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A reply to critics of *Creation Ethics*

David DeGrazia

With heartfelt thanks to the journal and my critics in this forum, I turn to the nearly impossible task of replying—however incompletely—to four commentaries within 1000 words.

Regarding the non-identity problem in the context of reproductive choices, Leslie Francis asserts that “for disability rights advocates, [DeGrazia’s analysis] is profoundly disturbing.¹ It assumes that the world is a better place if it lacks an individual with a significant disability and instead contains a different individual [who lacks this disability but is otherwise similar],” although both have full moral status and, presumably, lives worth living. In my view, the procreative decisions in question—explaining the apparent wrongness of which constitutes the non-identity problem in this context—are morally comparable with cases in which parents knowingly or negligently allow an *already-existing* child to *acquire* a significant disability (eg, blindness, paraplegia) that she did not already have, which is surely wrong. Without a compelling argument against the claim of comparability between the two types of choices, my critic seems much less well positioned than I am to make evaluative sense of these cases. I stand by my position. A significant disability does not *necessarily* make an individual’s life go worse than it otherwise would, especially where social structures and accommodations are appropriately arranged. But to lose the ability to navigate the world visually—or to use one’s legs—is to incur a *presumptive* disadvantage in comparison with retaining those types of functioning. That is why knowingly or negligently imposing such a loss on a person is obviously wrong.

Sheelagh McGuinness raises the important issue of public funding for abortion.² I assert a reasonable pluralism of views regarding our prenatal origins and the fetus’ moral status. McGuinness contends that in my effort to accommodate the substantial minority of the public who are sincerely (and reasonably) pro-life, I end up with a position that is unjust towards low-income women seeking abortions. First, to clarify my position, I do not hold that states should prohibit public funds for

abortion; rather, I hold that duly elected representatives of a state may permissibly make that choice. They may also permissibly make the opposite choice. Second, I suggest that the state *must* provide public funds for abortion where a mother’s life or health is at stake, and in ‘no-responsibility’ cases, in which the pregnant individual cannot be considered responsible for engaging in sex; these include cases of rape, cases of minors impregnated by other minors, and some cases of pregnancy involving cognitively impaired adults. Having said all that, it is fair to ask whether it could be just of a state to withhold public funds for abortions sought in more ordinary circumstances. McGuinness is quite sure the answer is negative. But the tone and content of her commentary reveal that she is not arguing from the standpoint of ontological-moral pluralism that I defended. Rather, her remarks proceed from the assumption that the *only* reasonable moral view is that abortion is permissible. Because her arguments deny the pluralism I defend without arguing against it, they beg the question of how to understand the morality of abortion.

Ingmar Persson challenges the time-relative interests account (TRIA) of the harm of death and advances an alternative account.³ Regarding his case of the woman seeking an abortion, TRIA implies that either aborting or not aborting would be permissible—“an intolerable result,” Persson thinks, because it “provides no normative guidance in these situations.” Of course, providing cogent grounds for the permissibility of abortion *is* normative work, even if it leaves the agent options. But Persson apparently thinks that TRIA implies, contradictorily, that aborting (if the woman aborts) and not aborting (if she doesn’t) are *morally required*. Yet this assumes a utilitarian requirement of maximizing utility, which I reject. Also, Persson is mistaken that TRIA would retrospectively—many years after a decision not to abort—evaluate the decision based on the non-discounted good of the offspring’s life; rather, TRIA would evaluate the harm of death *at the time of death* and would make the same judgment about it regardless of when the judgment is made. Regarding another case, does TRIA imply, implausibly, that it would be justifiable to allow a neonate to engage in a pleasurable

activity that would cause her death? I doubt that TRIA would discount the harm of the neonate’s death so much that it would be sufficiently close to zero to allow for this possibility. Moreover, the ethical evaluation of our treatment of neonates should be governed not just by the harm of death, but also by the community’s interest in protecting postnatal human beings. As for Merckx, the great cyclist, Persson thinks it might have been worse for him had he died in infancy than had he died during his peak years. Maybe so. But TRIA takes into account the degree of psychological relatedness to one’s future, so that the harm of infantile death is discounted, but also the magnitude of good life lost, which is much greater if death occurs during infancy. So TRIA might imply that infantile death is worse in this pair of possible deaths. In any case, it remains to be seen whether Persson’s alternative, ‘amplification’ account more adequately captures the harm of death.

In my account of permissible procreation, would-be parents must *generally* be able to expect that their children’s basic needs, all of them, will be met. But I accommodate some exceptions where failure to meet a basic need would be due to circumstances (eg, slavery) beyond the parents’ control. David Benatar takes exception to my allowing exceptions.⁴ I do so because I judge procreative freedom to have *some* moral weight and because it seems unfair to prohibit—categorically—victims of major injustice from becoming parents. However, I do not present a substantial argument for the independent moral weight of procreative freedom, and Benatar may be right that what parents owe children is entirely independent of parents’ circumstances and interests. But I doubt it. May the debate continue.

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