Chapter 12
Two Varieties of “Better-For” Judgements

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Abstract This paper argues against Julian Savulescu’s principle of procreative beneficence. It maintains that prospective parents have no obligation at all to choose the child, out of a range of possible children, who is likely to lead the best life. This is because a standpoint that the author labels “the internal perspective” is a perfectly appropriate one for parents to adopt when thinking about their own future children. It is only policy makers who are obliged to take up an opposing standpoint—“the external perspective”—and to be motivated by the sorts of “better for” judgements that that perspective delivers.

Keywords Principle of procreative beneficence · Savulescu · Parenthood · Prospective parents.

12.1 The Principle of Procreative Beneficence

In his much-discussed paper “Procreative Beneficence: Why We Should Select the Best Children,” Julian Savulescu gives admirably clear expression to, and argues forcefully for, a principle that commands the assent of many bioethicists. He states that principle as follows:

Couples (or single reproducers) should select the child, of the possible children they could have, who is expected to have the best life, or at least as good a life as the others, based on the relevant, available information.²

Savulescu labels this the Principle of Procreative Beneficence. For ease of reference, I will in this chapter refer to it as PPB.

Savulescu happily admits that PPB asserts only a prima facie obligation, or one that is capable of being overridden by other moral reasons. He also maintains that, despite their being prima facie morally obliged to select a child who is likely to
have the best life, prospective parents ought not to be compelled to do so, either legally or in any other way. If a prospective parent neglects to choose the best child she can, then she, other things being equal, makes a moral mistake. But it is one that she ought to be allowed to make. Others—medical staff for instance—are justified in trying rationally to persuade her not to make it, but they have no moral licence to coerce her. The demands of a principle of reproductive autonomy entail that parents must be given room to err in their decisions, so long as their errors will not harm their children. And while it is typically wrong to flout the requirements of PPB, Savulescu thinks that in doing so, a parent does not harm her child.

It is my aim in this chapter to argue, against Savulescu and those who agree with him, that prospective parents, precisely by dint of their filling that role, are in fact not bound by PPB. That is, I will urge that no prospective parent has even a prima facie obligation to select the child, from the range of her available possible offspring, who is likely to lead the best life, or at least as good a life as the others. Ultimately, I want to claim that this is because the best life would not be better for any particular child. But that does not mean that I can be numbered amongst those who straightforwardly oppose Derek Parfit’s No-Difference View. On the contrary, I think that there can be moral reasons to bring about better lives that are not better for any particular person or set of persons. It may even be the case that there usually are such reasons. Crucially, however, I think that those reasons do not apply to prospective parents in respect of their potential offspring. There is something about someone’s being a prospective parent that, we might say, exempts her from any requirement to create the best state of affairs she can through her reproductive decisions.

My argument for this conclusion will involve the drawing of a distinction between two perspectives that we can take up when considering the lives of possible future people. These I call “the internal perspective” and “the external perspective.” From the latter perspective, we may see ourselves to have reasons to bring about states of affairs that are, as it were, “better period,” rather than better for any particular person or set of persons (though I will later suggest that a judgement that some state of affairs is better period can be characterised as a disguised “better-for” judgement of a distinctive kind). From the former perspective, by contrast, no such reasons are visible. And, I will endeavour to show, the former standpoint is one that it is morally appropriate and fitting for a prospective parent to adopt and to take seriously.

Before I present that argument, however, I want briefly to make mention of another type of objection to PPB that finds expression in the literature. It is an objection of considerable importance, and one with which I have a good deal of sympathy. Its main thrust is that it is just impossible, at least in the vast majority of cases, to determine which of a range of possible lives is the best. Clearly, if we cannot determine that, then we have no prospect of selecting the possible child who is likely to lead the best life, just because we will not know which possible child that is. And on the overwhelmingly plausible assumption that we