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| Item Type     | Journal article   |
| Authors       | Douglas, Thomas;Powell, Russell;Devolder, Katrien;Stafforini, Pablo;Rippon, Simon                           |
| DOI           | <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2010.482642">http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2010.482642</a> |
| Publisher     | Taylor & Francis  |
| Download date | 2024-08-08 08:34:21   |
| Link to Item  | <a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14018/10382">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14018/10382</a>             |

# Resisting Sparrow's Sexy Reductio: Selection Principles and the Social Good

**Thomas Douglas**, University of Oxford

**Russell Powell**, University of Oxford

**Katrien Devolder**, Ghent University

**Pablo Stafforini**, University of Oxford

**Simon Rippon**, University of Oxford

Principles of procreative beneficence (PPBs) hold that parents have good reasons to select the child with the best life prospects. Sparrow (2010) claims that PPBs imply that we should select only female children, unless we attach normative significance to "normal" human capacities. We argue that this claim fails on both empirical and logical grounds. Empirically, Sparrow's argument for greater female well-being rests on a selective reading of the evidence and the incorrect assumption that an advantage for females would persist even when a serious gender imbalance is obtained. Logically, PPBs cite only *pro tanto* reasons and allow that the good of an individual child could be outweighed by other morally relevant considerations, such as those which take collectively suboptimal outcomes into account. There is thus no need to attach value to the "normal."

## EMPIRICAL FAILINGS

Sparrow's argument hinges on the empirical claim that women enjoy higher levels of well-being than men. We find this claim implausible for several reasons. First, although women's rights and opportunities have expanded dramatically in liberal societies over the last four decades, their self-reported levels of well-being have decreased, both in absolute terms and relative to their male counterparts (Stevenson and Wolfers 2009). We cannot simply assume that actual well-being will track common objective indices of welfare, such as longevity or civil rights. These represent only a fraction of the total factors that might affect individual happiness or flourishing. At the same time, it is anthropologically well established that men are better positioned economically and politically in virtually every human culture (Wrangham and Peterson 1996). It is thus not credible to claim that social and institutional constraints on women's well-being have been reduced to the point that a marginally longer life span provides women with significantly better options than men overall.

In addition, Sparrow claims that pregnancy, childbirth, and breast-feeding are important, meaningful experiences

that are available only to women. Yet the proportion of men who lament their inability to gestate or lactate is vanishingly small. It is therefore not at all obvious that a life lacking in such experiences is necessarily a less meaningful life for its bearer. Furthermore, Sparrow overlooks other potentially valuable reproductive advantages that men have over women. Although women who wish to have children usually endure long and physically demanding periods of gestation and lactation that often interfere with other important life projects, men can sire a large number of children at relatively little personal cost.

The broader point we want to make, however, is that philosophers are simply not in a good position to conclude that members of one sex lead better lives than members of the other. Men and women differ from each other in countless potentially relevant dimensions, and at present we lack the necessary factual and evaluative knowledge to integrate these differences into an overall comparison of well-being. Even more fundamentally, it may be incorrect to say that the life of a woman is better, worse, or precisely equal to the life of a man, just as it is wrong to say that a career in science is better, worse, or equal to a career in music (cf. Raz 1986).

Even if we accept Sparrow's claim that women tend to live more valuable lives than men under current circumstances, this asymmetry would cease to hold in a sexually imbalanced society with a preponderance of females. Both individual well-being and intersexual dynamics are sensitive to prevailing sex ratios. Unless we assume a radical biological and social reconfiguration of human sexual orientation, sex ratios that depart significantly from equilibrium will reduce the well-being of members of the overabundant sex, who will find it increasingly difficult to locate a suitable partner (one of the primary determinants of human well-being). In addition, unequal sex ratios generally decrease the bargaining power of the predominant sex in the market for mates. As a consequence, societies with significantly more women than men are characterized by higher

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Address correspondence to Russell Powell, Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics & Faculty of Philosophy, University of Oxford, Oxford, OX1 4JJ, UK. E-mail: russell.powell@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

rates of teen pregnancy, increased divorce rates, and lower remarriage rates following death or divorce (Guttentag and Secord 1983). The benefits of being male would rise, and the putative advantage of being female would probably disappear, once females became superabundant. So compliance with PPBs could not take us very far towards an all-female society.

### LOGICAL FAILINGS

Even if Sparrow's empirical claims were justified, his argument would fail on independent logical grounds. Sparrow claims that PPBs generate an obligation to select female offspring. But the PPB Sparrow claims to rely on could not on its own warrant any conclusion about what parents are all-things-considered obligated to do, since it asserts only the existence of *pro tanto* reasons to select the "best child"—reasons with some, but not necessarily decisive, normative force.

There are two obvious responses open to Sparrow. First, he could weaken his conclusion, acknowledging that parents indeed have only *pro tanto* reasons to select girls. However, he will then be left without a *reductio*. After all, granting Sparrow's empirical claims, the conclusion that parents have good reasons to select girls would be entirely plausible. A second possible response would be to start from a stronger PPB, one warranting the conclusion that parents are all-things-considered obligated to select girls. This would be the principle that parents are under an all-things-considered obligation to maximize the well-being of their children. However, as Sparrow admits, this principle is "implausibly strong." Indeed, we know of no one who has actually defended it.<sup>1</sup>

It could be argued that mere *pro tanto* reasons to select female children would give rise to an obligation if there were no countervailing reasons *not* to select girls. And Sparrow might deny that there are any such reasons, apart from those derived from the value of the "normal." But there clearly are other considerations that could outweigh any reasons parents may have to select female children. Sparrow illustrates one of these in showing how parental focus on the well-being of their own offspring could generate collectively suboptimal outcomes by eroding sexual diversity. Parents surely have strong moral reasons not to contribute to such outcomes.

Sparrow himself denies that his *reductio* can be blocked by appealing to collectively bad outcomes. First, he claims that these outcomes could be avoided through further human engineering, which, for example, could sever "the link between happiness and desire for the company of persons of the opposite sex" (3). But any such attempts are themselves likely to come at great cost, and this gives us sig-

nificant reasons to avoid them. If there were genuine low-cost options available, it would then be unclear why we should continue to oppose a single-sex society. More importantly, Sparrow maintains that even if collective action problems were unavoidable, they would have no bearing on selection decisions, since "it is simply unclear as to why parents should be concerned with anything more than the life prospects of their particular children" (3). But why is this unclear? It is true that the existing literature on selection has largely ignored the well-being of individuals other than the child-to-be-selected. Yet we normally think that people have significant moral reasons to look out for the well-being of persons other than their existing or future children.

For example, good parents not only bring up their children to have happy lives; they also encourage their children to be decent individuals who treat others well. Similarly, good parents may justifiably seek to avoid collective action problems such as those Sparrow mentions. Consider left-leaning parents who make the principled decision to send their children to state school, forgoing a potentially advantageous private education for their own children for the sake of what they consider a greater social good. Whether their decisions are morally best is debatable, but if it is accepted that a compelling social good is indeed at stake, then it would be implausible to claim that they act impermissibly.

Thus, Sparrow's *reductio* can be blocked by allowing social considerations to factor into selection decisions. This point could be made explicit in the following PPB:

Parents have significant moral reasons to make selection decisions that protect/advance the interests of the selected child *but also* those of other persons. (Douglas and Devolder 2009)

This principle implies, for instance, that parents have reasons not to select children likely to possess antisocial traits. Interestingly, this might be thought to strengthen the case for selecting female offspring, since maleness is strongly correlated with physical aggression and criminality (Wrangham and Peterson 1996). Once female predominance has become substantial, however, the principle will advise against selecting females, since doing so would diminish the well-being of others (including other females). In effect, femininity itself will have become an antisocial trait. ■

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1. In early writing on genetic selection, Savulescu (2001; 2005) does alternate between talk of "good reasons" and "obligation." In that context, however, talk of obligations is most charitably interpreted as referring to merely *prima facie* obligations that are grounded in good, *pro tanto* reasons.

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# Sexual Dimorphism and the Value of Feminist Bioethics

Nancy J. Matchett, University of Northern Colorado

“Should Human Beings Have Sex?” is a provocative title to a provocative article. Robert Sparrow’s (2010) focus is the value of sexual dimorphism, and he concludes that unless there are reasons to think the sexed nature of human beings is normatively significant, current trends in bioethical reasoning force the conclusion that “we may do well to move toward a “post sex” humanity” (3). It is our ability to reproduce without having sex, or at least not without having our sexual intercourse mediated by various technologies, that makes this a live possibility. So the title illustrates the ways in which views about whether sexual dimorphism is a good thing are intimately connected to views about what sorts of reproductive practices are morally appropriate.

Like commentator James Hughes (2010), I want to focus on the logic of Sparrow’s argument. Specifically, I want to ask whether the argument is one that feminists ought to embrace. There are some reasons to think the answer to my question is “yes,” but there are stronger reasons to think the better answer is “no.” Importantly, however, my feminist worries have relatively little to do with the specific conclusions Sparrow has reached. The problem is methodological, with the result that even the conclusions most attractive to feminists are lacking in normative force.

Although feminist bioethicists are an unruly bunch, they are loosely united by two methodological commitments. One is that we must pay attention to women’s actual lives and experiences, as opposed to the lives and experiences we expect or assume women have (Lebacqz 1991; Purdy 2001). The other, usefully captured by the slogan “the personal is political,” is that we must be wary of the public/private distinction, since all human decisions are bound up with larger networks of social power (Hanisch 1969/2006). Both of these commitments are rooted in the conviction that there is no

essence of femaleness, “but merely overlapping characteristics that give rise to our shared social understandings about these matters” (Lindemann Nelson 2000, 498; de Beauvoir 1953). While women’s lives are not completely disconnected from the gendered roles that women play, neither are they identical to the gendered stories that are often told about women.

It is with respect to the first commitment that feminists are most likely to appreciate Sparrow’s paper. After reviewing a number of recent arguments that we have reason to produce “the best child possible,” he notes that bioethicists “cannot avoid the question of whether a male or a female child will have a better chance in life” (3). And while he is sensitive to the fact that “the existence of widespread and profound institutional sexism in most societies across the world means that male children *appear* likely to have better life prospects and a much wider range of opportunities than female children” (my emphasis), he lays out four arguments that he takes to show that girl babies have significantly more open futures than boy babies: (1) sexism is being reduced; (2) once a basic level of reproductive health care can be assumed, women have significantly longer life expectancies than men; (3) the distinctive experiences surrounding pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing are only available to women; and (4) most if not all experiences available to men could be available to women who choose to pursue them. While feminists are probably less sanguine than Sparrow himself about the extent of improvements in women’s health care access and the reduction of sexism, these are certainly goals that feminists share. And Sparrow’s argument in this section does seem to be illustrating the more general point that if social structures do not systematically impede women’s choices and human lives are evaluated

Address correspondence to Nancy J. Matchett, University of Northern Colorado, Campus Box 126, Greeley, CO 80639, USA. E-mail: nancy.matchett@unco.edu