

What Sort of Person Am I? Reproductive Choice and Moral Character

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Recent developments in genetics and IVF techniques have raised the question of whether it will ever be possible to carry out significant genetic de-coding prior to the implantation of an embryo. Scientists disagree about the feasibility of this, but doctors and prospective parents are often in a position where a decision has to be made about which of several embryos to implant. Judgement has to be made about which are in the best condition and most likely to be viable. Whether or not we would ever be in a position to obtain fine-grained information within a time-frame which would allow us to make use of it, it is worth considering what our response should be if science and technology ever lead us this far.

Some argue that IVF is wrong to start with, and so we have already taken a false step to get this far. I will not attempt to engage with this view, assuming that IVF, as currently practised, is morally acceptable. Now, to my knowledge no one has argued that we should choose among available embryos on purely random grounds, being prepared to attempt to implant an embryo thought by the clinician to be in poor condition. So everyone who approves of IVF approves too of some selection, albeit not necessarily on

genetic grounds. I also believe there to be a pretty broad consensus that if it is known that the development of a particular embryo would lead to the birth of a baby with a horrendous life; say terrible pain, very poor mental and physical functioning, little or no capacity for enjoyment, and early death, then this would be a sufficient reason for rejecting that embryo. Commonly it is said that such a life ‘would not be worth living’. Whether or not one is happy with this phrase we can use it as a convenient marker. There is then, I believe, a broad consensus that it is not wrong to reject an embryo on the grounds that if it developed it would lead to the creation of a life not worth living. Indeed, many might go further and argue that we have a duty not to bring such a life into existence.

We noted several features that characterise a life not worth living. We should also keep in mind that care for a child in such a situation would be incredibly demanding.

Consensus on what is permissible breaks down when the development of an embryo would lead to the birth of a baby which has some, but not, all of the features that prevent life being worth living, or has all of them in a reduced degree. And, of course, the question of what we should do in such cases is far from science fiction, for we have developed a battery of tests which can be applied to the developing foetus at an early enough stage to allow for termination. However termination and IVF selection are two quite different contexts of choice, and while similar issues arise in both cases we should not assume that considerations developed on one context apply equally to the other. So, , I will concentrate only on the IVF case.

Matters, of course, become even more controversial when there is a possibility of selecting on positive grounds. What will eventually become possible is as yet unknown, but it seems likely that some decisions will sooner or later be within our power; for example height, eye, skin and hair colour, perhaps muscle tone, intelligence and disposition towards cheerfulness. Once this information is available, what should we do?

Some philosophers have argued that we have a moral duty to create the best children we can (I have heard Julian Savulescu argue this). I do not know of anyone who would want to argue that this alleged moral duty should be legally enforced, but, nevertheless, some argue that you act wrongly if you allow a less perfect life to come into existence when it was within your power to create a more perfect life.

My very limited experience suggests that a significant proportion of people feel extremely uncomfortable when they hear this argument. But the nature of the opposition is not too easy to pin down. Often it is said that it is wrong to 'play God'. Those who believe that there is a god may be in a good position to make such an argument, but the rest of us are struggling. We can use this argument only in a metaphorical sense, and all the work is in cashing out the metaphor.

A second objection is that it is unclear what is to count as 'best'. This may be right. But nevertheless there is room for making a distinction between better and worse among limited numbers. Statistical analysis can show that some characteristics give people a

more successful life, on average, than others, even if there is no single template of what is best.

A third argument is that selection would be counter-productive, as it would just raise the stakes. Sooner or later two metres would no longer be tall, and IQ equivalent to today's 160 would no longer be smart, and so on. Now there is something to this, but it is too strong to be right. One might as well argue that education is useless, because all it does is raise the general standard, and so there is no competitive advantage. The response, of course, is that not all advantage is competitive.

A fourth argument, which I have not seen elsewhere, but this probably only reflects my limited acquaintance with the area, is what we could call the argument from the 'Stepford Children'. The Stepford Children was a spin-off from the original, made for TV version of the Stepford Wives, in which real women were replaced with robotic identical looking replacements who behaved in a man's fantasy of what a wife should be like. The lesser-known Stepford Children were also replaced by robots. On the one occasion when I had the opportunity to watch this film I regret I was not aware of its relevance to my future research, and managed to sit through only a few moments, but you will get the idea. Stepford's children were polite, obedient, hard-working, truth-telling, intelligent, good at sports, and energetic, with no time for television or junk food. They were also deeply dull.

This is an argument from humility. Imagine that our parents had been able to select their children. How many of us would have been chosen? Would our parents' generation have done a better job than chance? For myself I am very glad that they were in no position to conduct the experiment. I also have grave doubts about my own ability to do better. I have even graver doubts about the abilities of those who not have grave doubts about their ability. In fact there are two problems. First would we make good decisions in any particular case? Second, would individual decisions add up to the creation of a population with the range and variation within it needed to create a flourishing society? This is the 'world of Stepford Children' objection.

We have looked at four arguments, with variations, against selection: playing God; no such thing as best; self-defeating; and the individual and collective Stepford Children. Only the last, in both versions, it seems to me, has any force. Yet I do not believe it captures all the discomfort that people feel on hearing that they have a moral duty to create the best child they can. Can we get closer to the root of this feeling?

A different sort of argument looks at issues of identity in a different way. A simplistic way of thinking about the process of making a choice – whether between flavours of ice-cream, or whether to choose one embryo over another – is that it is simply a way of identifying which option is most likely to be the most effective way of realising one's pre-given aims, values or preferences. Yet we are capable of thinking of choice in other ways. For example choice can have a symbolic function. Conspicuous consumption is an example; where one makes certain purchases in order to be seen as the sort of person who

makes purchases like that. Of course others may take away quite a different message from the person's actions. And the negative phenomenon – what we might call inconspicuous consumption – works in an exactly similar fashion.

So choice can have a type of significance in its own right. It can say something about you; your character, indeed your moral character. This is what I would like to explore now. And we need to be sensitive to a number of distinctions. First we need to distinguish what you choose from how you go about choosing, including the range of information you draw upon. Consider three people deciding which car to buy. One person reads a few magazines, takes a couple of test drives, talks to a couple of friends, and then makes a decision. Another spends time observing other people's reactions: whether they admire people who drive a particular car, or think them unimaginative or low class. A third person gathers every report and consumer test, test-drives every car, searches the internet for car-based chat-rooms and bulletin boards, pummels strangers with questions about fuel consumption and torque, and so on. Now suppose after all this, all three buy the same make and model of car. What we say about each of them, about their character, will, nevertheless, be likely to be very different. This, then, illustrates the first point. While what you choose may be revealing, how you go about the process of choosing may be even more so.

But revealing in what way? This leads to a second distinction. We might, in the first instance, want to distinguish an epistemological and metaphysical reading of the claim. On the epistemological reading, looking at people's choices, and their way of making

choices, is revealing of their pre-existing character. On the metaphysical reading it is rather, in part at least, that they determine or constitute their character through the choices they make. This distinction, though, may be somewhat artificial. One constantly has the option of remaking or refining one's character, or confirming one's existing character, and the making of some choices and not others will be an important means of doing this. Yet at the same time one is always remodelling on the basis of one's existing character. Therefore any choice is likely to be partially revealing of one's character and partially formative of it. This is just as much so even in the case where someone is deliberately trying to change the type of person they are, and is using a choice situation as part of the means for this.

Consider now a couple who wish to have a child. Suppose, in the first instance, they have no reason to believe that they will have any difficulty conceiving a child naturally. Yet suppose we are at a point in future history where pre-implantation screening can provide a great deal of genetic knowledge, correlated with mental and physical traits, and allowing significant control over the characteristics of one's children. And let us suppose that IVF is also very reliable.

The first issue facing this couple would be whether to opt for the natural method of conception, or to have an IVF conception. The second question is, if they opt for IVF, what principle should they follow in their choice of embryo? Only the best is good enough, or something less demanding? Finally they need to consider what range of information to draw on in making their choice. It may seem, at first, obvious that they

should draw on all possible sources of information if they are rational, but we saw in the case of car purchase that to do so can in some cases seem excessive, and to reveal a particular type of character or personality. So this is an important question.

Suppose now that this couple opts for IVF; that they want to create the best baby they can; and they want to draw on all possible information, including genetic information, whatever the cost or inconvenience. This, we might knowingly say to each other, is very revealing about them. But revealing of what, exactly? And what would a different set of choices have revealed; for example consider a second couple for whom the possibility of opting for IVF instead of natural conception never occurs to them, and they choose to screen only for conditions that might make a resulting life not worth living.

Clearly the couple choosing IVF is taking a highly interventionist stance. They are behaving on the basis of a number of assumptions: first that they are able to make a significant difference; second that the difference will be in line with their aims; and third that the result will be for the best, all things considered. The second couple may have decided not to try to exercise more control for many possible reasons. But putting aside any religious or mystical views, why not seek out the opportunity of exerting more control over the outcome? Here are some possibilities:

- i) scepticism about the possibility of influencing the outcome at all.
- ii) scepticism about the aims (what do we mean by 'best'?).
- iii) scepticism that the technology can deliver what they want.

- iv) scepticism about whether achieving their aims will really be for the best, overall.
- v) concern about how they might respond if things go wrong.

This last point is something I have not mentioned so far. To see its force, consider a couple who currently are very concerned that their next child should be a boy, but for whom abortion for sex-selection is not an option. Suppose they attempt every folk and pseudo-scientific method (dietary supplements and so on) that is said to raise the chances of a boy. When it is born, it is girl. What then?

Considerations like this are often raised under the head of ‘unconditional love’. It is sometime argued that you should not have high hopes that your child will turn out one way rather than another, for this may lead you to love your child in the wrong way, or less than you might have done. Love for your children, it is said, should be unconditional, and wishing for one set of characteristics rather than another is said to be a way of placing conditions. Indeed, so the argument goes, the objection applies whether your hopes are achieved or dashed: if you get what you want you ‘only love your child because it is a boy’ or a donor for a sibling, if you don’t you do not love it properly because it doesn’t have these features. The standard reply seems to be that this is a confusion: the chosen features are not conditions of your love, and so the resulting child, however it turns out – boy or girl, saviour sibling or not - will be unconditionally loved. You can love your unchosen daughter just as much as you would have loved your chosen son.

However, what happens in particular cases is an empirical matter, and it seems unlikely that there are psychological universals here. It is at least possible that wishing hard for a son may have the danger of lessening the quality of your relation with the resulting daughter. It is also possible that it may adversely affect the quality of your relation with your son, if you have what you wish for. I do not think this is a conceptual claim, or an empirical generalisation, but there may be a risk. If so, there is something to be said for the Stoic virtue of waiting and seeing, as a way of preparing yourself for whatever life has to offer, and not expecting or hoping that it will turn out, in detail, any one way rather than another.

Where stoicism is called for then, the opposite of stoicism is a vice. I don't know if the ancient world has a name for this vice, but the modern world does: 'control freak'. A control freak is someone who cannot bear uncertainty, dependence on others or chance, and wants to plan out the future and execute that plan. Yet this could hardly be a vice in a situation which requires you to take control. Under those circumstances the stoic attitude of waiting and seeing, and leaving things to trust, or to others is the vice; perhaps amounting to negligence. Control freakery is a vice only under certain circumstances.

These might include:

- i) It is not for you to take control.
- ii) It is not possible to exert meaningful determinate influence.
- iii) Your taking control may cause damage.

Now the first of these may correspond to the ‘playing god’ objection; the second to scepticism about the technology; and the third to the ‘Stepford Children’ or other consequentialist objection. But it would be very disappointing if this was all we could say, for it would mean that the ‘moral character’ objection simply reduces to other objections we have already considered. Yet I suggested that these other objections do not explain the feelings people feel on hearing it alleged that we have a ‘moral duty’ to create the best. I implied that the ‘moral character argument’ had more chance. So let us see if we are able to do more to bring out its distinctive nature.

A promising strategy returns us to the point that how you go about deliberating about a choice, and how you make that choice, are both revealing and partly constitutive of your moral character, including, we should now emphasise, your future moral character. One question that might immediately strike us, on hearing about our fictional couple who opt for IVF is: what sort of parents are they going to make? Having such a controlling attitude to their child’s characteristics is not a good sign or a good start. Even, then, if there is nothing inherently wrong with trying to exert influence pre-implantation, there is in trying to control too much of one’s children’s lives and futures. A couple who start off with a controlling attitude can worry us. This couple seem unlikely to become the sort of relaxed, tolerant, forgiving people that many think is a model of good parenthood. If they find themselves with tendencies to control, pre-implantation, then they have to make a decision about how to respond to these tendencies. Should they indulge, cultivate and reinforce these tendencies by selecting a particular set of characteristics for their child, or should they fight them by opting for natural childbirth after all, and being prepared

(within limits) to accept their fate? On this account of character formation, how one goes about making reproductive choices, is, in part at least, a training ground for parenthood. This has nothing to do with the ‘unconditional love’ objection, but rather that one can deliberately or otherwise set out to be a particular kind of parent.

It would be far too simplistic to say that how one chooses to behave pre-implantation *determines* the nature of one’s parenthood. There is no logical or psychological impossibility in putting enormous effort into choosing a particular type of child, and then becoming a model of a relaxed parent. And the opposite is also possible; indeed, sadly, not uncommon. However I am reminded of Rousseau’s advice for those building up a large fortune for themselves in order to do good for others with it later: you are deluding yourself – ‘later’ will never come. Of course, for some it does, but the general point surely stands: it is very hard to bring off this kind of switch in attitudes and motivation. So if you want to be a relaxed parent, start early.

Can this ‘formation of moral character’ argument explain why many would think that the fictional couple considered above are so creepy? Perhaps not on its own. But with the help of the individual and collective Stepford Children arguments we have quite a potent brew. The search for perfection rarely generates the results it aims at.