

Research Statement

K. Lindsey Chambers

My research focuses on problems in normative ethics, bioethics, and social and political philosophy that involve procreation and parenting. I am interested in the obligations we have to the persons we create that constrain how we may create them and, in particular, whether we can wrong someone by selecting her genetic traits. My ultimate aim is to use the case of procreation to illuminate broader issues in normative ethics about how you can wrong someone without harming her, the relevance of motives to directed or personal wrongdoing, and how the relations we stand in to other persons can generate special obligations that for both individuals and our wider social and political institutions.

The dominant framework for addressing procreative ethics has revolved around the notion of harm, largely due to Derek Parfit's famous non-identity problem. Parfit argues that procreators cannot harm, and so cannot wrong, the persons they create. Focusing exclusively on the question of harm treats what procreators owe their offspring as akin to what they would owe strangers (if they owe them anything at all). However, procreation is not like anything else we do to other persons – it results not only in the creation of a new person, but also in the creation of a distinct moral relation between procreators and their offspring. My work begins by treating this relation as central to the morality of procreation. Procreators usually expect (and are expected to) parent the persons they create, so we cannot understand what procreators owe their offspring without also appealing to their role as prospective parents. In my dissertation, I argued that prospective parents can wrong their future children just by failing to act well in their role as parents, whether or not their offspring are ultimately harmed or benefitted by their creation. From my dissertation, I published “The Problem of Choosing (For) Our Children” (in *Procreation, Parenthood, and Educational Rights: Ethical and Philosophical Issues*, Routledge 2016), in which I compared the scope of procreators' permission to select the traits of their offspring to the scope of parents' permission to control the education of their children.

The parental obligation framework that I developed in my dissertation still faced an obstacle. Though procreation is often the beginning of the parent-child relationship, the obligations that bear on how parents treat their already-existing children do not obviously apply to how they ought to create those children to begin with. For example, even if caregivers ought to avoid causing their dependents injury or disability, it does not follow that procreators should thereby always avoid creating persons who cannot exist apart from their congenital disease or disability. In “Wronging Future Children” (forthcoming in *Ergo*), I argue that persons who create children in order to parent them are bound by parental obligations that constrain how they can appropriately assume the role of parent to their offspring. Those obligations bear on their motivations as prospective parents, not just how they act after they become parents. Even when a procreator's motivation isn't malicious, or purely selfish, she can still fail to recognize and act for the end of the parental role. Intentionally creating persons with disabilities is wrong when procreators lack either the capacity or willingness to adequately parent the persons they create or when their procreative choices that are antithetical to the end of the parental role itself.

Underlying my account of procreators' parental obligations is the basic Kantian principle that we must constrain our treatment of other persons – including their creation – in light of their status as ends in themselves. The challenge in applying Kant's framework is explaining how a person's prospective moral status could regulate the process by which she comes to have that status in the future. In “The Practical Standpoint on Procreation”, available upon request, I employ Kant's distinction between the theoretical and practical standpoints to show that the non-identity problem is only a *moral* problem if we think of procreation as issuing in biological creatures, individuated by their unique genetics. If we look at procreation instead as an imputable action of persons that puts them in a special relation of duty to their prospective offspring, then the moral relevance of their future offspring's indeterminate genetic identity falls away.

Applying Kant's moral framework to the case of procreation highlights the moral importance of the relations we stand in to other persons. Procreation isn't simply the biological imperative of our species, it's an activity that results in a unique relation of duty between procreators and their offspring. My next project extends this relational account to the question of what moral consideration, if any, we owe early fetuses. In "Loving a Fetus with No Future", available upon request, I argue that a being can sometimes have moral claims on other persons in virtue of the *relation* it stands in to other persons. For persons who decide to get pregnant, or to continue a pregnancy, their future child is an appropriate object of their love, not if, as Elizabeth Harman argues, she has an actual future, but because she is already a person *to them* in light of what they're doing. The death of their fetus has (and should have) a different moral significance to them, in virtue of their person-creating activity, than the death of a fetus might have to someone who did not set out to create a child (and has not now decided to do so). The relational account of moral standing can explain both why it's appropriate for prospective parents to grieve a miscarriage and why most early abortions are morally permissible.

I am also interested in how our social and political institutions can support the moral lives of individuals. In future work, I will expand on the latter section of "The Practical Standpoint on Procreation", where I take up Kant's account of parental rights. Kant claims that procreators must have the right to parent their offspring, because they cannot discharge their responsibility to care for them without those rights. Kant's brief discussion of parental rights situates the actions of individual persons within a wider social and political context. Some of the activities we care deeply about, like procreation, are morally risky, but that doesn't mean we must avoid those activities altogether. Instead, we can arrange our social and political institutions in a way that provides a kind of moral scaffolding for those activities. When we think about how procreators ought to make decisions for their future offspring, then, we shouldn't isolate our focus on what individuals have control over. Procreators who choose whether to screen their embryo or fetus for Down Syndrome or Cystic Fibrosis, for example, do so within a particular political context where healthcare costs for persons with disabilities are extremely high. Their choice isn't simply about their own willingness or capacity to care for a child who will have some disability. Their choice is about whether to avoid creating a child whose disability will be especially costly *here*. To make procreation less morally risky, we need more than a scheme of parental rights and responsibilities. We must also consider how adoption policies, foster care provision, and access to public education and healthcare all contribute to either minimizing, or aggravating, the moral risks of procreation.