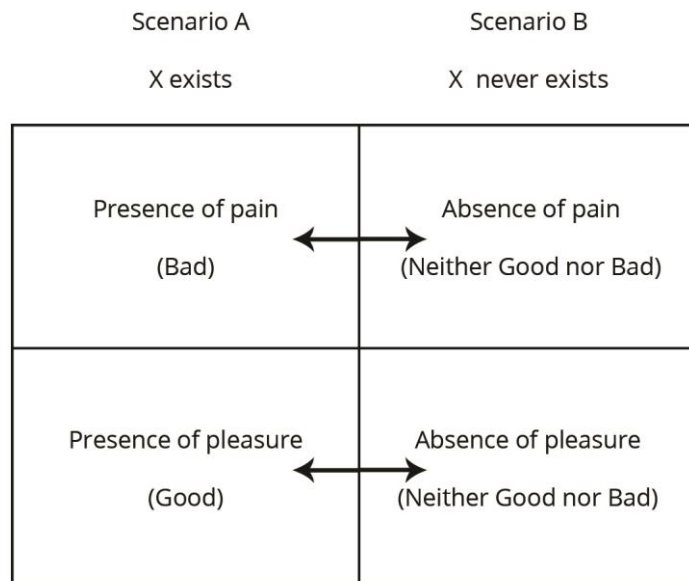


Figure 3

The third criticism (106-113) is focussed on Benatar treating coming and not coming into existence as if they were ordinary properties of persons, like hair colour. Overall states that properties can be neutral, advantageous or disadvantageous. Having brown eyes would be a neutral property, being disabled is a disadvantageous property while we would be happy about being good at sports (106-107).

For Overall, however, it would not make sense to say that coming into existence is a (dis)advantageous property, because existing is a necessary condition of experiencing advantages or disadvantages. Existence is the condition for having properties. Because of this, the content of the life that is led depends on whether living that life is a harm or a benefit (107).

We can therefore say that having a child is worth the risk, since most people are happy with their lives. However, Benatar seems to think most people are engaged in some kind of deception towards their own happiness. He mentions some psychological studies that indicate that people usually remember positive experiences rather than negative ones. He also states that studies have shown that self-assessments of well-being tend to lend more to the positive side of the spectrum than justified (Benatar, 2006, 64-65).

Overall notes that this belief is inconsistent with his distinction between asking whether a life is worth starting and asking whether it is worth continuing. The requirements for judging that if life is not worth continuing are higher than those for judging that life is not worth starting. If this is true, then credence must be awarded to the experience of the individual in question (108).

She also notes that it seems unlikely that the majority of people is guilty of false consciousness and that it is unfounded to deny the experience of all those that enjoy most of their life. Also, a positive outlook tends to make our lives better. If we do not remember bad experiences, then our lives are better than if we would. When we overestimate the

pleasantness of our future, we also benefit from it in the present. And if we have a positive view on our current well-being, it means that we are actually doing well. Even if there is a distinct difference between subjective and objective happiness, the point is that for the individual judging his life, the subjective level counts (108-109).

Overall thinks Benatar is right in saying that at least some harm will come to everyone in their lives. For one thing, all men must die. Yet for Overall this is no reason never to live, for the same reason that we do not skip on a holiday because it must end. She does agree on the idea that a life might not be worth living if one's suffering is severe and cannot be relieved. Few people, however, live such lives. Other ways of suffering are mentioned by Benatar, such as being tired and having desires, but Overall counters this by pointing out that such feelings can also be pleasurable or serve a function (109-110).

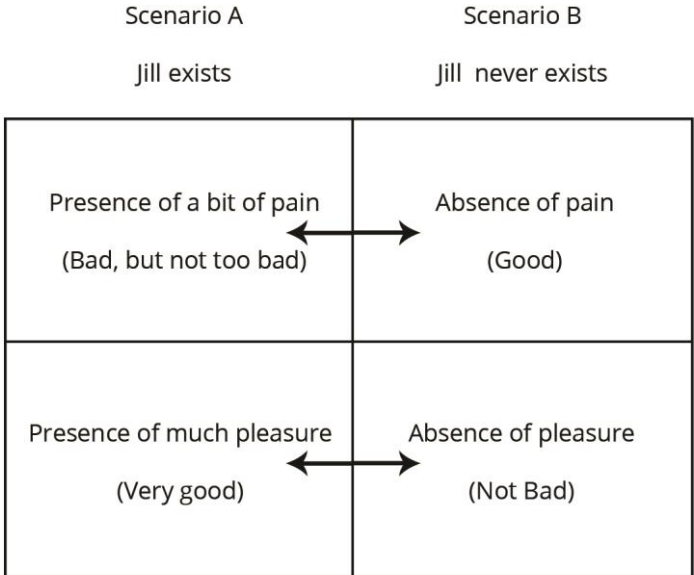


Figure 4

So even if we accept Benatar's views concerning the value of the absence of pain and pleasure, we can still show that it is not always better never to have been, namely for all those cases for which pleasure outweighs pains (represented by the case of Jill as shown in Figure 4, after Figure 6.4, 112).

Overall's last criticism (113-116) on Benatar's asymmetry is not focussed on showing his theory is mistaken, but on showing possible negative effects his theory might have. According to Overall, Benatar thinks his asymmetry explains why there is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence, while there is no duty to try and bring happy people into existence. He also recognizes that there is an alternative explanation: creating happy people would require sacrifice on our part (113-114).

Overall thinks it presumptuous of Benatar to talk about "us," since women do most of the job during the pregnancy and delivery. But, Overall states, even if pregnancy and delivery were easy, women would still be entitled to bodily autonomy, since the foetus does not gain authority over her body. Also, after birth, sacrifices are still to be made, because raising a child simply is not easy. Therefore an appeal to the right not to reproduce would be better protection for women's (and men's) well-being, than his own asymmetry (114-115).

She also accuses Benatar of being oblivious to the implications of his theory for women's rights. His theory implies that women's reproductive labour produces bad consequences by contributing to the harm on earth. These implications may be harmful to women in societies in which their status is dependent on their role as child bearers. The

theory can also be taken as a way to promote mandatory contraception and abortion. So if Benatar were right, his theory might prove harmful (115-116).

## Comments on Chapter 6

Although I do agree with Overall that Benatar's asymmetry is flawed, I do not think all of her criticism is that strong.

Her first criticism is meant to show us that, even if Benatar is right to ascribe value to absence of pleasure or harm when no entity is there to experience that absence, the absence of pleasure can still be bad. But her thought experiment only succeeds in this, because she compares the recreated lives with the lives the 10 million originally had. The second recreation is meant to show us that the non-existence of the fortunate 5 million is too high a price to pay even if the unfortunate 5 million would be better off, because they sacrifice their life that was mostly filled with the presence of pleasure, which is good. Depriving them of this good would thus be bad. However, if we would have to ascribe value to the absence of pleasure for non-existent entities, I would agree with Benatar that it would not be bad for those non-existent entities. This is because the deprivation of pleasure is only bad if there is an entity that has once experienced pleasure and knows what it will be missing. For non-existent entities, this is not the case, since because of their recreation, they have never experienced that pleasure.

The third recreation is meant to show us that non-existence is too costly even for the unfortunate 5 million. Based on what I have said above however, I would argue that for them the situation has improved. They have been relieved from suffering, while they also have not been deprived of their pleasures. The thought-experiment initially works because Overall compares the recreated society to the original society. This is an unfair move, because we are talking about the (re)beginnings of lives, as Overall herself stresses. The "original" society has never existed. Therefore I think Overall's first criticism, which assumes that value can be ascribed to experiences of non-existent entities, is flawed.

I also think Overall's third criticism is flawed. To her, it makes no sense to say that coming to existence is (dis)advantageous because (P1) only properties can be (dis)advantageous. Also, (P2) existence is the condition for having properties and (C) therefore the contents of one's life determine whether that life is positive or negative.

I do not doubt the conclusion (C), but I do doubt the second premise (P2) because of the problem of nonbeing (Reicher, 2014). In the twentieth century Alexius Meinong (1960) argued that there are objects that do not exist, such as the fountain of youth. How exactly it is that such objects are, is still being debated today (Berto, 2008, Einheuser 2012, Weinberg 2013). It is clear however, that such objects do have properties: of the fountain of youth we know that it contains a liquid. Based on her argumentation in her third criticism, we cannot accept that having a child is worth the risk since most people are happy with their lives. No matter Overall's defence of people's capabilities in judging their own happiness, with this argumentation it will not do.

Concerning the fourth criticism I will be brief. If Benatar's asymmetry was correct, it could still be that the right not to reproduce would be better protection for wellbeing than an appeal to the asymmetry. This would however not make the asymmetry less true. And if the asymmetry were true, we harm children by bringing them into the world. We can therefore not simply appeal to the bad consequences the asymmetry has for women to oppose that same asymmetry. If we did so, we would place the well-being of women above the well-

being of children. This, I find hard to accept. Therefore I do not think Overall's fourth criticism to be valid.

However, there is still the second criticism. It holds against my counterargument of Overall's third criticism. Even though non-existent things could have properties, they cannot experience their own properties, nor their (dis)advantages because they do not exist and never have. So Overall's second criticism would still endorse conclusion (C) of the third criticism.

This would mean that having children is, in most cases indeed worth the risk. Her defence of our capabilities in judging our happiness helps to further justify the gamble. Even though everyone suffers at least some harm in their lives, life is still worth living if the pleasure outweighs the harm.

So Benatar's asymmetry cannot succeed in morally obliging us to forsake having children for once and for all. I do think it is safe to say that we can infer from the above the condition that if a couple decides to have children, they should do what is in their power to make sure the hypothetical scale of pleasure and harm tips to the side of pleasure. Here again, we struggle with measurements. How can we measure pleasures and harms and how can we measure them against one another? And how do we determine what is within the power of the parents?

There might also be a possibility to treat pleasure and pain different from being weights on a hedonistic scale. Instead of stating that life is only worth living if life is more pleasurable than sad, one could also inquire into the meaning of pleasurable or harmful events to one's life. Someone who experiences almost no harm and much pleasure, might still live a pointless life, as Susan Wolf demonstrates in *The Meanings of Lives* (2013, 307). The other way around could also be true. Martin Gray, author of *For Those I Loved* (2001), was a Polish Jew, who suffered many horrors during the Second World War. He is the only member of his family that survives. After the war he builds a life in America and meets his future wife there. Together they move to France and start a family, of whom all die in a fire, but Martin Gray himself. His life might perhaps be called miserable, but at the same time it can be said to be very worthwhile, precisely because it is meaningful. While reading *For Those I Loved* it becomes clear that Gray clings to life precisely because of the things he has experienced and that he loves his wife and children because of what happened to him. After surviving the war it becomes a kind of mission for him to procreate, as ultimate vengeance and resistance to the Nazi's. So to say, as follows from Overall's reasoning against the asymmetry, that a worthwhile life is a life that experiences more pleasure than harm, is a bit short sighted.

What exactly constitutes a meaningful life, is a question which I cannot answer in detail here. For now, it will have to suffice that a meaningful life has at least some meaningful experiences. By "meaningful experiences" I mean (partially following Wolf (2013, 306)), subjectively rewarding experiences as opposed to a pointless happenings. I realize these definitions are vague, but for now they will have to do. Most important to note is that subjectively rewarding experiences might be harmful to the subject experiencing. For example, having a terminal illness is very harmful but might prove subjectively rewarding when overcome.

This does not mean that caretakers have no duty to try to let the hypothetical scale of pleasure and pain tip to the side of pleasure, however. In addition to this, they should also try to teach children what a meaningful life consists of and how to achieve this. I think it is safe to say that a pleasurable meaningful life is preferable over a harmful meaningful life, and it is a caretaker's duty to do whatever is in their power to provide for a pleasurable meaningful life for their children.

### 3 - An Obligation Not to Procreate

In the seventh chapter (117 - 147) of her work, Overall considers whether a case can be made for an obligation not to have children. If there are circumstances under which one should not procreate, then we are obliged to make sure we are not in those circumstances when decide to do so.

Overall considers what a possibility not to reproduce might mean. She writes:

*In speaking of a possible obligation not to have children, I am saying nothing about what the state should or should not do to curtail procreation. That is a matter of social policy, which I am setting aside in this book. [...] Instead, what I am interested in here is the possibility of a moral responsibility to limit one's own reproductive activities and outcomes.*

(118)

If such a moral responsibility exists, it would mean the use of safe and highly effective contraception during heterosexual intercourse. Possibly, it might mean that a woman has to obtain an abortion when she is pregnant (118).

Giving up intercourse altogether, Overall thinks, would be too high a price to pay because she considers sexuality a crucial aspect of human life. If no contraception is available however, individuals that might have an obligation not to reproduce should avoid heterosexual intercourse involving penetration (118).

Giving up one's fertility forever by sterilization would, in most cases, also be too high a price to pay. Individuals that have an obligation not to procreate might one day not be under this obligation anymore because the circumstances of their lives have changed (118).

Next, Overall considers under what circumstances there might be such an obligation. Three cases are mentioned that cause one to have such an obligation. First, one might have a moral responsibility to oneself not to have children (119-131).

On pages 119 to 122 Overall renders female authors that have a negative perception on motherhood. Most have strong feministic issues with motherhood (such as the oppressing role of motherhood in most cultures) and one, Corinne Maier (2007), wrote a book on reasons why one should not have a child. Most of the reasons mentioned in Maier's book are concerned with the liability children can be (and at least sometimes are). Examples are that children use (and require their parents to use) "idiot language" and having children means parents lose friends, but also that children have to be entertained and that they costs a fortune (in Western society). Overall states that the claims of all authors are "disturbing" (122). She then continues:

*If you perceive parenthood to be this bad, [...] then regardless of the truth of these various claims, you do have a responsibility not to procreate because your perception of parenthood does not bode well for the quality of your parenting.*

(122, Overall's emphasis)

She questions whether these issues create an objective case for a responsibility not to reproduce. The question should be whether parenthood is so bad, not whether it seems so bad, according to Overall. Right after this, she states that the evaluation of some aspects of parenthood may be a matter of preference. She then continues to dismiss Maier's arguments by showing that one could look at children from a different perspective. For example, to Maier, breastfeeding is slavery, but Overall thinks it less restrictive and more satisfying than bottle feeding (122).



The only reason for having a responsibility to oneself not to procreate, according to Overall, is when the circumstances are oppressive. Then, refusing motherhood can be a political act (123-124). She finishes the section by stating:

*[...] I believe that for some and perhaps many women, mothering is a decision not to deepen their oppression but to enrich their lives.*

(124)

Second, Overall discusses the possibility of a responsibility not to have children because one might not be able to achieve Procreative Beneficence (131). The Principle of Procreative Beneficence (PPB) has been coined by Julian Savulescu (2001) and holds:

*“Couples (or single reproducers) [that have chosen to have a child] should select the best possible child they could have, with the best life to be expected, or at least as good as others, based on relevant, available information. “*

Savulescu (2001, 415)

The principle must be evaluated in order to determine whether failing to achieve the PPB creates an obligation not to procreate. Achieving PPB would require the use of preimplantation genetic diagnosis after IVF (in vitro fertilization). Savulescu’s ideal is that every pregnant woman would undergo this process and select the best possible embryo, that is free from diseases and limitations such as asthma (2001, 416-417) , but also from non-disease genes that influence temper or intelligence (2001, 419-421).

Overall thinks this would be unreasonable because of several reasons (126-127). First, IVF is still extremely expensive in most jurisdictions and would only be available to the wealthy. Second, the process is far more complex and dangerous than intercourse. Third, IVF does not come close to the success rates of sex. Fourth, the older the woman, the more likely it is she has to undergo multiple treatments before succeeding. This can have a significant impact on her (psychological) well-being. Fifth, if multiple embryos are inserted to increase the success rate, chances of multiples are high. The gestation of multiples is potentially dangerous for the woman and the infants.

Overall states that even if these objections would not exist, PPB should still not be vindicated, because for many couples, there is a special significance in conceiving a child by making love. Using another method would be too high a price to pay (128).

If one rejects this, and accepts that we have a moral obligation to improve embryos, then we are endorsing the creation of enhanced offspring. The adoption of PPB would send society down a slippery slope, for there is no reason to believe procreative beneficence should end at the embryonic stage. Adhering to PPB might generate a variety of additional requirements to ensure the child of the best life. We would not only have to build sufficient financial resources which might make couples wait longer than they would have otherwise, but more extreme measures would also be required of the parents, such as immigrating to another country if this is in the child's best interests (128-129).

PPB is, however, not an absolute obligation and can be overridden by other concerns, such as the welfare of the parents and of existing children. And although the PPB is not a plea for a public policy, a wide scale adoption of the principle would affect public policy because of the redeployment of medical resources and health-care personnel that would be required. Because of that, and the harms PPB might cause the parents (especially mothers),

Overall thinks PPB is not morally acceptable. Therefore, failure to abide by the PPB cannot provide a reason not to procreate (129-130).

Third, Overall discusses the responsibility not to have children in order to avoid causing harm (131-146). She does this by considering some possibilities, such as the harm one might cause when one has children very early or late in life, or the harm that might be caused if the parents are not heterosexual. Here we will only discuss what Overall says about the material situation of the parents, the likelihood that the child will be harmed by society and the likelihood that one might not be a good parent, because these are the only matters that fit with the hypothetical couple I presuppose.

Concerning the material situation of the parents (139-141), Overall says that it would be unjust to require that childbearing should be a privilege to the wealthy, although she thinks a minimum standard should be used. It would be hard to define however, what constitutes being able to afford children. Good child rearing is not dependent upon the number of toys or clothes one can provide for his or her children. The needs of a child may depend on the culture they grow up in. Nevertheless, some material resources are required to raise a child, although it is hard to put a minimum on it.

On the likelihood that a child will be harmed by living in the society Overall renders an unpublished paper by Sue Donaldson and says we need to distinguish between necessary human suffering (such as illness, pain and death) and contingent suffering caused (as caused by poverty, violence and the environment) (141). When the contingent suffering is expected to be too high, it is wise not to procreate. However, as with material resources, it is hard to put a limit to this. Overall questions whether and to what extent the likelihood of contingent suffering should count against the morality of procreation. She considers harms arising from war or famine and environmental threats, but also the existence of oppression. Choosing not to have children because you fear they might be oppressed might partially allow oppression to continue. One could also argue that your future child might be the person to solve planetary problems. Yet, Overall thinks children should not be expected to function as instrument to solve problems (142).

On the likelihood that one will not be a good parent, Overall remarks that you cannot know what kind of parent you will be until you are a parent, but that we nonetheless have a responsibility to be aware of our potential strengths and weaknesses (142). If we hope to do what is right, we ought to try to give our children a good life. Therefore, we should not reproduce if we cannot meet a high standard of parenting capacity. Despite the normative and epistemological difficulties of that statement, Overall thinks this is correct (144).

The high standard Overall holds, is that of Lisa Cassidy (2006, 48, 49). Overall thinks that at first sight, Cassidy's standard seems very high, since Cassidy thinks parenting is too important to be done in a way that is just good enough. Therefore, people who think they would not be excellent at parenting, but merely adequate, should not have children (143). Excellent parents are characterized as patient, giving, accessible, calm, fun, compassionate and strong. Adequate parents, are thought not to beat their children, but spank them when they lose their patience, they do not torment their children, but can be smothering, selfish, cold, overly demanding, uninterested or have other qualities that would make one a less than ideal parent. Overall thinks that children of adequate parents would likely have a

worthwhile life, yet we have a responsibility not to reproduce if we cannot meet the high standard of excellent parenthood (143-144).

## Comments on Chapter 7

In the seventh chapter, Overall examines some cases in which an obligation not to have children might arise. First is a moral obligation to oneself not to have children. In this, she distinguishes two categories, those not excited about parenthood and those who see not having children as a political act. To those to whom parenthood seems bad she first says that their negative perception of parenthood negatively impacts their parenting capabilities.

On the same page (122) however, she questions whether perceiving parenthood to be bad, makes an objective case for a responsibility not to reproduce. Objectively, you would have such a responsibility only if parenting is really that bad, not if you perceive it to be bad. I beg to differ. I think you have a responsibility not to reproduce exactly if parenthood seems horrible to you. No matter everyone else, no matter the objective case, if you think having children is not for you, then you should not have them. Otherwise you risk being deeply unhappy with your life. It will also reflect very badly on children to have parents that are unhappy with their lives because they took some “objective case” as reference, instead of carefully considering their own motivations. This also relates to the subject of meaningful experiences as mentioned in the comments on chapter 6. If you perceive parenthood to be meaningful, it is likely you also perceive the necessary downsides and sacrifices of parenthood as meaningful too. If you do not perceive parenthood to be meaningful, the harms you might suffer because of it will be all the worse.

To be fair to Overall, however, she does state:

*“The evaluation of some aspects of parenthood may simply be a matter of individual preference.”*

(122)

Unfortunately, it is right after this statement that she dismisses Maier’s position with perspectives that emphasize the positive sides of having children. As someone identifying more with Maier’s perspective, it felt as if Overall was blaming Maier for fearing the bad effects of parenthood on parents. Overall admits that having children requires sacrifices, but reproaches Maier for overstating the difficulties. Here, I suggest, Overall’s opinion is biased because she is a mother herself. For her the sacrifices that come with parenthood are probably worthwhile, but she fails to recognize that the position of those who disagree with her is valid by supposing that people who perceive parenthood as bad should not have children. To me, Overall seemed to suggest that such people are somehow unworthy of having children because of their preferences.

Those not excited about parenthood should not parent, but not because it does not bode well for the quality of parenting. Rather because it would make people unhappy. I suggest that at least some of those who do not aspire to be parents would be excellent at parenting because they are aware of the fact that they would have to make sacrifices for their children and have a high threshold of what constitutes a “good enough” parent.

I agree with Overall that people that see not having children as a political act should not procreate. However, this is just as subjective as the above situation. Just as one has to decide how bad parenthood has to be in order not to become parent, so does one have to decide how bad the oppression has to be in order not to procreate. Overall recognizes that if one has strong reasons to procreate, one should still do so, even if the situation is oppressive (124). How strong those reasons are supposed to be, she does not say. She leaves it to the

individual (the women) to decide whether or not having a child would further the oppression.

Despite our differences when it comes to the perception of parenthood, I think Overall would agree with the following condition for having children in a morally justifiable way: When deciding on having children, one should make sure parenthood appeals to him or her. I would add that parenthood should appeal to the couple as meaningful. Additionally, one should make sure that the reasons to procreate outweigh, and do not further, any oppression one might experience.

Second, she examines whether there might be an obligation not to procreate if one cannot have the best possible children as expressed by the PPB. Once again, Overall appeals to the negative consequences of the implementation of the PPB, as she did with her fourth criticism of the asymmetry of pleasure and pain. Again, my answer is the same: the negative consequences of an idea do not make that idea less true. It might be true that the consequences of PPB are bad, but we cannot ignore the moral injustice Savulescu has brought to light if PPB is true, either.

The PPB is controversial and much has been written in response (see, for example Parker, 2007, Sparrow, 2007, Stoller, 2008, Bennet, 2009, Holland, 2016). Savulescu himself has written articles in defence of PPB (Savulescu, 2007, 2015, Savulescu & Kahane, 2009). A convincing criticism, to which Savulescu has not yet (to my knowledge) responded, was formulated by Andrew Hotke (2014). The strength of Hotke's argument is in the fact that he does not attack the three generally known premises of Savulescu's argument, but uncovers another. The three generally known premises are:

- 1) *Genetic traits can contribute to and/or reduce wellbeing.*
- 2) *We have more reason to choose a child with more wellbeing than a child with less.*
- 3) *The child who will have the most wellbeing is the best child possible."*

Hotke (2014, 257<sup>2</sup>)

The uncovered argument is:

- 0) *Morality requires us to do what we have most reason to do."*

Hotke (2014, 257<sup>3</sup>)

Only from these four arguments does it follow that parents are morally required to have the best possible child. Premise 0) is a statement by Savulescu (2001, 415).

It is however, premise 0) which leads to absurd conclusions and cannot be true. Because for any act x, if there is another act y for which there is more reasons to do so, then act x is morally wrong. This would elevate every decision to the realm of morality. For example, deciding where to place a table in your living room. If there are two positions for that table which are both aesthetically pleasing, but the first leaves more space for walking, we ought to do the first. Perhaps it is more convenient to do so, but saying this is morally better would be absurd.

Premises 1), 2) and 3) can only achieve that it is reasonable to strive to have the best child. As the above example shows however, a reasonable thing to do is not necessarily a moral thing to do. Something else is apparently required. Striving for the best child by adhering to the PPB is even harder to defend by reasons alone, since Overall has made clear

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers changed, for the reader's convenience.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers changed, for the reader's convenience.

why IVF and genetic diagnosis often either are harmful or less successful than natural procreation. Also, with premise 0) refuted, the conclusion that parents morally ought to have the best child does not hold. Therefore, there is no moral obligation to adhere to the PPB. It follows that there can be no moral obligation not to procreate if one cannot achieve Procreative Beneficence.

Lastly, there is the responsibility not to have children in order to avoid causing harm. If the material situation of a couple is below a hypothetical cultural minimum that allows them to provide for the needs of their child, I agree with Overall that this would harm the child. I wonder, however, if the harm of the child is enough reason to morally oblige the parents not to have children. As Overall herself argued in the first chapter, virtually every aspect of human life is ethical. Of all aspects, I think the desire of the parents (and what this signals) should be taken into account. If the parents are willing to sacrifice a lot in order to be able to "afford" their child, I think they could have children. If, for example, the parents go to bed hungry in order to properly feed their child, I would not think that those parents should not have procreated. On the contrary, I would admire them. I therefore think that we can only pose the following condition on the parent's material situation: When choosing to have a child, you should make sure your material situation is not so bad that it enables the harms caused by that material situation, to outweigh the pleasures of the life of the child.

The same can be said about a condition concerning the harm a child might suffer in society. Although Overall only says we should not procreate if the amount of contingent human suffering is too high, I am convinced she would agree that necessary human suffering counts as suffering as well. However hard to put a limit on the suffering, based on chapter 6, we might say that one should not procreate if the contingent and necessary suffering is expected to outweigh the pleasures of one's life. In the comments chapter 6, however, we established that such a life might still be meaningful and therefore worthwhile, but that a pleasurable meaningful life is preferable. Still, I think it would be bad on behalf of the procreators to have offspring which they expect to have more harm than pleasure in their lives, no matter how adequate they would be in teaching about the meaning of life. If we remember the example of Martin Gray, I think we wouldn't be too surprised if he would have said that he wished he was never born, even though he might also say his life was still worth living. It would be better on behalf of the procreators to try to change the circumstances in which they bring their offspring in the world. It would be best if all offspring was able to say that they are glad that they are alive and that they realise their life is meaningful.

One's parenting capacities cannot be determined in terms of the pleasures and harms of the child's life. As said in the comments on chapter 1, however, Overall's standard is incredibly high. In fact, I do not think I ever met a parent that is not at times smothering, selfish, cold, overly demanding or uninterested. For example, I have not met a person that, as a child, wanted to show either one of his/her parents something, to which their parents said: "That's nice." And the child would answer: "But you are not even looking!" And if I ever meet a person that has never had that experience in their youth, I am sure their parents would have other qualities that would qualify them as "less than ideal." I therefore think Overall's claim that you should only procreate if you anticipate to be an excellent parent is overconfident. Someone claiming to be the ideal prospective parent would have to be

arrogant, and we might even say he or she is suffering from hubris. And that person would therefore not qualify as “ideal.”

In terms of conditions for having children in a morally justified way I think it is more important that you, given the situation you are in, are sure you want to parent, your material situation suffices and that you are prepared to prevent as much harm as possible from happening to your child. To these conditions Overall would agree. I would argue that it should be added that parenthood is perceived as meaningful by procreators and, as already established in the comments on chapter 6, parents should try to teach their children about the meanings of both pleasurable and harmful experiences.

#### 4 - Procreation Values and Identity

Chapter 10 (203 - 220) is the concluding chapter of Overall's book. Of this chapter, I will only render what she has to say about the parent-child relationship (212-217), because it gives us clues to the moral obligations and responsibilities in such a relationship.

Overall questions the notion of unconditional love towards children. The attractiveness of the idea of unconditional love is that it implies that people will be loved no matter what they do. This promises that even that our lowest point, we will be loved. Aside from the unobtainable standard that is set by the notion of unconditional love, Overall thinks that unconditional love is not desirable, except toward those who are not yet or no longer autonomous. A baby is loved through tantrums and vomiting, and babyish behaviour is common among two year olds. The same cannot be said for six year olds, much less for a ten year old. Unconditional love would not be an appropriate response toward a child's undesirable behaviour (212-213).

Unconditional love towards individuals age six and above suggests that it does not matter who the child is, because if love is truly unconditional, it does not matter what that person does, what that person believes and values, no matter their appearance or attitudes, the parent will love that child independently of its characteristics. But who your child is does matter. Loving parents would never want to exchange their child for another's. And most people do want to be loved for who they are, for their particularities. For a parent, a child is loved because of all the characteristics that make him who he is (213).

So it appears there are limits to unconditional love. The possibility remaining would be conditional love, of which Overall distinguishes two types. For the first kind of conditional love, Overall gives the example of a kind of behaviour you might see on a playground: "If you share your candy with me, I'll be your friend." This kind of conditional love is only given as reward for some kind of achievement. This is the message some parents send their children when they say they will love their children if they behave according to parents standards (like achieving in school) (214).

Then there is the kind of conditional love that loves a child for what it does, says and what it is becoming. This kind of love values the child for what it chooses to be and sees the child as a person in its own right and not as a thing to be manipulated. It recognizes that the child is fallible and loves it despite this. But that love is not unconditional towards the child's behaviour, and cruelty or dishonesty will not be embraced. Instead, this kind of conditional love will help make the child become a better person (214).

Conditional love for a child is different from conditional love towards another adult because the parent-child relationship is asymmetrical. It is inherently asymmetrical because the child does not choose his parents but the parents do choose to have a child. Furthermore, the parents do not only start to build a relationship with someone, they actually create that person, their child. This is different from relationships and friendships, which are based on mutual consent (214-215).

Overall also describes the parent-child relationship as contingently asymmetrical because in the beginning, the child is vulnerable, dependent and needy towards the parents. Meanwhile the parents are able to survive on their own. To choose to have a child is to choose to preserve a human life and help it to achieve its self-sufficiency. The dependency of the child gradually diminishes. Good parenting enables the child to become autonomous. In



addition, the parents at some point discover their own vulnerability in the relationship. Their life cannot go well unless their child's life goes well. Eventually parent and child can relate to each other as adult equals because both are self-determining and can contribute to choosing the relationship's future direction. They are tied by their history, the dependency of love, and the need for the other's well-being as a condition for their own well-being (215-216).

To choose to have a child would be, according to Overall, to set out a relationship that gives a particular meaning to one's own life and to the life of the being that is created. This kind of relationship may have certain goals, but its value is not derived from those goals (217).

## Comments on Chapter 10

In this final chapter Overall gives us the first pronounced clues on how she sees the position of the parent. What she says concerning love in the parent-child relationship is interesting. She states that we do not love our children independent of their characteristics, but because of who they are. Therefore love for children is conditional. I think the kind of love parents have for their children is better to be perceived as Harry Frankfurt described it in *The Reasons of Love* (2006). Frankfurt writes that we do not love people because of their value. We cannot help ourselves for loving some people. It is a volitional necessity. We can love people despite recognizing that a person is not especially valuable, or even despite recognizing that person is utterly bad in its nature. Even so, the beloved is valuable to the lover. This is because what and whom we love necessarily acquires value for us because we love it (Frankfurt, 2006, 38, 39). This way of viewing love explains why many people see a special significance in becoming parent through birth, instead of adoption. Following Frankfurt, I think this special significance only exists because we love our child (from embryotic stage on). Objectively every child is equal to another, yet every parent always thinks his or her child more significant. This significance is gained by loving their child. Therefore I do not think that love for children is conditional, but that the love parents have for their children makes certain characteristics more significant. Despite this difference of opinion, I think it is safe to say that Overall and I both demand that when you choose to have a child, you should try as best as you can to love it.

What Overall says concerning the parent-child relationship also gives us some clues on the rights and duties parents have towards their child. There are several different philosophical accounts on parental rights and duties, and at the end of her book, it becomes clear which position Overall holds.

The six philosophical accounts are (Austin, n.d.):

- Proprietarianism. This view holds that children are the property of their parents. Aristotle held such a view in the *Nichomachean Ethics* (1134b). According to this view, people should treat their child as they treat their property. Overall would object to such an account, since she holds a child's vulnerability in high regard.
- Biological. This account holds that biological ties (either through genetic link or gestation) give procreators parental rights. Overall cannot be said to hold this view, since her account of the parent-child relationship appeals more to a psychological bond than a biological one. Although the nuclear family is presupposed, she does not condemn adoption and she argues that people who have abusive tendencies should not parent (143). This implies that for Overall, parental rights are not founded in biological ties but correspond to the well-being of the child.
- The best interest of the child. According to this view, children should be raised by those who serve their best interests. From Overall's description of the parent-child relationship, we can infer that she does not adhere to this account. Although the interests and vulnerability of the child impose a duty on us, it is in the best interests of the parents that they get to raise their child. Therefore the best interests of the child alone are not sufficient for Overall.

- Constructionism. According to constructionists, parenthood is a type of social contract, arising from the social agreement between the parents and moral community. To such an arrangement Overall would surely object, since the social contract would only require us to provide a certain minimum for our child, while Overall has very high demands on parenthood and thinks children should flourish. To want a child is to become vulnerable to their condition, and therefore a social contract would fail to take into account the values of the parent-child relationship.
- Causation. The causal account holds that procreators have a duty to care for their offspring because they have caused it and are responsible for it. Although Overall emphasizes the vulnerability of children, in the comments on chapter 1 we have seen that this does not make it necessary for parents to be the caretakers of their children, nor does Overall argue for this based on that vulnerability.
- Fundamental interests of parents and children. I believe this is the account Overall holds. Children have an interest in being taken care of because of their vulnerability, thereby creating the obligation to care for them. The reason that most of the time procreators are the suitable parents to their offspring is because during pregnancy, procreators start building a long-lasting relationship that makes their happiness dependent on that of their offspring. It is this vulnerability that gives procreators a right to parent their offspring.

So if I am right in saying that Overall has a philosophical account of parental rights and duties that holds the fundamental interests of parent and child at heart, then she would certainly oppose to any system that holds children in common or institutionalized child-care. Although Plato's and Gheaus' systems would not necessarily hurt the children, they do deprive procreators of their parental rights, therefore harming them. In a 2012 article however, Gheaus admits:

*"The special characteristics of the parent-child relationship also make parenthood too valuable to be denied to people on the mere grounds that other people would make 'better' parents."*

(Gheaus, 2012, 437)

To her, the financial, physical, psychological and social costs of pregnancy and the embodied, emotional and intimate relationship with the foetus that develops during pregnancy speak in favour of adequate parent's moral right to keep their offspring as children (Gheaus, 2012, 446). Still, in the 2017 article, she states that parental monopolies of care could only be vindicated if it was necessary protection of the child's interest. This is not the case, she thinks, because the most extreme failings of care are not easily discovered when children only receive care from their birthparents (Gheaus, 2017, 4).

Yet I think it would be unjust to require all parents to give up their exclusive right to parent their child because some parents are neglecting duties and/or abusing their right. Therefore we cannot demand children to be raised in communal institutions. While it can be advantageous for a child to be free of parental monopoly, it changes the exclusivity of the parent-child relationship. This is not only a great harm to the parents, but also to the child. As the parent-child relationship is contingently asymmetrical, parents are bound to exercise some authority over their child. It is inevitable that parents and children argue over this, and

part of the parent-child relationship is loving each other despite such arguments. Having another caretaker to run away to does not only allow the child to run away and thereby harming that part of the parent-child relationship, but it also risks the parents wanting to please their child in order to keep it close. Even if parents make mistakes in the distribution of the special goods of childhood, I think such mistakes are almost all of the time well meant. Therefore if one chooses to have a child, one should want a parent-child relationship in the way Overall described it. However, if the parent-child relationship is so bad that it harms the child, placing the child in good institutional childcare facilities might be the better option. This would also mean that those who truly regret having children could better place their children in such facilities. I think parents who truly despise parenthood would traumatize their children by doing so, yet the child will be better off with caretakers that genuinely care about him or her. I do not know whether or not Overall would agree to this, yet I cannot think of a ground she has to object to it, since we have already established that the vulnerability of the child is not sufficient to demand the procreators to become caretakers. Yet we can also see why it is so significant that procreators love their own offspring.

## Conclusion

I began this thesis by writing down my own doubts and questions. In order for me to answer them now, I would like to list all the conditions under which one can have children in a morally justified way, as deduced in the commentaries above.

In the comments on chapter 1 I have concluded that the vulnerability of a child alone cannot demand procreators to become caretakers. Second, we should question our childrearing urges and, if Hume's law is to be taken seriously, procreators and parents should not accept things as they are when they can be improved in a way that is advantageous to their offspring. Early in this thesis we did not know if Overall thought that the fact that procreators cause a child to exist gave them moral responsibilities to care for the offspring. Combined with the comments on chapter 10 we can say it does not. Overall does not hold a causal account of parental rights and obligations. Instead, these rights and obligations are founded in the fundamental interests of parent and child. Lastly, potential procreators should consider whether or not their decision reflects badly on the society they live in.

In the comments on chapter 6 I have concluded that the asymmetry of pleasure and pain does not hold up, and therefore it cannot oblige us to stop procreating once and for all. Instead, once a child is born, there is a duty to make sure that the hypothetical scale of pleasure and pain tips to the side of pleasure. However, we lack any method of measuring such a scale, and Overall does not provide in this. Here again, the comments on chapter 10 is relevant, since it depends (in a morally ideal situation) on the procreators willingness to parent by whom that duty rests. If procreators forfeit their right to parent, then childcare institutions should take care of this. Lastly, I added that caretakers should, in addition to the above, teach children about meaningful lives and how to achieve them.

In the comments on chapter 7 I have established that if you decide to have children, you should know fairly certain that parenthood appeals to you. While I have argued that this is in the importance of the procreator, I can now see the significance of Overall's point of view in terms of the interests of the child. Since she holds the interests of parents and children as the fundamental ground for parental rights and obligations, a child might be seriously harmed if parenthood does not appeal to procreators. Additionally I have determined that any oppression should not be too bad and should not be furthered by having children. Next, one's material situation should be sufficient not to make to child be harmed in such a way that the hypothetical scale of harm and pleasure tips to the side of harm. The same is true for all the necessary and contingent harms a child might suffer, although we recognize that a miserable life might still be worth living. Lastly I think that Overall holds too high a standard of parenting capacity. To be an ideal parent would be too high a threshold for parenthood.

In the comments on chapter 10 I have argued for another way to view love in the parent-child relationship than Overall. Despite this, she and I would both require parents to try to love their child as much as possible. This love is what grounds parental rights. These rights could be forfeited in a morally ideal world if the situation required it.

As for me, many of my questions have been answered. Although I think Overall's threshold for good enough parenting is at times too high, I do think that if a minimum could

be set, the responsibilities would still be overwhelming. I do not know whether or not I would be able to live up to them, but I do know that I do not want to. The parent-child relationship is a beautiful thing, and I now understand why people would want children. However, striving for a good parent-child relationship and being a good parent, is a calling, I think, in the same way that being an artist, musician or philosopher might be a calling. Serious sacrifices should be made in order to achieve an almost impossible goal, the most important of which to me is the time you do not get to spend on other things. And just as most people with a talent for painting are not meant to become artists, I think most people that happen to be able to have children, should not parent. I am one of those people, yet I encourage everyone to determine for themselves what their calling is.

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