

Introduction

Having children is one of the most common projects among adult human beings throughout history and across differences among human beings. The aim of having children transcends differences in religious traditions, as well as racial differences and a variety of physical differences. Adults with physical impairments are no less desirous of children than those without such impairments. What is more, having children transcends the widest possible economic and educational disparities, including even dramatic differences in freedom. Thus, even under the burden of slavery, during which many black females were forcibly impregnated, it is true nonetheless that many blacks chose to have children.

In many cases, adults want and seek to have children whatever else they do as adults and regardless of whatever other successes they may have as adults. To this end, in fact, adults will often go to extraordinary means, spending large sums of money and subjecting themselves to grueling procedures. In vitro fertilization, for instance, comes readily to mind. And I shall leave aside entirely the issue of cloning that looms large on the horizon. In any case, children are often thought to give both a completion and a meaning to life that nothing else can give. While we certainly think that a person can have a remarkably meaningful

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life without children, there is at least the tendency to think that children (can) contribute to a meaningful and complete life in a way that nothing else (can) does. Surely professional success, fame, and fortune are not thought to render children otiose. On the contrary, many who enjoy these aspects of life often seek to complete their lives by having children, where raising and being involved in the lives of one's children are thought to provide an incomparable richness to life that cannot be had otherwise.

To be sure, there can be good reasons, such as health, for not having children. Still, wanting to have children is not a want that anyone generally has to explain. Far from it. What often seems to mystify and require an explanation is a person's not wanting to have any children at all. Not only that, the more well-off we think a person is in terms of having the resources to make for a good parent, the more it seems to us that having children is the reasonable thing for the person to do. In fact, folk wisdom often characterizes a person who refrains from having children as selfish. Interestingly in this regard, the one explanation for not having children that seems to be the most palatable from the outset is the pursuit of a religious calling. And here it is not so much that the existence of the want is denied; rather, the want is thought to be sublimated to what is considered a higher calling. Moreover, the pursuit of a religious calling is typically characterized by folk wisdom as an altruistic endeavor; hence, this pursuit rebuts the charge of selfishness. If being a rational animal capable of self-locomotion is a defining feature of the essence of a human being, then having children would seem to be one of the defining features of the practical life of a human being.

The above is, of course, a very bold and broad characterization regarding one of the central aims of human beings. I have spoken of the aim of having children in a rather noble way. Yet, it is manifestly clear that people often have children for reasons that are

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far from noble. For some, having children is rather like acquiring a marvelous trophy that they can now showcase and brag about. The hired nanny knows more about the child than the parents.¹ For others, if talk shows are to be believed, having children is a way of getting even or proving one's adulthood. Just so, even after one has allowed for the ignoble reasons for which people have children; and even after one has allowed for the fact that some people do not want the children that they bring into this world and bring home; and even after one has allowed for the reality that more people nowadays are quite self-consciously choosing not to have children: the claim that in general people want to have children stands as true as the claim that in general people want to have more rather than less money. No one thinks that this claim about money is vitiated by fact that some people with considerable ability choose careers that pay less well than other careers, and that others still go so far as to take vows of poverty. In a like manner, the claim is not that every single person wants to have a child. That is manifestly false. Rather, what is being advanced is the more modest, but yet quite significant, claim that having children is one of the most common human activities that transcends all human categories. It is what most people want to do, and in fact do, whatever else they might choose to do.

One might question the validity of folk wisdom on the grounds that a proper account of the project of having children, indeed, admits of a self-interested interpretation rather than an altruistic one. Evolutionary theory is generally invoked here. I shall show in chapter 2 that evolutionary theory does not at all require a self-interested interpretation of human beings having children. Furthermore, I shall show that the sense in which political theory

¹ For a very provocative book in this regard, see Laura C. Schlessinger, *Parenting by Proxy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000).

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claims that persons are self-interested does not apply to having children.

Before continuing, three brief points of clarification are in order. The first is this. The expression “having a child” is, strictly speaking, ambiguous between, on the one hand, simply bearing a child and, on the other, bearing a child and raising it. A woman may bear a child and not raise it. She may put it up for adoption or, painfully, the child might not live. The overwhelming majority of women wish to raise the children whom they bear. Alternatively, owing to adoption, it is possible to raise a child without bearing any children whatsoever. Significantly, most people want to bear the children whom they raise; and adoption at infancy, which is the preferred mode of adoption, is intended to get as close as is humanly possible to raising a child from birth without actually birthing the child. Hence, the fees for adopting a newborn infant are much higher than are the fees for adopting, say, a three-year-old child. In any event, there is no reason whatsoever to think that in order to achieve the aim of raising children, adoption would ever become preferable to birthing children. If it did, however, this would not threaten the impulse of my argument, as we shall see. People want to raise children whom they regard as their own. Birth unequivocally achieves this end; adoption at infancy is the next closest thing. What is more, the significance of having children lies not so much in giving birth to them – which is hardly trivial, to be sure – but in raising them. Although I shall use the language of “having children,” it should be understood to cover adoption as well. This should also be understood to cover raising children. This is how we normally speak. When a person claims to want to have a child, we typically understand that the person wants both to bear a child and to raise the child that she bears, unless the individual immediately sets the record straight. There are

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exceptions, of course, such as serving as a surrogate womb for another. These do not count against the force of the argument.

The second point of clarification pertains to bearing children and the sex act. Although bearing children naturally, if that is the word for it, is a probable consequence of the sex act (between fertile individuals of the opposite sex), it is obvious that people may want to engage in the sex act without wanting to conceive a child. However, I did not make the ridiculous claim that people want to conceive a child every time they engage in the sex act. Rather, I have claimed that wanting children is a common desire that transcends all differences. This claim is compatible with people having more children than they wanted to have or having a child at a time when they did not want to have one.

Third, although it is perhaps true that a great many people want to have more than one child, this is not the thesis of this book. In claiming that having children is the most common of all human projects, I mean only to be making the very weak claim that most people want to have at least one child.

Now, if it is obvious that having children is such a common project among human beings, it is profoundly striking that this most human of all human projects does not have center place among political theory construction. Typically, political theories concern themselves with how adults interact with other adults. On the one hand, there is the issue of adults bargaining with one another in order for each to get what she or he wants. On the other, there is the issue of each adult curtailing her or his aims in order to show the proper amount of respect for another adult. The problem with this two-prong model is that it dramatically fails to capture the project of having a child. For the very essence of the project of having children is not that of either bargaining with another adult in order to obtain something or refraining from doing something in the name of respecting another adult,

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but that of bringing life into this world or nurturing life from its infancy (as with infant adoption). More specifically, the project of having children is about voluntarily choosing to take on a significant moral responsibility for a new life. What is more, this is an end in itself. Having children is not just one among any other project that a person might wish to realize. Quite the contrary, the very nature of the project is understandably thought to be fundamentally different, because bringing a life into the world and raising it is, indeed, quite unlike any other project that a person might pursue. What is more, the fact that people expend great sums of money in order either to conceive a child or to adopt one, and thus to have this enormous responsibility of caring for a life, indicates that parenting is a task unlike any other in terms of its significance in the lives of individuals. It is one thing to take on great responsibility; it is quite another to make great sacrifices in order to do so, where there is no public honor or public prestige that comes with doing so as with politics. Nor is there any form of substantial remuneration save the delight that one takes in caring for the object of one's responsibility. Furthermore, the eagerness – and that is precisely the word for it – of people to adopt when all else fails underscores even more dramatically the significance that individuals place on raising a child.

Much of political theory takes it as a given that human beings are essentially self-interested or that for all practical purposes we might as well think of them that way. But this way of viewing human beings is rather at odds with the idea that having children is one of the most central projects that human beings take themselves to have. For, as I shall show in chapter 2, the project of having children does not lend itself to a self-interested interpretation, at least not as this idea has been traditionally understood. Indeed, as I have already noted, folklore has it that those who do

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not have children are self-interested, unless, of course, they are answering to a higher calling.

The line of thought here in folklore is straightforward enough. No matter how much delight parents take in raising their children, parenting requires making significant sacrifices from time to time for the sake of their children; hence, parenting requires a measure of altruism. There is absolutely no way to be a decent parent and opt out of making such sacrifices from time to time. While monetary sacrifices may come readily to mind, this is hardly the only sacrifice that parents may have to make on behalf of their children. For instance, well-off parents may have to forgo an extraordinary career opportunity or business adventure. By contrast, the person who refrains from having children – not owing to religious reasons – is one who thereby chooses not to do that which would require her or him to sometimes make sacrifices for another. Although a person without children may take on other altruistic endeavors, such as becoming a Big Brother or a Big Sister, the individual is free to opt out of them. Relocating for career considerations is, for instance, a perfectly good reason to bring a Big Brother or Big Sister relationship in the original city to a close. This occasions a loss on the child's part that no one denies, but that everyone understands. Indeed, simply the pursuit of a romantic interest in another city many hundreds of miles away suffices as a good reason to opt out; whereas no single parent can rightly opt out of parental requirements in pursuit of a romantic interest. These considerations alone are certainly consistent with folk wisdom that parenting is altruistic in a way that non-parenting as such is not. To be sure, this does not make the nonparent without a religious vocation selfish. Just so, one can see the line of thought that gives rise to the presumption that parenting is altruistic.

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Now given the importance and the altruistic nature of parenting, it is quite ironic that political theory assumes that most people are self-interested without ever addressing the fact that most people have children and that, in doing so, most people do what is commonly held to be contrary to the idea of relentlessly promoting their self-interest.² Traditionally, self-interest is to be understood in terms of a baseline. An act is in (*contrary to*) a person's self-interest if it raises (*lowers*) the individual above (*below*) that baseline. To be sure, much refinement is possible here, since from the outset what counts as the baseline can be a matter of great dispute and, moreover, the baseline can change over time. Thus, whereas having a high school diploma was once upon a time the baseline for getting a decent job, it is arguable that the baseline is now a bachelor's degree. Similarly, the baseline for poverty changes, because it corresponds to the level of economic prosperity in a society. At any rate, one thing is clear: the notion of self-interest will have become more than a little eviscerated if with far fewer resources left, or notwithstanding great

² In understanding the role of self-interest in moral and political philosophy, my first intellectual debt is to Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958), and then to David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Intellectual heir to Baier, Gauthier is perhaps the first contemporary theorist to make the assumption of self-interest so explicitly and unapologetically in his work, and yet with the hope of establishing an altruistic conception of morality. Neither, however, addresses the fact that having children seems to be the central project of most adults in the world, whatever else their aims are. So neither addresses the fact that, in having children, people commonly do what is held in some way not to be in their self-interest. I have discussed Gauthier's self-interested project in "Rationality and Affectivity: The Metaphysics of the Moral Self," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 5 (1988): 154–72. However, I must acknowledge that I, too, did not think to invoke the project of having children. My inspiration for the present text owes much to the work of Roger D. Masters's remarkable essay "Evolutionary Biology and Political Theory," *American Political Science Review* 84 (1990).

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opportunities that were forgone, a person can still say that her or his self-interest has been maximized. Yet, people often say that they are better off on account of having children although they acknowledge that they are worse off because they now have fewer resources than when they started out or that they forwent a few marvelous opportunities. And one very strong evidence of sincerity here is that people rarely regret having children, notwithstanding the costs involved. To be sure, our view of children has changed somewhat; and I shall say something about this momentarily. Still, if having children is one of the most common human projects and, moreover, this project does not readily admit of a self-interested interpretation, then something is amiss if political theory ignores these two stark truths. If throughout history, and across every conceivable set of circumstances, the overwhelming majority of people who take vows of poverty were to turn out to be those with red hair, one would expect political theory to reflect this reality.

This book, then, is meant as a corrective to political theory in contemporary thought. The basic idea at least in the tradition of social contract theory is that under conditions of scarcity it is in the best interest of adult human beings, understood as essentially self-interested, to cooperate. Then the trick is to get a stable commitment to an altruistic morality or conception of justice from this simple truth. To this end, tremendous intellectual ingenuity has been pressed into service, from the metaphysics of taking oneself seriously over time to considerations of long-term self-interests, to the nature and force of promising or keeping an agreement. Somehow, some way, it is supposed to turn out that in the end self-interest no longer has anything like the dramatic pull that it was alleged to have at the outset. Self-interest is supposed to cease to be the very fount of motivation. In response to exactly how this extraordinary feat is supposed to happen

there seems to be an awful lot of what I would call disingenuous *amicus ad hominem*: “If you cannot see how the argument works (or certainly would work with just few a extra innocuous assumptions), then may I politely suggest that you do not properly understand it.”

Well, as I have noted, whatever else people decide to do, they generally have children. Moreover, they voluntarily choose to do this. And this simple fact would suggest that the initial characterization of adult human beings as essentially self-interested stands in need of correction. My aim in this book is to bring out how significant a difference this simple fact makes in how we understand ourselves as human beings.

Although much of the history of political theory has attached very little importance to the fact that adults have children, there are two shining exceptions, namely Plato and, centuries later, Rousseau who was a great admirer of Plato.³ There is no plausible reading of the *Republic* whereby Plato’s construction of the state can be understood in terms of adults trying to get the most for themselves. And Rousseau makes the following tantalizing claim:

The family is the first model of political societies. The head of society corresponds to the position of the father; whereas the people, themselves, correspond to the image of the children. What is more, all are born equal. . . . The only difference is that with the family, the love of the father for his children is what, as it were, rewards him for that which he does on their behalf. (*Emile* Bk I, Ch. 1)

Since we typically presume that there is a natural affinity between family members rather than some natural enmity to be overcome,

³ Rousseau wrote: “If one wishes to have a really excellent idea of a fundamentally just society, one must read Plato’s *Republic*. This is not just a political work, as is often supposed by those who judge books solely by their titles, this is the most beautiful treatise on education ever developed.” *Emile*, Book I.