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Parenthood: Right or Privilege?

Birth control is not population control. Individual goals, not community needs, motivate individual actions. In every nation women want more children than the community needs.

How can we reduce reproduction? Persuasion must be tried first. Tomorrow's mothers must be educated to seek careers other than multiple motherhood. Community nurseries are needed to free women for careers outside the home. Mild coercion may soon be accepted—for example, tax rewards for reproductive nonproliferation.

But in the long run a purely voluntary system selects for its own failure: noncooperators outbreed cooperators. So what restraints shall we employ? A policeman under every bed? Jail sentences? Compulsory abortion? Infanticide? . . . Memories of Nazi Germany rise and obscure our vision.

We need not titillate our minds with such horrors, for we already have at hand an acceptable technology: sterilization. The taboo on this subject is fast dissolving, thanks to Arthur Godfrey and Paul Ehrlich, who have confessed their sterilizations in public. Fear (mostly unjustified) about the safety of the "pill" has motivated multitudes to follow in their footsteps.

It should be easy to limit a woman's reproduction by sterilizing her at the birth of her n th child. Is this a shocking idea? If so, try this "thought-experiment": let $n = 20$. Since this is not shocking, let n diminish until population control is achievable. The Women's Liberation Movement may not like it, but control must be exerted through females. Divorce and remarriage play havoc with assigning responsibility to couples or to men. Biology makes women responsible.

Many who want no third child would fight resolutely for the freedom to have that which they do not want. But what is freedom? Hegel said that "Freedom is the recognition of necessity." People need to recognize that population control is needed to protect the quality of life for our children.

The "right" to breed implies *ownership* of children. This concept is no longer tenable. Society pays an ever larger share of the cost of raising and educating children. The idea of ownership is surely affected by the thrust of the saying that "He who pays the piper calls the tune." On a biological level the idea of ownership of children has not been defensible for almost a century, not since August Weismann drew his celebrated diagram of the relationship of germ plasm to somatoplasm.

Biologically, all that I give "my" child is a set of chromosomes. Are they *my* chromosomes? Hardly. Sequestered in the germinal area long before *my* birth, "my" gonadal chromosomes have lived a life of their own, beyond *my* control. Mutation has altered them. In reproduction, "my" germ plasm is assembled in a new combination and mixed with another assortment with a similar history. "My" child's germ plasm is not *mine*; it is really only part of the community's store. I was merely the temporary custodian of part of it.

If parenthood is a right, population control is impossible. If parenthood is only a privilege, and if parents see themselves as trustees of the germ plasm and guardians of the rights of future generations, then there is hope for mankind.

—GARRETT HARDIN, *University of California, Santa Barbara*