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1

Begetting

‘Reuven, listen to me. The Talmud says that a person should do two things for himself. One is to acquire a teacher. Do you remember the other?’

‘Choose a friend,’ I said.

— CHAIM POTOK¹

AS A STUDENT, I read in Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen* these words from the Talmud, according to which there are two things every person needs to do for themselves: *Find a teacher. Choose a friend.* These words always remained with me, because I felt that they are true. This, I believe, is also true: there are two questions in life that every person needs to answer for themselves. One is the question of religion. The other is the question of begetting. *To beget*: that is, ‘to bring (a child) into existence by the process of reproduction; to procreate.’²

It is the latter question about which I wish to say a few things, because I believe this question tends to be misunderstood, miscommunicated, and, above all, underestimated. By the question of begetting, I don’t just mean the question of personal inclination: ‘Do I, do we, want to have a child?’ This is the question with which the vast majority of conversations and deliberations about procreation seem to begin and end. But it is not the question of begetting, though it can be a part of it.

By the question of begetting I mean something of larger and deeper significance, something that is born from, and spreads around it, a rich and complicated moral background, a question that consists of other questions. To ask the question of begetting is to ask, ‘What does it mean to bring a new creature into the world?’ It is to ask, ‘What does it mean to decide to perform an act of creation? What does it mean to make the decision that life is worth living on behalf of a person who cannot be consulted?’ It is to interrogate one’s own responsibility and commitments, morally and philosophically and also personally. To ask the question of begetting is to know, to admit to oneself, that this question can never be purely one of personal inclination, however much we might wish it to be.

This book is an attempt to raise some of these questions, if not (fully) to answer them. It is a personal and philosophical exercise in filling out that moral background, in full awareness of the issues that are at stake. It comes out of a place, not of judgment, but of concern, commitment, and compassion, not only for creators and created, but also, and especially, for those who are not yet created.

One might see this book as a similar exercise, in some ways, to Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Eating Animals*. Foer, upon becoming a parent, felt himself bound to answer, for himself and for his child, certain questions of morality that did not seem quite so urgent before his child was born. This book springs from a similar intuition—that something more is owed to the newly created, that something more is required from us as their creators—but it takes a step even further backwards and pauses, not just at the obligations inaugurated by creation, but at creation itself. What does it mean to decide to create a new being at all? What is required from us in making that decision? What are the ethics of creation?

As in the question of religion, this is a question in which philosophical arguments can (and should) be made—but it is also a question that ultimately we have to decide for ourselves, there being no higher tribunal in this world to which we can turn for its resolution. It is a question in the answering of which some element of uncertainty will necessarily remain. In what follows I will make some claims, but I do not claim to answer this question conclusively, the point I most want to make being simply that these are matters we should consider more deeply.

This book was written on and off over a period of seven years, and in three different countries: a process in the course of which I have changed my position at several points; its structure is dialogic rather than chronological. It is an open-ended exercise, an *essay*, or attempt, rather than a treatise, consisting of personal musings, philosophical arguments, excerpts from books I happened to be reading at the time, and conversations with family, friends and, sometimes, strangers. It is also something that has lain dormant in my desk for several years, when certain heated interactions with other people made me reluctant to pursue the topic further. It is, in some ways, something I have been terrified of writing, but to which I am deeply and personally committed.

Questions

There are, then, two ways of asking the question of begetting. One is the strictly personal question: do I want to beget? That is, do I, do we, want to have children, or a child? This question of personal desire tends to be collapsed into what is often considered to be its natural outcome: the *decision* of whether or not to beget. That is to say, a person saying they want to have children (or not) is often considered equivalent, or near-equivalent, to that person saying they *will* in fact have children (or not). This personal question of wanting or deciding to have children certainly is very present in modern-day culture. But it tends to be a superficial presence, the kind that covers up a deeper absence: a lack of true concern over the existential implications of what it means to make reproductive decisions, whether as a parent or as someone otherwise involved in the process of procreation.

But what happens if we start asking different questions? Such as:

- Is the decision to have children by default a good thing? (If so, then why?)
- What does it mean to make this decision? When is it justified—and when is it *not* justified?
- Is it ever wrong to decide to have children? What would make it a wrong decision?

- What kind of reasons are there for having children, or not having them? Are some reasons better or worse than others?
- Is there such a thing as a moral right to have children? Is this something every person is *entitled* to?

These are all questions to be struggled with, and I don't pretend to know the answers—but I do believe they are questions *worth* asking, *worth* struggling with. I believe that just broaching this topic is vastly more important than coming to a single fixed conclusion. My goal is simply to place these questions on a communal moral horizon—not just *prior* to the decision to beget or not to beget, but also *posterior* to it: after one has, or has not, 'begotten'.

Few assumptions are so stagnant, so rigid, so deeply walled in as the assumption that the decision to have children is by default a good thing; that having children is one of the most elevated aspects of human activity, and, indeed, of the human condition. I believe it is time to question this assumption.

It is a crucial part of this exercise, one that goes against the grain of some of our deepest beliefs and perhaps our biological drives, that we test our intuitions. This can only be a personal exercise, one in which we ask ourselves what beliefs are already in place. Which are firm, and which are shaky? Which ones are most valuable, most precious to us? Often it is precisely the valued yet shaky ones that provoke most resistance, most cognitive dissonance.

In what follows, I will be trying to evoke both our common intuitions and what may be called *counter-intuitions*: sets of beliefs that are brought in to communicate with much older, rustier traditional beliefs, and yet on closer inspection are perhaps no less intuitive. Essentially, then, this is a work of intuition—or, better yet, a work of intuitions testing intuitions; a work of intuitions clashing with each other. Consequently, I'll be talking about language, narratives, and perspectives—what I'd like to call the emotional premises of begetting—as much as about motives and ethics.

The aim, again, is not so much to answer the question of begetting, as to make it what it should be: a real *question*, one that needs to be asked by not only philosophers, but by any human being living in the

modern world. For we were all begotten—and most of us will at some point face (or have already faced) the choice of begetting.³ How is it, then, that this question not at the burning heart of personal and philosophical enquiry? How is it not on the tip of every tongue?

The Devil's Advocate

It was not on the tip of mine. Not until three things happened in my own life. First, and it seemed all of a sudden, people started having children all around me—not all of them in the most stable situations or relationships as they did so. Second, I reached an age at which the question of whether I myself would want to have children suddenly seemed to become very important to other people, and I was asked this question increasingly often as my twenties went towards and then into my thirties. Third, I had a conversation with the devil's advocate, in the form of one of my best friends—let's call her Sylvia.

'I actually believe having children is immoral,' she said to me, one afternoon in a restaurant in Rotterdam.

I sat back baffled—I had never heard or dreamt of such a thing.

She explained herself further. 'Life always contains some suffering. Potentially lots of it: you never know this in advance. No harm is done if a child isn't put into the world. The child doesn't suffer from not existing, since there isn't a subject who can suffer yet. But once it's created, it will certainly suffer. Probably a little, maybe much, this doesn't matter: it's not worth the wager. The only persons potentially harmed by not having children are the parents, since the decision to have children is essentially a selfish one. People have children to fulfil selfish desires, but since this decision entails bringing suffering into the world, it is immoral.'

I picture myself having blinked a few times, wondering where to begin to answer such an outrageous claim. In the conversation that followed, I think I probably challenged every aspect of this argument, which in the way it was framed went counter to my every intuition. I don't remember the entire conversation, but I remember bits and pieces.

First of all, I challenged the pessimism it implied. 'Don't we love life?' I knew I did.

‘I do love life,’ she replied, ‘but I also see much pain and suffering in the world. You don’t know if that isn’t going to happen to the future child. Even a small chance of that suffering occurring makes the choice to procreate irresponsible and immoral.’

I also countered the suggestion that parenthood is intrinsically self-ish. Is it not one of most noble, most selfless acts? Doesn’t it have to do with love, above all things? Love that brings with it the desire to bring new life into the world.

‘But the child doesn’t even exist yet,’ she replied. ‘How can you love something that doesn’t even exist? In the end people have children for themselves, to satisfy their own desires.’

I even, to my immediate embarrassment, blurted out the possibility that, if people aren’t happy with their lives, there’s always a way out.

At this, she was outraged, and rightly so. ‘You mean suicide?’ she said. ‘That’s really saying something, you know. It’s a horrible end to life, it comes with so much pain and anguish, not just for yourself but also for your loved ones. What it must take to make such a decision!’

I immediately took it back: here I knew she was right. I agreed with her that, once you’re alive, there’s no easy way out, and so one cannot just put new beings in the world thinking they can always take themselves out of it again.⁴

‘So what about the future of humanity, then?’ (I may also have said). ‘If everyone stops having children, then the human race ceases to exist.’

‘I don’t think that’s such a bad thing,’ she replied very calmly. ‘For the planet, it would be a very good thing indeed.’

We went back and forth for about an hour, or more. I argued against her to the best of my abilities, but in the end I was lost for words. I remember quite clearly my conclusion.

‘I feel there’s a fallacy in the argument,’ I said to her, ‘but I can’t put my finger on it. I’ll keep thinking about it and get back to you.’

Think about it I did. And talk about it—with family and sometimes with friends. My first intuition was that this argument showed something about the limits of philosophy: that if a philosophical argument could lead to this conclusion, it shows that philosophy can only go so far; that it can lead to inhuman, even inhumane, conclusions. Looking

back, I think what I experienced was cognitive dissonance. Two intuitions were running counter to each other: on the one hand, that this was an outrageous claim that went against the grain of some of my deepest beliefs; on the other, that there seemed to be something very rational, very right, about *some* of the things that Sylvia was saying.

This feeling of dissonance, of tornness, lasted for about a year, or two, during which I kept coming back to the idea, turning it over and over in my mind, and not finding a solution. (I should point out that this was before I had read any philosophical texts about the topic, before I'd ever heard of 'anti-natalism', and so my inability to refute the 'Sylvian Argument' at the time may have had more to do with my own limits as a philosopher.) I went on with life and had concerns of my own, but the question was there in the background, making its presence felt.

This was also a time in my life when I myself was witness to some things. I observed (now with Sylvia's question ever in the back of my mind) several young parents in my vicinity, deciding to have children with a nonchalance, an unconcernedness, and a recklessness that bewildered me, and that seemed to go against all my intuitions of the selflessness and, perhaps, the innate virtue of parenthood. I also observed how the children were the dupes of such recklessness, growing up with tensions that left their traces, and their scars. I became very concerned for some people very close to me. And I think it was in a conversation with my mother that I remembered my earlier discussion with Sylvia, and for the first time I truly was able to question my own perspective, and to wonder: what if she was right?

And so it happened that, a year or two after that first conversation, I found myself sitting in the same restaurant, with the same friend, and asking her, 'Do you remember that conversation we had about having children?'

'Yes, of course,' she said. 'You disagreed completely.'

'Well, actually,' I said to her, 'now I think you may have a point.'

She laughed and looked at me incredulously, and we spoke again, for an hour or more, during which we found ourselves, to my own surprise, overwhelmingly 'on the same page'. We were able to speak, now, about our bafflement at the ease with which people in our age group decided

to have children. Just because they wanted to, and in some cases, seemingly, just for fun. As improbable as the notion of selfishness (that is, of *irresponsible* selfishness) had appeared to me before, so now was it unavoidable.

Since then, other conversations have followed, also with another friend, who was far from agreeing with us. But it doesn't matter whether we agreed or not: I feel now that there is just something very right about that image of three young women who had studied philosophy together discussing the ethics of procreation; discussing also their own wishes and desires and commitments on this score. To everyone, I would wish conversations of that kind. And in fact it was in one such conversation that another of my closest friends looked at me for a long time and said, 'I wonder what you will write about this.' That was the moment when I realised that that was exactly what I would do.

To cut a long story short, somewhere in my late twenties, I changed my mind with regard to the question of begetting, and I began myself to play the devil's advocate in discussions of this kind. I never completely agreed with what I came to think of as the Sylvian Argument; I never was able to commit as strongly as my friend to the radical conclusions of her argument: that procreation is always, to some extent, immoral. (That is, I was not, nor am I now, an anti-natalist.) Instead, I came to gravitate—hesitantly, reluctantly—towards some more moderate theses. That having children is not *by default* a good thing. That morally speaking, no one is ever fully and positively *entitled* to create another person (since we never have that person's consent). That in many situations, there are more and better moral reasons for *not* having children than for having them. (All of this, mind you, does not yet include considerations stemming from the climate crisis, which serve to deepen many of these concerns, but to which they are not limited).

In other words, I was not convinced procreation is immoral. But I now believed the question of begetting was a *problem*—a personal, ethical and philosophical problem, especially in a secular age. Perhaps, I began to think, it is the greatest philosophical problem of our time. And so I could not understand why all philosophers, indeed, all human beings, weren't talking about it all the time—especially if they

themselves bore the personal wish to have a child. I began to grow concerned over the prevalent language of entitlement that surrounds such decisions, and over the complete lack of self-doubt or even hesitation with respect to that entitlement.

I also began to look with different eyes at the narratives that are so widespread in our societies, and to suspect the existence of a lop-sided paradigm shift, in the sense that we seem to have changed the way we talk and think about begetting while failing to enquire into the moral background of this change. Up to this point, I had read hardly anything about this topic, and did not know about this discussion beyond my own conversations with friends and family. It was only after I had begun to write down some of my own thoughts on the matter that I started reading what other thinkers had had to say about the questions I was now struggling with. In what follows, therefore, I'll be going back and forth between my own intuitions and other philosophers' reflections; the exercise, throughout, is a dialogic one.

The book contains five parts, which can be read separately from each other, and in a different order. Part 1, 'Arguments', offers a brief historical background to the question of begetting and invites a variety of voices, past and present, to make their case for reconsidering the ethics of creation. Part 2, 'Climate', discusses the issue of begetting in the light of climate change, and distinguishes two distinct concerns that motivate this debate. Part 3, 'Narratives', considers some of the most common cultural narratives and languages we employ in speaking or thinking about begetting, and questions their adequacy. Part 4, 'Motives', examines some of the various reasons people have for deciding to have children, and tentatively asks whether these can be divided into 'better' and 'worse' kinds of motive. Part 5, 'Alternatives', explores various alternative languages for each of the narratives discussed in part 3, in an attempt to do justice to the deeper meaning of begetting and move towards a language of givenness and responsibility, rather than entitlement.

One thing, then, that this book will *not* do is to make the case for or against 'anti-natalism': the somewhat unpleasant term coined for the belief that procreation is immoral. (As will become clear, there are reasons to be uncomfortable with certain aspects of this debate, whether

within academic philosophy or outside it.) For one thing, against all the tendencies of modern philosophy, I suspect that there simply is no moral certainty that can be achieved in this debate. The stakes are too high for that; the premises too unsure. But this should not discourage us: for in some debates, as in this one, merely gaining a sense of *the right questions* is an overwhelming achievement—whether or not we can ever arrive at any definitive answers.

By the end of this book I hope to have convinced the reader, not that begetting is moral or immoral, but that the question is one worth asking—indeed, a question that *must* be asked—by each and every one of us, as an exercise of our humanity, morality and fellow feeling.

I am reminded here of another passage in a Chaim Potok novel, in which Reuven (the same Reuven who was to ‘find a teacher’ and ‘choose a friend’) says of a radical Talmudic scholar, ‘He asks very good questions. I don’t like his answers. But he asks some very important questions.’⁵ Having studied the many varieties of anti-natalism, I am left with much the same feeling: that whether or not they have the right answers, they ask the right questions—and that in itself is a great good.

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