

Spring 4-19-2017

Is Having Children an Essential Part of a Good Human Life?

Bethany Blinsky
bethany.blinsky@otterbein.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/stu_dist

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Blinsky, Bethany, "Is Having Children an Essential Part of a Good Human Life?" (2017). *Distinction Papers*. 50.
http://digitalcommons.otterbein.edu/stu_dist/50

This Distinction Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research & Creative Work at Digital Commons @ Otterbein. It has been accepted for inclusion in Distinction Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Otterbein. For more information, please contact shickey@otterbein.edu.

Is Having Children an Essential Part of a Good Human Life?

Bethany D. Blinsky
Department of Religion and Philosophy
Otterbein University
Westerville, Ohio 43081

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Distinction.

Advisory Committee:

Stephanie Patridge, Ph.D.
Distinction Advisor

Advisor's Signature

Andrew Mills, Ph.D.
Second Reader

Second Reader's Signature

Meredith Meyer, Ph.D.
Distinction Representative

Distinction Rep's Signature

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Unchosen Love.....	5
Unchosen Love in Other Relationships.....	7
A Meaningful Life Without Children.....	10
Practical Worry.....	11
Conclusion.....	13
Works Cited.....	15

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the wonderful mentors that I've encountered during my time Otterbein University. You've made me a better person and a better academic.

Introduction

In “Virtue Theory and Abortion” Rosalind Hursthouse makes the case that the decision to have an abortion can be an immoral one. She argues for this by stating that having children is part of what it means to live a good human life (Hursthouse, 774). She states, “The familiar facts support the view that parenthood, in general, and motherhood and childbearing in particular, are intrinsically worthwhile, are among the things that can be correctly thought to be partially constitutive of a flourishing human life” (Hursthouse, 774). In “Virtue Theory and Abortion” Hursthouse focuses solely on the ethics of the act of *choosing* to have an abortion. As such, Hursthouse’s argument is about how to evaluate and understand the ethics of an individual’s choice. It is not about the larger, political, conversation surrounding pro-choice policies.¹ For example, there are places in the United States of America where one is legally permitted to set off fireworks. However, one’s neighbor may be a veteran who has PTSD, and the sound of fireworks going off could be a trigger for the veteran. In this instance, even though one has the right to set off fireworks, it still appears that it is a morally wrong thing to do. This case deals with the same sort of worry that is in Hursthouse’s argument in “Virtue Theory and Abortion”. Which is that even though we may legally and politically have the right to do something, it still can be a morally wrong thing to do.

Hursthouse argues that there are very few justifiable reasons to have an abortion. Some of these instances are: women who are in extremely poor health (and cannot support a pregnancy), women who are already worn out from previous childbearing, or women who work very physically demanding jobs (Hursthouse, 773). However, even when the reason is justifiable, Hursthouse believes that having an abortion can still be the result of bad judgement. She

¹ This point of clarification was brought to my attention by Dr. Stephanie Patridge.

explains, “So even in the cases where the decision to have an abortion is the right one, it can still be the reflection of a moral failing - not because the decision itself is weak or cowardly or irresolute or irresponsible or light-minded, but because lack of the requisite opposite of these failings landed one in the circumstances in the first place” (Hursthouse, 775). Meaning that the decision to have an abortion *can* be the morally right one, but the decision that lead for the *need* to have an abortion in the first place may be indicative of a moral failure.

Unchosen Love

Underlying Hursthouse’s claims about abortion is an evaluative assumption about having children. This assumption is that having children is an innately worthwhile thing to do and that it is almost certainly part of living a good human life. Though in “Virtue Theory and Abortion” Hursthouse doesn’t offer much argumentation as to why she believes having children is an inherent good. To help elucidate upon her argument I utilize some of Claudia Mills’ argumentation from her piece “The Ties That Bind: Duties to Family Members”. In this paper Mills claims that there is an unchosen nature in the parent and child relationship, and this unchosen nature is what makes the relationship so special (Mills, 330). She states, “Now, is the great good here to participate in an unconditional and unchosen relationship, or to be the recipient of the unconditional love which usually - but not invariably - accompanies it?” (Mills, 330). In this paper I do not focus upon the answer to this question, but instead I derive from it that unconditional love is what comes about from a relationship that is unchosen, and is something that does not come about in other relationships in life. As such, I will refer to the term unchosen love as what is special about the parent and child relationship, with the contingency that we likely expect that unconditional love comes about in unchosen relationships.² To clarify,

² To be clear, this is not to say that unconditional love always comes about in unchosen relationships.

the unchosen nature can be understood as the way in which a child does not choose to be born from a certain parent, and a parent does not choose their child. And even though a parent doesn't know who their unborn child will be, they deeply love them (Mills, 330). This illustrates the unconditional love that comes about in unchosen relationships - as parents can love their children without knowing anything about who they will become in life. Mills also argues that it is some sort of love that is not contingent upon who we are or what we do. She explains, "It is simply a great good to have some reservoir of love that does not have to be earned and, more important, cannot be forfeited...Love based on a choice can vary with changes in the features of the beloved that motivated and justified that choice. Unchosen love is, in this way, uniquely secure," (Mills, 330).³ To further understand what unchosen love is consider the following two examples. First, imagine a married couple, Linda and Katie. Part of what Linda dearly loves and treasures about Katie is her honesty. So when Katie commits adultery and lies about it Linda does not love her anymore. For Katie did something that changed Linda's entire perspective of her character. In this instance it becomes abundantly apparent that Linda's love for Katie was not unconditional. In the second example a criminal has been recently put into jail. This criminal has been charged of various crimes. In fact, she even admitted that she did commit the crimes she's charged with, so there is absolutely no doubt that she is guilty. Most people in the criminal's life have abandoned her. The only people who remain in contact with her are her parents. In this case, it feels apparent that there is something special about the criminal's relationship with her parents. As Mills says, unchosen love is something that cannot be forfeited and is uniquely secure (Mills, 330). And in this case the criminal's actions didn't cause her parents to abandon her, so their

³ Mills also states that sibling relationships are unchosen (Mills, 331). However, in this paper I focus upon the parent and child relationship, as I believe that parenthood should be not be thought of as partially constitutive of living a good human life.

relationship works to illustrate the unique security of unchosen love found within parent and child relationships, whereas the example of the romantic partners works to illustrate how their relationship was conditional on one partner's perception of the other. As such one could infer that from these examples there may be something intrinsically special about relationships that are unchosen, in that they appear to survive hardships that other relationships in life may not.

Unchosen Love in Other Relationships

To be clear, I am not saying that parents never reject their children, or vice versa. Nor am I saying that it is never justifiable for parents to sever their relationship with children, or for a child to sever the relationship with a parent. Mills herself states, "If a relationship is proving toxic, or too painful, it is fine to sever it; one is not required to sacrifice one's own personhood - one's identity, one's happiness, one's sanity, to provide some good for others, if one *can* even provide this good in such a setting" (Mills, 334). Instead, I believe that due to the unchosen aspect of these relationships it does *seem* that they can survive many hardships that many other bonds do not. This point is what the above examples serve to illustrate. Furthermore, they support Hursthouse's idea that having children is partially constitutive of leading a flourishing human life. As they show that there is just some sort of inherent good associated with the parent and child bond. However, I wonder if this kind of love can *only* be found within parent and child relationships, or if it exists elsewhere in life? In "The Ties That Bind: Duties to Family Members" Mills argues that this is possible.

This leads me to another, closely related question. Are family relationships indeed as "special" as I have said? Do not many of us have friends who are as close to us as siblings, who become, in essence, "families of choice"? My answer here is yes, of course we can, but to treat friends as family is precisely to discard the idiom of "choice" in our interactions with them. A family by *choice*, I submit, is not a family at all. To have a friend who becomes a "sister" or a "brother" is to have a friend whom one recognizes that one is irrevocably committed, committed come

what may, from whom it would be inconceivable to walk away. (Mills, 334)

Here Mills is arguing that it is possible for friendships to become unchosen, and that using the language family by *choice* is linguistically wrong, as one would not be able to remove such a friend out of their life and thus their relationship is unchosen. To help explain how this is possible I lay out two different scenarios where it appears that the love between two people is unchosen, but it is not a parent and child relationship, in order to further Mill's above assertion. In the first scenario imagine two lifelong best friends. Currently, they are in their mid-50s, but they met back during their undergraduate years. Since college they have kept in touch, see one another regularly, and deeply value their friendship. These two friends have helped each other through financial troubles, death, and illness. They sometimes have huge arguments with one another, but they've always end up working it out. If something devastating were to happen, like one of them turned out to be a secret criminal, the other would not be able to easily dislodge her friend out of her life. She may be horrified by her friend's actions, even disgusted with her character, but she would not be able to utterly abandon her. In fact, she would feel a moral duty to visit her friend in jail. To call her and see how she is doing. Help her find legal counsel. In a friendship that is as loving and meaningful as this one - I'd wager that these two friends would say that their commitment to one another *feels* unchosen. To be fair, at first it definitely was chosen, as they decided to hang out with one another, and sought each other out. But to these two friends, that was such a long time ago, and they have been through so much, that it does not feel this way for them now. They view each other as something closer to sisters than friends. One would do anything for the other. Their love for each other is based upon the years they have spent with one another and all the times they helped each other through hardships. Thus, the bond between these two friends looks to be unchosen. .

In the next scenario imagine a grown man who moved in with his aunt as a teenager because his parents passed away in an accident. At first, their relationship was definitely chosen. He was underage and needed a guardian, and she took on the job as his caregiver because she cared for him and knew that it was the morally right thing to do. But over the years their love for each other began to change into an unchosen love as well. The aunt helped him get into a good college, paid for his schooling, and took good care of him. He treasures and appreciates her help and loves her as deeply as he did his own mother. The love between the aunt and her nephew appears to be just as unique and special as a parent and child love. The only difference being that they initially chose one another out of necessity.

Deep, meaningful, long lasting relationships that facilitate the experience of unchosen love provide security and safety in one's life.⁴ They are intrinsically worthwhile for a plethora of reasons. I believe that these two scenarios illustrate circumstances where unchosen love comes about in relationships that are not between a mother and her child. Because of this I believe that any sort of committed, long lasting, loving relationship can facilitate the experience of unchosen love. This is not to say that *all* relationships in one's life will - but some relationships have the ability to do so. Hence, I do not think that having these sort of relationships in life means that one has to be a parent. I do concede that there may be something still innately valuable and unique in parent/children relationships. Maybe even something that one can *only* experience in such a relationship. As the love between parent and child, and the love between two lifelong friends, may never be able to be exactly the same. But I don't think that is necessarily what matters here. As I believe that so long as one has loving and committed relationships that provide security and unconditional love then one is living a good human life. These relationships may not

⁴ By deep, meaningful, long lasting relationships I mean any kind of relationship that can lead to the experience of unchosen love.

even be life long, but so long as one has someone to rely on during times of hardship, someone who will not back away from them, then one is living a good human life. This could be several different people throughout one's lifetime. Thus, I argue that we should not hold the belief that having children is partially constitutive of living a good human life. But, instead, we should hold the belief that having meaningful relationships with other people is part of living a good human life. I say this because what I believe is special about child and parent relationships is the meaningful bond created, the experience of unchosen love, and I think that unchosen love can be found elsewhere in life. As I said earlier, it may not be exactly the same as the relationship between parent and child. But it would still lead one to feel secure, loved, and generate a bond that seems important. I'd even say that one can lead a good human life so long as throughout their life they have meaningful relationships with other people. It does not even have to be the same friend, or a grandiose friendship, but a bond that feels significant. That makes them not feel alone in this world.

A Meaningful Life Without Children

In "Virtue Theory and Abortion" Hursthouse states that people can choose to not have children without necessarily expressing some sort of immoral decision making. She also notes that although having children is intrinsically worthwhile thing to do, she does not subscribe to the view that all people who choose not to have children are inherently selfish (Hursthouse, 775).

People who are childless by choice are sometimes described as 'irresponsible,' or 'selfish,' or 'refusing to grow up,' or 'not knowing what life is about.' But one can hold that having children is intrinsically worthwhile without endorsing this, for we are, after all, in the happy position of there being more worthwhile things to do that can be fitted into one lifetime. Parenthood, and motherhood in particular, even if granted to be intrinsically worthwhile, undoubtedly take up a lot of one's adult life, leaving no room for some other worthwhile pursuits. (Hursthouse, 775)

But if we are to believe that there is something intrinsically special about having children, that doing so is almost certainly part of having a good life, then how do other worthwhile pursuits make up for that? I believe that this worry is reconciled with my own view. For if we focus not on being a parent, but developing meaningful relationships in life, relationships that can facilitate the experience of unchosen love, one can live a good human life - *without* having to become a parent. As a person can have a worthwhile vocation, but if she does not have *any* relationships with other people, it would likely seem that she was missing out on something profound. It feels as though this person would likely not be living a fulfilling human life. As such, I agree with Hursthouse that there a multitude of worthwhile pursuits one can pursue in life, and that parenthood is only one. And by accepting my more general view as true one can lead a good human life without ever having to consider becoming a parent. This person only needs to have some sort of relationship in their life that appears unchosen and thus unconditional. A person that they can rely on during times of stress and hardship. Thus, by experiencing meaningful relationships in other avenues one lead a good human life without feeling an obligation to become a parent.

Practical Worry

The notion that having children is partially constitutive of living a good human life generates a practical worry as well.⁵ This worry is about women who feel *pressured* by cultural expectations to have children. In 2015 a study called *Regretting Motherhood: A Sociopolitical Analysis* was published by Israeli sociologist Orna Donath. This study examines 23 Israeli mothers who felt pressured to have children and now regret their

⁵ This point of clarification was brought to my attention by Dr. Stephanie Patridge.

decision (Donath, 344). Mothers in the study claim that they love their children but they still wish that they hadn't chosen this life for themselves. One mother explains,

Look, it's complicated because I regret becoming a mother, but I don't regret them, who they are, their personality. I love these people. Even though I married that imbecile, I don't regret it because if I'd married someone else I'd have different children and I love them, so it's really paradoxical. I regret having had children and becoming a mother, but I love the children that I've got. So yes, it's not something you can really explain. Because if I regretted it then I'd not want them to be here. But I wouldn't want them not to be here, I just don't want to be a mother. (Donath, 355)

I believe this poses a problem for Hursthouse's claim. As it appears from this woman's testimony that she does love her children even though she does not wish to be a mother. And if it is true that mothers are only having children because they feel pressured, and not because they truly want to, it does seem as though something problematic is occurring. Parenthood should be a duty one only takes on if one truly wants that experience in life. If it aligns with one's values and goals as a human being. As such, I believe, by stating that having children is partially constitutive of leading a good human life, one may be furthering this problematic cultural standard.

To this worry Hursthouse might potentially respond by saying that the women involved in this study are expressing a vice. They are lazy, selfish, and only regret becoming a mother because they wish to indulge in their hedonist tendencies more often. Or maybe these women had disillusioned expectations of what parenthood actually is, and now that they are faced with the reality of parenthood, are bitter about the duties that they committed themselves to. However, I'm not entirely convinced that this is what is happening here. I don't think it's fair to claim that they are expressing a vice just because they wished they would have chosen a different life trajectory. For if these women didn't have kids they could have still been able to find deep, meaningful relationships that facilitated this kind unchosen love. Through friends, romantic

partners, nieces and nephews, for instance. What I believe that mothers who regret becoming mothers show is that we cannot say that having children is partially constitutive part of living a good human life. As this standard may make women feel obligated to do something they truly do not want to do. By becoming a mother one may experience deep, unchosen, unconditional love as a result - but one can also experience this in other avenues. To be fair, I admit that the study performed is not a large survey and is restricted to one country. But I'd wager that if such a study were to be reproduced on a larger scale, with women from around the world, it would produce similar results. This is because we live in a patriarchal world that demands that women become mothers. It's expected, a cultural norm, and to not do so without a reason such as infertility may lead to scorn from others.

Conclusion

In "Virtue Theory and Abortion" Hursthouse does not provide much argumentation as to why she thinks children are partially constitutive of living a flourishing human life. Thus, by borrowing some of Claudia Mills' argumentation I argue that it is the *unchosen* nature of parent and child relationships that make them intrinsically good, as Hursthouse describes (Mills, 276). What I mean by this is that parents and their children do not get to pick one another. And if they grow to have different values, but still love one another that demonstrates this sort of unchosen love. A love that is not easily forfeited (Mills, 330). By offering some examples I illustrated that unchosen love may be able to come about in relationships that are not between parent and child. By examining lifelong friendships, and the love between family that is not a parent and child relationship, I believe it's evident that this love exists elsewhere in our lives. It may not be easy to develop, or be entirely common, but I believe that it is there, nonetheless. Hence, I argue that we should not hold the belief that having children is partially constitutive of living a good human

life. But, instead, we should hold the belief that having meaningful friendships with other people is partially constitutive of living a good human life. As other relationships can also become unchosen, and be intrinsically worthwhile in the same way parent and child relationships are.⁶ To be clear, I am not arguing that Hursthouse wouldn't agree that friendships are important or partially constitutive of living a good life. I'm arguing that we should not specifically consider parenthood to be such. Furthermore, my argument is not that parenthood isn't intrinsically worthwhile. But instead, I believe that my view, that having meaningful relationships with other people is partially constitutive of a good human life, encompasses parenthood *and* other relationships. Thus, parenthood could be the way one person finds deep, meaningful, relationships and experiences unchosen love. And a different person might find this through their friends or romantic partners. Hence, I am not saying that parenthood isn't part of a living a good human life. But that I believe it is part of a larger theme of having meaningful relationships that all people likely can subscribe to. My view also solves the practical worry, which is that women may feel obligated to have children even though they truly do not want to be mothers. By advocating for this cultural shift of what it means to live a good human life, these women would likely not feel societal pressure to take on the job of motherhood. Whilst people who still very much want to have children would still have the opportunity to live a good human life by doing so.

⁶ This is not to say they are exactly the same. But they can provide support and unconditional love in the same way.

Works Cited

Donath, Orna. "Regretting Motherhood: A Sociopolitical Analysis." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 333-367.

Hursthouse, Rosalind. "Virtue Theory and Abortion." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Princeton University Press, 1991, pp. 765-778.

Mills, Claudia. "The The Ties That Bind: Duties to Family Members". *Whats Wrong? Applied Ethicists and Their Critics*. Ed. David Boonin, Ed. Graham Oddie. Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 327-336.