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BOOK REVIEW

Choosing Tomorrow's Children: The Ethics of Selective Reproduction

Stephen Wilkinson
Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2010
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Recent technological advances have resulted in prospective parents being able to choose certain characteristics of their children, whether it be choosing an embryo on the basis of its gender, selecting an embryo as a tissue match for a sick sibling, selecting *for* a disability or deselecting an embryo to avoid disease. Much has been written to date on whether or not certain forms of selective reproduction should be prohibited, with the majority taking a precautionary stance. Stephen Wilkinson starts his book with three real cases to illustrate examples of selective reproduction. He thus engages the reader immediately, drawing her into the ethical dilemmas faced by families and, as a result of the technology required for such procedures as IVF (*in vitro* fertilisation) and PGD (pre-implantation genetic diagnosis), the medical profession and those who decide on policy.

After a general explanation of selective reproduction the book then describes the methodological and theoretical assumptions used in arguments for and against its practice. Wilkinson presents the debate from a different perspective and takes what he describes as a 'negative approach.' This approach starts from the view that the State should only ban a procedure if there are compelling reasons for doing so – Schematic Political Liberalism. There is an initial presumption that an action or procedure (such as sex selection) should be allowed until there is a strong argument against it. Utilising his negative approach, Wilkinson proceeds to address the arguments raised against each procedure and whether they are sufficiently robust to result in a prohibition. He concedes that his conclusions are not always satisfactory, given that much will depend on empirical research yet to be undertaken by social scientists, which incidentally will be difficult to obtain both practically and ethically. Although this is true, it does leave the reader dissatisfied at times and some counter-arguments could be too easily dismissed on this basis. Nevertheless, it serves to highlight the real need for such research and how it could add considerable value to the debate.

His second chapter examines parental duties and virtues. Wilkinson has doubts about the Principle of Unconditional Parental Love, in relation to the principle itself and also, particularly, whether it can apply to prospective parents and an as yet unknown future child. What is more important, he feels, is the attitude of acceptance of the child when born, rather than focussing on the attempt by prospective parents to choose the characteristics of a child. He rejects as mere speculation the views of Scott¹ who points out that those parents who care unduly about a child's characteristics may have a worrying approach to parenthood and so

¹ R. Scott, 'Choosing between Possible Lives: Legal and Ethical Issues in Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 26 (2006), 153-78: 167.

breach the Principle, and also Flinter² who emphasises the medical, financial and psychological costs involved in undergoing IVF and PGD as proof of the importance to those parents of achieving certain characteristics. Wilkinson may be correct in that there may be a dearth of evidence on these concerns, yet the conclusions arrived at are difficult to contradict. When addressing the closely linked Virtue of Parental Acceptance, and in particular Rosalind McDougall's claim that as acceptance of the child no matter what his or her characteristics is a parental virtue sex selection is wrong³, Wilkinson does not agree that even if we accept that parents should have this virtue it does not necessarily follow that prospective parents should also possess it.

Chapter three addresses the prospect of choosing an embryo on the basis that it has a disability. This refers back to one of the real life cases identified in the introduction where an American couple who were deaf chose a congenitally deaf sperm donor in order to produce a deaf child. The chapter focuses on the Child Welfare Argument and the potential harm this could entail for the child once born. Wilkinson concludes that the role of the Child Welfare Argument is limited given that harm will only occur in very few cases (i.e. - where it could be argued that the life of the child is so bad that he or she would have been better off not having been born at all, given that the alternative is not to have existed). Despite Wilkinson convincingly and persuasively leading the reader through his arguments, the instinct remains that this choice would be inherently wrong. It is testament to Wilkinson's skills as a philosopher that the reader must concede that the analysis leads to a logical conclusion, but for me the initial response prevails. Yet even when applying other moral theories such as the natural law theory and Rawl's Contract Theory and principles such as beneficence and non-maleficence to the issue I found myself using Wilkinson's arguments in response.

His next chapter focuses on when a child is being chosen for the wellbeing of another – either to meet the preferences of the parent(s) or, in the case of a saviour sibling, for the sake of an already existing, ill child. As well as evaluating the Cost of Care argument and explaining his scepticism of its use to justify reproductive decisions, he continues to address the claims that choosing an embryo which will save another, or which will satisfy the desires of the parents, instrumentalises and commodifies the embryo. Wilkinson, in line, with Kant's anti-instrumentalisation principles, has no objection if the child is not *only* created as a means, but is also treated as a human being - after all, most children, if not all, are created for reasons which could be regarded as just as instrumentalising. The commodification claim fails, he believes, because it would necessarily involve treating persons as fungible when they should not be treated as such. Yet, when relating the argument to possible future children it would be difficult to require that one embryo be considered irreplaceable when very little is known about it.

Any book on the ethics of selective reproduction arguably would not be complete without a chapter on eugenics and here Wilkinson recognises that the term itself at times can hinder proper debate because of its pejorative use and the historical negative associations it holds. He also believes that it is not obvious that choosing an embryo in order to avoid serious genetic disorders is 'eugenic.' Even if it is, he believes that it could be a form of eugenics which is acceptable. Again, however, perhaps because of the horrific associations with the word 'eugenics', the phrase 'acceptable eugenics' appears to be an oxymoron. Also, within this chapter, Wilkinson discusses the Expressivist Argument – that choosing embryos without disease or disability conveys a negative message regarding those already living with such disabilities or disease. Wilkinson considers that the problem lies more in how the

² F. Flinter, 'Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis Needs to be Tightly Regulated', *BMJ* 322 (28 Apr. 2001), 1008-9.

³ R. McDougall, 'Acting Parentally: An Argument Against Sex Selection', *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 31 (2005), 601-5: 603.

practice is communicated and articulated, but also recognises that, at times, this Argument does stand up. The possibility should at least make us more aware of how we articulate the practice and the effect the language we use could have on others.

The penultimate chapter focuses on enhancement and here Wilkinson critically assesses the various ethical views on creating children with enhanced traits or characteristics. The arguments against selection on this basis generally fail, he feels, unless enhancement is for properties which are considered positional goods and so give the person born a competitive advantage over others. Embryo selection for such goods, if left to the free market, would lead to increased inequality and injustice, thus harming those who were unable to afford those goods.

Social Sex Selection merits its own chapter as, although many of the previous arguments apply to this practice, Wilkinson holds that there are further arguments which apply particularly to this form of sex selection. One is the fear that it will result in an imbalance in the gender of the population and he refers to the research carried out on the social effects that may arise as a result⁴. The other concern is that to choose an embryo because of its sex is indicative of sexism. Primarily he questions whether family balancing is a morally preferable basis for sex selection and so entitled to a privileged status. He concludes that it is not necessarily better than other forms of sex selection although, admittedly, it is less likely to be based on sexist beliefs and less likely to result in a sex imbalance. Finally he argues against prohibiting sex selection generally in the UK and certain other countries as it could be regulated in a way which would limit any possible harm and any sexism would be 'fairly harmless' and certainly no worse than other examples of sexism which are currently allowed, or at least tolerated. This again seems a rather easy response to what is now a global concern⁵ and it could be claimed that adding to sexist practices to even a limited extent only serves to exacerbate and aggravate the problem. Sex selection in countries such as China and India is already well documented but there is now evidence that there are skewed sex ratios in countries such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia and Albania, arguably based on deep-rooted social approaches to women and the superiority of males. It is not possible to begin to change such attitudes unless good examples are set elsewhere.

In answer to the claim that to allow the practice here would be to send a message that it is acceptable to other countries (countries where the practice may be abused) is dismissed by Wilkinson on the basis that other countries have so far not been influenced by our policies and are unlikely to be so in the future. Although the claim is undoubtedly true there is a concern of hypocrisy here and, to use Wilkinson's own response to several alternative arguments, further empirical research is required on this issue before we can really feel comfortable with this conclusion.

Wilkinson's aims are clearly established at the beginning of each chapter, with very concise conclusions bringing his arguments together. The unavoidable labyrinthine discussions are thus concisely explained and clarified before the reader proceeds to the next chapter and the next philosophical argument.

The style is accessible and Wilkinson treats the reader almost as though he or she is putting forward questions and possible objections directly to him. He then responds to each possible query briefly and confidently before moving on, resisting the temptation to leave the

⁴ W. Rogers, A. Ballantyne, and H. Draper, 'Is Sex Selective Abortion Morally Justified and Should It Be Prohibited?', *Bioethics*, 21 (2007), 520-4:522.

⁵ UNFPA Guidance Note on Prenatal Sex Selection, 2010. Source: http://unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2010/guidenote_prenatal_sexselection.pdf (21st October, 2011).

main discussion and go too far down another path. This is a clever technique as it helps the reader to feel part of the debate, but as much as it provides some answers it also leads to further challenges, an inevitable response given the issues examined, and a positive one in that it reinforces the reader's engagement.

A final concluding chapter would have been welcome, although Wilkinson cannot be faulted for signposting his views throughout and summarising each chapter. However, given that many of the theoretical approaches apply to several forms of selective reproduction, and some of the counter-arguments are based on repeated themes such as lack of empirical evidence and the difficulty of applying approaches to future possible children, such a chapter would have been beneficial, both stylistically and to close the loop of any arguments left open.

Wilkinson draws on a wealth of sources to assist his arguments but also in recognition of counter-arguments. His examples to illustrate each of his claims are well thought through and contribute to the weight of his conclusions as well as assisting the reader to understand the philosophical process. This is an excellent book which will persuade, if not convince, that there is insufficient resilience in the arguments against selective reproduction to warrant a prohibition, at least in the UK. It is a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on the ethics of selective reproduction.

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