

FEAR OF A FEMALE PLANET: HOW JOHN HARRIS CAME TO ENDORSE EUGENIC SOCIAL ENGINEERING

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Abstract:

In this paper, I respond to criticisms by John Harris, contained in a commentary on my article "Harris, harmed states, and sexed bodies", which appeared in the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, volume 37, number 5. I argue that Harris's response to my criticisms exposes the strong eugenic tendencies in his own thought, when he suggests that the reproductive obligations of parents should be determined with reference to a claim about what would enhance "society" or "the species".

Keywords: bioethics, biomedical enhancement, genetic enhancement, human enhancement, John Harris, harm.

FEAR OF A FEMALE PLANET: HOW JOHN HARRIS CAME TO ENDORSE EUGENIC SOCIAL ENGINEERING

In a recent article, which was published in this journal, I argued that the existence of sexual dimorphism in *Homo sapiens* poses a profound problem for John Harris's attempt to defend an ethics of human enhancement that denies the normative significance of the capacities of a "normal human body".[1] In a commentary published in the same issue, Harris responded by dismissing all of my arguments and insisting that although we have strong moral reasons to have the best children possible, this does not mean that parents are obligated to choose children of one sex over the other.[2]ⁱ My purpose in this further contribution to this debate is to draw out the way in which Harris's reply to my original criticisms makes explicit various problematic features of his philosophy that have to date merely been implicit or at least that have not been widely acknowledged. In particular, Harris's recourse to a claim about what would be good for society and/or "the species" in order to avoid his account implying that parents should use sex selection to choose female children is a striking demonstration of how claims about the *social* utility of individuals creep back into the "new" eugenics.[3]

Misunderstandings indeed

Given that Harris accuses me of a "complete misunderstanding of how the concept of normalcy functions" in debates about enhancement and suggests that my "arguments and entire approach utterly fail" I will first briefly point out that in fact it is Harris who misunderstands my arguments and consequently fails to address their substance.

I had suggested that:

The fact that *Homo sapiens* is a sexually dimorphic species means that attempts to evaluate whether a given individual is in a harmed condition will sometimes require making reference to their sex—and therefore to the normal capacities of that sex.[1] (p.276)

Harris responds that, at most, the concept of the normal can serve to alert us to the possibility that someone may be in a harmed condition, if most members of their class suffer from some impairment. He points out that certain disease conditions may be widespread in some populations and thus "normal" and insists that the harm of various conditions "is in no way connected to, nor diagnosed by, the normality of their incidence in a particular population and our moral reasons to treat these conditions are unconnected to their normalcy" (p.262). Harris's discussion therefore neglects the possibility that the "norm" might be something other than statistical—for instance, a suitably idealised account of proper species-functioning. More importantly, what Harris offers here is counter-assertion rather than argument. Restating that a harmed condition "is identified as one that needs amelioration not by reference to normal functioning but by reference to what might be possible to make things better" does nothing whatsoever to address my suggestion that the

ⁱ All quotations in what follows refer to this source unless otherwise indicated.

existence of sexual dimorphism poses a profound problem for this account, especially in the context of sex selection, given that it is indeed possible to improve upon the “normal functioning” available to one sex (most plausibly males) by selecting children of the other sex.[4].

It is therefore significant that Harris also fails to engage with my discussion of the implications of his “emergency room test”. Harris mistakes the purpose of what was only an initial illustration of the way in which our understanding of an individual’s health and well-being is sensitive to their sex. In raising the question of whether or not it would be negligent to fail to provide a womb transplant to a boy who was “discovered” not to have a womb when he presented to a hospital emergency department, I was in no way implying that I thought that providing the boy with a womb would extend his life expectancy. Harris’s rather distasteful suggestion that the difference in male and female life expectancy is in “the balls” is therefore entirely beside the point. My purpose was simply to point out that, if we *do* think that it *would* be negligent to fail to restore a young woman’s womb and that it *would not* be negligent to fail to provide a young man with one, this must be because we are making reference to an account of the normal functioning of individuals of each sex.[5] That is, men are not in a harmed condition if they lack a womb, where women (usually) are.

Fear of a female planet

While Harris’s failure to engage with the substance of my original discussion in these instances is relevant to an assessment of the overall burden of the argument in the dispute between us, what is *most* striking and important in his response to me is actually the way he now, for the first time (to my knowledge), explicitly links the obligations of parents facing reproductive decisions to the moral and political evaluation of the *society* that would arise if other couples made the same decision that they are contemplating and also – even more bizarrely—to a concern with the fate of “the species”. As I will explain further below, this line of argument places Harris firmly in a tradition of eugenic thought that argues that we should settle the question of “what sort of people there should be” by reference to what would maximise social welfare.

In fact, Harris seems unsure whether he wants to argue: (1) that while parents *do* have “strong moral reasons” to avoid bringing male children – who *are* harmed by being born into a “harmed condition” – into the world, this obligation is overridden by the need to avoid the prospect of an all-female world and to protect the interests of the “species”; or, (2) that parents *do not* have reasons to avoid bringing male children into the world because men are *not* harmed by being born in a “harmed condition” as the benefit *men* receive from being born into a world with two sexes outweighs the impact of their lower life expectancy on their expected well-being.

Harris’s claim that “the all female world is attractive neither morally, socially, politically nor indeed as anything that could be called an enhancement, let alone a viable reproductive goal” suggests the first argument, as does his suggestion that “our species cannot systematically forego one of its main genders without threat of extinction”. Likewise, his insistence that he does not

...believe that the gradual eradication men from the planet by the erosion that would take place if reproductive choices systematically excluded them, would have a positive effect on human welfare, happiness, social life or any other aspect of existence for either of the two main sexes of people, or for societies. The creation of an all-female world would not be conducive of human flourishing (p.263)

is plausibly understood as a claim that the strong *pro tanto* obligation on parents to choose female children is outweighed by the benefits to the larger society of the continuing presence of men.

However, this latter passage is also susceptible to interpretation as an inchoate version of the second argument that I identified above: that men – who are, after all, one of the “two main sexes of people” – are not in a harmed condition because *they benefit as individuals* from the existence of sexual diversity. Similarly, when Harris says:

If, as I believe, the all female world is in *no-one's* interests because it would be a worse world than the one we have (despite the suggested but problematical gains in health and life expectancy over the alternative world) then *all people who will ever exist* benefit from the fact that we have exercised reproductive choices without eliminating men and no-one has been wronged by such choices. Any harm involved is necessary because it is to the overall benefit *of all who will ever exist* and it creates a world better than the specific alternative of an all-female world. (p.264) [My italics]

the phrases I have italicised suggest that Harris wants to claim that men are *not* born into a harmed condition as long as they are born into a world in which two sexes exist.

In fact *neither* (1) or (2) is a plausible account of why Harris is not committed by his own previously published arguments to the claim that parents are obligated to select female children.

(1) Earth needs men

The first of these arguments concedes my claim that men are – on Harris's account – born into a harmed condition, something that most people would find implausible. It also substitutes a (dubious) claim about what would be good social policy for a claim about the reasons bearing on couples. While it is true that a *law* or *policy* requiring couples to bring only female children into existence would eventually lead to an all-female world, any particular couple's reproductive decisions will have only an infinitesimal impact on society's gender ratios. Thus the choice that parents face is not between a male child in an all-male world or a female child in an all-female world but only between a male and a female child who will live in a world with gender ratios fixed by the aggregate consequences of the independent decisions of other couples. The relative merits of different sex ratios are irrelevant to this decision, as they are entirely unaffected by it. As a male child will have a shorter life expectancy regardless of social sex ratios, parents will be obligated to select female children regardless of whether they agree with Harris that there are strong reasons to avoid bringing about an all-female world. [4, 6]

Even at the level of social policy, Harris's argument here is extremely dubious. Not only is he now firmly within the eugenic tradition that argues that parents should have the children that would be good for society, he is also endorsing the idea that the quality of life of some individuals should be sacrificed the sake of the welfare of others. This is problematic, to say the least, as Harris himself seems to acknowledge in earlier work![7] Imagine, for a moment, that the birth of a certain number of persons with lives “barely worth living” would greatly increase total welfare in a society and

consequently would even increase average welfare.ⁱⁱ One way this might turn out to be the case was if the population of individuals born with higher welfare gained great pleasure from their superior circumstances or – more charitably – an increased appreciation of the good things in life as a result of occasionally having the thought “there but for the grace of God go I”. As the individuals who were brought into existence with lower welfare still benefit from their existence (though their lives are barely worth living they *are* worth living) Harris must deny that we would wrong them by bringing them into existence. Yet surely a policy of bringing such people into existence to improve the welfare of “society” is eugenic social engineering in its most repugnant form? This is precisely the line of argument that Harris has adopted to explain why parents are obligated to bring male children into existence despite their lower expected welfare.

Both of these problems (confusing the reasons bearing on parents and the reasons bearing on policymakers; and, sacrificing the welfare of some for a collective good) also beset Harris’s argument that parents are obligated to have children of both sexes for the sake of “the species”. Harris’s obsession with the fate of the species is doubly strange because while species may flourish – at least in the sense of expanding in numbers or ecological niches – or dwindle, they do not suffer or experience well-being.[9] Moreover, the extinction of species may occur without any negative consequences for individuals. One way the species might become extinct, for instance, is if all human beings were replaced by “post-humans”: this is a prospect that Harris anticipates with tremendous excitement elsewhere in his philosophical oeuvre.[10-11] Another way the species might disappear is if all the members of a “final generation” came to an agreement not to have children. Although it would bring about the end of the species, this agreement would harm no one and it is therefore difficult to see why a consequentialist such as Harris should object to it.ⁱⁱⁱ Finally, the argument that Harris puts forward here, about the need to preserve “genetic variety”, is one commonly made by undergraduate bioethics students to explain why it would be wrong to use genetic technologies to prevent the birth of persons with genetic disorders. Yet, to date, Harris has been remarkably quiet when it comes to arguing that it is wrong to prevent the birth of children with cystic fibrosis (for example) because of the contribution the existence of genes for this condition in the human gene pool makes to the future of “the species”.

(2) Men enjoy sexual diversity

The second argument that Harris offers to explain why parents are not obligated to select females – that males benefit as individuals from the existence of sexual diversity – fails entirely due to the same failure to distinguish the choice between a single-sex and a two-sex world, which might be faced by policymakers, from the choice between a male and a female child in a world where sex ratios will be determined independently, which parents face, noted above. While it might indeed be rational to prefer to be a man born into a sexually diverse world rather than a woman born into an all-female world, this simply isn’t the comparison that parents have to consider when they think

ⁱⁱ Disability scholars have sometimes made an argument that might be extended along these lines when they have emphasised the various ways in which the existence of persons with even quite profound disabilities greatly enriches society. See, for example, [8]. An obvious danger with this claim is the difficulty in justifying it without participating in the theodicy satirised so effectively by Voltaire in *Candide*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Consequentialists who believe that we should *create* individuals in order that they should experience well-being might object to this outcome but again only because they are concerned with the well-being of individuals. This line of argument quickly generates difficult questions in population ethics, which, like Harris, I am content to leave aside here.

about the well-being of their future child. Rather, they confront a choice about what sort of child to bring into existence in a world with a sex ratio that is determined independently of their decision. Thus, at the moment, while sex ratios remain roughly even and presuming that *both* sexes benefit from the existence of sexual diversity, the relevant comparison is whether it is rational to prefer to be male or to be female and the purported benefits of sexual diversity for men are entirely beside the point.

It is true, however, that were the sex ratio to change dramatically enough, this might well have implications for which sex it would be rational to prefer to be. If two thirds of the population were women, for instance, perhaps it would be rational to prefer to be a man. Interestingly, it's not clear that this argument would speak in favour of choosing girl children in a society in which two thirds of the population were men, as there are reasons for thinking that the quality of life of women is not improved by being the object of too much male attention. Even in societies with female majorities there may come a point where one is better off being a member of the female majority rather than one of a small minority of males. Notice also that allowing that the social context can determine the obligations of parents opens up a large can of worms for advocates of non-therapeutic genetic interventions in so far as, for instance, racism can significantly affect the life prospects of people born with different skin colours such that it may be "rational to prefer" to be born a member of the dominant racial group rather than a member of a group that faces discrimination.[12]

In any case, these speculations are moot when it comes to what parents are obligated to do in our current social context where sex ratios provide no reason for selecting in favour of male or in favour of female children. The decision about which sex it would be rational to prefer to be can only be made on the basis of the expected welfare of male and female children. Harris has provided no reason to think that this calculation will not favour women.

Having it both ways on the moral weight of harms

One other feature of Harris's reply that it is worth drawing attention to here is his obfuscation as to whether parents "are obligated"/ "should"/ "have strong moral reasons to" avoid the birth of children who have less than the maximum possible capacities. Remember that Harris insists that:

... A harmed condition obtains whenever someone is in a disabling or hurtful condition, even though that condition is only marginally disabling and even though it is not possible for that particular individual to avoid the condition in question... If my daughter had no option but to be born without a little finger, if she suffered from a genetic defect that involved having only four digits on the left hand, then for her it was life thus harmed or no life at all. It was not possible for her to have all her fingers. But to be born thus, albeit slightly, disabled is to be born in a harmed condition and one that she could have rational preference to be without.[13]

Yet, as he now glosses Parfit on non-identity cases, where parents are choosing which children to bring into the world:

So long as the children who result from those choices have, or can reasonably be expected to have, lives that are worthwhile overall those children have benefitted

from the choices that produced them. Such children have no reason for rational regret that they were born. (p.263-4)

This would suggest that only those born with lives “not worth living” suffer from a disability, a conclusion radically at odds with his previous claims. Unsurprisingly, Harris immediately back pedals and insist that, of course “...such children may be harmed by existence in the sense that they are born with disadvantages *relative to others...*”. (p.264)

Perhaps it is coherent to claim that one can be benefited by being born into a “harmed condition”. [12] What is *not* coherent is the claim that the reasons we have to avoid bringing people into existence in a harmed condition lapse whenever these individuals still benefit from existence. Thus, Harris ultimately concedes that parents who do not maximise the expected well-being of their offspring by providing them with each and every available enhancement “will have harmed their children to the extent that deprivation of those goods harms them” (p.264). Where parents choose to have male children, this would appear to be a very significant harm indeed, given that male children have a 3-to-7-year shorter life-expectancy than female children. [4]

If, as Harris insists, “the obligation to do what we have moral reasons to do is robust” and that “failure to do [these things] may need to be explained and justified to ourselves and others” then it appears that he ultimately concedes that parents do indeed have robust moral reasons to choose female children and consequently will need to “explain and justify” failure to act on these reasons. In attempting the latter, they will need to do better than Harris, whose arguments – I have shown – relate to the consequences of a social policy of selecting girls, rather than of any particular couple’s choice.

A profound failure of imagination

Harris concludes his paper by restating his belief:

...that such intrinsic differences [between the sexes] as exist are without moral or political significance, and I do not believe I am alone in finding it perplexing to decide which gender has the better life (p.266)

This admission will come as welcome — although somewhat overdue — news indeed to various disability scholars, who have made precisely this argument against Harris (and others) in relation to the lives of people with disabilities (See, for example, [14-16]). On his own account, then, Harris appears to be guilty of a failure of imagination: while he will not entertain the possibility that either men or women have “better lives”, in his other writings he has been all too ready to insist that we can assess the impact of differences in bodily capacities on the life prospects of people with disabilities. [17] Moreover, it is striking that the limits of Harris’s capacity to decide who has a better life coincide so precisely with normal male and normal female capabilities.

A philosopher’s nightmare?

Harris has got one thing right: he notices that I make “the philosopher’s nightmare – a charge of inconsistency”. As I have shown here, Harris’s attempt to reconcile his claim that our obligations to enhance make no reference to what is “normal” with his belief that we have no reason to select in

favour of male or female children drives him to contradict himself in relation to a number of central issues in the ethics of human enhancement. He confuses the obligations of parents and policymakers, embraces eugenic social engineering, obfuscates the force of our putative obligation to enhance, and make surreptitious reference to the concept of the normal to justify the refusal to assess the quality of different sorts of human lives. If Harris fears inconsistency as much as he professes, he has cause for nightmares indeed.

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