



Ethics Bites

The Family

David Edmonds

This is *Ethics Bites*, with me David Edmonds

Nigel Warburton

And me Nigel Warburton

David

Ethics Bites is a series of interviews on applied ethics, produced in association with The Open University.

Nigel

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David

In western countries at least, the traditional family unit, married man and woman, living with their offspring, is breaking down. Partly this is due to fewer people choosing to get married; partly to higher divorce rates; partly also, because technological changes, such as in-vitro-fertilization, have led to more children being raised by an adult or adults with whom they're not biologically connected. For example, sperm donors may allow single women, or gay couples, to have much-wanted children without the need for heterosexual intercourse; but these children often grow up with no knowledge of their biological father.

Brenda Almond has written a book about the family, and is a member of the Human Genetics Commission. She believes we're far too blasé about family break-down. There are strong empirical grounds, she says, for believing that the traditional model of the family leads to better outcomes for children: but knowledge of who our parents are is also linked to deeper questions about identity, about who we think we are.

Nigel Warburton

Brenda Almond, welcome to *Ethics Bites*.

Brenda Almond

Pleased to be here, thanks for inviting me.

Nigel

The topic we want to focus on today is the family. I'd just like to ask you to start with, what the family is in your view?

Brenda

Well that's the key question these days. We seem to have drifted into a situation where the family can mean whatever anybody wants it to mean. In particular, there are two things. One is what you might call the de-gendering of parenthood. The other is the cut-off, the de-linking of biology, biological parenthood, from having children. So I stuck to what seems a very unimaginative kind of concept of the family, modelled on many mammal species that it consists of a male and a female and their joint offspring. And it turns out that's a very controversial view to hold.

Nigel

Can you just explain precisely what you mean by the de-gendering of the family?

Brenda

We seem now to have the idea that motherhood and fatherhood aren't necessarily connected – motherhood with being a woman, or fatherhood with being a father. It's important. It looks insignificant, but it's having quite a dramatic impact on family law across the western democracies, as everybody is rushing in the field of family law to changing laws so that you are getting rid of the old assumptions about who's a mother, who's a father, who should be on a child's birth certificate, who should bring those children up.

Nigel

So could you explain why this is a philosophical issue. Obviously there are empirical questions about how the family is changing in society. But what makes this a philosophical issue?

Brenda

Take the family issue as a whole and its link with personal relationships - marriage, continuity – you do find deep philosophical and ethical questions arising. I think that a lot of people use a kind of cost-benefit argument when they're discussing the issue. This could be considered philosophical, because it's utilitarian. But it's interesting to go back say to Aristotle. I think we could draw from Aristotle the idea that the human animal flourishes best in a certain kind of biological unit, one that transcends generations, for example, as the family does, and so gives us a sense of the past and the future. Helps us actually come to terms with our own mortality. In the book that I wrote I prefaced the whole book with a Chinese proverb which I found quite striking: 'To forget one's ancestors is to be a brook without a source, a tree without a root.'

Nigel

Is what you're saying that there is empirically a right way to organize a family if you want that family to flourish, particularly the children within that relationship?

Brenda

I'm not a social scientist myself but I've looked at a lot of the social science research. There is actually no dispute on the empirical question: that as far as children are concerned the best setting is actually two parents of the opposite sex, who are married to each other; that is, they have made that commitment. And the people who've done these sorts of comparisons look at quite straight-forward issues, like how they do in education, health, continuity in their personal lives. Cohabitation, for instance, very much more the norm now, doesn't produce such good results as far as the children are concerned. And the number of years that the various kinds of living together last are quite strikingly in favour of marriage.

Nigel

Even if that is true, does anything moral or political follow from that?

Brenda

Well, if we're talking about politics, then politicians do have some sort of duty to arrange things in so far as they've got the power to do it, to optimize arrangements within society, and if society has a good institution, such as marriage for example, then we don't need to go so far as to say they have an obligation to foster it. It's sufficient to say they have an obligation not to introduce legal and economic disincentives to that institution. I'm afraid I think this is what has been happening over the last few decades and looks set to continue in the future.

Nigel

The driving force for a lot of that change is a liberalism about life style, usually argued for in terms of peoples' choice about how they live as sexual beings: their freedom to decide what they want to make of their lives.

Brenda

I quite agree. And I think I could describe myself as a libertarian anti-libertarian. There are limits to the freedom we want everybody to have. We can just appeal to John Stuart Mill and say the limits are set where your choices are harming other people. So where people have set themselves to have children and to bring them up, if their choices are going to be

damaging for those children, then I think that you've got a quite a strong liberal case, at least, for them to think very carefully about the way they're going.

Nigel

[The poet] Philip Larkin famously pointed out that just about every parent does things which will harm their children in some way. We all harm our children in some way, but we also hope the cost benefit analysis brings them out above a threshold. It's not clear to me that simply because on average a two-parent heterosexual family is going to be better, that there should be any restriction on lesbian and gay people bringing up children even though they won't necessarily be their biological children.

Brenda

First of all you must distinguish between raising children and creating children. Then you have to distinguish between creating children for situations where they won't be brought up by a genetic parent, but will perhaps have that explained to them, they'll know that, and situations where they won't. I think there's no problem about bringing together children who need a home, and unrelated people who are ready and able to provide them with that. Creating children is more problematic. And a third question which is implicit there is bringing children up without a genetic parent, but concealing that fact from them. In the course of ordinary life people do have secrets within the family and it can turn out that a father isn't the person that the child thinks it is, but we are now getting a situation where, in some countries they've already done it and in this country we're thinking about doing it, where birth certificates give the wrong information on that. So I think that's a very important issue.

Nigel

Most of what you've said so far hinges on empirical evidence. Now if the empirical evidence got overturned and it emerged that lesbian couples were better at bringing up children than heterosexual ones who were biological parents, or that gay couples tended on average to be better parents than heterosexual ones, would you then change your view about how the family ought to be organized and how politicians ought to influence the shape of our society?

Brenda

First you might say that there is something wrong in creating people, already separated from their genetic parent, plus half or the whole of their genetic relatives. Now that donor conceived people are about in the real world, they're grown up, they're no longer small children, many of these are making a very strong case against this, and they're feeling very angry that they've been cut off from connections which people historically have always thought extremely important. I think there are cases where you can see why somebody desperately wants to have a child and this is the only way. So I'm not saying we must never do anything of this sort. But if it's done then I think it must be done in a way which is so open that the child or the adult person will know that that's their situation and background and preferably also will have a way with consent to make contact with those lost relatives. I think there are rights involved here which it's never been necessary to express before. But it's not a new conception. The whole folk lore of Cinderella, lost children, there's all those Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, and of course the Oedipus story, people understood what a difference it made to have someone you thought was not your mother, who turned out to be your mother or vice versa. Someone you thought was your father then turns out not to be; these are very deep sentiments, and to feel we can shake them off in a single generation is rather foolish.

Nigel

So, I discover that I was actually the son of a sperm donor, does that mean I have a right to know all my siblings, all my cousins and all my uncles and aunts who are presumably out there?

Brenda

I think the British government has already conceded that point. At least to the extent that we now will permit somebody at 18 to go and find out if they were donor conceived, and actually to get the last known address of the person. So once that's been conceded, then finding those other relatives would be a short step; and of course it's in line with adoption law, which much more universally has gone over to the view of providing the information. Could I make

another practical point for this business of knowledge? Maybe this isn't so philosophical, but it's very important. The genetics is developing very radically on the medical front. The geneticists don't really think it's very valuable to rely on people who might want to know what genetic diseases they're prone to, for example. It's not going to be scientifically useful for them to do DNA tests; what they think continues to be most important is what they call family tracing. And so when you put people in the situation of – let's put it strongly – being deceived about their close relatives, then you're actually putting them in a situation of risk as far as their health is concerned.

Nigel

I can see that point about transparency; the moral point that we ought to be honest about our relationship with our children and tell them the truth about something so fundamental as who their parents were. But what's the huge value attached to biology; is it simply a prophylactic against certain kinds of inherited disease?

Brenda

Far from it. But it's subtle things, like what people look for in their own children; they don't always find them, but they look for common attitudes and interests, physical resemblances, and they're very pleased, I think, when they find some of their own or their relatives characteristics in the child that they're bringing up. People dive into the sea to rescue, in the most extraordinary circumstances, children they think belong to them. People may hang back a little more from rushing into the burning building or jumping into the foaming sea to rescue people they have no particular connection with. Good or bad that seems to be something about human nature.

Nigel

For you, biology trumps everything; that is really the driving force in the family. Whereas there seems to be very strong arguments for saying love, and a nurturing environment, is key?

Brenda

Yes, that's true. Supposing there's a mix up in hospital – and in fact this has actually happened quite recently - where the wrong babies were sent back home with the wrong parents. Well, as a matter of fact the parents get very upset about this and I suspect that the children when they grew up would also be very upset about it. People do have a strong feeling that if they're having children they want to have their own children.

Nigel

In that case that you describe of the switched children; suppose nobody ever found out that the children had been switched, would that make the world a worse place for that?

Brenda

Well I don't really understand the world being a worse place. Most people will feel that knowing their birth origins is something extremely basic and personal to them and to their identity. They might say why should other people feel entitled to deprive them of that? As an example, one thing about the African slave trade was that there were people who were shipped across the ocean, lost all contact with their origins, and this was thought to be one particularly bad aspect of a whole lot of wrongs, and it's interesting that Afro-Americans now go back to Africa looking for their roots. So this question of how you construe your own personal identity, comes in very strongly here.

Nigel

So depriving people of their own biological origins is a special kind of harm.

Brenda

A special kind of harm and a violation of a very fundamental right.

Nigel

Brenda Almond, thank you very much

Brenda

Thank you

David

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