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Should potential parents consider adoption as a first choice?

Recent debates about parenting have centered around a couple's obligation to adopt. Some argue that parents have no obligation to adopt and are entitled to a biological child. Others argue that parents should consider adoption in lieu of having a biological child given adoption and environmental crises. In this paper, I argue that potential parents have no moral obligation to consider adoption as a first choice; however, the obligation to consider adoption comes into effect if they seek to have more than one child.

I develop this argument in two sections. The first section of this paper examines why potential parents have no moral obligation to consider adoption as a first choice. I present the assumption that parents can prioritize their interests under certain conditions. Then, I argue that the benefits of a genetic child meet those conditions, granting parents the ability to prioritize their interests. The second section of this paper qualifies why the obligation to consider adoption comes into play if parents seek to have more than one child. I propose that a couple has already reaped the benefits of pregnancy through their first biological child and should uphold pre-established moral limits. Finally, this paper anticipates potential counterarguments, such as why such an obligation applies specifically to the second child.

Section One

I firmly believe that potential parents have no moral obligation to consider adoption as a first choice. I ground this belief in the assumption that people can prioritize their own interests.

Even proponents of adoption recognize that people can favor their interests under certain conditions. For example, adoption advocate Tina Rulli acknowledges that our interests can defeat the duty to adopt when they rise to the level of a project: “when they have non-trivial, non-negative value and concern interests that have central significance in our lives,” such as affecting life plans or goals (Rulli, 2016, p. 671). In other words, potential parents are caught in a balancing act. One side of the moral seesaw is the decision to have a biological child. The other side of the seesaw is the decision to adopt a child. If the benefits of having a biological child are trivial and can be fulfilled by raising an adopted child, the moral seesaw tilts toward adoption. If the benefits of having a genetic child are non-trivial and cannot be fulfilled by raising an adopted child, the moral seesaw tilts toward having a biological child. Although Rulli and I may disagree on the parents’ obligation to consider adopting their first child, I accept Rulli’s assumption that parents can prioritize their interests when they rise to the level of a project.

Building on Rulli’s assumption, I propose that the benefits of having a genetic child are non-trivial and thus allow potential parents to privilege their interests. The value of creating life is one example of a non-trivial benefit that comes with having a biological child. For some parents, the act of creating another human fulfills a life goal in a way that adoption cannot. The value of continuing genetic lineage is yet another example of a non-trivial benefit associated with having a biological child. For some parents, preserving the family bloodline and legacy is their central life goal. They cannot expect an adopted child to be equally invested in the family lineage, given that an adoptee has a lineage of her own.

Critics would assert that the benefits I listed of having a biological child are, in fact, trivial and could be achieved through adoption. Except for the desire to experience pregnancy, Rulli systematically debunks the “trivial” reasons why parents might prefer a genetically-related

child (Rulli, 2016, p. 679-696). However, Rulli fails to realize that what is trivial to her may not be trivial to potential parents. What potential parents define as a “project” tied to their important life goals and pursuits is highly subjective and personalized. I, too, could go through Rulli’s list and systematically debunk her rationale behind the “trivial” benefits of having a biological child.

In the interest of space, I have chosen to refute just two of Rulli’s examples. First, Rulli states that the desire for parent-child physical resemblance is “too trivial to ground the permission to procreate rather than to adopt” (Rulli, 2016, p. 679). In fact, the “parenting experience is not significantly impacted by family resemblance.” Although this may hold true for Rulli, some parents center their life goals around being accepted by their community and family. Even in the unlikely situation that their adopted child closely mirrored their physical appearances, the parents could still feel alienated and left unable to achieve an essential life objective: acceptance. Second, Rulli dismisses the value of having a genetic child as an expression of love (Rulli, 2016, p. 687). She claims that a child does not symbolize love because she literally came from two parents; instead, she embodies a parental union because she receives their love. But some parents could say that the child represents their love in significant part because she is the product of sex, which many see as a consummation of their love and an affirmation of their life’s purpose. The problem with Rulli’s approach is that she personally finds almost all of the benefits of having a genetic child to be trivial. In truth, what we consider to be trivial is highly subjective. Thus, if potential parents *personally* believe that the benefits of having a genetic child are non-trivial, they should be allowed to privilege their interests and be freed from the obligation to consider adoption as a first choice.

The first section of this paper explored whether potential parents are obligated to consider adoption as their first choice. I structured my argument on Rulli’s assumption that parents can

privilege their interests when they have non-trivial, non-positive value. Given that the benefits of having a genetic child are non-trivial, I conclude that potential parents have no moral obligation to consider adoption as a first choice—at least for the couple's first child.

## Section Two

While potential parents have no moral obligation to consider adoption for their first child, the obligation to consider adoption comes into effect if they seek to have another child. To preface the second part of my argument, I clarify the distinction between an “obligation” and an “obligation to consider.” An “obligation” is a duty that a parent is compelled or forced into. In a different vein, an “obligation to consider” encourages couples to be open to and not immediately foreclose adoption as an option. Because an obligation to consider is a weaker form of compulsion, there are no legal punishments if parents choose to have another biological child.

Even though there may not be legal punishments for having a second biological child, there are moral principles that bring this obligation into effect. For one, a parent may have already experienced all the benefits of procreation through their first genetic child. Thus, it is uncertain whether having another biological child will benefit the parents significantly. The obligation to consider adoption may also come into effect because of pre-determined moral limits. For example, we have the right to eat, but not the right to gorge ourselves (Conly, 105, p. 105). We have the right to water, but not to take daily two-hour showers. Likewise, we have the right to a genetic child, but not as many as we desire. These moral limits come without punishment, but adhering to certain standards is best for us and society at large.

The moral limit must be capped at one biological child because the marginal benefit of each respective biological child sharply declines after the first, especially considering the significant societal benefits of adoption. We can assume that parents receive great benefits from

having one child. However, parents that choose to have another biological child may only slightly advance their personal interests at the expense of societal interests. By capping the moral limit at one biological child, potential parents can serve societal interests by helping a child in dire need of adoption. While we all have a duty to advance the physical and mental well-being of children up for adoption, interest in the child varies. Therefore, potential parents must ask themselves whether the marginal personal benefit from having a biological child justifies forgoing the societal benefits of adoption. For some people, adoption is more beneficial and less costly. These couples would gladly consider adopting their first or second child. For others, adoption is less beneficial and more costly. They feel that they wouldn't be a good parent to an adopted child or prefer to support the child indirectly through tax dollars to the foster care system. Advancing the interests of children in the adoption system is one reason, but not the strongest reason, why the moral limit is capped at one genetically-related child.

The more convincing reason why the moral limit is set at one biological child is because of the society-wide interest in protecting the environment. There is some variation in our interest in the environment, but most people have a basic commitment to clean air and water. Parents with one biological child do not have a devastating environmental impact, as their sole newborn replaces a dying population. When parents choose to have an additional child, they accelerate the population growth rate and generate another 80 years of waste (Young, 2001, p. 185). Potential parents must ask themselves whether the marginal personal benefit from having a biological child justifies the environmental strain on society. For some, the environmental impact does not justify the marginal benefit. They may choose to adopt or to stop having children. For others, having another biological child would bring their family so much happiness, they can forgo the benefits to society by choosing not to adopt.

Some people may question why parents have an obligation to society. I would say that parents have some responsibility to consider the society given that their first biological child is consuming a finite number of natural resources (Young, 2001) and receiving state-wide child-rearing benefits from taxes (Olsaretti, 2017). Others may find fault in quantifying the marginal benefit of human life. I recognize that it is difficult to place a number on the happiness a biological child will bring you, and this is not a decision I take lightly. Hence, I would urge parents to consider whether they have reaped all or most of the benefits of having a biological child. If they believe they have, adoption is certainly a possibility worth considering. If parents believe the process of having a genetic child is transformative and part of their lifelong goals, they should have another biological child, so long as they consider adoption first.

This paper has explored whether potential parents are obligated to consider adoption as a first choice. Most debates have taken a black and white approach to this question, whereas I offer a more nuanced approach. I propose that potential parents having their first child are not obligated to consider adoption as a first choice. They are allowed to privilege their interests if they find the benefits of a genetically-related child to be non-trivial. The obligation to consider adoption comes into effect if they seek to have more than one child. This is because couples have a vested interest in the well-being of children and the environment. For some couples, the marginal benefit of having another biological child is significant in light of societal interests, and that's perfectly fine as long as they consider adoption first. However, some couples may question the marginal benefit of having another biological child. In these cases, there are several ways to more seriously "consider" adoption—whether by talking to your partner, visiting a foster home, or speaking to adoptive parents.