REPRODUCTION

Procreative beneficence and the prospective parent

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Julian Savulescu has given clear expression to a principle—that of “procreative beneficence”—which underlies the thought of many contemporary writers on bioethics. The principle of procreative beneficence (PPB) holds that parents or single reproducers are at least *prima facie* obliged to select the child, out of a range of possible children they might have, who will be likely to lead the best life. My aim in this paper is to argue that prospective parents, just by dint of their being prospective parents, are in fact not obliged to act on PPB. That is, there is something about their filling the role of prospective parents that exempts them from selecting the child with the best life. I urge that it is more realistic to view prospective parents as bound by a principle of acceptable outlook, which holds that they ought not to select children whose lives will contain an unacceptable amount of suffering.

Julian Savulescu has set out and defended a “principle of procreative beneficence” (PPB), which asserts a *prima facie* moral obligation on the part of prospective parents, as follows:

couples (or single reproducers) should select the child, of the possible children they could have, who is expected to have the best life, or at least as good a life as the others, based on the relevant, available information.¹

Savulescu holds that PPB ought not to be legally enforceable. That is, prospective parents cannot justifiably be coerced into following the principle. Persuasion, on the other hand, is warranted, or at least can be in the absence of overriding moral considerations.

A consequence of PPB is that, where preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) and embryo selection are available, prospective parents are morally obliged to make use of them, and to select the embryo most likely to develop into the child with the best life. The most obvious application of PPB might be thought to be in ensuring that embryos with disease traits are not selected in preference to embryos without disease traits. As Savulescu correctly notes, however, the application of PPB is not restricted to such situations. Rather, it entails that, given a range of embryos *with or without disease traits*, prospective parents ought *always* (again, in the absence of overriding moral considerations) to select the embryo that is likely to develop into the child with the best life. Interestingly, this also means that PPB does not, unless supplemented by other principles, entail that an embryo with disease traits will never be selected: such selection will occur when every available embryo displays disease traits.

Although the expression “procreative beneficence” is Savulescu’s own, he is by no means the only bioethicist to argue for, or at least make use of, a principle of this sort. Similar arguments have been advanced by, among others, John Harris,² Raanan Gillon,³ Derek Parfit,⁴ and Allen Buchanan, *et al.*⁵ It might be thought at first sight that such arguments are convincing: is it not clear that parents ought to have children who will stand the greatest chance of leading full and successful lives? Is it not the case that full and successful lives will be best achieved not only in the absence

of possibly painful and limiting disabilities, but also in the presence of traits such as intelligence and a genial character?

Actually, it is not at all obvious to me that the answer to this last question is “yes”. I am far from certain that someone without disease traits is even *likely* to lead a better life than someone with them (at least in cases where those traits are not so severe as to result in a great deal of persistent pain, or to lead the person to judge that she would be better off dead). My view is that it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to produce a list of qualities that would tend reliably to lead their owner to live a better life than she would in their absence.¹

This is a controversial point, and I do not pursue it further in this paper. Instead, I assume for the sake of argument that a definitive list of this sort could be isolated, and claim that, even given such a list, prospective parents are not morally bound by PPB. That is, there is no automatic obligation (not even a *prima facie* obligation) for them to select the embryo that will develop into the person with the best life. Instead, it is more accurate to portray prospective parents as bound by what I shall call a “principle of acceptable outlook”.

THE BEST LIFE FOR WHOM?

It might be argued that the talk of “better” or “worse” lives invoked by principles like PPB is either incoherent or unable to ground genuine moral obligations. That is, it does not seem at first glance that the best or better life mentioned in such principles is best or better *for anybody*; and if it is not best or better for anybody, but simply best or better *period* (whatever that may mean), then it is difficult to see how we can be obliged to bring it about.

My own position is that the notion of betterness *period* is, perhaps despite appearances, perfectly coherent, and that it can ground certain moral obligations. Significantly, however, I do not think it can ground the obligation asserted in PPB. Before I can explain why this is so, however, it will be

Abbreviations: PAO, principle of acceptable outlook; PGD, preimplantation genetic diagnosis; PPB, principle of procreative beneficence

¹ It is also, incidentally, open to debate whether it is possible to make a clear and definitive distinction between disease and non-disease traits. I thank Christian Lenk for drawing this point to my attention.

necessary to look a little more closely at the claim that the better or worse lives mentioned in principles like PPB are not better or worse *for* anybody. I will endeavour to show that there is a sense in which this claim is true and a sense in which it is false. It is true when made from what I shall call “the internal perspective” and false when made from what I shall call “the external perspective”.

Suppose I have before me two embryos, A and B, and that I must decide which is to be implanted. Suppose too that it is abundantly clear that if A is implanted it will develop into the person with the better life (let us call such an embryo a “better life embryo”), and, correlatively, that if B is implanted it will develop into the person with the worse life (let us call such an embryo a “worse life embryo”).

For *whom* will the better life be better? Our immediate response might be that it will be better for the person—call him Fred—who will develop from A. This seems to suggest, however, something that is straightforwardly false: that Fred could have lived either of the two possible lives available and, happily, got to live the better. This is not, however, how things stand at all. Had B been implanted, the worse life would have been lived, but it would not have been lived by Fred.

In the same way, the worse life will not be worse for the person—let us call her Wilma—who will develop from B. Such a judgment assumes that Wilma could have lived either of the two lives available, and was unfortunately saddled with the worse. Again, this is to misrepresent the situation. If A had been implanted, the better life would have been lived, but it would not have been lived by Wilma.

The concern here is that PPB relies on the idea that one life will be better *period* than another life. And, the worry goes, a life that is better *period*, since it is not better *for* either the selected or the deselected child, displays at best a nebulous, “free floating” betterness, which is so abstract and unrelated to any particular person’s concerns as to be morally inert. Had PGD been available around forty years ago, for example, my parents could doubtless have selected an embryo that would have developed into a person with a better life than mine. The embryo might have grown into somebody more athletic or less inclined to grumpiness when tired. Since, however, that life would not have been better *for* either me or my athletic, non-grumpy counterpart, what would that matter? What is it to me that somebody else could have lived a life better than mine, especially when mine is at the very least perfectly acceptable? How could my parents have been *obliged*—as PPB insists they would have been—to choose that embryo?

I think, however, that this concern is unjustified, because I maintain that a “better *period*” judgment is in fact a distinctive and disguised variety of “better *for*” judgment. To say that A’s life would be better than B’s is admittedly not to say that:

- (1) It would be better *for* A or *for* B if the better life embryo were implanted.

It is, however, to say that:

- (2) A’s life would be better *for* A than B’s life would *for* B.

To assert (2) is to hold that A’s interests will be better met by A’s life than B’s interests would be met by B’s life. Whereas (2) could under certain circumstances be true, (1), as we have seen in our example of Fred and Wilma, could not. It appears that (1) and (2) are judgments made from very different perspectives. Although (1) is made from what I call “the internal perspective”, (2) is made from what I call the “external perspective”.

THE INTERNAL PERSPECTIVE AND THE EXTERNAL PERSPECTIVE

It is crucial for my argument that a clear distinction be made between the internal and the external perspective, because I shall urge that, while some choices that affect which possible persons will exist ought to be made from the external perspective, those made by prospective parents about their future offspring need not be. It is appropriate and fitting that prospective parents should make such decisions from the internal perspective. Indeed, I think a case could be made for the claim that the external perspective is a positively inappropriate and unfitting one for prospective parents to take up.ⁱⁱ

In thinking about the life of a possible person A, we adopt the internal perspective when we (i) “imaginatively inhabit” that life, imagining what it would be like to live it, and (ii) make the sort of “better” and “worse” judgments that we would make about A’s life *if we were* A. All the “better *for*” judgments made from the internal perspective will be judgments about what will be better *for* A. When we adopt the internal perspective, we remain unmoved by the talk of better and worse lives that features in principles like PPB, because such talk belongs only to the external perspective.

In thinking about the life of a possible person A from the external perspective, we (i) imaginatively inhabit that life, attempting to gain a sense of what it would be like to be A; (ii) imaginatively inhabit the life of another possible person B, attempting to gain a sense of what it would be like to be B, and (iii) draw back from the perspective of both A and B in order to make a judgment about which life is better. This, as we have seen, involves judging whether A’s interests would be better met by A’s life than B’s interests would be met by B’s life.ⁱⁱⁱ

The two perspectives I have outlined are mutually exclusive: judgments made from either perspective have no force when viewed from the other perspective. So, when I take up the internal perspective on some possible person B’s life, I am unimpressed by the external perspective judgment that another possible person A’s life would be better for A than B’s life would be for B. This fact would be nothing to B, just as the fact that my parents could have selected a more athletic and less grumpy person than myself is nothing to me.

The question of what principle ought to guide decisions about which of a range of possible future persons should be brought into existence, then, boils down to the question of which perspective ought to be adopted when making such decisions. Savulescu clearly opts for the external, as PPB is rooted in that perspective. I think, however, that there is no one answer to this question, and that the appropriate perspective to adopt will vary with the identity of the decision maker and the context in which the decision is being made.

For instance, it seems to me that adoption of the external perspective, and correspondingly of a principle not unlike PPB, is obligatory for political decision makers selecting social policies that will indirectly affect both who will come into existence in the future, and the quality of those future

ⁱⁱ Let me be clear about what I am arguing here: I am saying only that it may be inappropriate for parents to select embryo A over embryo B *solely* because embryo A is the better life embryo. This emphatically does *not* entail that it would be wrong to make this selection on the grounds that embryo B would develop into a child whose life would, say, place an intolerable or unreasonable burden on her parents.

ⁱⁱⁱ What I have called “the external perspective” is, of course, only one perspective among many that might meaningfully be dubbed “external” (such perspectives might include those that consider what is best for society, or most cost effective, and so on). My use of the expression “external perspective” is, however, restricted to that perspective that considers whether A’s life would be better for A than B’s life would for B.

persons' lives. One example meeting this description is Derek Parfit's well known thought experiment in which a decision has to be made between a policy of conservation of natural resources on the one hand, and a policy of depletion of those resources on the other (Parfit,⁴ pp 361–4). Another example of the same sort is provided by Savulescu (Savulescu,¹ pp 417–18). Adoption of the depletion policy, Parfit stipulates, would greatly improve the quality of our lives for the next few centuries, but then make for a significantly lower (though not unbearable) quality of life for all the generations that follow. Adoption of the conservation policy, on the other hand, would result in our quality of life remaining where it is, and would keep it constant for all successive generations.

Importantly, Parfit thinks it safe to assume that adoption of the depletion policy will alter future events to such an extent that existing people will meet other partners, conceive children at different times, and so on, than they would have under the conservation policy. Within a couple of centuries a wholly different set of people will exist than would have existed had the conservation policy been selected.

It should be clear that if the depletion policy is adopted, there will be no one who will live a worse life than they would have done had the conservation policy been adopted, because if the conservation policy had been adopted, they would not have existed to have a better life. That notwithstanding, it seems intuitively clear that the conservation policy ought to be adopted: that the decision makers should opt for the policy that will result in the existence of that group of people whose lives are best able to meet their interests.

Crucially, however, I think that the adoption of the external perspective, and of principles rooted in that perspective, is not obligatory for prospective parents. When the decision makers are prospective parents, and the decision to be made affects which of their possible future offspring are to be brought into existence, it is morally appropriate for them to adopt the internal perspective. Whether it is *prima facie* obligatory is a further question. I am inclined to say that it is not, but that it is nevertheless unfitting or inappropriate for prospective parents to take up the external perspective.

PROSPECTIVE PARENTS AS DECISION MAKERS

Suppose that a prospective parent is trying to decide which of, say, two embryos should be selected. To do this, she must imaginatively inhabit both possible future lives. A point that has been astonishingly absent from the literature is that when she does this, she is imaginatively inhabiting the life of her potential offspring (I say “she” and “her” in what follows only to avoid repeated and consequently cumbersome use of “he/she” and “his/her”; I am aware that parents can be of either sex!). It is therefore appropriate that she should relate to those potential children's lives in a way that is proper for a parent. This, I suggest, will involve an extremely close identification with the possible subject of the life she is imagining—so close that it will include, and take seriously, the sorts of assessments that each offspring would be likely to make of his own life. In short, the standpoint she takes up will include just those features from which the external perspective abstracts; it will be the internal perspective. The only “better for” judgments available from this perspective will concern what is better for the person who develops from each embryo. The transpersonal “better for” judgments of the external perspective will have no force.

Two objections are possible here. First, it might be urged that it is never legitimate to take up the internal perspective when thinking about merely possible lives, as to do so is imaginatively to inhabit the life of someone who does not exist, and consequently has no interests. This objection can be fairly swiftly dealt with, as the making of transpersonal,

external perspective judgments about better and worse lives—something we must do if we are to be guided by PPB—also involves imaginative inhabitation of the lives of people who do not exist or have interests.

Second, it may be thought that I have only described what a prospective parent will *as a matter of fact* do in thinking about the lives of her potential children, or what standpoint it would be *natural* for her to take up. My claim is not, however, merely that a prospective parent *will* adopt the internal perspective. My point is that it is *appropriate* that she should imaginatively inhabit each possible person's life in a manner that is proper for a parent. There is a correct, morally admirable way for a parent to relate to her child, a way of relating that it would be regarded as a fault in a parent to lack. A good parent is one who is able to see things from her child's perspective, who makes the child's interests her own, who takes seriously the child's view of his own life. Of course, when the prospective parent makes a decision about which embryo to implant, there is no child, and the prospective parent is not yet a parent. Even so, to make a decision at all, the prospective parent must, as we have seen, imaginatively inhabit the lives of each future possible person: and in this very act of imaginative inhabitation and decision making she is not, and ought not to be, a detached, neutral person. Rather, in making the decision at all, she is someone who is preparing for the role of parent and the embryo she chooses will, if all goes well, become her child. It is not only understandable, but perfectly proper, perfectly fitting, that she should adopt the internal perspective in thinking about the possible lives of her potential children.

It may be pointed out at this stage that there is no moral reason for the parent *not* to select a better life embryo. And I can agree that this is indeed the case, before going on to point out that, other things being equal, she also has no moral reason not to select the worse life embryo. My opponent might respond, however, that even if there is no moral reason not to select the better life embryo, there *is* a moral reason to select it: namely, that it will develop into the person likely to lead the better life. This cannot be said of the worse life embryo. Therefore, the better life embryo ought to be implanted.^{iv}

What this objection boils down to is the claim that prospective parents ought not simply to adopt the internal perspective, but that they should also judge their situation from the external perspective. That is, it is only from the external perspective that (again, other things being equal) there is a moral reason to choose the better life embryo. From the internal perspective, the sort of transpersonal judgment needed to ground PPB has no purchase: it cannot be regarded as any sort of reason, let alone a moral one. I have argued, however, that it is not the case that prospective parents are obliged to take up the external perspective; indeed, I have urged that it would be morally inappropriate for them to do so.

THE PRINCIPLE OF ACCEPTABLE OUTLOOK

It might seem that from the internal perspective it is a matter of complete indifference whether a better life embryo or a worse life embryo is implanted. Indeed, I do think that the *mere* fact that A is a better life embryo gives a prospective parent no reason to select it in preference to B, a worse life embryo. That is conspicuously not to say, however, that there might not be other reasons for rejecting B in favour of A.

I have argued that the internal perspective is an appropriate standpoint for prospective parents to adopt. It is possible, however, to imagine other such attitudes: attitudes that are rooted, as is the internal perspective, in the

^{iv} This objection was pointed out to me by an anonymous reviewer.

normative character of the role of prospective parent. For instance, it could plausibly be maintained that a good parent is obliged to hold a principle of the form “I will not allow any child of mine to have a quality of life below L,” where L is a level of acceptable outlook. This “principle of acceptable outlook” (PAO) will typically find expression in attitudes such as “I do not want any child of mine to suffer unacceptably”, attitudes that we would deem it proper for parents and prospective parents to hold, and improper for them to lack. Of course, what counts as unacceptable suffering, or precisely where the level of acceptable outlook ought to be fixed, are not questions to which any very definite answer can be supplied. As, however, we are concerned here with ethics, perhaps we should accept Aristotle’s counsel, and not expect any more precision than the subject is able to provide.⁶

The most straightforward application of PAO involves cases in which the life of a possible child would not be worth living. Such a life would fall well below any plausible candidate for L. PAO could, however, also apply to other cases: cases in which the possible child’s life would be worth living, but would contain what the prospective parent considers a greater load of suffering than she is prepared to allow her child to endure. It should be noted, however, that this does not entail that no embryo with disease traits will ever be selected, even assuming that such traits can be uncontroversially defined. The decisive factor in whether an embryo is selected will not be the presence or absence of disease traits, but whether the quality of life of the person who develops from the embryo will be likely to fall below L.

It might be argued that, in applying PAO, a prospective parent would be guilty of a certain arrogance, in so far as she felt herself able to judge what would constitute an unacceptable level of suffering in somebody else’s life. It seems to me that two responses can be made to this argument. First, at the time the decision is made, there is nothing else to go on but what the prospective parent thinks an unacceptable level of suffering. Second, it needs to be remembered that nobody is either harmed or wronged by not being brought into existence, no matter how wonderful their life would have been. To think otherwise is unwarrantedly to assume that there is a cosmic waiting room inhabited by ghostly prechildren, some of whom can be caused enormous frustration by being denied a chance of earthly existence.

Now, suppose once again that a prospective parent is faced with the choice between implanting a better life embryo A or a worse life embryo B; and suppose too that B would be likely to develop into someone whose life would fall foul of PAO—whose quality of life would be below L. In such a case, if guided by PAO the prospective parent will reject the worse life embryo B in favour of the better life embryo A. Note,

however, that her reason for this choice is not that A is the better life embryo, but that B’s quality of life would be unacceptably low. So, even though the result would be the same as it would have been had she acted on PPB, she would in fact have acted on PAO.

Why does it matter which principle she acted upon if the results are the same? The point here is that the results will not be the same *in all cases*. For instance, where the expected quality of life of both embryos exceeds L, PAO will not oblige the prospective parent to select the better life embryo. So certain choices that under PPB would count as morally forbidden come out as morally permissible under PAO.

On the other hand, PAO will forbid certain choices that PPB allows. Suppose that, for whatever reason, it is only possible for a couple or single reproducer to produce one embryo, and that that embryo will develop into a person with a quality of life below L. Whereas PPB would allow such an embryo to be implanted, PAO would not.

I have argued that prospective parents, simply in virtue of the fact that they are prospective parents, are not bound by PPB. This is because PPB is rooted in what I have called the external perspective, while the proper and fitting perspective for prospective parents to adopt is the internal. From this latter perspective, the mere fact that A is a better life embryo supplies no reason to select it in preference to a worse life embryo B. This does not mean, however, that a prospective parent’s choice about which of a range of possible children to select should be entirely unprincipled. Instead of being guided by a principle of procreative beneficence, a prospective parent should make her choice on the basis of a principle of acceptable outlook. Such a principle would, significantly, make it a matter of indifference whether a better or worse life embryo was selected whenever both embryos would be likely to develop into people with a quality of life that would not fall below L.

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