

Christine Overall

Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate

CAMBRIDGE, MASS. AND LONDON, UK: THE MIT PRESS, 2012

*Reviewed by Rachel Fredericks*

978-0262525299

"...her book constitutes an important contribution to feminist thinking about a crucial domain of human experience; it gives feminists and their allies a great deal to consider."

As contraception and reproductive technologies have become more effective and accessible, people have increasingly had a *choice* about whether to procreate. Christine Overall argues persuasively in her latest book that this choice is of profound ethical significance, not simply a private matter or a biological inevitability. Nevertheless, as she notes, this choice is rarely discussed in moral philosophy (12). Her book is an immensely rich and incisive step toward remedying that lack; in it, she develops numerous arguments about the circumstances under which and reasons for which one can and cannot make a morally justified choice to procreate or not to procreate.

I applaud Overall for her consistent emphasis on how the biological reality of procreation, whether involving reproductive technologies or not, is different for men and women. As she shows, these basic differences in experience tend to disappear when male philosophers develop highly abstract arguments about procreation, which allows for the perpetuation of thoughts and practices that oppress women (and children). Overall never fails to consider how such differences matter to the moral justifiability of the procreative practices and choices she investigates. Thus her book constitutes an important contribution to feminist thinking about a crucial domain of human experience; it gives feminists and their allies a great deal to consider. The book is suitable for a broad audience, including people both inside and outside

academia; I can imagine using it (or, more likely, individual chapters from it) in various courses, especially upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses.

It is, however, important to be aware of a limit to the scope of Overall's arguments. Since her book is about the *choice* whether to procreate, its arguments have little application to people who, because of oppression, poverty, ignorance, biological factors, or other factors, cannot choose whether to procreate. Overall focuses on twenty-first-century North Americans, but even within this limited domain, she seems rather more optimistic than I am about how many of us truly have a choice in this matter (9–13).

Overall makes multiple negative arguments that are critical of existing literature and multiple positive arguments in support of her own view. I consider the positive elements of her project first, which provide a helpful groundwork for understanding her negative arguments and a worry I discuss later. In chapter 2, Overall outlines a view of reproductive moral (not legal) rights as having "both a consequentialist and a deontological foundation" (20). She says there is a consequentialist foundation for reproductive rights insofar as being able to make choices about their procreation is of fundamental importance to potential parents' welfare, and insofar as children have a fundamental interest in being wanted. Since such rights are crucial for the protection of women's personhood, she says they also have a deontological basis (21).

Overall defends a positive right to reproduce, a negative right to reproduce, and a right not to reproduce. The positive right to reproduce protects against unjustified discrimination in the provision of reproductive services. She says that societies can be justified in making choices about which reproductive services to offer based on various financial and other considerations, but that when a society does offer a reproductive service, that service may justifiably be denied to individuals only on medical grounds. The positive right to reproduce is limited (a) because one has no right to an unlimited share of medical resources, only a right to one's fair share of the limited resources to be allocated in a nondiscriminatory way, and (b) because one has no right to others' bodily products or services, although some reproductive services depend on such products and services (22–29). The negative right to reproduce is an unlimited right in that one is entitled to be free from interference with one's procreation. The right not to reproduce is also unlimited, a "right not to be forced to reproduce, whether through sexual slavery, denial of access to contraception, or lack of access to abortion" (31). Although she supports these rights, Overall argues that one cannot justify the choice to procreate solely by reference to these rights, for there are many features relevant to justifying such a choice that are independent of these rights (such as the potential child's welfare).

In the final chapter, Overall aims to show that people can be morally justified in choosing to procreate. She says, "The best reason to have a child is simply the creation of the mutually enhancing love that is the parent–child relationship. In choosing to become a parent, one sets out to create a relationship, and . . . to create the person with whom one has the relationship" (217). She proposes that the choice to procreate can be meaningful insofar as it involves a choice to change one's self-identity, ideally for the better. I can suggest no better reason to procreate when it is justifiable to do so, although I return to the issue of justifiability in a bit.

The majority of Overall's book is devoted to critical arguments. In chapter 3, she discusses what potential parents should do when they disagree about whether to procreate, primarily to point out the inadequacies in some of the strategies for resolving such disagreements that have been proposed by others. Because of this critical focus, I am not certain how helpful this discussion would be to those who are actually attempting to resolve such a disagreement with a potential partner in procreation. Then again, like Overall, I would not expect any one strategy to neatly resolve such a significant disagreement in all or even most cases.

Overall then criticizes multiple arguments meant to justify the choice to procreate or to defend a duty to procreate. She objects to standard deontological arguments in favor of procreation, including those having to do with "heeding the supposed intrinsic value of childbearing; passing on a name, genetic link, or property; fulfilling a duty to others; keeping a promise; and discharging duties to religion or to the state" (70). She rejects most of these because they treat women and/or children as mere means to other ends, and explores ways in which some are ableist, classist, racist, and/or sexist. Next, Overall criticizes standard consequentialist arguments in favor of procreation, including those meant to justify choosing to procreate

by reference to the economic or psychological benefits that the parent(s) are expected to gain thereby, on the grounds that they are unjust to the women and/or children involved. She argues at length against the claim that creating a "savior sibling" for an existing sick child can be justified via consequentialism. Her sustained arguments that the decision to procreate is more difficult to justify than the decision not to procreate are quite persuasive and crucial to eliminating discrimination against people (especially women) who do not procreate.

Overall's negative project also extends to criticisms of arguments supporting a duty *not* to procreate. In chapter 6, she criticizes David Benatar's argument that being created always seriously harms a person, and that therefore procreation is never justified. In chapter 7, she identifies which factors (such as parental age, sexual orientation, marital status, material situation, and so on) are and are not relevant to determining whether a potential parent has an obligation not to procreate. In chapter 8, she discusses how illnesses and impairments in potential children and/or parents do and do not affect the justifiability of the choice to procreate. Each of those chapters makes a valuable contribution to the literature and could be read on its own. However, the next chapter merits closer attention insofar as it is somewhat less satisfying.

In the penultimate chapter, Overall considers how threats of human overpopulation and extinction affect the moral justifiability of procreative decisions. With overpopulation in mind, she says that "we should consider it morally justifiable for every individual, whether in a relationship or not, to have one biologically related child," a claim which she sees as "easily justified" (183). Thus she believes that we have an individual moral responsibility to limit procreation to one child per adult. She considers and rejects multiple reasons to think that this asks too much, and one reason to think that it asks too little. However, the reason of the latter sort that she considers is not the only reason to think that her recommendation asks too little.

I worry that despite Overall's persuasive arguments about the difficulty of justifying the choice to procreate and her thoughtful outline of how one might justify this choice given the difficulties identified, she has not fully captured the range of obstacles to such a justification. In particular, if climate change significantly reduces Earth's capacity to support human life of a quality worth living within relatively few generations, humans might significantly exceed sustainable population levels in the relatively near future even if, starting tomorrow, everyone limits their procreation to one child per adult and resource consumption does not increase. Following Overall's recommendations would certainly decrease our population, but I do not see a reason to think it would necessarily ensure a morally justifiable outcome (even without considering the impact of human procreation on nonhuman animals, plants, and ecosystems). We should be concerned about a recommendation that could be consistent with exceeding our planet's carrying capacity. Given Overall's own emphasis on the relevance of one's contingent material, psychological, and social conditions to justifying the choice to procreate, the one child per adult recommendation must not be taken to apply in a static way across all circumstances anyway. The challenge is to take the dangers of climate change into account and still be able to show that her recommendation is appropriate in the current circumstances.

Despite the worries mentioned, I am deeply grateful to Overall for illuminating key questions about whether and why it can be morally justified to procreate, and I am eager to see how the literature develops in response to her thought-provoking book.

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