

Parental Selection of Children's Sexual Orientation

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As we learn more about the causes of sexual orientation, the likelihood increases that parents will one day be able to select the orientation of their children. This possibility (at least that of selecting for heterosexuality) has generated a great deal of concern among supporters of homosexual rights, with such selection being widely condemned as harmful and morally repugnant. Notwithstanding this widespread condemnation, and even assuming, as we do, that homosexuality is entirely acceptable morally, allowing parents, by means morally unproblematic in themselves, to select for heterosexuality would be morally acceptable. This is because allowing parents to select their children's sexual orientation would further parent's freedom to raise the sort of children they wish to raise and because selection for heterosexuality may benefit parents and children and is unlikely to cause significant harm.

KEY WORDS: homosexuality; sexual orientation; genetics; abortion; eugenics; genetic selection.

INTRODUCTION

Science continues to gain insight into the origins of particular sexual orientations (Bailey *et al.*, 1993; Bailey and Pillard, 1991; Hamer *et al.*, 1993; LeVay, 1991, 1993; Meyer-Bahlburg, 1993) and to provide us with more and more effective ways of controlling our environments and our genetic endowments. The combination of these two factors, knowledge and technology, will in all likelihood lead, at some point, to the ability of parents to control, or at least greatly influence, their children's sexual orientation. One would expect that the vast majority of parents inclined to attempt to influence the orientation of their children will wish to do so in the direction of heterosexuality. Are such parents little, if any, better than

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Nazi advocates of eugenics or can such actions be morally justified? In general, how should we evaluate such parental actions from an ethical standpoint?

Our purpose here is not to propose or defend any general ethical system. Instead, we will attempt to evaluate certain actions within the framework of what we perceive to be factors that are, in actuality, commonly taken into account in secular moral decision making. These include the action's costs and benefits (broadly construed) and the motives of the actor. Again, we will not attempt to provide a theoretical justification of the relevance of these factors to issues of morality. Rather, we will determine how selection of a child's sexual preference should be viewed if one accepts (as we believe a great many people do) that those factors, applied consistently and rationally, are crucial in making moral judgments.

The first question to confront is that of the ethical status of homosexuality itself. Certainly, whether homosexuality is good, bad, or neutral will be an important factor in our evaluation of attempts to avoid having homosexual children. Our position, which we will take as axiomatic for purposes of this discussion, is that homosexuality, like heterosexuality, is ethically neutral. Because homosexuality causes no direct harm to others (other than those who take offense at it on irrational and/or inhumane grounds) and because homosexual behavior is crucial to the ability of homosexual people to enjoy their lives (as heterosexual behavior is to heterosexuals), homosexuality should not be morally condemned or proscribed.

The proposition, however, that there is nothing morally wrong with homosexuality by no means entails the proposition that there is something morally wrong with trying to avoid having homosexual children. To proscribe homosexuality is to do direct serious harm to a group of people with little countervailing benefit. In contrast, to avoid having homosexual children does no direct harm to anyone, as it involves no condemnation or proscription of anyone's behavior or status. (By definition, if a child is kept from being homosexual, he or she will not have homosexual status or engage in homosexual behavior.) The ethical status of avoiding homosexual children depends instead on its indirect harms, if any, on its benefits, if any, and on the motives of those engaging in it.

Methods of Avoiding Homosexual Children and Grounds for Objection

There are, at least in theory, several possible ways in which having homosexual children could be avoided. These include refusal to conceive (for couples whose genetic characteristics make having a homosexual child likely), genetic manipulation, changes in pre- or postnatal environments, and abortion of fetuses likely to become homosexual children. Our purpose here is not to address the moral acceptability of any particular method but to focus on the propriety of parental selection of children's sexual orientation, quite apart from the method used to achieve that end. The analysis in this paper applies equally to any method of selection (ignoring

those that are obviously morally unacceptable, such as infanticide) and for purposes of our analysis we assume that all such methods are, in themselves (that is, ignoring the particular purposes for which they are being employed), morally acceptable. In particular, we take no position on the moral status of abortion. If the reader has any moral question at all about abortion, we ask that he or she assume that some other, morally acceptable, method of selection (perhaps an intrauterine injection that alters the relevant genetic makeup of the fetus) will be used. We will, however, at certain points, devote particular attention to abortion, as it seems often to be perceived as the most ethically problematic method.

Recent scientific studies have presented evidence that the chances that a child will be homosexual are greatly influenced by his or her genetic makeup (Bailey *et al.*, 1993; Bailey and Pillard, 1991; Hamer *et al.*, 1993; Whitam *et al.*, 1993). Researchers have in fact claimed to have identified the general location of the gene that appears to affect sexual orientation (Hamer *et al.*, 1993; Hu *et al.*, 1995). These studies have provoked widespread reactions based on (in addition to their scientific implications) their perceived implications for law, ethics, and social policy (Burr, 1993; Hamer and Copeland, 1994). Indeed, in their initial scientific report, Hamer and colleagues took the step, unusual in a scientific research report, of explicitly opposing what they considered to be possible misuse of their findings (Hamer *et al.*, 1993). One response to the evidence that sexual orientation has an important genetic component has been the speculation that knowledge of the genetic origins of sexual orientation could lead to a prenatal test for homosexuality (Allen, 1992; Campbell, 1992; Hamer and Copeland, 1994; Holtz, 1994; Knox, 1993). Parents who did not wish to have homosexual children could then abort fetuses likely to become homosexual. This possibility was even the premise of a controversial play (written prior to Hamer's finding), *Twilight of the Golds*, in which an expectant mother wrestled with the dilemma of whether or not to terminate her pregnancy, which was likely to produce a homosexual child.

The prospect of selective abortion to avoid having a homosexual child is considered by many to be morally repugnant (Bancroft, 1993; Cashman, 1993; Hamer *et al.*, 1993; Hamer and Copeland, 1994; Murphy, 1990). One may object morally to aborting a fetus because it is genetically destined to become homosexual, or more generally, to using any method that enables selection for heterosexuality, on one or more of the following grounds:

1. All uses of the method, for any purpose, are morally wrong (e.g., all abortions are wrong).
2. Although some uses of the method may be morally acceptable, use of the method for the purpose of selecting the child's characteristics is morally wrong.
3. Although some uses of the method, including some for the purpose of selecting certain characteristics, may be morally acceptable, use of the method for the purpose of selecting heterosexuality is morally wrong.

Ground 1—Any Use of a Particular Method Is Wrong

It is not our purpose in this paper to address the question of the general morality of the use of any particular method that might enable selection for heterosexuality. For that reason, we will not discuss the merits and demerits of Ground 1, the general moral objection to the use of a particular method, other than to note that, as a basis for objecting to the avoidance of homosexual children, Ground 1 at least raises no consistency problems. As will be seen, this cannot be said of Grounds 2 and 3. Those grounds distinguish among interventions based on motives or purposes, and thus raise questions other than that of the general moral acceptability of a given method of intervention. It is, therefore, with Grounds 2 and 3 that we will concern ourselves.

Ground 2—The Eugenics Objection

Ground 2 states a general moral objection to intervention for the purpose of selecting a child's characteristics (whatever those characteristics might be). We may refer to this as the "eugenics" objection. This ground encompasses selection on the basis of characteristics as diverse as, let us say, severe brain damage to less-than-exceptional intelligence. Obviously, moral distinctions may be made on the basis of the characteristics involved but this possibility is addressed in the discussion of Ground 3, later. The objection stated in Ground 2 is not that it is wrong to select for certain characteristics, but rather that, regardless of the characteristic, such selection is wrong.

Proponents of this position often seek to support it by (1) asserting that attempts to determine children's characteristics through genetic manipulation or other such selection methods amounts to "playing God" (which apparently is assumed to be morally wrong; Landers, 1993) or (2) equating such genetic manipulation or selection with certain practices engaged in or advocated by Nazi scientists or other historical proponents of eugenics (e.g., Cashman, 1993). We do not consider either of these arguments to be intellectually serious objections to these selection practices. We frankly do not know exactly (or even approximately) how one is to distinguish between manipulations of nature, which are sufficiently benign to be sanctioned by God (say, a tonsillectomy) and those that are so intrusive as to impermissibly usurp God's role. And, more fundamentally, playing God is a theological objection that derives its force, if any, from religious doctrine. It has no place in a secular moral and policy analysis. The "Nazi" objection is the result of muddled thinking. Certainly, many things the Nazis did were evils of a magnitude not seen before or since. Their attempts at eugenics may be properly condemned because of the racial goals they sought to achieve and because of the forcible and inhumane nature of their experiments. This amounts to a condemnation only of *Nazi* eugenics. The moral

status of eugenics *in general* is not determined by the horror of the Nazi version of it.

Is the enterprise of, say, prenatal genetic selection to determine children's characteristics (whatever they might be) morally wrong? It is difficult to see why. Women who smoke or drink to excess while pregnant are universally condemned for, in effect, *failing* to engage in the proper prenatal selection of characteristics (high birth weight, etc.). Parents who read to their children are universally praised for attempting to make more likely their children's possession of certain characteristics (intellectual proficiency, etc.). Putting aside any moral questions about the method used in itself, it is not clear how, for example, prenatal genetic selection is morally distinguishable from these practices. The argument is sometimes made that allowing such interventions, because they might involve significant expense, would result in various desirable characteristics being disproportionately concentrated among the wealthy (Krimsky and Hubbard, 1995; Wertz and Fletcher, 1989; Wright, 1994). This might very well come to pass. But our economic system already results in the disproportionate possession by the wealthy of many goods that contribute to children's well-being and success (education, nutrition, medical care, etc.). This may pose a moral problem for capitalism but it hardly constitutes a legitimate moral objection to genetic or other selection *per se*. And, of course, it would be highly questionable to argue that the solution to this disproportionality problem would be to entirely ban more expensive education or medical care, so that, for the sake of fairness, everyone is kept at the educational and medical level of the poorest people in our society.

In short, then, parental (and societal) attempts, pre- and postnatal, to ensure, to the extent possible, that children possess certain characteristics are universally encouraged, and their neglect universally condemned (so long as the characteristics are considered of the appropriate type—see the discussion of Ground 3, given later). That the mechanism involved happens to be of a newer, more “technological,” or more physically invasive nature, such as prenatal genetic selection by means of abortion, has no apparent moral import (again assuming for argument's sake, as we do throughout this paper, that the method in itself raises no moral difficulties).

Ground 3—Selecting for Heterosexuality Is Wrong

Abortion. Political liberals tend, for whatever reason, to be ardent supporters of both gay rights and pro-choice programs. For this reason, we suspect that many of those who would object most vehemently to the notion of aborting a fetus because it will be homosexual are also among the strongest supporters of abortion rights. Liberals often assert that abortion, at least at some relatively early stage of pregnancy, simply has no moral dimension and that a woman has a moral right (and must continue to have a legal right) to have an abortion for virtually any reason she considers appropriate. This position can give rise to two sorts of apparent inconsistency.

First, it is difficult to reconcile moral abhorrence toward the abortion of pregnancies likely to produce homosexual children with acceptance of abortion for virtually any other reason, however trivial or selfish it may seem. Can it plausibly be the case that a couple's having an abortion because they wish to maintain their high economic standard of living, or because the pregnancy came at an inconvenient time, raises no moral issue whatever, whereas an abortion to avoid having a homosexual child is *per se* evil? We do not mean to assert here that it is not possible to draw moral distinctions among abortions based on the reasons of the people having them, or that homosexual abortions are or are not morally acceptable. What we do wish to point out, though, is a possible inconsistency in the level of moral scrutiny applied to homosexual abortions as compared with other abortions. If it is clearly wrong for people to abort gay fetuses because of their religious objections to homosexuality or because they feel (correctly or not) that being gay subjects a person to an unacceptable level of societal rejection, surely an already well-off couple's aborting a fetus to avoid the expense of a child at least raises a substantial moral question.

There is, of course, an infinite number of possible ethical systems under which homosexual abortions are always wrong whereas abortions for other reasons, including the trivial and selfish, are always acceptable. (One such system might have as first ethical principles the propositions that the lives of only homosexual people are worthy of moral consideration and that life begins at conception. Another might be derived from a belief that a particular pro-gay, pro-choice activist who took this position was a prophet of God or God himself. These systems are limited only by one's imagination and in any case could be multiplied infinitely by adding unrelated moral rules, e.g., it is wrong to wear red on Mondays, etc.) Under such a system, any possible inconsistency is eliminated by hypothesis. However, the real question is, given our commonly accepted moral principles, is any such system plausible? We do not think so.

The second type of consistency problem faced by those who would condemn homosexual abortions while maintaining that virtually all other abortions implicate no moral issues can be illustrated by examining possible means other than abortion of avoiding having gay children. Consider the following possibilities:

1. It is determined that eating shrimp during pregnancy will result in a gay child.
2. It is determined that reading certain books to a young child will result in his or her becoming gay.
3. A *preconception* genetic test is developed that tells couples with 100% accuracy whether their children will be gay.

If, as maintained by this group, abortion in itself has no moral dimension, but homosexual abortion is morally objectionable, consistency requires moral objections of equal strength to (a) women not eating shrimp to avoid having gay

children, (b) parents not reading certain books to their children so they do not become gay, and (c) couples who know from the preconception test that their children would be gay taking steps not to conceive. If there is nothing wrong with abortion in itself, then the only ground on which homosexual abortions can be morally condemned is that they seek to avoid gay children. Consistency would then require that all means of avoiding gay children be condemned with equal force.

But would members of this group really believe that women who refrain from eating shrimp during pregnancy to avoid having gay children (or those who take the other steps outlined earlier) deserve the same severe moral disapproval as women who abort for that reason? Our guess is that the vast majority of them would not. This may bespeak some unacknowledged level of moral discomfort with abortion or it may indicate simply a failure to be logically consistent. One final possibility is that our guess is incorrect. In any case, we think it is instructive to indicate the positions entailed by the conjunction of the propositions that abortion is, in itself, morally unproblematic and that homosexual abortions are morally wrong.

The Morality of Attempting to Avoid Having Homosexual Children. This brings us to the more general question of the ethical status of attempts, by whatever means (other than those that are obviously morally problematic, such as infanticide), to avoid having homosexual children. We propose to address that question by examining two broad factors (whose relevance to the morality of acts we take, as outlined earlier, as axiomatic for purpose of this discussion): the possible motives of those engaged in selecting for heterosexual children, and the costs and benefits of such selection.

As with virtually any human action, selecting for heterosexuality might be motivated by many different factors or combinations of them. Perhaps the most obvious and, arguably, pernicious of these is the potential parent's belief that homosexuality is wrong or evil and that homosexuals are therefore (at least if all else is equal) less worthwhile or valuable people than heterosexuals. Because, as we have assumed, homosexuality is ethically neutral, this point of view irrationally devalues and denigrates a group of human beings in a way that has resulted in much undeserved harm to that group. Those who subscribe to this view and, in particular, those who subscribe to it so strongly that they act on it (though we defer the discussion of such actions' consequences) deserve moral condemnation.

Should our moral evaluation of such heterosexism be altered if its basis in a particular person is a sincere adherence to a religion that condemns homosexuality? One may intuitively feel that such a person is not as blameworthy as someone who condemns homosexuality for some other reason. Still, having a religious ground for the belief makes it no less irrational and no more respectful of homosexual people's legitimate claims of moral equality with heterosexuals. The nonreligious heterosexist has made a specific irrational decision on this issue. The religious heterosexist has made a general irrational decision to accept moral rules, regardless

of their individual merit, because they purport to derive from a certain source. It is difficult to see why the latter decision is entitled to greater moral sympathy than the former. It may be the case, as an empirical matter, that on average religious heterosexists take positions of greater moral acceptability in areas not involving homosexuality than do nonreligious heterosexists. This may be relevant to an evaluation of the relative merits of the two groups as human beings, but it is irrelevant to an evaluation of the relative merits of their positions in the area of homosexuality. A religious basis, however sincere, for an indefensible and harmful moral position makes it no more defensible and no less harmful. This seems intuitively clear in the case of, for example, the moral acceptability of discrimination against black people. It should be just as clear when people are being discriminated against for any other irrational reason, including their sexual orientation.

Parental desires to avoid having a homosexual child may, however, arise out of motives that are less blameworthy than heterosexism. In fact, the motive may be praiseworthy. In attempting to avoid having a homosexual child, a parent may be motivated by a desire to spare the child the unhappiness that may arise out of living in a society that often treats homosexual people badly in a variety of ways. Surely such a motive deserves moral approval as would an action based on the motive, at least so long as the benefits of sparing the child are not outweighed by any harms the action might cause (see discussion of costs, given later).

Finally, selecting for a heterosexual child may stem from motives that are neither good nor bad, but simply acceptable, from a moral standpoint. For example, parents may wish, understandably, to guarantee themselves the highest probability of one day having grandchildren. Although homosexual people often have children, one's chances of being a grandparent would certainly seem to be maximized by having heterosexual children. The desire for grandchildren is one that seems morally neutral and that a great many people would no doubt understand and sympathize with.

Heterosexual parents may also wish to have heterosexual children for the simple reason that they wish to have children more like themselves, with whom they can more easily and completely fulfill the role of parent in connection with their children's sexual lives. That role involves such activities as teaching, advising, empathizing, and vicariously experiencing, all of which would be, at least in many cases, facilitated by parents' sharing the sexual orientation of their children. A comparison may be made here with a child's religious upbringing. Catholic parents, let us say, would very often be deeply disappointed and saddened by the conversion to, say, Judaism, of their children. This is not necessarily because the parents are anti-Semites or even value Judaism less than Catholicism. Rather, such parents may wish to have children who are like themselves in this respect and with whom they can share certain feelings and experiences that are important to them. Few people would claim that such parents are acting immorally when they enculturate a child

in their religion. Similarly, heterosexual parents might wish to have heterosexual children not because they object to homosexuality but to have more in common with their children in an important area of life. Such a motive seems understandable and morally acceptable.

The second factor we wish to consider in evaluating the morality of attempts to avoid having homosexual children is the consequence of such avoidance or, more specifically, its costs and benefits. The principal benefit of parents' ability to select their children's sexual orientation is the furtherance of parental liberty. Moral condemnation of such selection would to some degree limit, or at least impose a cost on, the parents' freedom to raise the sort of children they wish to raise. That freedom has traditionally been very highly valued in our society and, like any liberty, should not be restricted without good reason. Possible additional benefits include the child's avoidance of the difficulties often experienced by homosexual people due to individual and societal intolerance, and the avoidance of similar difficulties that might be experienced by the siblings of the homosexual child.

One putative benefit of selecting for heterosexuality is that homosexuality is a disease whose elimination (or reduction in incidence) is therefore beneficial. We will not here enter the debate over whether homosexuality is a disease, and in fact there is no reason to do so. We have argued elsewhere (Greenberg and Bailey, 1994) that whether a given behavior or behavioral disposition is a disease is utterly irrelevant to its moral status (as well as to any other interesting question about it). To determine whether homosexuality is a disease, we need to know what characteristics define a disease and whether homosexuality has those characteristics. If homosexuality is undesirable because it is a disease, it must be the case that (1) homosexuality possesses at least one undesirable property, *P*, and (2) *P* is one of the defining properties of disease. Clearly, though, because our moral decisions are to be based on the desirability of homosexuality, we can make those decisions using Proposition (1) alone, that is, before, and without, making the disease determination. Determining whether homosexuality is or is not a disease thus gives us no relevant new information about it. Consideration of that question is therefore fruitless, or worse, given that the proper definition of disease is a matter of some dispute. Analysis should focus instead, as we do here, on the relevant characteristics of homosexuality, that is its costs and benefits (broadly conceived), and not on whether those or other characteristics fit some definition of disease.

What harmful consequences or costs are to be weighed against the benefits cited earlier? As discussed earlier, selecting for heterosexual children appears to cause no direct harm to anyone. The result of such selection is that a child either never comes into being (and a being that never existed cannot be harmed) or is heterosexual rather than homosexual. Even if homosexuality is not inherently inferior to heterosexuality in any way (and we believe that it is not) and even if homosexual people did not experience societal intolerance and discrimination (which of course they often do), it is quite difficult to see how being heterosexual

rather than homosexual causes any harm to the child himself. If selection for heterosexuality causes any harm, that harm must be of some less direct variety and must come to people other than the child himself. But the attributions of such less direct harms or costs, moral and otherwise, made to selection for heterosexuality are not convincing.

One such potential indirect cost would involve the possibility that widespread heterosexual selection would eventually significantly reduce, or even eliminate, the homosexual population. Homosexual people may be more likely to make certain kinds of valuable contributions in areas such as the arts and obviously contribute to certain kinds of social and cultural diversity. Such contributions and diversity would be threatened by a substantial reduction in the homosexual population. And, as is the case with the extinction of a species, we might irretrievably lose valuable genetic or psychosocial characteristics possessed only, or primarily, by gay people, of whose existence or utility we are presently unaware. In addition, if the gay population were to shrink, gay political power might lessen as well, possibly resulting in less effective governmental protection for those gays who remain. Finally, if there were far fewer homosexual people, they might seem more unusual and aberrant to others, which might result in more intolerance. These costs, though certainly conceivable, seem highly speculative and unlikely to materialize (particularly given the fact that the relevant selection method could presumably be used by homosexual parents to select *for* homosexuality).

But even if we knew that such a drastic reduction in the homosexual population and some or all of the consequent harms discussed earlier would result from parental freedom to select heterosexual children, it is by no means clear that those harms would outweigh parents' liberty interest in raising the sort of children they wished to raise. A religious analogy is again instructive. Like homosexual people, Jewish people have made unique and valuable contributions to society in many areas and are a small minority of the population traditionally subject to irrational discrimination and intolerance. Suppose that for some reason the Jewish population had greatly diminished and was in danger of disappearing altogether. Suppose further that we knew of some risk-free and cost-free means (admittedly difficult to imagine) by which non-Jewish parents could bear Jewish children. Would anyone argue that non-Jewish parents would be acting immorally if they chose to have children of their own religion rather than Jewish children despite the likely consequence of the eventual extinction of the Jewish population? We do not think that anyone would seriously take this position, the reason being that, however unfortunate the eventual extinction of the Jewish population might be, avoiding it would not be considered to outweigh the importance of parents' liberty, in each individual case, to raise the sort of children they wished to raise. This case is morally indistinguishable from that of parents choosing heterosexual children notwithstanding the possible substantial diminution of the homosexual population.

A second putative indirect harm arises out of those cases in which heterosexuality is selected out of parental heterosexism (though, as discussed earlier, this is by no means the only possible motive for such selection). Certainly, heterosexism is morally indefensible. It is difficult, though, to specify exactly what harm comes from an act, otherwise harmless, that is caused by the actor's heterosexism. It is sometimes suggested that such acts further or somehow validate societal heterosexism (Murphy, 1990). We see no reason to think that this is so. In fact, the only real consequence we can identify of such an act is that it notifies anyone who knows of it and of its motive that the actor is heterosexist. Murphy (1990) employs a racial analogy to condemn heterosexist attempts to avoid having gay children—just as racist acts are morally wrong, so too are heterosexist acts. This may seem quite plausible because the racist acts we typically think of are clearly wrong—lynchings, Jim Crow laws, etc. Consider, however, the racist act of always choosing vanilla ice cream over chocolate because the color of chocolate ice cream reminds the racist of black people. Or suppose a racist were to wear a sign around his neck or, better, post one in a private room in his home, saying “I am a racist.” Because neither the sign nor the choice of ice cream harms anyone, it is difficult to see that either compounds in any way the already existing moral wrong of the person's racism. The heterosexist, particularly one so extreme as to act on his heterosexism, deserves moral condemnation. The act itself, though, selecting for a heterosexual child, because it otherwise does no harm, serves only as evidence of the actor's bad state of mind, which already exists.

The alleged cost or harm that seems to be of most concern (its analog is frequently cited as a reason to disapprove of or ban sex selection by parents) is a more general version of this “heterosexist-motive” objection, namely, that parental actions to avoid homosexual children, regardless of the parents' motives, would reinforce, validate or legitimate, and thereby increase societal heterosexism (Schuklenk *et al.*, 1997; Stein, 1998). This argument obviously requires that such actions be done in a way that makes society at large aware of them. The most that argument could prove, then, is that the publicizing of such an action, rather than the action in itself, is morally wrong. In any case, the assertion that public parental avoidance of homosexual children, or its public moral acceptance, would increase general intolerance of homosexuality is, of course, an empirical prediction whose truth value is unlikely to be determined by argument alone. Nevertheless, serious doubt is cast on its truth by the closest analogs we can cite. To our knowledge, the public's undoubted awareness and acceptance of parental actions to ensure that a child's religion is the same as that of his parents has done nothing to increase intolerance of any religion. Similarly, we know of no reason to believe that avoidance of genetically defective children, made possible by relatively recent technological advances, has increased general intolerance of those actually born with such defects.

The precise mechanisms by which parental selection will allegedly validate and thereby increase societal intolerance are generally not made clear by the

proponents of this position. The general idea, though, seems to be something like this:

1. Allowing, or failing to condemn, parental selection for heterosexuality will be generally viewed as endorsing such selection.
2. People will generally attribute heterosexist motives to those parents engaging in such selection.
3. So, as a consequence of 1 and 2, allowing such selection will be seen as endorsing those heterosexist parental motives.
4. Finally, this apparent endorsement of heterosexist motives will result in an increase in intolerance and antihomosexual acts in society at large.

Each step in this argument is at least subject to serious question. As to Steps 1–3, the notion that granting someone the freedom to do something is not equivalent to endorsing that action or the motives underlying it is a simple and commonplace one. Interestingly enough, two examples can be found in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. That amendment guarantees freedom of speech, regardless of the offensiveness or immorality of its content (with a handful of narrow exceptions), and freedom to practice the religion of one's choice, even if those practices seem to most people to be incomprehensible or even harmful. Few, if any, people take this protection of freedom to indicate our society's legal or moral endorsement of all such speech and religious practices.

Even if allowing parents the freedom to select for heterosexuality is seen as an endorsement of the parents' motives in so doing, it is highly questionable that those motives will be assumed to be heterosexist. As discussed earlier, there are several possible motives for wishing to have a heterosexual child, many of them not based at all on heterosexism. We believe that many people would understand, sympathize with, and share such nonheterosexist motives. This obviously calls into question the notion, expressed in Step 2, that the general public would assume that selection for heterosexuality would be done out of heterosexist motives.

Even if allowing (or not condemning) selection for heterosexuality were generally viewed as a societal endorsement of heterosexism, the extent to which this would increase actual intolerance of and harm to homosexual people is not clear. That that putative increase in intolerance and harm would outweigh the value of allowing parents the freedom to raise the sort of children they wish to raise is a generally tacit and undefended assumption of the proponents of this view.

Stein (1998) argues that the use of orientation–selection procedures would cause people to view homosexuality as a physical disorder “by indicating that screening for homosexuality is a reasonable and sanctioned medical procedure.” Again, this is an empirical prediction that, though possibly accurate, seems implausible. It is a widely known and accepted fact that many medical procedures (e.g., cosmetic surgery, sex-change operations, elective abortions) have nothing to do with disorders of any kind. We know of no reason to think that screening

for homosexuality will be viewed as addressing a disorder merely because it is a medical procedure, particularly if, as seems likely, medical techniques for selecting other characteristics that are not related to disorders (e.g., high intelligence and attractive appearance) are eventually developed and used.

Parents' freedom to have heterosexual children, if they so choose, may be very important to them and would not cause any direct harm to anyone. Those who argue that that freedom should be denied on the basis of a putative long-term, indirect, incremental harmful societal phenomenon should, it seems to us, bear the burden of convincingly demonstrating that that harmful phenomenon will in fact occur. But proponents of this view generally do not even attempt to make a case for the accuracy of their empirical prediction that parental selection will cause real harm by "validating" societal heterosexism. They are instead content merely to assert it. We should treat with healthy skepticism any assertion that people should not be free to live crucially important aspects of their lives in the ways they wish, which directly harm no one, on the ground that some indirect harm will eventually come to society as a result. This is true whether such arguments are used to attempt to limit the freedom of homosexual people to live their lives as they see fit or of parents to raise the sort of children they see fit to raise.

Even if increased intolerance of homosexuality did result from parental avoidance of homosexual children, that result would be the product of faulty moral reasoning. As argued earlier, avoiding homosexual children by morally acceptable means is, in itself, morally unobjectionable and implicates moral issues completely different from those raised by treating existing homosexual people badly. The question thus becomes whether an act that is otherwise morally acceptable becomes unacceptable because of mistaken conclusions people would draw (if in fact they would) from its public proliferation or acceptance. We would suggest that the best response in this type of situation would not be to deem the act (or, more accurately, its publicizing) unacceptable but to educate those making the moral error. An ethical system based even in part on people's known misconceptions or errors is bound to become rife with inconsistencies and unacceptable curtailments of legitimate moral rights, as there is no reason to expect such misconceptions to follow any logically consistent pattern or to properly take into account all relevant moral factors.

It appears to be the case, then, that if allowing parents to select for heterosexuality is to be evaluated based on motive and consequence, one would be hard-pressed to find it to be morally wrong. First, there are several plausible parental motives that range from morally acceptable to morally praiseworthy. Furthermore, parental freedom to select children's important characteristics is a highly valuable, and highly valued, liberty. Finally, selection for heterosexuality (even when done out of the worst motives) can benefit parents and children and seems unlikely to cause harm sufficient to outweigh those benefits and the value of parental liberty.

CONCLUSION

We believe that many people find parental selection for heterosexuality intuitively troubling or even abhorrent. We also believe, however, that this is one of those intuitions that does not stand up to rational analysis. The general enterprise of attempting to influence what a child will be like cannot be objected to. Raising a child consists exactly in attempting to dictate what that child will be like in a multitude of ways. Virtually everyone believes, and rightly so, that it is, indeed, a primary *duty* of parents to take steps, both pre- and postnatal, to assure that their children possess certain characteristics and do not possess others. Assuming that a particular method of selection, in itself, poses no moral problem, its use, as a general matter, cannot be faulted.

Even assuming, as we do, that homosexuality is completely unobjectionable morally and not inherently inferior to heterosexuality in any way, the specific enterprise of selecting for heterosexuality seems to be morally acceptable. Again assuming that the method employed in itself raises no moral problem, one cannot consistently object to its use in selecting for heterosexuality with any greater force than one would object to, for example, (1) parents genetically disposed to homosexuality refusing to conceive; or (2) parents refusing to eat a certain food while pregnant or to expose a child to certain books, if such actions were found to increase the likelihood of a child's being homosexual. These two actions do not seem to pose serious moral problems. More importantly, selection for heterosexuality may tangibly benefit parents, children, and their families and seems to have only a slight potential for any significant harm. Further, parents making such selections may well be doing so out of good, or at least neutral, motives. And even when the selection is made out of the worst motive, parental heterosexism, the act itself serves only as evidence of that bad motive and does nothing to compound it. Given this, we see no reason, in the case of the selection of a child's sexual orientation, to deprive parents of the freedom (taken for granted in a multitude of other contexts) to determine what their children will be like.

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