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A RESPONSE TO JEFF MITCHELL

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While there are numerous questions that the having of children raise, there is one that philosophers should be particularly concerned with – “What is the good reason for the having of children?” Recently, Jeff Mitchell has given a deontological answer to this question (*Contemporary Philosophy*, Vol. XXIV, NO. 5 & 6, Sept/Oct & Nov/Dec 2002, pp. 42-46). His answer is based on the moral function of the having of children. He claims that parenthood is a “moral calling” and that one should heed the call out of a sense of duty and responsibility for the good of society (Mitchell, 44). In this paper, I will argue that such a “moral calling” account is mistaken. I maintain that Mitchell’s account is mistaken on two grounds. First, I maintain Mitchell has assumed a problematic stance at the outset and it infects his position in general. That assumption is that we can and should consider the interests of non-existent people when considering the utility of an outcome. By looking at this assumption, we see that the warrant for such a moral reason to have children is lacking, hence, we ought not to appeal to such a reason when deciding whether to have children. The second problem is the failure to provide the epistemic conditions for a central consideration – the warranted belief that one would probably make a good parent. Furthermore, even if we attempt to construct what such conditions might be given other aspects of Mitchell’s account, the conditions fail to provide an adequate justification for the central consideration. Thus, I intend to show that such a moral calling rationale for the having of children is not superior to rationales that focus on the individual’s self-interest.

I. THE “MORAL CALLING” ACCOUNT

The impetus for Mitchell’s account is the failure of the rationales which stem from the standpoint of an individual’s self-interest. Rationales such as the positive impact on the parents, the having of children as a means to happiness for the couple, and the desire to leave something of one’s self behind all are based on the attempt to satisfy the interests of the parent(s). The problem with such rationales, according to Mitchell, is that the “step into parenthood is rarely of direct benefit to those who take it” (Mitchell, 43). The having of children does not, or does little to, advance the individual interests and welfare of the parent. Furthermore, while most human relationships involve a contractual element, Mitchell notes, the parent-child relationship is different in that it is one where there is quite a bit of taking on the part of the child and very little giving. So, in terms of cost/benefit analysis, having children cannot be given a good rationale.

After rejecting such consequentialist rationales, Mitchell argues that the good reason comes from a deontic perspective. This perspective arises from two considerations:

The first is the insight that although we may not need more people per se on the planet, we are in real need of more persons who are morally decent. The second is the warranted belief that one would be a good parent (Mitchell, 44).

Combining these two considerations, we get the following reason:

[T]he single best reason for having children is the warranted opinion that one would be a good parent and thereby have a reasonable expectation of raising morally decent individuals who will go on to make a positive contribution to society. From this standpoint parenthood is essentially a moral calling, and those who answer it should do so out of a sense of responsibility for the good of society (Mitchell, 44).

So, what we have on the table is a reason that dictates that when an individual(s) is deciding whether to have a child, she first must have the warranted belief that she would make a good parent. Once the individual(s) has this warranted belief, then she is warranted in the formation and having of the expectation that the child that is brought into existence will be morally decent and go on to make a positive contribution to society.

Before assessing this rationale, I need to make a quick note of what is meant by 'morally decent'.

The necessary conditions of a morally decent person, according to Mitchell, are (a) she has a genuine respect for the well-being of others, (b) she has her own behavior as an object of reflection, (c) she understands that an act can be legally or socially acceptable, but yet unethical and, so, is aware of the need to evaluate the laws and social norms in order to behave in a self-consistent and intelligent fashion, (d) she genuinely appreciates and enjoys social goods such as friendship and familial solidarity, and (e) she is more or less well-adjusted in that she has a level-headed assessment of her own abilities and this assessment coincides with a realistic perspective of life in general (Mitchell, 45). In saying that these are necessary, it is not meant as a straightforward conceptual analysis. Rather, I take (a)-(e) to be, more or less, an explication of what could be meant by moral decency. The important point for my purposes is that these conditions focus on the cognitive status, intellectual abilities, and held beliefs of the child being brought into existence. That is, the goal of the parent(s) is to bring a person into existence that will minimally satisfy these conditions.

II. THE "MORAL CALLING" ARGUMENT VS. THE BASIC INTUITION

One thing that the moral calling argument does at the outset is conflict with what has been called the "basic intuition". The initial expression of the basic intuition is that a person's existence is ethically neutral (Broome, 228; Haldane, 84). The basic intuition maintains that the welfare a person would have, were they actual, cannot constitute a reason to bring that person into existence (Broome, 228). There is a qualification on the basic intuition – it applies to the creation of those who would have a good life. That is, if a person's life were to be bad by being brought into existence, then that is a reason against bringing her into existence. A person's life is ethically neutral only if she would have a good life (Broome, 228; Parsons, 147). As Jan Narveson puts it, "We are...neutral about making happy people" (Narveson (1973), 73).

Why should one accept the basic intuition? Jan Narveson gives, perhaps, the most straightforward reasons (Narveson (1967), 63-64). First, he argues that the only ground of duty is the effects our actions have on other people. It follows from this that whenever one has a duty, it must be possible to say on whose account the duty arises. That is, if one has a duty to x, then it must be possible to determine whose happiness is in question. Now, if a person is not born, she does not exist, and hence we cannot say that the welfare or happiness she would have, if she were to exist, gives us a reason to create her. Second, one cannot have a duty toward a person to bring her into existence, because if she were to fail, then she would be failing no one. That is, if one is to have a moral duty, there must be the possibility of failing someone. But, in this case, the person would not exist and hence there would be no one to fail. So, bringing a person into existence cannot be a moral duty in itself. While some may disagree with Narveson's reasoning, it does give us *prima facie* justification for the plausibility of the basic intuition (for a more substantial defense see Parsons (2002)).

How does Mitchell's account fail to capture the basic intuition? According to the moral calling account, once one has the warranted belief that she would make a good parent, then she is justified in assigning a value of the positive contribution that a child, if brought into existence, would make to the world. Thus, underlying the moral calling account is the claim that a person's existence is not ethically neutral. Consider the following situation. Suppose there are two people who are deciding whether to have a child. They both desire to be parents and hold the belief that they would be good parents (in accordance with Mitchell's second consideration). Now, according to Mitchell, from this held belief, they are supposed to develop and maintain a "reasonable expectation" that they will go on to create and

raise a morally decent person. By having the expectation of having and raising a morally decent person, the couple are assuming that the value a person will have (both personally and socially) in the future is quite high. In other words, the having of the expectation implies that the couple does not accept the basic intuition; rather they believe that the non-existent person's utility value does figure quite prominently into the decision. So, it would seem that the moral calling account either is mistaken due to its failure to capture the basic intuition or we must give up the basic intuition.

So, why shouldn't we just maintain that the basic intuition is mistaken? The problem with giving up the basic intuition is that by doing so we risk ending up with the conclusion that a large population of morally decent persons who experience very low levels of well-being is better than a small population of morally decent persons who experience high levels of well-being (which is a variation of Derek Parfit's "repugnant conclusion") (Haldane, 83; Parfit, ch. 17). So, it would seem that we should create as many persons as we can, given that we believe that we would be good parents, even if they will only have very low levels of well-being in the future. Yet, I do not think that many would support such a result and would rather accept the basic intuition. So, it would seem that considering Mitchell's account in light of the basic intuition shows that the moral calling account is on a shaky foundation at the outset.

III. ON ONE'S WARRANTED OPINION ABOUT BEING A GOOD PARENT

There is a second problem with the moral calling account. Consider Mitchell's second consideration that one needs to have a warranted belief that one would probably make a good parent. What does this amount to? In articulating this, Mitchell makes an analogy between the notion of parenthood and the notions of vocation and profession. He claims that common to all three of these notions is the "idea of a summons to a specific occupation that contributes to the general social welfare" (Mitchell, 44). More specifically, these imply that the individual is forced to take "sober stock" of her abilities and talents; and to reflect on how those abilities and talents could be best put to the well-being of others. Yet, a question arises – how is one to ascertain whether they are going to be the kind of person who can make a significant contribution to society through the creation and rearing of children? Furthermore, what are the conditions for such a warranted belief that one is the kind of person that would make a good parent?

The initial concern is that Mitchell does not provide the epistemic conditions for a warranted belief that one would make a good parent. That is, since he does not specify what it means, epistemically speaking, to have a warranted belief that one would probably make a good parent, it does not seem plausible to arrive at the desired conclusion. According to Mitchell, if one has the warranted belief that she would make a good parent, then one can form the expectation that she is able to raise a morally decent child who will make a positive contribution to society. Yet, suppose that one has a warranted belief that she would make a good parent. Without knowing what constitutes evidence or any other epistemic conditions for such a warranted belief, we are in no position to make the inferential leap to the claim that I am able to raise such a child. It is possible to construct various cases where one has the warranted belief that one would probably make a good parent, but is not able to actually be a good parent. Also, it seems plausible to have a case where one is actually a good parent and never has the warranted belief that she could probably be a good parent. So, without specifying the epistemic conditions for his second consideration, Mitchell's account is worrisome.

But what could such conditions look like? One proposal is that if the person believes that she is a morally decent person (as stipulated by Mitchell's explication), then she would be warranted in believing that she would be a good parent. This would satisfy Mitchell's analogy in that the individual takes stock of her abilities and reflect on how these will contribute to the well-being of society. There are problems with this proposal. It is possible to conceive of people who believe they are morally decent, but who lack the ability to raise a morally decent child. Furthermore, it is possible for people who believe they are not morally decent to raise a morally decent child. So, it would seem that believing

oneself to be morally decent is neither necessary nor sufficient for having the warranted belief that one would be a good parent.

Perhaps the warrant for the belief can come from the character of the person. That is, if one has a warranted belief that she is the type of person who has ability to care for and raise a morally decent child, then she has the warranted belief that she would be a good parent. Yet, there seems to be a problem with this proposal. The problem is that in order to consider whether one would be able to care for and raise a morally decent person she would need to consider it from her own self-interest. That is, if one is attempting to determine whether she is able to care and raise a morally decent person, then she must determine whether it is in her self-interest to raise such a child. The reason for this is that the evidence that would warrant such a belief would come from contextual matters the individual is in and from beliefs about the personality of the individual. The contextual matters would be those such as the amount of money or income that the individual has, the social support that is around the individual, the amount of time that the individual has in relation to her other activities, one's own physical ability to perform the tasks necessary, etc. The beliefs about one's own personality would be those such as the belief that one has the temperament, patience, appropriate level of care, etc. that would be needed in raising a child. Such evidence is about the individual and the individual's situation. When one is assessing such factors, she is essentially asking whether she would be willing to give up enough of her interests to adequately raise a child. For example, when assessing whether one is in the financial situation to raise a child, she is essentially asking whether she is in a financial position to maintain the existence of another entity as well as her own self. She is assessing whether she can financially maintain the interests of two persons. And it will be the same for the other evidential considerations. While such assessments may seem natural and unproblematic to many, Mitchell faces a problem with this line of reasoning since he rejects such self-interest accounts at the outset. By denying that such rationales could warrant a good reason for having children, Mitchell denies himself such a move (since his second consideration would then result in claiming that the individual ought to consider and maximize her own self-interest). Thus, attempting to establish the warrant conditions for the individual's belief that she is the type of person who has the ability to care for and raise a morally decent child fails to support Mitchell's second consideration.

IV. A LAST WORRY

The previous point concerning the possibility of Mitchell's proposal being at bottom being one of self-interest (due to epistemic worries) leads to a further worry. Mitchell claims that "[f]rom this standpoint parenthood is essentially a moral calling, and those who answer it should do so out of a sense of responsibility for the good of society" (44). Even if we accept this as true, it would not seem to outright reject self-interest rationales as being good reasons. The good of society is merely the sum of the individual's goods that make up the society. That is, there is no entity, "society," that has interests of its own that we have duties to promote. This forces us to accept that in considering the good of society we must consider the individual interests of those in the society, including the parents. Yet, Mitchell has argued that the having of children does little or nothing to advance the interests of the parents. And, if it does little to advance the interests of the parents, then it is false that having children is good for society since the good of society is in large part made up of the parent's interests. Thus, if we take the good of society to be cashed out in terms of the sum of the individual's goods, then Mitchell proposal is mistaken due to his earlier rejection of rationales that rely on self-interest.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

What I hope to have shown in this paper is that Mitchell's account of the best reason for having children as a matter of moral calling is problematic. It is problematic in that it violates the basic intuition and that it fails to provide the epistemic conditions for a central consideration – the warranted belief that

one would probably make a good parent. Due to these two problems, I feel that Mitchell's account fails to provide a better rationale than consequentialist or self-interested accounts. In fact, if the epistemic conditions are cashed out in terms mentioned earlier, Mitchell's account becomes at bottom one of the self-interest of the individual(s). Perhaps it is as Josh Parsons notes, "[O]ur reasons for having children are perhaps more selfish than we would like to admit" (147).

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