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Virtue Ethics and the Selection of Children with Impairments A Reply to Rosalind McDougall

Carla Saenz

Abstract

In “Parental Virtues: A New Way of Thinking about the Morality of Reproductive Actions” Rosalind McDougall proposes a virtue-based framework to assess the morality of child selection. Applying the virtue-based account to the selection of children with impairments does not lead, according to McDougall, to an unequivocal answer to the morality of selecting impaired children. In “Impairment, Flourishing, and the Moral Nature of Parenthood,” she also applies the virtue-based account to the discussion of child selection, and claims that couples with an impairment are morally justified in selecting a child with the same impairment. This claim, she maintains, reveals that the flourishing of a child should be understood as requiring environment-specific characteristics. I argue that McDougall’s argument begs the question. More importantly, it does not do justice to virtue ethics. I also question to what extent a virtue ethics framework can be successfully applied to discussions about the moral permissibility of reproductive actions.

Keywords

virtue ethics; child selection; disability; Rosalind McDougall

In “Parental Virtue: A New Way of Thinking about the Morality of Reproductive Actions” Rosalind McDougall proposes a virtue-based framework, instead of the more commonly used deontological approach, to assess the moral issue of child selection.¹ The application of her virtue-based account to the selection of children with impairments does not lead, according to McDougall, to an unequivocal answer to the morality of selecting impaired children. In “Impairment, Flourishing, and the Moral Nature of Parenthood,” she seems to take a step further.² In this very thought-provoking article McDougall applies again her virtue-based account to the discussion of child selection and maintains that couples with an impairment are morally justified in selecting a child with the same impairment. This claim, she maintains, reveals that the flourishing of a child should not be understood in universal terms, but as requiring environment-specific characteristics.

I shall argue that McDougall’s argument begs the question. More importantly, it does not do justice to virtue ethics. While her article aims at highlighting an important ambiguity in

Contact: Carla Saenz, Department of Bioethics, Building 10/1C118, Clinical Center, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD 20892-1156, USA, saenzca@cc.nih.gov or csaenz@yahoo.com.

NOTE

The opinions expressed here are the author’s and do not reflect the policies and positions of the National Institutes of Health, the U.S. Public Health Service, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

¹McDougall, Rosalind. Parental Virtue: A New Way of Thinking about the Morality of Reproductive Actions. *Bioethics* 2007; 21:181–190.

²McDougall, Rosalind. 2009. In *Disability and Disadvantage*. K. Brownlee and A. Cureton, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 352–368. This paper was presented at the “Disability and Disadvantage: Re-Examining Topics in Moral and Political Philosophy” conference in 8–9 September 2007, hosted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. There is significant overlapping between this article and McDougall 2007, although the former departs from the latter in a relevant way.

virtue ethics with respect to the concept of a child's flourishing, there is still substantive ambiguity in her own analysis. As part of my discussion, I question to what extent a virtue ethics framework can be successfully applied to discussions about the moral permissibility of reproductive actions.

THE ARGUMENT

The structure of McDougall's argument regarding the selection of children with impairments is not obvious. She provides a "virtue-based approach to the moral assessment of reproductive actions" (2009, 352) which builds upon her previous work (2007, 183–187). She departs from that previous article, however, insofar as she seems to be arguing for the conclusion that parents are morally justified in selecting a child with an impairment, for which she is apparently using an argument with the following general structure:

- P1** If the characteristics necessary for a child's flourishing are environment-specific, then selecting a child with an impairment is morally justified³
- P2** The characteristics necessary for a child's flourishing are environment-specific
- C** Selecting a child with an impairment is morally justified.

The following argument seems to capture McDougall's reasoning in support of P1:

- P3** Virtuous parents bring about the characteristics necessary for a child's flourishing
- P4** The characteristics necessary for a child's flourishing might be environment-relative
- P5** In some environments an impairment is necessary for the flourishing of a child
- P6** It is possible for parents to select a child with an impairment
- P7** Actions that fit the actions of virtuous parents are morally justified
- C*(P1)** If the characteristics necessary for a child's flourishing are environment-specific, then it is morally justified to select a child with an impairment

P3 and P7 seem to call for two different types of "tests." As for P3, one needs to check whether the characteristic at stake is necessary for the flourishing of the child. As for P7, one needs to check whether the actions at stake would be performed by virtuous parents. P3 and P7 can however be combined into one premise, P8: Actions that bring about the characteristics necessary for a child's flourishing are morally justified. The particular parental virtue at stake in McDougall's 2009 discussion is acceptingness: "i.e. perceiving acceptingly the characteristics of one's child" (2009, 357).⁴ Acceptingness is "a parental character trait conducive to the flourishing of the child and thus a parental virtue" (2007, 185). She adds that acceptingness is a parental virtue because of the inherent unpredictability of a child's characteristics and the importance of parental acceptance to their wellbeing (2007, 185).⁵ It is not clear to what extent this particular virtue plays a role in McDougall's argument given that she proposes a "flourishing-based test of whether a particular characteristic is one that the virtuous parent considers acceptingly" (2007, p.186).

³More about the formulation of this premise later.

⁴McDougall does not claim that it is the only parental virtue. More about this later.

⁵I think "acceptingness" is an unfortunate term for the virtue that ultimately justifies the actions of parents *selecting* a particular type of child, as opposed to just accepting any child they happen to conceive. Selecting a child (even, as it were, "acceptingly selecting" a child) is at odds with an intuitive understanding of the virtue of "acceptingness," as well as with McDougall's own explanation of the virtue in this quote.

It is thus the idea of flourishing which does the justificatory work, which suggests that I am justified in combining P3 and P7 into P8.

In this argument P5 is undoubtedly the most questionable premise. Can an impairment ever be *necessary* for the flourishing of a child? McDougall claims so.⁶ She makes her case using the following examples: An achondroplastic couple that selects an achondroplastic child, and a deaf couple that selects a deaf child. As for the first case, she asserts,

a child's lacking achondroplasia *precludes* flourishing on the environment-relative understanding because the child's physical environment is set up for people with this condition. An average-sized child would literally be a misfit in his or her concrete environment, presumably with negative implications for his or her flourishing (2009, 363, my italics)

She adds that children's familial environment has a significant impact on their well-being, and in order for the child of an impaired couple to have the interactions with her parents that are conducive to flourishing, the child has to be impaired. She emphatically concludes, "a lack of the impairment in question becomes *incompatible* with the child's flourishing in this situation." (2009, 363, my italics)

McDougall makes an analogous case as for the second example. Because of the importance that deafness might have in the parents' way of living as part of the deaf community, "hearing ability might be *incompatible* with flourishing" (2009, 362, my italics). Since the deaf family communicates using sign language, McDougall claims that being deaf is a characteristic that the child needs in order to flourish in this environment (2009, 362–363).

Certainly, a child's ability to interact in her specific environment contributes to her wellbeing. It is however not true that a child *needs* to be deaf in order to interact with deaf parents, or that a child needs to be achondroplastic in order to interact with achondroplastic parents. Hearing-abled people do communicate with deaf persons using sign language. The interaction of persons with achondroplasia is not restricted to people their size. To that extent, it does seem false that children need to share their parents' impairment in order to interact with them and thus flourish.⁷

As further justification for her claim that children need to share their parents' impairments in order to flourish, McDougall draws attention to the importance of participating in shared family practices, and in communities that cherish one's way of living.⁸ Yet, if she is right about this, a couple, say, severely affected by a serious disease that shapes their everyday practices, and that is closely related to a community of people with the same serious disease, would also be justified in selecting a child with that disease on the basis that it is necessary for the child's flourishing. Nothing in McDougall's argument seems to prevent this unfortunate implication.⁹ Moreover, nothing, *at least in principle*, prevents McDougall's

⁶In McDougall 2007, however, before envisioning the distinction between environment-specific and universal accounts of children flourishing, and as part of her discussion of the deaf couple that selects a deaf child, she states Hearing, the characteristic that Duchesneau and McCullough are rejecting, *is* compatible with living a flourishing life. Although Duchesneau and McCullough (and others) may argue for the benefits of membership to the Deaf culture, particularly for *their* child, to claim that hearing is incompatible with flourishing would be implausible. (2007, 188, her emphasis) Yet she also considers the opposite reasoning, which is the one she pursues in the 2009 article (2007, 189).

⁷If it is true that people can only interact with others who share their condition, it seems that, given most people are neither deaf or achondroplastic, we would have a good reason to select children that lack these impairments: Lacking these impairments is necessary to communicate with the vast majority of people in the world. While, as McDougall acknowledges, family interaction is very important, interaction with people that are not part of your family is certainly important, too. On a different light, it seems that McDougall's claims have discriminatory implications. If she is right about impaired people not being able to meaningfully interact with non-impaired people, then it seems that some level of segregation would be justified. My thanks to Lorella Terzi for drawing my attention to this problem.

⁸See 2009, 361–364, and 2007, 189.

argument from morally justifying the selection of a child that is deaf and blind and achondroplastic and that suffers other diseases at the same time.

This discussion leads us to P2 in the general argument above. Are the characteristics necessary for flourishing dependent on specific environments? Are they “universal”? McDougall seems to assume that the characteristics necessary for a child’s flourishing are *either* universally-applicable, *or* environment-specific. But this is a false dilemma. Some characteristics might be universally-applicable while others are environment-specific. Pointing out some environment-specific characteristics does not show that *all* the characteristics necessary for a child’s flourishing are context-specific. At any rate, what type of support does McDougall give for P2, namely, the claim that the characteristics necessary for flourishing *are* specific to particular family environments? McDougall does not offer any explicit justification for it. While she illustrates it with examples, in their analysis she assumes that the claim at stake is true. Certainly, McDougall cannot allege that what justifies P2 is that it allows us to morally justify selecting a child with an impairment (C), for the argument would blatantly beg the question.

Although McDougall states she is offering a way to morally assess reproductive decisions, it cannot be the case, on pain of begging the question, that she is arguing *for* C, namely, for the conclusion that it is morally justified to select a child with an impairment. It is thus necessary to revise her argument, which might have been misrepresented above.

REVISED ARGUMENT

Upon closer examination of McDougall’s article, it becomes evident that she is not arguing for the conclusion I suggested above, that it is morally justified to select a child with an impairment, but assuming it as a premise that is part of another argument. As a matter of fact, McDougall states at the beginning of her paper that “claiming moral permissibility for couples with an impairment selecting for children with the same impairment points to embracing an environment-specific understanding of the characteristics conducive to a child’s flourishing” (2009, 352). Her argument thus seems to have the following structure:

- P9** If selecting a child with an impairment is morally justified, then the characteristics necessary for a child’s flourishing are environment-specific.
- P10** Selecting a child with an impairment is morally justified.
- C**** The characteristics necessary for a child’s flourishing are environment-specific

However, McDougall is committed to P1 in the argument above, namely, that if the characteristics necessary for a child’s flourishing are environment-specific, then selecting a child with an impairment is morally justified. She states, “if we want to argue for a couple’s decision to select for impairment as being compatible with acceptingness,” that is, for the moral justifiability of selecting a child with an impairment, “we must accept an environment-relative understanding of the characteristics compatible with the child’s flourishing.” (2009, 364)¹⁰ If that is the case, the first premise in the last argument I have presented (P9) actually involves a biconditional:

- P11** Selecting a child with an impairment is morally justified *if and only if* the characteristics necessary for a child’s flourishing are environment-specific.

⁹A similar example based not on health but on education can be made: An illiterate couple of gardeners for whom the community of illiterate gardeners is very important would be, according to McDougall’s argument, be justified in keeping their child illiterate, so she shares the household practices with her family and interacts with her community.

¹⁰See also 2009, 361, 363.

In other words, the moral justifiability of selecting a child with an impairment depends on the view that the characteristics necessary for the flourishing of a child are environment-specific, and the view that the characteristics necessary for the flourishing of a child are environment-specific relies on the position that parents are morally justified in selecting a child with an impairment.

This is however circular reasoning. Moreover, the propositions contained in P11 are themselves highly controversial. What reason do we have to accept any of them? McDougall appeals to her intuition in order to claim that parents are morally justified in selecting children that share their impairments. The acceptance of the environment-relative account “will be determined in part by the strength of the intuition that potential parents with impairments are morally entitled to select for children who share their characteristics.” (2009, 367) Yet this intuition is certainly one that needs to be justified. It happens to be precisely what is at stake.

McDougall, then, begs the question insofar as she does not offer any reason to choose any of the propositions contained in P11. She acknowledges, “Different conceptions [universal or environment-based characteristics necessary for flourishing] deliver differing results about the moral status of this couple’s action.” (2009, 353) But do we have any reason to prefer the conception she advances over its alternative? Again, it is unacceptable to say that it allows us to morally justify the actions of the couples in her examples, because that might well be not morally justified in the first place, as my own intuition suggests.

A more charitable interpretation of the biconditional in P11 is however possible. In the context in which there is disagreement about the moral justifiability of couples with an impairment selecting a child with the same impairment, McDougall can be seen as merely attempting to articulate the different understandings of flourishing implied in the positions in conflict. That is, if one claims that the selection of a child with an impairment is morally justified, one must necessarily be committed to the claim that the characteristics necessary for a child’s flourishing are environment-specific. Conversely, if one claims that the selection of a child with an impairment is not morally justified, one must necessarily be committed to the claim that the characteristics necessary for the flourishing of a child are universal.¹¹ Certainly, McDougall’s concern is not just with the morality of the selection of children with impairments, but with the development of a virtue-ethics framework to assess parenthood. Therefore, despite one’s interpretation of her position with respect to the selection of children with impairments, my critiques to her virtue-based framework and to the appeal to virtue ethics in general in this context, still apply.

McDougall however does not seem to be neutral with respect to the different positions in conflict, but committed to the claim that the selection of children with impairments is morally justified, and consequently that the characteristics necessary for a child’s flourishing are in fact environment-specific. While no argument in support of these claims that mutually imply each other is given, McDougall reveals her commitment to these claims when endorsing the position of the achondroplastic mother who claims that the flourishing of her child would be compromised if the child is of average size (2009, 361). McDougall says, “[a]lthough the potential child’s ability to function in the average-sized world outside his or her parents’ home will of course also impact his or her wellbeing, fitting with his or her family environment seems fundamentally important to his or her flourishing.” (2009, 361)¹²

¹¹I am here granting McDougall that “environment-specific” and “universal” are the only two possible alternatives, although this constitutes a false dilemma as I have already pointed out. It would be thus more appropriate to say “non-environment-specific” instead of “universal.”

¹²While McDougall is rather subtle in written, she was very explicit about her commitments when she delivered the 2009 article in the *Disability and Disadvantage* conference in Chapel Hill in 2008.

She adds that the understanding that the characteristics necessary for a child's flourishing are environment-specific "captures the intuition that the child's ability to interact in his or her specific situation contributes to his or her wellbeing." (2009, 363) McDougall's endorsement of the environment-specific account of flourishing is more emphatically revealed in her discussion about the implications of this position beyond the selection for impairment. She says, "[i]t seems clear that parental preferences as well as their physical characteristics form part of the familial environment in which a potential child will grow up. Alignment with one's parents' valued and abilities plausibly increases a child's wellbeing in the same way that fitting the physical home environment does." (2009, 365)

As mentioned above, this position has some unfortunate implications: Are we also morally justified in deliberately selecting a child with an illness or a disease, provided that her parents have that illness or disease, too? McDougall might perhaps reply that doing so is not morally acceptable because it conflicts with parents' overriding moral obligation to promote health or avoid disease in one's children, and that, since neither achondroplasia or deafness are diseases, selecting children with these conditions is morally acceptable while selecting children with health problems is not. Being achondroplastic or deaf is not lacking health, but just being different in the way "bookish" people are different from athletics-oriented people. Deafness, McDougall reports, is seen by the parents who selected the deaf child as "a minority cultural identity rather than as a disability." (2007, 187) Their cultural identity is defined by their use of the American Sign Language.

First, it is not clear then what explains parents' overriding moral obligation to promote health or avoid disease in their children. In her 2007 article, McDougall acknowledges that "much more needs to be said about the exact nature of this parental virtue [of acceptingness], in order to avoid the objection that such a virtue is implausible because it is in conflict with admired parenting practices such as the treatment or avoidance of disease in one's child" (2007, 185–6). That clarification is still pending in McDougall 2009, where it becomes even more relevant given that her claims are stronger there than in her 2007 article.

Second, this possible reply suggests that health counts as a universal condition that is necessary for flourishing, so this reply is not available to her for it would defeat the purpose of her article insofar as she argues that the characteristics necessary for a child's flourishing (among which I include health) are environment-specific.¹³ But it is not obvious that health is merely the absence of disease. At any rate, it seems that, even granting her that, her argument has the (also unfortunate) implication of morally justifying deaf parents in not medically treating their non-deaf child who starts losing her hearing capacity, or in intentionally giving their non-deaf child antibiotics (or any other medicine) that would cause the child to lose her hearing capacity.

McDougall would perhaps attempt the following response, along the lines of Parfit's nonidentity problem, to my rejoinder. If child B has characteristics Y and we deliberately perform actions that lead to B having characteristics X, where X is less desirable than Y, then arguably we are harming B, which is wrong. But, McDougall would probably argue, this problem does not apply to child selection, because we are not choosing between child B with characteristics X, and child B with characteristics Y, but between child A (with characteristics Y) and child B (with characteristics X). To that extent, we are not harming A by choosing B, unless we assume non-existence is a form of harm.¹⁴

¹³More on universally-applicable and environment-specific conditions later.

¹⁴It should be noted that McDougall intentionally avoids dealing with harm (and the problem of the nonidentity of potential children) by using a virtue-ethics framework. See 2007, 190 and 2009, 354.

However, if she pursues this train of thought, she would be still implying that characteristic X, which correspond to deafness and achondroplasia, does not merely constitutes a “difference” but a less desirable trait than characteristics Y, which is what she was denying in the first place. Instead of pursuing the discussion about what is health, and what our moral obligations to attend health (in any of its understandings) are, I want to discuss to what extent McDougall’s virtue ethics assessment is helpful for the discussion about the moral permissibility of reproductive actions, which is the main claim in her 2007 article and assumed in her later discussion of reproductive actions.

MINIMAL REQUIREMENT TEST

I want to point out a more serious problem of McDougall’s article, which eventually leads me to question the usefulness of virtue ethics in general for arguments on moral permissibility. Throughout both her articles, McDougall uses the following predicates as synonymous:

X is *compatible* with a child’s flourishing

X is *conducive* to a child’s flourishing

X is *necessary* for a child’s flourishing.¹⁵

It is however obvious that there are significant moral differences between these predicates. The following definitions make the differences explicit:

X is *compatible* with A’s flourishing if and only if it is possible for A to have trait X and flourish (that is, if and only if having trait X cannot prevent A from flourishing)

X is *conducive* to A’s flourishing if and only if X is a trait that is expected to contribute to A’s flourishing

X is *necessary* for A’s flourishing if and only if X is a trait that is indispensable for X’s flourishing (that is, A will only flourish if A has trait X).

In her discussion of the virtue of acceptingness, though, which is the particular virtue on which the moral justifiability of selecting a child with disability depends, McDougall opts (in both of her pieces) for compatibility. She states, “Characteristics that are *compatible* with a child living a flourishing life would be perceived acceptingly by the virtuous parents, while those that are *incompatible* with a child’s flourishing would fall outside the scope of this parental virtue.” (2007, 188 and 2009, 361, my italics)¹⁶ So, in order to see whether selecting a particular characteristic is morally justified or not, we have to determine whether it is an action a virtuous parent would perform in the circumstances, for which we need to ask the following question: Is the characteristic in question compatible with the child’s flourishing?¹⁷

Deeming virtuous parental actions on the basis that they bring about traits that are merely compatible with flourishing is in my opinion problematic because it does not do justice to our understanding of what constitutes a virtue. McDougall’s virtue-based approach to reproductive issues does not do justice to virtue ethics. Virtue implies excellence. Being virtuous thus constitutes a very high standard, which does not get captured in this sort of

¹⁵I have arbitrarily selected one of these alternatives in my reconstruction of McDougall’s arguments in sections 1 and 2. The first two paragraphs in McDougall 2009 paper suffice to show the use of these predicates as synonymous. Accordingly, the following are also considered synonymous:

X is *incompatible* with a child’s flourishing

X makes a child’s flourishing *less likely* (see 2009, 1366.

¹⁶See also 2007, 188–189.

¹⁷See 2009, 361.

“minimal requirement test” that McDougall advances. According to this test, only parental actions that bring about characteristics that are *incompatible* with flourishing, that is, that will prevent a child from flourishing, are considered non-virtuous and thus rejected as morally unacceptable.

Yet few things can actually *prevent* a child from flourishing. We can conceive of children flourishing in very adverse circumstances. The media often reports stories of children flourishing despite severe health problems, minimal familial support, extreme poverty, and the like. The question is: Is opting for those conditions morally justified given that they are not *incompatible* with children’s flourishing?

I do not think it is virtuous or even morally acceptable to make things deliberately harder for some individuals. To do so, seems to be worse than just not improving situations that, because of the natural lottery, happen to be hard for some.¹⁸ At any rate, even granting McDougall that parental actions are morally *acceptable* as long as they bring about traits that are compatible with a child’s flourishing¹⁹, I am reluctant to admit that these actions can be deemed virtuous. The fact that the requirements are so minimal distorts our view of what a virtue is. “X is a virtuous action” is plainly not equivalent to “there’s nothing wrong with action X.”

McDougall observes that “the flourishing of a child is taken to be a satisficing rather than a maximizing idea in this context.” (2009, 356) Aiming at “maximal” flourishing seems to be implausible.²⁰ However, she adds, “the very concept of flourishing involves the idea of a high level of wellbeing (...) Thus the level to be satisfied in order for a child to be flourishing is “intuitively a high one, far higher than the life-worth-living level” (2009, 356) Nevertheless, since her assessment focuses on the mere compatibility of the traits at stake with flourishing, McDougall’s virtue-based approach collapses into one that is not substantially different from the “life worth living”: In both cases moral permissibility depends on very minimal requirements.

McDougall does make the claim, following Hursthouse, that “the idea of a virtue intrinsically involves the notion of the correct amount” (2007, 188; 2009, 357)²¹. Arguably, this means that being a virtuous parent involves having the *right* concern with the flourishing of one’s child.²² But this is not sufficiently informative. It is not clear how this “right concern” gets cashed out in McDougall’s assessment of reproductive actions which appeals to mere compatibility with flourishing.²³ A functional assessment of reproductive actions should specify what these right concerns are.

¹⁸This discussion parallels the debate between liberals and libertarians. Libertarians point out that it is not *impossible* for a child in extreme poverty to succeed in life. Liberals reply that, while that is true, it is definitely more difficult for such a child to succeed than for one whose basic needs are attended to a reasonable degree; we are not justified in allowing such disparity given that we cannot possibly claim that any of these children “deserved” to be born in the particular condition they were born into.

¹⁹See 2009, 361, 363.

²⁰See 2009, 356.

²¹McDougall draws this idea from R. Hursthouse. 1987. *Beginning Lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²²As suggested by McDougall’s quote of Hursthouse: “built into each concept of a virtue is the idea of getting things *right*: in the case of generosity giving the *right* amount of things for the *right* reasons on the *right* occasions to the *right* people” (2007, 187 as well as 2009, 357, quoting from Hursthouse 1987, 228–9; Hursthouse’s italics).

²³Certainly, having the “right concern” with the flourishing of one’s child relates to the individual virtues—in this case acceptingness. Virtues, in the Aristotelian tradition, constitute a mean between two extremes, which are being excessively accepting and being deficiently accepting. The doctrine of the mean thus contributes to provide some guidance about the “right amount of things.” However, it is still not sufficiently informative because, as specified by Hursthouse in the previous quote, the “right amount of things” is only one of the several aspects of “getting things right.” Furthermore, the appeal to the specific virtue of acceptingness does not succeed in being sufficiently informative because of McDougall’s definition of acceptingness as “perceiving acceptingly the characteristics of one’s child,” which is supplemented by a “flourishing-based test of whether a particular characteristic is one that the virtuous parent considers acceptingly.” To that extent, and as explained in section 1, it is the idea of flourishing (and not the actual virtue of acceptingness) which does the justificatory work in McDougall’s account.

One might wonder to what extent it is possible to develop a functional assessment of reproductive actions on the basis of the concept of flourishing, and thus using virtue ethics as a framework. On the one hand, it is *possible* for a child to flourish in extremely adverse circumstances. On the other hand, it is possible for a child *not* to flourish in exceptionally favorable conditions. One thus wonders whether the appeal to the notion of flourishing obscures rather than clarifies what the moral obligations of parents are. McDougall acknowledges that the concept of flourishing is “inevitably vague” (2009, 356), yet she does not consider the implications of such vagueness for her account.

While it is reasonable to claim that parents have a *prima facie* obligation to promote their children’s flourishing, it is not obvious what this obligation implies. McDougall herself takes the obligation to promote the flourishing of one’s child to imply three significantly different requirements throughout her article—providing the traits *necessary* for a child’s flourishing, providing the traits *conducive* for a child’s flourishing, and providing the traits *compatible* with a child’s flourishing—, although in the core of her discussion she opts for the third alternative, which is the least demanding on parents. This ambiguity indicates the difficulty of defining what the obligation to promote the flourishing of one’s child implies. It seems, however, that even if she opts for one of the other alternatives—providing the traits *necessary* for a child’s flourishing, and providing the traits *conducive* for a child’s flourishing—, she would still face the difficulties inherent to the concept of flourishing. Other concepts, for instance, opportunity, might be better candidates to ground a functional assessment of reproductive actions.

Finally, a virtue-based account faces an additional difficulty regarding the different particular virtues one can bring to the discussion of parental action. McDougall mentions three parental virtues—acceptingness, committedness, and future-agent-focus— (2007, 185; 2009, 357) although she admits that this is not an exhaustive list. In her 2007 article McDougall takes into account the virtues of acceptingness and future-agent focus, and concludes that there is not an unequivocal answer to the morality of selecting impaired children. An assessment based on the future-agent-focus virtue—which she compares with Feinberg’s idea that children have a right to an open future (2007, 186)— suggests that the action of selecting children with impairments is morally wrong (2007, 186).

In her 2009 article, however, McDougall makes the virtue of acceptingness the focus of her discussion (2009, 357). In this piece she maintains that selecting an impaired child is morally justified, at least when parents have the same impairment. While she mentions the virtues of committedness, and future-agent-focus, she does not take them into account in her discussion of the morality of selecting an impaired child. One thus wonders what justifies the focus on the virtue of acceptingness, or the dismissal of the virtue of future-agent-focus in this discussion. More generally, how are we supposed to evaluate the moral permissibility of actions in cases in which specific virtues come to conflict? I have argued that, given the particular structure of her argument, it is not obvious what exact role this specific virtue plays. The moral permissibility of selecting a particular trait depends on whether this trait is compatible with the flourishing of the child. Yet, as I have explained, the notion of flourishing is a highly complex one. The already murky idea of what parents’ moral obligation to promote the flourishing of their child entails becomes further complicated by the possibility of taking different parental virtues into account. Shifting the focus from one particular virtue to another reveals different and even incompatible duties involved in parents’ obligation to promote their child’s flourishing. This in turn constitutes another reason to doubt that a virtue-based framework can be useful to assess the moral permissibility of reproductive actions, or to provide guidance for action in general.

FINAL REMARKS

I have argued against the view that the moral obligation to promote the flourishing of one's child should be interpreted as the obligation to provide the traits merely *compatible* with the flourishing of a child. This is too minimal of a requirement. It does not do justice to our understanding of virtues, and, more importantly, it has morally unacceptable implications. Thus the other interpretations deserve more consideration. More specifically, it seems that we need to investigate whether there are any traits that are genuinely necessary for a child's flourishing. If that is the case, then it is reasonable to claim that parents have a moral obligation to provide those traits.

Yet this suggestion brings us again to the problems of appealing to the notion of flourishing that I mentioned above. Since children might well fail to flourish in the most favorable circumstances, and flourish in the most adverse ones, it does not seem possible to identify the traits on which flourishing actually depends. Therefore, it seems that the appeal to the concept of flourishing, and ultimately to virtue ethics, does not contribute to our understanding to what is morally permissible for parents to do.²⁴

Biography

Carla Saenz is a Fellow at the Department of Bioethics at the Clinical Center of the National Institutes of Health. She has a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Texas at Austin. Her current research focuses on justice and health equity.

²⁴My thanks to Marion Danis for her comments on an earlier version of this paper.