

Diversifying Syllabi Text Summary and Teaching Tips
“On the Supposed Moral Harm of Selecting for Deafness”
Melissa Seymour Fahmy

Readability: Moderate. Short, clearly written and organized, but rather dry.

Possible applications:

- Bioethics:
 - Procreation ethics
 - Decision making and procreation
 - Artificial Reproductive Technologies
 - Complicate too-quick conclusions about the harms of selecting for deafness or other disabilities
 - Highlight the importantly different moral considerations and possible harms in cases of pre-implantation selection versus post-implantation and post-birth decisions
 - Argue against evaluating various cases piecemeal; make a case for “norms that govern not just the use of reproductive technology, but procreation and procreative decision-making in all of its various forms” (128)
- Demonstrates important philosophical skills: A case study of taking strong initial intuitions and digging into them to try to nail down the exact philosophical positions entailed
- Disabilities studies
- Non-Person-Affecting Principle of Harm
- Complement to Derek Parfit “The Non-Identity Problem” in *Reasons and Persons*

Thesis:

Most of the ways of accounting for the supposed moral harm of selecting for deafness are insufficient. First, several are unconvincing or misapplied in the case of selecting for deafness, even though they are relevant to post-implantation or post-birth decisions. Second, other avenues to account for the supposed harm commit one to larger positions in the ethics of procreation (including unassisted coital reproduction) that do not possess the same strength of intuitive support and thus require more examination before conclusions may be reasonably drawn about selecting for deafness.

Key definitions:

right to an open future – There are a collection of rights, which cannot be exercised prior to adulthood. However, the right to an open future holds that as a child these rights are ‘in trust’; the inhibition of the future exercise of these autonomous rights is a harm as it violates these rights in advance.

non-person-affecting principle of harm - locates moral harm in a state of affairs rather than in some injury done to a particular individual.

Summary:

Fahmy considers five approaches to explaining the supposed moral harm of selecting for deafness through preimplantation genetic diagnosis.

1. Harm to the child

Fahmy rejects this because one cannot make sense of the comparison between the harms of existence versus 'harms' of non-existence (129). One cannot compare the harm done to a being by causing it to not exist to the possible harm done once it exists.

2. Right to an open future

- Again, because the genetic markers for deafness are present in the gamete, the parent is not limiting the future of the child, but choosing a child who already has a limited future. Thus, the right to an open future cannot explain the supposed moral harm of selecting for deafness (130).
- Fahmy briefly sketches a hypothetical argument that the right to an open future might ground an obligation for parents of deaf children to provide a cochlear implant, to preserve an open future (131).

3. State of affairs analysis

Shifts from focus on harms to the particular child, to more general problems with the ensuing state of affairs, for which the parent would be held responsible.

Claim: "It is morally good to prevent the avoidable harm, but preventing this harm cannot be said to be done for the sake of the child who would experience it" (131).

Fahmy affirms that this "offers at least a plausible account of the supposed moral wrong in selecting for deafness. A state of affairs analysis, however, has implications for an ethics of procreation that extend well beyond the deaf case" (131). She argues that we must therefore consider very carefully many other cases of procreation that result in generally bad states of affairs, including the case thought to be least complicated, which is unassisted coital procreation.

4. Parental/civic responsibility

Shifts focus to aspect of character of decision-maker as the wrong-making feature of the decision to select for a deaf child, not a state of affairs or harm to child.

- Parental responsibility claim: Parents should not procreate if the child is not likely to have a decent chance of a happy life. Fahmy argues that this 'irresponsibility' assessment of the supposed moral harm is not apt for the choice to select for a deaf child (133).
- Civic responsibility claim: The supposed moral harm of selecting for deafness is found in additional costs to society, and a parent is irresponsible for causing that state of affairs. In response, Fahmy admits that there is promise in this approach. However, she argues that much more has to be done in evaluating the costs and benefits of selecting a deaf child, as well as applying this in a large set of other circumstances (134). One must be very cautious in adopting this reasoning and considering liminal cases of costs to society and difficulty of avoiding procreation.

5. Failure to express certain parental virtues

Again, focuses on the character of the decision-maker as the wrong-making feature, rather than a state of affairs or harm to the child.

- Openness to the unbidden

Claim: “The practice of selection... pose[s] a special threat to the parent-child relationship or to the cultivation of the parental virtue of *openness to the unbidden*” (134). Fahmy argues that parenting teaches one the requisite virtue, and it is unclear whether the virtue need be expressed in the procreation process for it to be present in parenting (134).

- Unconditional parental love

Claim: “Setting conditions on which child to create amounts to setting conditions on our love for whatever child we get, for it sets conditions on which child will receive that love” (135). Fahmy argues that the best way to flesh out this relationship is in terms of creating expectations on the part of the parent which are likely to be disappointed, leading to negative feelings toward the child. She objects that this connection is speculative, not necessary, and that the gains of selection might outweigh the danger of these negative feelings.

Complimentary texts/resources:

Articles

- Stanford Encyclopedia article [“Parenthood and Procreation”](#) by Elizabeth Brake and Joseph Millum
- [“Disability, Minority, and Difference”](#) by Elizabeth Barnes

Books

- *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity* by Andrew Solomon

Movies

Sound and Fury

We Need to Talk About Kevin (for discussions about parental responsibility and its limits)

Short Movies/Clips

[The Heather world: Heather Artinian at TEDxGeorgetown](#)

[On Becoming Hearing: Lessons in Limitations, Loss, and Respect](#) Dirksen Bauman

[Eminem Lose Yourself ASL](#) (You Tube)

Possible class activities

- Create a visualization of the argument and Fahmy’s argumentative strategy.
- Might prepare for the article by asking students to articulate their intuitions about whether selecting for deafness is morally harmful; if they say that it is, push them to try to specify exact what the harm resides in. This may increase the impact of this article in surmounting the surprising difficulty of articulating exactly what might be harmful.
- Brainstorm the best possible qualities one would want their child to have, and discuss how these qualities could be construed as harmful.