

Is Having Children a Moral Good? / Why isn't Bertrand Russell a Triangle?

The motivation to present a paper on the moral status of reproduction arose from the vacuum that exists around the topic. Debates on reproduction usually end with the party in favour of having children falling back onto some mysterious and compelling feeling that they could not explain. Lisa Belkin demonstrates perfectly the attitude that worries me. In giving a critique of Christine Overall's book *Why Have Children*, Belkin concludes as following:

"...moral tests imply logic, and we are outside that realm when we are talking about certain subjects. Love. Faith. Children. It is likely none would exist if rationality were the test. Why did you have kids? Did it have anything to do with common sense? Was it "morally defensible"? Must it be?"

Considering that a child is a sentient being, I think that the act of creating one requires at least *some* moral examination. But then, outside of my research for this paper, I found that even if there is a rigorous debate surrounding moral questions, people always fell back onto "some mysterious and compelling feeling".

I have lost count of the number of times I have heard an articulate, intelligent, compassionate person explain in detail why, to give another example, eating meat is morally wrong and then in the next breath say something along the lines of, "but bacon is just *too* good to give up". Or, as some Brighton students heard in a talk given last year, eating animals is morally wrong but "who can say no to a Malbec and a good steak." My problem then, is not with those who do not engage in moral philosophy. My problem is with those who do engage with moral philosophy and yet act in a way that contradicts their conclusions.

But my complaint is far from anecdotal. It has been well documented, most famously by Eric Schwitzgebel and Joshua Rust, that philosophers are usually hypocrites. To quote their study:

"...ethicists were much more likely than non-philosophers to rate eating the meat of mammals" as immoral, "however, when asked about their last evening meal, ethicists reported eating meat at approximately the same rate as" non-philosophers.

Although, perhaps we should be reminded of how Bertrand Russell understood his position as a Professor of Ethics. When faced with the hypocrisy of being a Professor of Ethics engaged in immoral conduct, Russell replied: "I was also a Professor of Geometry at Cambridge but they never asked me why I was not a triangle".

I think that there is a problem that plagues moral consideration, at least in Western societies. The problem is that of desire, or more specifically, the insatiable desire to enjoy. Theodor Adorno phrased it another way; the problem with moral philosophy today is an “unwillingness to equate the moral with a restricted, narrow, and superseded ascetic ideal”. Of course, it would be irrational to condemn each individual for failing to fulfil any moral ideal. Again, to quote Adorno:

“There has to be an element of unswerving persistence, of holding fast to what we think we have learnt from experience, and on the other hand, we need an element not just of self-criticism, but of criticism of that unyielding, inexorable something that sets itself up in us”.

And that “something that sets itself up in us” is, I argue, the true moral imperative of today’s ideology, the moral imperative that Slavoj Žižek describes as “the superego injunction to enjoy”.

And I do not think that this is a problem with relativism as such. It is not that in today’s society people are such strong relativists that they go from one moral position to another between meals, or that they have no moral core, so to speak, and they change their moral position depending upon their circumstance. I think that absolutism is the problem of moral philosophy today. The moral imperative to *enjoy* is absolute.

Personal enjoyment is so central to current ideology that it barely enters into debate when we ask how to live a good life. Enjoyment, or pleasure, is not a pure category of subjectivity. Our pleasure is not formed *a priori*. If we are to be good social constructivist, if we seriously proclaim that our subjectivity is a product of social relations, we need to consider that pleasure, our enjoyment, is structured through Capitalist ideology. Pleasure as a structuring principle of capitalism is evident with the rise of so-called “ethical consumerism”.

“Yes, consumer culture *was* immoral, and probably still is if you shop at Asda, but you can now consume guilt free at Infinity Foods.”

The message is, “carry on being a consumer because consumption is now an ethical act”. Hisbe, an “ethical supermarket” on London Road, has as its slogan “People Before Profits”. Of course this is bullshit, but such establishments allow for people to live an “ethical” life without changing their living habits, without sacrificing pleasure. Fair Trade coffee, soya milk as an ethical alternative to dairy, and electric cars are all part of this phenomena.

The enjoyment that an individual gets from consumer culture is, not just preserved, but exacerbated. Now there is no excuse not to consume because Capitalism has provided its own antidote. Whenever we see these things, ethical supermarkets, charitable banks, humane

slaughter, and whatever, we should remember Adorno's famous phrase, "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly".

We are fully immersed in the "wrong life". Capitalism is inescapably evil and capitalism has embedded itself into every aspect of our daily lives. Capitalism ensnares even the most mundane of daily activities and makes aspirations for moral purity impossible. We have to acknowledge this fully without sinking into nihilistic despair if we are to move towards being able to live a good life. We have probably all encountered symptoms of the nihilistic despair I am speaking about.

When explaining why one has taken a moral standpoint, a common response is usually something along the lines of, "yeah, but what about the clothes that you are wearing? They were made in a sweatshop". We cannot fall into this trap when asking how to live a good life today. Moral philosophy should ask what to do *now*, in today's society. The task is not to be morally pure, or a saint of some sort, because Capitalism has rendered such dreams impossible. The task today is to live our critique. If it at all turns we see dangers of exploitation, we must move forward regardless.

So, my problem relates to the way moral philosophy has been rendered meaningless through its separation from praxis. This is not to say that I want people to conform to some kind of categorical imperative, I only argue that we should strictly adhere to the moral axioms that emerge from our rational debates. These axioms should, of course, consider structural limitations. But I think that when we engage in rigorous moral philosophy we should always make sure that we include in the debate our desires and pleasure, never forgetting that Capitalism has structural effects on our desires and pleasure.

We need to be willing to sacrifice some of our enjoyment because our enjoyment has been structured by the very system that we oppose. I think that we should be fiercely self-critical if moral philosophy is to mean anything. If we fail to take seriously the necessary praxis of moral philosophy then we mistakenly equate moral philosophy with geometry. Questions on the good life are reduced to abstract and meaningless hypothetical calculations.

So, to bring my talk back to the original question, is having children a moral good? I fear that the answer to that question, and others, *might be* irrelevant. If we cannot reunite moral philosophy with praxis and rigorous self-critique then this conference would be better off asking why we are all not triangles.