Principles of procreative beneficence (PPBs) hold that parents have good reasons to select the child with the best life prospects. Sparrow claims that PPBs imply that we should select only female children, unless we attach normative significance to ‘normal’ human capacities. We argue that this claim fails on both empirical and logical grounds. Empirically, Sparrow’s argument for greater female wellbeing rests on a selective reading of the evidence and the incorrect assumption that an advantage for females would persist even when a serious gender imbalance obtained. Logically, PPBs cite only pro tanto reasons and allow that the good of an individual child could be outweighed by other morally relevant considerations, such as those which take collectively suboptimal outcomes into account. There is thus no need to attach value to the ‘normal.’

**Empirical Failings**

Sparrow’s argument hinges on the empirical claim that women enjoy higher levels of wellbeing than men. We find this claim implausible for several reasons. First, although women’s rights and opportunities have expanded dramatically in liberal societies over the last four decades, their self-reported levels of wellbeing have decreased, both in absolute terms and relative to their male counterparts (Stevenson and Wolfers 2009). We cannot simply assume that actual wellbeing will track common objective indices of welfare, such as longevity or civil rights. These represent only a fraction of the total factors that might affect individual happiness or flourishing. At the same time, it is anthropologically well established that men are better positioned economically and politically in virtually every human culture (Wrangham and Peterson 1996). It is thus not credible to claim that social and institutional constraints on women’s wellbeing have been reduced to the point that a marginally longer lifespan provides women with significantly better options than men overall.

In addition, Sparrow claims that pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding are important, meaningful experiences that are available only to women. Yet the proportion of men who lament their inability to gestate or lactate is vanishingly small. It is therefore not at all obvious that a life lacking in such experiences is necessarily a less meaningful life for its bearer. Furthermore, Sparrow overlooks other potentially valuable reproductive advantages that men have over women. Whereas women who wish to have children usually endure long and physically demanding periods of gestation and lactation that often interfere with other important life projects, men can sire a large number of children at relatively little personal cost.

The broader point we want to make, however, is that philosophers are simply not in a good position to conclude that members of one sex lead better lives than members of
the other. Men and women differ from each other in countless potentially relevant dimensions, and at present we lack the necessary factual and evaluative knowledge to integrate these differences into an overall comparison of wellbeing. Even more fundamentally, it may be incorrect to say that the life of a woman is better, worse, or precisely equal to the life of a man, just as it is wrong to say that a career in science is better, worse, or equal to a career in music (cf. Raz 1986).

Even if we accept Sparrow’s claim that women tend to live more valuable lives than men under current circumstances, this asymmetry would cease to hold in a sexually imbalanced society with a preponderance of females. Both individual wellbeing and inter-sexual dynamics are sensitive to prevailing sex ratios. Unless we assume a radical biological and social reconfiguration of human sexual orientation, sex ratios that depart significantly from equilibrium will reduce the wellbeing of members of the overabundant sex, who will find it increasingly difficult to locate a suitable partner (one of the primary determinants of human wellbeing). In addition, unequal sex ratios generally decrease the bargaining power of the predominant sex in the market for mates. As a consequence, societies with significantly more women than men are characterized by higher rates of teen pregnancy, increased divorce rates, and lower remarriage rates following death or divorce (Guttentag and Secord 1983). The benefits of being male would rise, and the putative advantage of being female would probably disappear, once females become superabundant. So compliance with PPBs could not take us very far towards an all-female society.

**LOGICAL FAILINGS**

Even if Sparrow’s empirical claims were justified, his argument would fail on independent logical grounds. Sparrow claims that PPBs generate an obligation to select female offspring (esp. pp. 13, 27). But the PPB Sparrow claims to rely on (pp. 4-5) could not on its own warrant any conclusion about what parents are all-things-considered obligated to do, since it asserts only the existence of pro tanto reasons to select the ‘best child’—reasons with some, but not necessarily decisive, normative force.

There are two obvious responses open to Sparrow. First, he could weaken his conclusion, acknowledging that parents indeed have only pro tanto reasons to select girls. However, he will then be left without a reductio. After all, granting Sparrow’s empirical claims, the conclusion that parents have good reasons to select girls would be entirely plausible. A second possible response would be to start from a stronger PPB, one warranting the conclusion that parents are all-things-considered obligated to select girls. This would be the principle that parents are under an all-things-considered obligation to maximize the wellbeing of their children. However, as Sparrow admits, this principle is “implausibly strong” (p. 5). Indeed, we know of no-one who has actually defended it.1

It could be argued that mere pro tanto reasons to select female children would give rise to an obligation if there were no countervailing reasons not to select girls. And Sparrow might deny that there are any such reasons, apart from those derived from the value of the ‘normal.’ But there clearly are other considerations that could outweigh any reasons parents may have to select female children. Sparrow illustrates one of these in showing how parental focus on the wellbeing of their own offspring could generate collectively suboptimal outcomes by eroding sexual diversity (p. 15 – see also p. 17 & 19, & note 6). Parents surely have strong moral reasons not to contribute to such outcomes.

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1 In early writing on genetic selection, Savulescu (2001, 2005) does alternate between talk of ‘good reasons’ and ‘obligation.’ In that context, however, talk of obligations is most charitably interpreted as referring to merely prima facie obligations that are grounded in good, pro tanto reasons.
Sparrow himself denies that his reductio can be blocked by appealing to collectively bad outcomes. First, he claims that these outcomes could be avoided through further human engineering which, for example, could sever “the link between happiness and desire for the company of persons of the opposite sex” (pp. 15-16). But any such attempts are themselves likely to come at great cost, and this gives us significant reasons to avoid them. If there were genuine low-cost options available, it would then be unclear why we should continue to oppose a single-sex society. More importantly, Sparrow maintains that even if collective action problems were unavoidable, they would have no bearing on selection decisions, since “it is simply unclear as to why parents should be concerned with anything more than the life prospects of their particular children” (p. 14). But why is this unclear? It is true that the existing literature on selection has largely ignored the wellbeing of individuals other than the child-to-be-selected. Yet we normally think that people have significant moral reasons to look out for the wellbeing of persons other than their actual or future children.

For example, good parents not only bring up their children to have happy lives; they also encourage their children to be decent individuals who treat others well. Similarly, good parents may justifiably seek to avoid collective action problems such as those Sparrow mentions. Consider left-leaning parents who make the principled decision to send their children to state school, forgoing a potentially advantageous private education for their own children for the sake of what they consider a greater social good. Whether their decisions are morally best is debatable, but if it is accepted that a compelling social good is indeed at stake, then it would be implausible to claim that they act impermissibly.

Thus, Sparrow’s reductio can be blocked by allowing social considerations to factor into selection decisions. This point could be made explicit in the following PPB:

Parents have significant moral reasons to make selection decisions that protect/advance the interests of the selected child but also those of other persons (Douglas and Devolder 2009). This principle implies, for instance, that parents have reasons not to select children likely to possess anti-social traits. Interestingly, this might be thought to strengthen the case for selecting female offspring, since maleness is strongly correlated with physical aggression and criminality (Wrangham and Peterson 1996). Once female predominance has become substantial, however, the principle will advise against selecting females, since doing so would diminish the wellbeing of others (including other females). In effect, femininity itself will have become an anti-social trait.

REFERENCES


