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Paper 2

Introduction

Abandonment, orphanage, adoption, and other issues regarding offspring are not new to our era. It is not unreasonable to assume that even the earliest human parents desired their offspring to possess certain characteristics, and that there were always those not fully satisfied with their offspring. However, with the advent of artificial reproductive methods now accounting for 1.8% of all births in the United States, ethical issues surrounding the transmission of human life have become even more salient. One of such issues is what decisions parents can make regarding the characteristics of their offspring.

In this essay, I first set a moral framework regarding human dignity and social norms. Then, I discuss each of sex, race, appearance, health, and genetic enhancement in terms of their moral acceptability as offspring selection criteria. I distinguish among gamete selection, gene therapy, and adoption as contexts that may change the way these criteria should be applied, as well as between state laws and individual decisions. Overall, my standpoint is that offspring characteristics selection should prioritize the well-being of both parents and their children and that it should not lead to discrimination.

Considering Human Dignity

Although technological progress has opened a wide array of possibilities, it is not obvious if humanity can morally use all of them. What should guide both government laws and individual actions is morality, an important bedrock of which is the notion of human dignity. A discussion of offspring selection therefore relies on assumptions regarding the dignity of human beings at different levels of their development. The goal of this essay is not to arrive at such assumptions but rather to apply my fundamental beliefs, presented as the assumptions of this essay, to this ethical problem.

Let me first define two key terms, "human being" and "parents". My definition of a human being is the following: *a living organism built on its own homo sapiens genetic material*, where "living" means "maintaining some or all physiological functions."[1] I use the word "parents" with reference to social parents, who may or may not be the biological parents of a child.

Crucial to my perspective is the assumption that all human beings are equal in dignity, and that both the state law and individuals should respect it. I believe that human dignity is inalienable and irreducible; human dignity does not depend on any traits or on actions of an individual, nor the way he or she was conceived. Therefore, even the least developed or the sickliest or disabled human being deserves the fullness of human rights; similarly, even the cruelest criminal or otherwise most undesired individual deserves the same rights.

An implication of this viewpoint for the choice of offspring traits is that ethical considerations should not be limited to the interests of parents but should also include the interests of the offspring. Thus, even though many cases of embryo selection practices were

[1] For its justification, you are welcome to read my previous essay.

frequently mentioned in Professor Haig's lectures, my discussion of this ethical problem assumes that trait selection never entails the elimination of human beings, including embryos. Selecting embryos necessarily involves discarding some of them, and this is a violation of the right to life, which I consider universal.

Finally, I would like to state that, following some less universally accepted ethical standards, I also oppose artificial methods of reproduction even when they do not involve discarding unborn individuals. However, it does not seem to conflict with my conscience to propose moral principles that could guide artificial gamete selection. I derive these principles from those guiding the "natural" partner selection, as these two are analogous to some extent.

Considering Social Norms

Social norms may be important factors in many people's reproductive decisions. The norms may pertain to sex, race, appearance, health, abilities, or other traits. Therefore, before discussing each of these characteristics, I find it necessary to present my approach as to how social norms can or cannot play a role in offspring conception and trait selection.

I consider benefits obtained by the means of social norms, such as inheritance laws, not to be a valid reason for conceiving a human being. For instance, there was a case of a 62-year old French woman living in California who used spermatozoa from her brother to protect the family wealth from dispersing. In this case, a child conceived primarily for financial reasons. This example illustrates the situations that I consider violations to the dignity of a human being.

Moreover, I believe social engineering not to be a right intention behind government policies regarding reproduction. The law could preserve certain "natural" or existing equilibria in society, such as the equal sex ratio. The government could also counteract discrimination on any grounds. However, any reproduction policy that sought to enhance the gene pool, for example to reduce crime rates, would be close to eugenics, and thus I would oppose it.

Considering Sex

It seems that preferences regarding sex are one of the most salient across cultures. In many traditions, fathers are not satisfied until they have their first son. The reasons are practical, like the demand for help with work requiring a lot of physical strength; political, like the inheritance of the throne; or cultural, like the belief that having a male descendant is a matter of honor.

There are situations in which such a preference, in conjunction with other policies, may lead to a disproportion between the number of men and the number of women, for example in modern-day China. This not only leads to an increased number of single individuals but may also significantly alter gender relations by shifting power to one of the genders. As a result, it may ultimately lead to a permanent change in gender norms. Therefore, it is crucial to consider gender ratio in crafting policy regarding offspring selection.

Overall, I believe that the socially desirable gender ratio is one-to-one, as it gives more individuals a chance to find a partner and it prevents unnecessary changes in gender norms. Theoretically, the changes in gender norms could be positive. For example, the deficit of women in society could possibly lead to their emancipation. However, as stated above, I do not consider actively improving social norms to be morally acceptable factor in deciding about offspring selection policies.

Discrimination in adoption is another important issue related to sex. In cultures where there is a bias against a particular sex, the discriminated sex may not only be more often abandoned by biological parents but may also be less often adopted, which would exacerbate the problem of discrimination.

For these reasons, I am opposed to the possibility for parents to choose the sex of an adopted child, and I argue for a state policy against selection based on sex. However, at the individual level, I do not find it morally wrong if parents have personal preferences for offspring of a particular sex, except when their preferences reflect their sexism.

Considering Race

Although, in the absence of the cultural and historical context, race could be considered almost exclusively in terms of appearance and health factors, in practice, it is necessary to separately discuss this human trait. While having racial preferences for an employee or a client is unacceptable, having such preferences seems acceptable for the purpose of finding a partner. Since drawing a line between racism and personal preferences is difficult, it is not obvious what the state and individuals should accept regarding offspring race selection.

There are reasons to accept race selection. Unlike changes in the sex ratio, changes in the race ratio do not seem to rapidly translate into social problems. Moreover, race may be a factor that changes the degree to which parents feel connected to the child based on their genetic similarity.

However, the disadvantages of race selection may be large. Like in the case of gender discrimination, offspring selection may exacerbate racial discrimination. In the case of adoption, for example, couples of the dominant race X may be often willing to accept only children of race X or Y but not Z. As a result of such actions, children of the race Z may be discriminated against and overrepresented in orphanages.

Therefore, I would distinguish between individual morality and state policy objectives in the case of race. While I would find it morally acceptable that individuals freely choose the race of their offspring if they had such a possibility, I argue that the state could impose limits on race selection for adoption purposes if empirical evidence demonstrates a persistent, systematic, and large discrimination of children in orphanages based on race. However, I would not impose restrictions regarding gamete selection.

Considering Appearance

The problem of appearance has some analogies to the problem of race but does not carry the burden of cultural differences and historical conflicts. For example, like the case of race, the similarity of appearance seems a convincing reason for offspring selection. It seems “natural” and acceptable that many parents would prefer to have their children look like them, and this seems a valid factor in gamete selection or adoption. The case of gene editing is less clear, since modifying somebody’s appearance does not seem to justify this risky procedure.

However, preferences regarding appearance may go beyond parent-offspring similarity, as parents may want to reject the children they find unattractive and choose those more good-looking. This may lead to a systematic discrimination based on the attractiveness of appearance.

Although, ideally, the state would prevent this form of discrimination, it is difficult to conceive such a legislation in practice. Perhaps artificial intelligence in the future could objectively settle the subtle difference between the similarity preference and a "beauty bias." As of today, I would like the state to only forbid gene therapy with the goal to change appearance. However, it remains a moral obligation for individuals to consider appearance not a factor in offspring selection and to be ready to accept the less attractive children, too.

Considering Illness and Disability

Whereas sex, race, and appearance are related to a person's identity, illness or disability are usually not considered an inherent part of an individual. Therefore, ethical considerations regarding health-related issues seem different from those identity-related. That said, the problem of offspring selection based on health may be even more controversial.

One the one hand, it seems "natural" and acceptable to desire healthy offspring. Parents generally desire to have healthy children and to minimize risk factors before and after birth. Young people (subconsciously) select their partners based on the predicted health of the future offspring, as health is one of the factors that makes potential partners look more attractive than others.

On the other hand, the dignity of a human being requires accepting children regardless of their illnesses or disabilities. The discrimination of such individuals would be very cruel. Perhaps the only justification for parents to leave for adoption or not to accept the adoption of such children would be the parents' incapability of taking proper care of the children.

Since gamete selection seems somewhat analogous to partner selection, it seems acceptable for potential parents select the gametes most likely to result in a healthy child. It also seems acceptable to practice gene therapy to repair the defected genes. Phenylketonuria and sickle cell anemia are examples of genetic diseases that could be eliminated in the future if gene editing possibilities expand.

However, it is unacceptable to discriminate against already living sick or disabled individuals, regardless of whether they are embryos, feta, or babies. The state should intervene to protect them at any level of development. Yet considering adoption policy, there could be exceptions in justified cases, for example when parents would not afford time or financial resources for the treatment of such a child.

Considering Genetic Enhancement

Finally, it is important to discuss the case of genetic enhancement. I understand genetic enhancement as the selection of genes more predictive of high cognitive and physical abilities and of certain skills. This issue is related to health considerations; however, to the extent that better skills are plausibly less important than better health, different ethical principles apply here.

The argument from the "natural" partner selection seems to be relevant also for genetic enhancement, as ability and skills are the traits people look for in their partners, which is an evolutionary mechanism favoring the genes that better fit a given environment. Moreover, the selection of individuals based their abilities and skills is socially acceptable in different contexts, such as employment. In this light, gamete selection based on genes favorable for different sorts of skills and abilities does not seem by itself immoral. As long as such a selection does not lead to

the discrimination of the sick or disabled, it seems acceptable to desire the adoption of high-achieving children.

Nonetheless, there are objections to genetic enhancement. Artificial gamete selection may not always be a pure reflection of the "natural" mechanism of selection, as children usually have abilities and skills similar to their parents. Genetic enhancement also does not seem a proper justification for gene therapy, at least as long as the procedure remains risky.

A controversial but possibly reasonable policy solution would be to permit parents to seek the adoption of children with abilities and skills within the range associated with their own traits. I believe that it would be good for a child with high test scores to be more likely to be selected by parents who themselves had high test scores; it would also be good for intelligent parents to be more likely to adopt an intelligent child. This would not only reflect the "natural" trait-passing process, but also increase the probability that parents and children match and get along well.

Conclusion

While technological progress is good, humanity may sometimes use it the wrong way. Some aspects of offspring selection may resemble eugenics and human engineering. What aspects of the progress are good depends on whether humans treat each other as subjects rather than as objects. The government and the individuals should respect equal dignity of all human beings.

I conclude that while it is morally acceptable for parents to have personal preferences regarding sex, race, appearance, health, and abilities of their offspring, the state should allow parents to only choose race, appearance, predicted health and skills in the case of gamete selection, only choose health in the case of gene therapy, and only choose appearance, abilities, and possibly race and health in the case of adoption.