

Prompt: Should everyone be allowed to be parents? If not, what disqualifies them?

## Of Orphans and Orpheus

Sorrow filled my heart as I reluctantly hugged a girl of a local orphanage in Yangshuo, China. Saying goodbye mere hours after meeting for the first time felt like a dream with no clear beginning but a definite resolution. An orphan is defined by the dictionary as, “a child who has lost both their parents due to death or abandonment”. Yet, it wasn’t until I heard my friend describing her mother in a clinical, detached tone, that I truly understood the meaning of abandonment. It wasn’t until I sat on my rooftop on a depressingly cold spring night, processing the news that my friend passed away, that I confronted death for the first time. In the fragile yet cozy world I had built for myself, of warm evenings spent reading the short stories of Murakami and the sweet scent of vanilla fragrances emanating from my diffuser, death and abandonment held no place. To love is to accept grief. This, I can accept. I internalized it when I first read *The Little Prince* as a child. Yet, grief stemming from love, diametrically differs from grief beget by abandonment. Bearing a child through love and with love, differs from bearing a child through hate and with hate. More often than not, the relationship between children and parents is complexed and nuanced. In the opening of *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy writes, “All happy family are happy in similar ways. Every unhappy family are unhappy in their own ways.” This tendency manifests in the natural world through thermodynamics and combinatorics. Order, like happiness, is singular and precise. Disorder, like unhappiness, is multimodal and continuous. The unique combination of unhappiness is simply a statistical byproduct of the difference in magnitude between the singular and multiple, the discrete and continuous, the few and the many.

The issue of parenting arises when considering ethics. It is abundantly clear that abuses in parenting disqualifies them as parents. Indeed, that is how the law operates. Child protection services and government supported programs legally protect children from neglect and abuse. Here, a crucial distinction must be made. Are parents a continuous biological role, that cannot be taken away, or is it a combination of biology, social, and economic roles that an individual consciously adopts? For the former, only genetic challenges such as carrying syphilis that will be congenitally passed down may threaten the parent’s right. For the latter, which I find to be more interesting, each aspect of parenthood may be threatened. Another distinction should be made. Whether everyone should be allowed to be parents is different from whether everyone should be allowed to have children. What makes separates good and bad parents, capable and incompetent parents, lies in the teleological tension between societal judgement and cultural values. It is in this ever-evolving symbiotic tension that judgement manifests. Judgement that is inherently incorrect as evaluated by its descendants, but nonetheless reflective of a specific time period. Whether everyone should be able to have children is more explicitly focused on the microcosmic relationship between the individual and the creator, and the role that individuals play in creation. It fringes upon inherent rights with

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opposing scenarios. The addict who sells their baby for more drugs is to be pitied. But to think that they deserve to possess their child is gross ignorance.

Now, having made these critical distinctions, the path to answering the question appears paradoxical. Societal and frameworks for law merges the biology of reproduction with very few considerations of ethics of reproduction. Indeed, reproduction can be argued to be inherently unethical in a planet that is slowly being destroyed by climate change, facing immense conflicts, and in a capitalistic economic system built on exploitation. This is strengthened when the disparity of reproductive rates between developed countries and lesser developed countries creates the statistical bias that one is significantly more likely to be born in a poverty-stricken family than a comfortable one. Such a perspective, while realist and grounded, fails to see the beauty in life and the freedom of choice it may bring. Yet, this type of optimism falters when confronted with forced prostitution due to poverty. Maybe it is not one or the other, but a paradoxical merging of both perspectives. Life is cruel, yet also beautiful. Similarly, abusive parents lead to a horrible experience of life. However, it may also accelerate maturity, encourage a deeper appreciation of the small things, and provide a perspective that may radically overcome generational trauma. The answer is not a blind ignorance that focuses only on the good, but the acceptance that the chance to live is precious. For it is only with a consciousness that one can evaluate their consciousness and their life and determine whether they find their life to be worth living. With every example of children breaking generational trauma and ending cycles of abuse, is an example of a dead child crying in their room wishing they were dead, a child wearing long sleeves to hide the scars they developed from cutting, and a child hanging strangely peacefully on a noose. The reconciliation between such pain and hope lies in a teleological suspension. Camus would argue that this is evidence for the absurd. An absurd world that defies logic and ethics, where suffering and hope embrace, where love and grief entwine, and where wisdom and ignorance blend together.

The answer to the question lies in fundamentally in what the individual can accept. If they are incapable of accepting tension and embracing paradoxes for meaning, they are stuck to defend one of two stances. In the first stance, they must defend the right for all to be parents, regardless of circumstance and capacity. In the second stance, they must reconcile that not everyone should be a parent, but also that what disqualifies that individual is inherently unquantifiable. This unquantifiability thrives in the crevices of cultural differences and the moral relativism that seems all too tempting for a culture built upon conflict-avoidance at all costs. Yet, if one is capable of embracing that tension and liminal unknowability, one can recognize that everyone should be able to have children, and that even though abuses are inevitable, the radical beauty of creating life in an act that empowers a soul to think for itself may justify the evil it banally ignores.

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Returning to the orphanage, orphans face extraordinary cruelty, either rejected by their parents or the world itself. Yet, in that cruelty, they are bound by nothing in a way few individuals may claim. Their experience offers a glimpse into this paradox. A paradox of death and survival, loneliness and community, suffering and hope. Softly, I let go of the girl. My legs felt heavy, and a burden set in my heart as I walked away. Whispering fake promises of coming to visit her in the future and holding the bracelet she has gifted me tightly, I marked myself a liar. A liar and a coward who cannot bear to disappoint a girl of immense innocence, but a liar, nonetheless. So, I now walk the liminal spaces, thinking in lucid dreams and wishing to wake up one day, and escape the cave. The smell of the fire keeps getting fainter. The shadows dancing feels more and more familiar. Maybe this is not the cave anymore, but my home. Maybe I must accept reality.