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Introduction

I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.

—Deuteronomy 30:19.

Why Have Children?

I suspect that most people eventually ask themselves the question “Why have children?” at least once or twice during their lives.

Back when I was much younger than I am now, I was trying to decide whether I wanted to have children or not. I eventually did choose to have two children, whom I adore. I am fortunate and blessed to have them. Along the way, I learned a few things about the decision whether to have children.

First, if you wait to have children until you are absolutely sure that it is the right decision, then you may wait forever, and you may never have children.

Second, as Onora O’Neill remarks, a decision to have a child is not merely a choice to beget or bear a child, but rather a decision “to undertake the far longer and more demanding task of bringing up a child or arranging for its upbringing, to at least that level which will minimally fit the child for independent adult life in its society” (1979, 26). But you cannot know ahead of time what it will be like to become a parent or what sort of child you will have. You cannot entirely know what is good and what is hard about the process of creating and rearing until well after you have the child.

And third, the decision to have a child is a decision to change your life forever. It is irreversible and for that reason more significant than

most other life decisions, including those related to education, romantic commitments, work, or geographical location. As one author puts it, “Motherhood is a threshold that, once crossed, cannot be eradicated. . . . Ironically, it’s like death—‘the bourn from which no traveler returns’ as Hamlet says. In becoming a mother, a woman goes to a new place” (Fertile 2006, 187).

Choosing whether to have children may not seem like the sort of decision that is deserving or even capable of analysis. The novelist Margaret Laurence once wrote, “I don’t really feel I have to analyse my own motives in wanting children. For my own reassurance? For fun? For ego-satisfaction? No matter. It’s like (to me) asking why you want to write. Who cares? You have to, and that’s that” (quoted in Sullivan 1998, 244). Philosopher Diana Tietjens Meyers similarly observes, “When asked why they want or don’t want to have children, most people are flummoxed. Highly articulate individuals lose their fluency, grope for words, and stumble around, seizing on incompatible explanations and multiplying justifications” (2001, 752).

How one decides whether to have children and the ethics of choosing to procreate are topics that I have been pondering for decades.¹ In this book, I explore questions that are at the heart of the “why have children?” issue. I am asking what we might talk about if we were not “flummoxed” and inarticulate about having children.

Why Choosing to Have Children Is an Ethical Issue

In contemporary Western culture, it ironically appears that one needs to have reasons *not* to have children, but no reasons are required to have them. People who are childless² are frequently and rudely criticized and called to account for their situation. One woman who wrote about her decision not to procreate was “denounced as bitter, selfish, un-sisterly, unnatural, evil” (Kingston 2009, 39). It is assumed that if individuals do not have children, it is because they are infertile, they are too selfish, or they have just not yet gotten around to it. In any case, they owe their interlocutor an explanation. They cannot merely have decided not to procreate. In contrast, no one says to a newly pregnant woman or the proud father of a newborn,³ “Why did you choose to have that child? What are your reasons?” The choice to procreate is not regarded as needing any thought or justification.

Indeed, the philosopher Rosalind Hursthouse says, “Just as a special context is needed to make sense of ‘What do you want to have health (or knowledge, or pleasure or virtue) for?’ so is one needed to make sense of ‘What do you want to have children for?’. Unions are ‘blessed’ not cursed with issue; those who have children are ‘favoured by fortune’; the childless are ‘unfortunate’; to be unable to have children is a lack, a privation, a misfortune” (1987, 309).⁴ In other words, Hursthouse thinks it does not make sense, outside of special contexts, to inquire into the motives or reasons for having children. This view suggests that having children is the default position; not having children is what requires explanation and justification.

These implicit assumptions, I suggest, are the opposite of what they ought to be. The so-called burden of proof—or what I would call the burden of justification—should rest primarily on those who choose to have children. That is, the choice to have children calls for more careful justification and reasoning than the choice not to have children simply because in the former case a new and vulnerable human being is brought into existence whose future may be at risk.

Thus, I think Laurence’s “Who cares?” attitude is mistaken. The lack of acknowledgment that childbearing can be a moral choice may be due to its assimilation to other processes thought to be normal parts of human life—for example, the phenomena of “falling in love” or being sexually attracted to another person. These aspects of human life are often regarded as the product of drives or instincts not amenable to ethical evaluation. For example, James Lenman claims that asking why we want children is “foolish,” for “it is partly just because we’re programmed that way much as we are for sex. It just seems to be a part of our biological dispensation that most of us aspire to parenthood, feel pleased when we attain it and are more or less unhappy when it passes us by. It’s not altogether a matter for rational consideration” (2004a, 325).

Some people, women in particular, believe that there is a “biological clock” inside them that generates a deep drive to have a child. It appears to be more than a simple desire to have a child; it is felt more like a biological force and is therefore very compelling. This drive is sometimes explained in evolutionary terms: our very biological constitution determines that we bear children. The popular press likes to refer to the existence of a supposed “mommy gene.” Biologist Lonnie Aarssen writes

about an apparently nongendered “parenting drive,” which he describes as “an explicit desire to have children in the future” and which involves “an anticipated experience of contemporaneous pleasure derived directly from ‘real-time’ parenthood per se” (2007, 1772).

The questions we should ask are whether such a desire is either immune to or incapable of analysis and why this desire, unlike virtually all others, should not be subject to ethical assessment. There are many urges apparently arising from our biological nature that we nonetheless should choose not to act upon or at least to be very careful about acting upon. Even if Aarssen is correct in postulating a “parenting drive,” such a drive would not be an adequate reason for the choice to have a child. Naturalness alone is not a justification for action, for it is still reasonable to ask whether human beings should give in to their supposed “parenting drive” or resist it. Moreover, the alleged naturalness of the biological clock is belied by those growing numbers of women who apparently do not experience it or do not experience it strongly enough to act upon it. As Leta S. Hollingworth wisely noted almost a century ago, “There could be no better proof of the insufficiency of maternal instinct as a guaranty of population than the drastic laws which we have against birth control, abortion, infanticide, and infant desertion” (1916, 25).⁵

After all, human beings are thoroughly social entities. Our sheer survival means we have been socialized; we live not as individual “islands, entire of ourselves,” in John Donne’s words, but as a “part of the main,” an acculturated segment of the whole that is humanity. Because we are social beings, we do not just see the world; we instead see the world *as* we have learned to see it and as we sometimes choose to see it. All human behavior (except perhaps simple reflex actions, such as the movement of the leg in response to a hammer tap on the knee) is a reaction to the world as perceived. Once past the age of early infancy, we do not just respond like automatons to inner promptings. Instead, what and how we perceive and feel are at least in part a function of our experience and our learning. In seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, or smelling something, we are engaged in a process of interpretation, a process that we have gradually learned as part of our socialization into our particular culture.

The inevitability of interpretation applies to our inner as well as our external environment. Thus, for example, if I experience a certain fluttering in my midsection, I may variously interpret it as anxiety, fear, anticipation,

happiness, or just the need for a snack. Whatever inner promptings we may experience, they “always already” contain a social message, and they are “always already” open to reinterpretation. This description applies to the desire to have a child. Because of the inevitability of interpretation, it does not make sense to blame or credit instinct as the source of behaviors such as having children.

If we fail to acknowledge that the decision whether to have children is a real choice that has ethical import, then we are treating childbearing as an unavoidable fate and a mere expression of biological destiny. Instead of seeing having children as something that women *do*, we will continue to see it as something that simply *happens* to women or as something that is merely “natural.” But whatever our biological inclinations may be, we do have some control over our fertility, and the rapidly declining birthrate in most parts of the world is evidence of that fact.

But I myself stressed at the beginning of this chapter that there are many things about having children that one cannot know until one actually has them. It might similarly be argued that one cannot know what a childless life will be like until one commits to living it. Given the unknowability of the outcomes of a decision to have a child or not have a child, it may seem unfair to elevate the decision to the level of ethics.

However, I would argue that many significant ethical decisions are similar to this particular decision: we cannot know or know well all the possible outcomes of the choices we consider. Some things do just have to be experienced. Nonetheless, the indeterminate results of human freedom do not relieve us of the responsibility to consider carefully the moral aspects of our decisions. Moreover, although our own experiences of and reactions to having a child or remaining childless may be difficult to predict, it *is* possible to observe the effects on other people who have made those decisions. We are surrounded by people who have had children or have chosen not to. As with many important life decisions, we can learn something about the nature of the choices by observing others who have already made them. So the difficulty of making the choice whether to have a child or not and the unknowability of the outcome in one’s own case do not preclude seeing procreation as an ethical decision.

Nevertheless, it might be objected that the question whether to reproduce or not is merely prudential, not ethical—that it is like other major life decisions, such as whom to marry (or whether to marry), where to

live, what career to choose, and so on. These decisions affect primarily the chooser's welfare; hence, they are not inherently ethical issues.

But I suggest that virtually every area of human life has ethical dimensions, including seemingly pragmatic choices of what to eat, what form of transportation to use, how to heat or cool one's home, and so on. We can no longer assume that so-called private life is only personal and therefore in principle immune to ethical examination. Questions about choosing whether to have children are of course prudential in part; that is, they are in part practical in nature, and they are concerned about what is or is not in one's own interests. But they are *also* ethical questions, for they are about whether to bring a person (in some cases more than one person) into existence—and that person cannot, by the very nature of the situation, give consent to being brought into existence. Such questions therefore profoundly affect the well-being both of existing persons (the potential parents, siblings, grandparents, and all the other people with whom the future child may interact) and of potential persons.

Children are both vulnerable and dependent; they will have a "lifelong emotional interdependence" with their parents (Cassidy 2006, 44). Procreation decisions are about whether to take on responsibility for a new life or new lives. Questions about choosing to procreate are also closely tied to how we define our own lives and how we interact with our social and physical environments.

These decisions also have profound implications for the community or communities in which we live. Mianna Lotz argues, "There exists a (generally unacknowledged) distinctly collective interest *in procreation being undertaken with a seriousness, intent and purposiveness that reflects and expresses concern or regard for the moral community itself*, understood at its broadest level as comprising both moral agents and moral subjects." Lotz 2008b, 9, her emphasis). This collective interest requires us to "relinquish our relatively recent yet now widespread preoccupation with procreation as principally, even exclusively, a private and individual matter. . . . Questions of procreative morality are not posed exclusively within the sphere of private individual morality or the procreator-child relationship, but always fall also within the scope of collective morality" (2008b, 12).

Lotz suggests several possible explanations of why our specific reasons for procreating matter morally. One possibility is that our reasons are "predictive of the quality of parenting, and derivatively of the quality of

life or welfare of the future child” (2008a, 294). However, Lotz says, the empirical information available does not suggest much of a connection between “procreative motivations” and “parenting capacity.” Instead, factors such as parental mental ill health, domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and socioeconomic deprivation better predict bad parenting, including the abuse and neglect of children (2008a, 295).

But notice that some of these factors might in certain cases also affect parental motivations. For example, a woman who is the target of domestic violence might want to have a child because of the illusion that doing so will eliminate the abuse. Or a woman who is addicted to alcohol might think that having a child will somehow help her to stop drinking. Because children generally do not solve their parents’ problems, the implausibility of these reasons suggests that a motive for procreation might in some cases predict potential problems in how the child is treated. That is, some parental motivations might be indirect predictors of bad parenting. In chapter 5, I argue that at least one motivation for parenting—the quest for a “savior sibling” for an existing child who is ill—does have a substantial effect on how the new baby will be treated. More generally, we cannot be indifferent to the potential implications of procreative motives for parenting behavior.

A more plausible explanation, Lotz says, for why our reasons for having children matter lies in what children “express”: the “meaning or message” (whether it is intended or not) that is conveyed by one’s procreative motivation, whether it is conveyed to family members, to people outside the family, or even to the child herself (2008a, 297). I agree that our procreative motivations may have this signaling effect. And even if this particular effect is small, our motives for procreating (or not) remain morally significant for the other reasons I have suggested.

In this book, then, I investigate not only what *actual* reasons women and men might have for procreating or what reasons they may *say* they have, but also reasons that people do not recognize or that they fail to acknowledge. So in part I am attempting to recover those reasons. But this investigation is normative rather than empirical; it is concerned with values and not only with facts. Many of the standard reasons for procreation are, I think, mistaken, but they are worth attending to for the sake of what can be learned about whether there are *good* reasons (as well as bad ones) for having children and, if so, what they might be. When it

comes to choosing whether to have children or not, there *is* a moral right and wrong to the choice or at least a moral better and worse.

My aim, I hasten to add, is not to argue for policing people's procreative motives or for creating disapproval (or approval, for that matter) of particular procreative decisions. I'm not interested in being a moral disciplinarian. Nor am I interested in telling people what they ought to do or what I think is right for them to do. My aim is simply to explore some ways in which we might think systematically and deeply about a fundamental aspect of human life.

And I want to insist that this aspect *is* something about which we can, do, and should think. Although choosing to have children or not to have children may involve many feelings, motives, impulses, memories, and emotions, it can and should also be a subject for careful reflection. Whereas in the past procreation was not a matter to which women's will or ideas or decisional capacity had much application, now it is something that women can potentially control, that they can make truly their own. As Lori Leibovich points out, "Couples can opt out of parenthood, women can have children into their fifties, single women can procreate on their own, and gays and lesbians can start families—or not. All of the old rules about childbearing no longer apply" (2006, xv). Moreover, the decision whether to have a biologically related child or not is one that may be made repeatedly over a period of years. Many women (and men) do not simply choose once and for all whether to become parents; rather, they make decisions about their life goals and parenting plans on several occasions, including during pregnancy itself.

The Gendered Nature of the "Why Have Children?" Issue

Any discussion of the ethics of procreation must include feminist perspectives because choosing whether to have children is gendered; it cannot be discussed as if men's and women's very different roles in procreation are irrelevant to the issue. Some parts of the discussion must be unique to women themselves because of women's role—despite recent technological developments—in conception and gestation. For a woman, the decision whether to have a child may include the decision whether to conceive a child; whether, once it is conceived, to carry it to term; and whether, once it is born, to rear it. A woman⁶ may (that is, has the ability

to) accept or reject motherhood at any of these three stages; hence, the reproductive decision she makes is not a unitary once-and-for-all choice, but rather an ongoing process of assenting to or rejecting motherhood.⁷ In this book, I focus primarily on the decision whether to conceive or not. This book is not about abortion or about choosing to give up one's child for adoption. Nonetheless, I make a few comments about abortion in chapters 7 and 8.

Unlike men, who can literally walk away from the results of their procreative behavior, women must literally bear the procreative consequences of their heterosexual activity. To prevent conception, the woman is the one who must worry most about using contraception successfully; all forms of contraception lodge in or are ingested by her body, and she runs the health risks that some forms of contraception create. It is the woman who undergoes the physical consequences of conception and pregnancy. Even if she has an abortion and hence decides against motherhood (at least of the particular individual the fetus would eventually otherwise become), she must bear the moral, pragmatic, and medical weight of making that decision. If she continues the pregnancy, she must care for herself as her body changes radically and must take into account all the consequences of her actions for the fetus. During labor and delivery, she undergoes an experience that can be uniquely demanding and often severely painful.

Just as important, women are still defined socially in terms of their relationship to children. Hence, the context of the procreation decision is political—that is, it is imbued with differences in power, authority, prestige, wealth, and future prospects. Although considerable progress has been achieved in the past century, most of the responsibility for children is still automatically assumed to rest upon mothers rather than upon fathers. Women much more than men pay the price of bad decisions to bear children, whether that price is in terms of the women's education, their employment, their money-making potential, their health and the care they receive for it, their relationships, or their personal fulfillment. Because the context of procreation is political, reproductive decision making cannot realistically be discussed outside of a feminist framework. That framework must include a deep understanding of the differences gender creates in human lives—differences in personal experiences, belief systems, material resources, access to power, and opportunities. Later chapters show

that failing to take seriously the gendered nature of society, including our procreative behavior, results in analyses of procreative choices that are not only unrealistic, but also profoundly immoral.

In order for any procreative decision to have ethical significance, the woman involved must have moral agency, authority, and freedom. A woman's choice whether to procreate can be made independently of being in a relationship with a man—indeed, with the assistance of insemination, it can be made independently even of any sexual interaction with a man. Nonetheless, the ethics of men's reproductive decisions is also interestingly complex and worth considering, comprising not only the decision whether to take part in conception, but also whether to support the woman's pregnancy and delivery and whether to raise the child. Meyers points out that “many child-bearing decisions are collaborative decisions that bring into play the peculiar psychodynamics of particular couples and, in many cases, the power imbalances that shadow heterosexual relationships as well” (2001, 744). I believe she is right, but I do not focus directly on the power imbalances themselves. I instead assume a situation in which women, whether in a relationship or not, are able to be self-determining decision makers. I do not think this assumption is farfetched; indeed, many women, though certainly not all, with access to effective contraception are able to make autonomous procreative decisions. The rapidly declining birth rate in every culture in which women have good access to education and health care is evidence of their capacity to make such decisions. In doing so, they may collaborate with another person, male or female, in making procreative decisions, or they may make these decisions alone. Meyers is considerably more pessimistic than I, arguing, “While it would be wrong to claim that *no* woman ever makes a fully autonomous reproductive decision—either to have children or not to have them—the evidence of women's testimony suggests that the women who do are *exceptional*” (2001, 746, my emphasis). I'm not convinced she's right, for as philosopher Lisa Cassidy observes, “Even though . . . pressures [religious, legal, and cultural] may subject many of us to emotional strain, it would be wrong to say the very *existence* of such social pressures wholly co-opts every reproductive choice we make” (2006, 42, my emphasis).

However, I would not go as far as Corinne Maier, the author of a sardonic book that offers “forty good reasons not to have children” (Maier

2007). Maier claims, “Ever since the pill and the IUD, most of the children who have been born have been *wanted* children. They are no longer the unavoidable consequence of a sexual act but the product of willpower under scientific management. The unforeseen has been eliminated. Long live planning!” (2007, 5, her emphasis).⁸ The notion that most babies, even in the West, are the outcome of careful planning assisted by “scientific management” is implausible, though. Many teen mothers and mothers of a little “baby bonus” arriving in their menopausal years can attest to its falsehood.

Procreation is not always a choice. In a few cases, a couple may want one child but end up with multiples (particularly if they have used the “scientific management” of in vitro fertilization [IVF] with the implantation of multiple embryos); hence, one child is chosen, but the others are not, even if they are not actively unwanted. In some cases, contraception is simply not used, whether because it is not available, because the individuals are unaware of it or the need for it, or because of a failure to take responsibility for birth control. In other cases, heterosexual intercourse is voluntary, but although children are not wanted contraceptive methods are inadequate or are incorrectly used. And sometimes conception is not chosen because sex is the result of coercion or violence.

All of these facts are deeply problematic. In some of these cases, there is no moral responsibility, as, for example, when multiples result “naturally”—that is to say, without the intervention of reproductive technology. There is sometimes moral culpability on the part of both partners (for example, when contraception is omitted out of laziness or misused out of culpable ignorance). But in cases of rape or cases where the man refuses to use contraception and the woman acquiesces out of fear, there is a clear violation of the woman’s rights and integrity. Moreover, there is a growing social scientific and philosophical body of evidence about the various social forces that have acted, primarily on women,⁹ to induce or compel people to have children or in some cases to persuade or prevent them from having children. The literature on pronatalism, antinatalism, and women’s autonomy (e.g., Hollingworth 1916; Peck and Senderowitz 1975; Gimenez 1983; Meyers 2001) is fascinating. Although it is undeniable that procreation is often unchosen, I am nonetheless interested in cases where whether to have children is voluntary.

I am therefore setting aside any discussion of childlessness that is not deliberately chosen. That is not to say that unchosen childlessness is not a topic of interest in itself, including as it does issues related to infertility, women's relationships with men, and socioeconomic status, among others. But I am interested in cases where a true choice is made.

Ethical questions arise both in procreating one's own children and in adopting. Both are interesting and important topics, and they have some themes in common. Ethically speaking, however, the two are not entirely the same, largely because in the case of adoption the child already exists (or at least is in utero), whereas in the case of procreation one is deciding whether to bring a child into existence.¹⁰ In adoption, there are also several social policy issues—such as the nationality of the baby, the role that religion and race should or should not play, the adoptive parents' age and sex/gender, their supposed fitness for parenting, and so on—that are different or at least thought to be different from the issues about having one's own biologically related child. Much has been written about the ethics of adoption, and it is a huge topic in its own right. Rather less has been written, as far as I can tell, about the general ethical dimensions of procreating—a choice that millions of people presumably make quite frequently.

Self-help books on the market purport to assist would-be parents in making a practical choice about whether to have children. There are also informal discussions in nonphilosophical books, on Web sites, in newspapers and magazines, and in blogs. Yet despite the significance of biological offspring both to an individual's self-concept and life plans and to the broader community's well-being, the ethical nature of this choice is seldom recognized, even—or especially—by philosophers.

There is an extensive academic literature¹¹ about the use of IVF, egg and embryo donation, and pregnancy. There is also considerable debate about choosing whether to procreate when there is a strong possibility that the resulting child(ren) will have physical or mental impairments (I return to this issue in chapter 8). But although bioethicists have had much to say about “new” reproductive technologies and practices, about procreation and disability, and about pregnancy and childbirth, they appear to assume that simply choosing whether to procreate is a pragmatic decision, not one with moral repercussions. And although population ethicists discuss abstract utilitarian issues concerning overpopulation, quality

of life, and how many people there should be in the world, they usually fail to explore the “why have children?” question as an individual moral issue for which multiple arguments, for and against, are relevant.¹² I believe these discussions are radically incomplete, and this book shows how this large gap in philosophical thought can be filled.

I focus primarily on the choice to procreate via heterosexual intercourse or insemination, but not via other technologies. I am concerned not so much with *how* people do or ought to procreate, as with *whether* they should procreate and how many children, if any, it is morally legitimate to have. (The latter is in effect a question about repeated “whethers”—whether to have a first child, whether to have a second child, whether to have a third child, and so on.) Nonetheless, issues related to “assisted reproduction” using reproductive technologies cannot be entirely ignored. Let me give just one example for now. To the extent that ectogenesis (growth of a fetus outside the uterus) becomes possible and available, it may dramatically change the “why have children?” question, for pregnancy (or at least part of pregnancy) would no longer be necessary.¹³ If ectogenesis becomes widely and readily available, it may have wide-ranging effects on our ideas about rights and obligations with respect to procreation (I discuss this possibility further in chapter 3).

In discussing the ethics of choosing whether to procreate, my focus is primarily on the context of twenty-first century North America. The book is not about legal issues concerning procreation. Nonetheless, there is a relationship. First, the laws of the society in which one lives may either constrain or encourage one’s procreative decisions; the legal environment is part of the context that needs to be considered when individuals are deciding whether to reproduce. Second, one’s conclusions about the ethics of choosing whether to procreate may have implications for what the law should be. So, for example, if there are certain rights with respect to procreation, then society’s legal framework may need to reflect and reinforce those rights. Existing reproductive laws may well be illegitimate and in need of modification or abolition. More generally, a society’s social policies should support morally justified reproductive needs and choices and provide assistance in acting on them. Individuals making choices about procreation should not and cannot be regarded as acting in a social void, independent of other people and relationships or outside of the broader culture in which they live.

Main Questions

At least six general ethical questions should be considered in the ethics of choosing whether to have children:

1. What are good reasons for having a child?
2. Under what conditions is having children morally justified?
3. Do women ever have a moral obligation¹⁴ 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?

Notice that these questions are quite distinct. You might, for example, have good reasons to have a child without having any obligation to have a child. You might have good reasons not to have a child without having an obligation not to have that child. For example, one of your good reasons for having a child might be that you are “good with” children. But that fact in itself does not give you an obligation to have a child. One of your good reasons for not having a child may be the fact that you have a demanding career, but that reason in itself does not mean you have an obligation not to have a child.

In discussing these six questions, I for the most part set aside questions about what *kind* of child to have. An extensive literature discusses, pro and con, the ethics of choosing to have particular sorts of children, whether by embryo selection, cloning, or genetic enhancement (e.g., J. Harris 2007). Such questions are complex and fascinating. But this book examines the choice prior to deciding what kind of child to have and is concerned simply with whether to have a child or not. The discussion of children’s own characteristics arises primarily in chapters 7 and 8, when I discuss the potential obligation not to have children.

Looking Ahead

The first important consideration in answering the six main questions is reproductive rights, in particular the reproductive rights of women. Chapter 2 is devoted to canvassing the scope and limits of reproductive rights with respect to the ethics of choosing to have children. I distinguish between the right to reproduce and the right not to reproduce, and I

suggest that there are two different types of right to reproduce. I argue that simply appealing to reproductive rights by itself does not constitute a complete justification for choosing to have children. Yet acknowledging and respecting women's reproductive rights is essential to protecting women from procreative exploitation. In chapter 3, I discuss the situation in which prospective biological parents disagree about whether to continue a pregnancy that has already been initiated. Whose wishes should prevail? Is there a solution that attends to the interests of both prospective parents?

Chapters 4 and 5 are concerned with reasons for having children. The various purported justifications for having children that I investigate derive from historical sources, from contemporary culture, and, in a few cases, from philosophical debates. One list of putative reasons, for example, comes from a study undertaken by a then-philosophy graduate student, Leslie Cannold, of childless and so-called child-free women in the United States and Australia. The reasons these women suggested for having children include "the desire for the responsibility and commitment children require, the desire to take risks and to face new life challenges, to satisfy and/or keep their partner, to fulfil their (positively viewed) imagined future as a mother, . . . to love and to be loved by a child, to confirm their femininity and adulthood, to remain 'in-step' with their peers, to avoid loneliness, to affirm existing relationship bonds (like those with their own mothers), and to find existential meaning and fulfillment in their lives" (2003, 279).

For the most part, these reasons fall into one or the other of two familiar categories of ethical theory: deontology and consequentialism.¹⁵

Deontologists believe that certain acts or the practices and rules to which these acts are related—for example, keeping a promise—are right in themselves and that other acts—for example, murder—are wrong in themselves, independent of the consequences of the acts. Outcomes are not what make our choices morally justified; it is their conformity to certain moral rules. If you are a deontologist, you regard it as important to make the "why have children?" decision on the basis of doing what is inherently right and avoiding doing what is inherently wrong. Deontological reasons include what are, for some people, core values: the values of lineage, name, and property; religious duties; marital and familial duties; and even duties to the state. I discuss these reasons in chapter 4.

By contrast, consequentialism is the ethical theory that the rightness and wrongness of actions are entirely a function of their outcome. If you are a consequentialist, you regard it as important to make the “why have children?” decision on the basis of the anticipated consequences of having a child or not having a child. You would try to minimize the harmful consequences and to maximize, or at least to optimize, the good consequences. So, for example, some people have said that the justification for having children lies in benefits to the society or the benefits to the would-be parents and other members of the family, such as would-be grandparents and already-existing siblings. I discuss these reasons in chapter 5. Together, chapters 4 and 5 show that the reasons typically given for having children are not very strong and are insufficient to constitute an obligation to procreate. Indeed, most typical justifications for procreation implicitly or explicitly involve using women or children for others’ purposes.

Now some might say that even if most reasons for having children are inadequate, there is usually at least one important and valid consequentialist reason for procreation: that children themselves are benefited by coming into existence. This idea is controversial. Some philosophers believe that individuals are neither benefited nor harmed by coming into existence and that, as a result, all reasons for procreation must necessarily be “other referring”; that is, they cannot have anything to do with the child’s well-being because before being created, no one exists who can be affected by coming into existence. Other philosophers argue that coming into existence has the potential to be a benefit, but it can also be a harm, particularly if the child is born into severe poverty or abuse. Indeed, in a recent book tellingly titled *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, philosopher David Benatar argues vehemently that “coming into existence is *always* a serious harm” (2006, 1, emphasis added). If he is correct, then there appears to be a well-nigh insuperable reason that makes having children morally wrong. I think he is mistaken. In chapter 6, I point out various problems in Benatar’s arguments and suggest that it is *not* always “better never to have been.”

In chapter 7, I consider some possible reasons not to have children,¹⁶ which are mostly consequentialist in nature, and I discuss whether there are cases where one might have an obligation not to have children. Potential reasons for the moral wrongness of having children include concerns such as the repressive effect of motherhood on women within cultures

where being a woman is still a social disadvantage and the dangers of bringing a child into a severely impoverished, oppressive, or perilous social environment or of exposing a child to war or to life-threatening environmental threats. In chapter 8, I discuss the complicated questions of whether the risk of passing on serious disease or physical or mental impairments generates a responsibility not to procreate and whether persons with impairments of their own can justifiably choose to procreate.

On a global scale, the dangers of procreation go far beyond the individual: they include growing overpopulation and the strain on planet Earth's carrying capacity. The "why have children?" decision is, therefore, a big issue, having to do with fundamental institutions such as education and health care, the way we do business, our stewardship of the environment, our consumption of resources, and our care for each other. It more broadly raises questions about the value of humanity and the future of the planet. Should we care whether the human race persists or be sanguine about the possibility of human extinction? Both overpopulation and the possibility of extinction are the focus of chapter 9. Our procreative reflections raise deep-seated issues about the importance of human existence and the value of what we do and who we are, with all our frailties as well as our virtues.

Based on the discussion in the first nine chapters, I come to the conclusion that an approach to the ethics of choosing to have children that relies on reproductive rights, on deontological reasons, or on consequentialist reasoning is inadequate or incomplete. In chapter 10, I examine the possibility that the procreation decision, weighty as it is, ought to be seen as a kind of wager. Rejecting that approach, I then explore what procreation means to human beings in terms of our central values and our sense of identity. In becoming a parent, one not only creates a child but also re-creates oneself. To become a biological parent is to generate a new relationship—not just the genetic one, but a psychological, physical, intellectual, and moral one. I conclude by exploring the nature of the parent-child relationship at its best and argue that the formation of that relationship is the best possible reason for choosing to have a child.

