

**PROCREATIVE BENEVOLENCE: A MORAL OBLIGATION OR A JUSTIFICATION
OF NEOLIBERAL ETHICS?**

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Introduction

As Assisted Reproduction Technology (ART) continues to advance rapidly, the possibilities for reproduction are becoming more extensive. One of these new possibilities that arose from ART is the controversial principle of Procreative Beneficence (PB). This principle coined by Julian Savulescu has received much criticism from scholars, particularly disability rights activists. In the article “The Moral Obligation to Create Children with the Best Chance of the Best Life,” Savulescu and Guy Kahane argue that parents have a moral reason to select a child who “given his or her genetic endowment, can be expected to enjoy the most well-being” (Savulescu and Kahane 2009, 274). They also defend PB and provide responses to common objections. While the validity of the counter-arguments provided is worth questioning, the article fails entirely to analyze the possible consequences PB could have on society if it became widely accepted.

In this paper, I argue that PB is a form of neoliberal ethics that has the potential to benefit the privileged members of society while further disenfranchising others. I further hold that the possible effects PB could have on society make the principle immoral and a social justice issue. I will begin by briefly introducing the concept of PB and defining relevant terms. Next, I will explain how PB aligns with a Neoliberal approach/ideology. Afterward, I will demonstrate how PB would negatively impact society if it were to become more prevalent and why it would be considered a social justice issue.

Background

The principle of Procreative Beneficence claims that parents should select the child “who is expected to have the best life, or at least as good a life as the others, based on the relevant, available information” (Savulescu 2001, 415). The concept of PB is possible due to the

combination of in vitro fertilization (IVF) and preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) which is used to detect chromosomal abnormalities and single genetic gene disorders. The use of both IVF and PGD allows parents to select children based on their genetic endowment without requiring abortion. As the technology continues to advance, PB can be expanded to selecting children based on positive genetic traits and not only as a means to prevent disability. Savulescu and Kahane argue that parents have a “moral reason,” by which they mean a moral obligation, for choosing the “most advantaged child” who is expected to “enjoy [the] most well-being” in their life (Savulescu and Kahane 2009, 275). It is also worth acknowledging the absence of definitions in Savulescu and Kahane’s article. While they argue in favor of selecting the most advantaged children who are expected to enjoy the most well-being, they fail to define well-being or clarify how well-being is determined.

Moreover, Savulescu and Kahane support their argument in favor of PB through commonsense morality (Savulescu and Kahane 2009, 2). While they neglect to provide a specific definition of the term, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines “common-sense morality” as a “set of moral judgments or intuitions or principles” that are “determined by our normal reactions to cases which in turn suggest certain normative principles or insights” (Driver 2022). It is crucial to recognize that commonsense morality not only allows but also normalizes the pursuit of individual interests as it is largely based on intuition.

Neoliberal Ethics

While there are varying explanations of neoliberalism, I will be referring to the definition provided by Steger and Roy who state that neoliberalism is “a mode of governance that embraces the idea of the self-regulating free market, with its associated values of competition and self-interest, as the model for effective and efficient government” (Ganti 2014, 91). Essentially,

neoliberalism holds that the state should have limited control while private rights should be strengthened. This framework removes responsibility from the government and instead places it on individuals. In his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey describes neoliberalism as “an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action” (Harvey 2005, 3). A neoliberal approach is problematic as it distorts the notion of justice and denies the role of structurally rooted issues in society.

Procreative Beneficence as a form of Neoliberal Ethics

I argue that Savulescu’s conception of PB is an example of veiled neoliberal ethics. While Savulescu does not explicitly state which moral code he is committed to, his defense of PB demonstrates this connection. In his article “Procreative Beneficence: Why We Should Select the Best Children,” Savulescu cites a feature of “liberal democracy” to emphasize that “we can allow people to form and act on their own conception of a good life” (Savulescu 2001, 420). This explanation mirrors neoliberal ethics, “where acting on the assumption of self-interest and self-autonomy generates a particular political-economic vision of “human well-being” (Harvey 2005, 5). This can be further observed through Savulescu’s claim that PB differentiates from eugenics. He states that, unlike eugenics which utilizes “selective breeding to produce a better population,” PB is “an essentially private enterprise” (Savulescu 2001, 424). This distinction between public and private actions is a feature of neoliberalism that emphasizes personal autonomy rather than concern for society.

Savulescu’s and Kahane’s use of Commonsense morality to defend PB provides another example of how PB is a form of neoliberal ethics. They state that it is “implicit in commonsense morality that it is morally permissible and often expected of parents to take the means to select future children with greater potential for well-being” (Savulescu and Kahane 2009, 277). Yet as

the previously mentioned definition demonstrates, the framework of Commonsense morality is ambiguous because it is based on intuition. Moreover, this framework is in contradiction to Savulescu and Kahane's claim that PB is different from Procreative Autonomy. This principle states that it is morally permissible for parents to choose their children if selection is possible. Savulescu and Kahane argue that the two principles are different because PB holds that parents must select the *best* child while under Procreative Autonomy, "it is equally permissible for them to select the worst" (Savulescu and Kahane 2009, 279). They also dismiss Liberal Eugenics, a form of Procreative Autonomy that allows parents "to select their children according to their own conceptions of the good," because it does not provide enough constraints (Savulescu and Kahane 2009, 280). Despite this distinction, it remains unclear how PB differentiates from Procreative Autonomy when the notion of "well-being" is subjective and does not have a rigid definition.

How Does a Connection to Neoliberalism Make PB Problematic?

While Savulescu argues that PB differentiates from eugenics because it is a matter of private enterprise, he does not consider that PB could still have eugenic effects on society. At this time, PB is only possible through the use of IVF and PGD which is costly and unaffordable for many parents. The common use of PB would allow the financially privileged to create a new class of individuals that could be resistant to disabilities, illnesses, and possess certain qualities that would significantly improve their odds of success. This accepted use of PB would have detrimental effects on society as the gap between social classes would grow exponentially and structural issues such as discrimination would be further perpetuated. Savulescu concludes his article by stating that a more effective way of addressing discrimination is by "correcting discriminatory social institutions" (Savulescu 2001, 425). He argues that by doing so, "we can achieve both equality and a population whose members are living the best lives possible"

(Savulescu 2001, 425). Yet this raises the question of *which* members of society? Considering that PB would not be accessible to certain groups of individuals, it would become progressively more difficult for members of these groups to advance in society. The social outcomes of PB are in line with a neoliberal approach that maintains that it is an individual's responsibility to succeed.

To further address the question of how PB can have harmful effects on society, it is sufficient to examine the effects of neoliberalism. Bobby Wilson analyzes how neoliberalism “impacts larger structural and institutional forces like racism and economic inequality” (Wilson 2007, 97). Due to the shift toward the individual, he states that neoliberalism “frames social ills in a personal and private manner” (Wilson 2007, 98). This is incredibly problematic because these structural issues are no longer viewed as a concern for society. Such a framework neglects to find adequate solutions and instead allows structural issues such as racism to continue unacknowledged. It is evident that due to these existing structural issues, the prevalent use of PB would have negative social consequences and further perpetuate issues such as racism and economic equality.

Conclusion

Through this essay, I addressed that Savulescu and Kahane's article failed to consider the social implications of PB. Despite Savulescu claiming that PB differentiates from eugenics, I believe that private matters such as PB will still have effects on society. I have argued that the absence of this discussion and their defense of PB demonstrates that PB is a form of neoliberal ethics. This raises many concerns about the possible implications PB would have on society. Without taking these implications into consideration, I hold that PB falls under neoliberal ethics and is immoral due to its effects on society.

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