

Disproving the Family

Stefan Molyneux's position on child raising invalidated by his own ethical framework.

In his book, ['Universally Preferable Behaviour'](#) (UPB), Stefan presents a rational framework of the same name, and its demonstration of secular ethics. The framework is as valid for ethics as the scientific method is for science, or as logic and empiricism themselves. If you haven't read the book this article might be difficult to understand, although there is nothing in this reasoning that is really new to us – as it is not new to children, who understand it intuitively.

Stefan also makes the following moral proposition with regards to raising children: “biological parents are positively obliged towards their children” in the form of care, food, custody...

Before addressing how the UPB framework specifically invalidates this moral proposition, let's look at how the book itself registers the self contradiction of proposing this rule in the first place.

In the beginning of the book (version 1.0, chapter 'Ground Rules', p.9) Stefan duly points out that:

I fully accept the Humean distinction between “is” and “ought.” Valid moral rules cannot be directly derived from the existence of anything in reality.

But, for some reason, he derives this “ought” from the mere existence of a newborn child (“is”), or from the existence of a certain voluntary parent-child contract, which he contradictorily argues is both naturally given and entered into by the parent.

Later on (chapter 'Child Raising', p.89) he even goes on to say “everyone must fulfill voluntary obligations”. This does not only mean elevating particular statements or clauses to the level of moral rules, which would conflict with things like “murder is immoral” (if I must fulfill the personal voluntary obligation of “murdering you” because I made such an agreement with – a suicidal – you, then clearly I can override the universal moral rule “thou shalt not murder”, and anyone coming in your defense would be immoral); but also means that Stefan thinks voluntary positive obligations can be created out of life's old habit to reproduce itself. (Let's leave alone for now what it means to create an obligation out of what is naturally an indulgence.) Clearly, not everyone to whom children are born has had the voluntary intention to conceive them and create such contracts; and it is only conscious will or intention that determines if someone is morally liable.

In this same chapter Stefan explains that this “ought”, and our moral right to enforce it, is

derived from the knowledge parents have of their child's biologically dependent state and that they "choose to conceive" him or her, or that children are "effects of their bodies".

If this kind of implicit contracts created moral rules, then anything one might promise or accept in a contract would be automatically elevated to the category of moral rule, and we should enforce it (let's not even think about the material effects of our bodies being equally elevated). Stefan is aware of this when he does not put "fraud" in the category of universally preferable behaviour (morality) later in the book (p.83); just as he is aware that UPB is a framework for simply testing the validity of ethical propositions, *not creating arbitrary obligations*, let alone positive obligations (if the framework could do that then, significantly in this context, the UPB-compliant rule "thou shalt not watch porn" should be enforced, resulting in the violent repression of millions of people).

So why would Stefan suddenly create this rule and positive obligation, in the light that he fully accepts the original humane distinction? If UPB is just, as he says "a cohesive, objective and rational framework for evaluating moral propositions", not a set of moral commandments, then how is it that these positive – and rather incriminatory – "oughts" can be derived from it?

The answer is, in essence, that this is an attempt to rescue the western family ideal, after it has been shown – notably by himself – to be a mere irrational cult, along with all other family models. Indeed, if mother and father are both "equally obliged" towards their biological children, they had better stay together in family; or the reverse: if staying together in family is a moral imperative, then I would be likely to see the children that come out of my body in light of Stefan's proposition. There are also, I believe, other reasons for it (see my article "[Peaceful Parenting Superstars!](#)") which have as a background the biological fact that there is no gender-equality in the relationship between parents and child (men do not give birth...) and that false morality like this works primarily in the benefit of the woman as a child farmer.

Let us now see how the UPB framework invalidates this proposition at the level of logical consistency by reminding ourselves that:

1.

Children are conceived by two *people*.

2.

Moral rules are universally binding for *people*.

3.

A moral rule or theory has to be logically consistent and empirically valid (UPB)

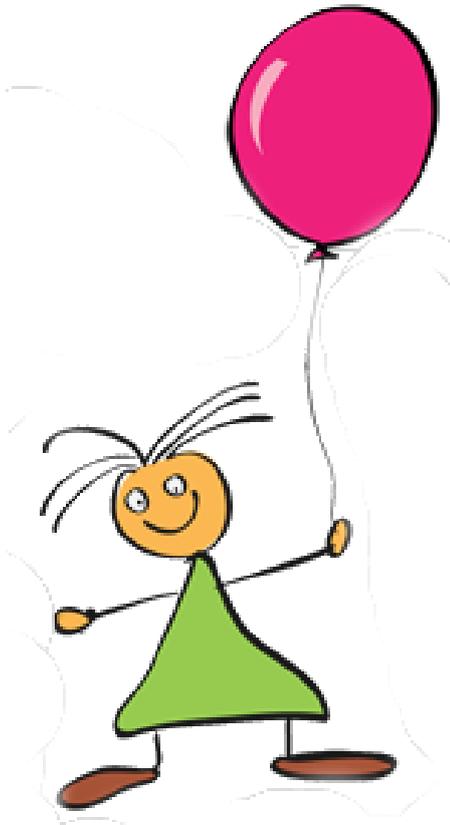
4.

The moral theory proposed by Stefan is: “you have positive obligations towards the children you have conceived”. This includes providing custody, food, care,... besides the negative obligations to avoid spanking, yelling...

Using Stefan's own logical reduction in the book (“two men in a room”, p.66) to test this theory, we see that a man and a woman in a room with their baby cannot both be moral at the same time, because, for any behaviour towards the child that constitutes “being good” or “care”, only one of them can perform it. Perhaps they could both be moral if their obligations were negative (e.g. “not spanking” or “not yelling” to your children; although, as we will see later on, this cannot be a moral rule either according to Stefan himself) but child raising requires also positive behaviour (e.g. “feeding” or “holding”) and this is what the proposition is about.

Since the nature of this UPB test is that of conceptual logic, any such proposition that binds two subjects to perform one behaviour towards a single object (a one-to-one correspondence) cannot be valid.

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This is not an issue of material possibilities for performing said behaviour (“taking turns”, “holding at the same time”...) as seen also in how UPB tests the moral propositions of “rape” or “theft”, but one of conceptual logic. The intrinsic inconsistency of a moral proposition cannot be salvaged by empirical dispositions, according to UPB and logic itself.

Similarly, in this direction, an advocate of the theory could argue that what counts in terms of behaviour is the individual’s intention (“the two parents cannot perform exactly the same good action at the same time, but they have the intention and readiness for it”). However, as seen in the case of the moral proposition “rape is moral” in the book, for example, we know the victim’s intention has to be to resist rape in order to enable it to be rape – the victim has to resist virtue in order to allow virtue. The victim’s illogical intention to act against the universally “moral” behaviour of rape, and therefore be immoral, is not mitigated by the fact that he could later on become moral by having the opposite intention “in the back of his mind”, by becoming the rapist himself later on, or availing himself of some “simultaneous raping device” that could cancel out the fact that he has to prevent the moral behaviour in question... None of this applies. The moral rule is inherently invalid by its own formulation, and cannot be validated by special empirical arrangements.

In the same logical way, here, in order to enable morality (caring for the child), one must intend to prevent the behaviour that is considered morally good, either by resisting it in oneself to let the other parent act, or by forcefully replacing his or her caring actions with one’s own. This is a logical contradiction that completely invalidates this proposition and the moral obligation to be good to your children, when being “good” means positive or active actions.

Let us now look again at the chapter called “Child Raising” in its confused effort to establish this moral rule within a book and system that implicitly and explicitly rejects it.

Parents who starve a child to death are clearly guilty of murder. Children are born into this world in a state of involuntary imprisonment within the family – this does not mean that the family is evil, or corrupt it is simply a statement of biological fact.

In other words: "the monogamous family is a biological fact". It is hard to believe that Stefan here actually uses an appeal to nature to attempt to validate a cultural claim, but it is true.

Children are by the parents’ choice enslaved to the parents – this form of biological incarceration puts negligent parents in the same moral position as a kidnapper who allows his captive to starve to death, or a nurse who lets her utterly-dependent patients die of thirst.

So now it turns out that the family and children's captivity within it are not only a "biological fact", but also the "parents' choice"... (!)

What happens here is, of course, that having come across his own statement "Children are born into this world in a state of involuntary imprisonment within the family", which is just an arbitrary cultural prejudice (biological parents do not have to cause their children's imprisonment; they can allow others to meet their needs) and, indeed, an "evil and corrupt" and possessive *choice*, Stefan must rush to deny it by saying it is a biological fact, contradicting himself. A typical case of denial, and just one more irrational defence of the cult of the family.

In a display of circular reasoning, he himself creates the moral rule by pulling the "biological" card, whereby parents automatically become captors, and then says that the rule is deduced from the parents' will – which is necessary for there to exist actual moral responsibility.

These kinds of implicit contracts are quite common in life. We do not sign a contract with a restaurateur when we go to eat a meal in his restaurant; it is simply understood that we will pay before we leave. I have never signed a contract when I walk into a store promising not to shoplift, but they have the right to prosecute me if I do.

Stefan makes an irrelevant comparison here by referring to a *negative* and universal moral obligation – to not steal. A relevant comparison to child raising would be that there existed a contract known to me by which, for example, I would have to begin working for the shop the moment I stepped into it – a *positive* obligation. Clearly, then the option to try to avoid stepping on this shop – the same as people who engage in sex can try to avoid having children – becomes very useful in avoiding responsibility. Still, the fact that children can be born, or that I can step into this shop as an accident, does not make it an intention on my part, and therefore not create a voluntary obligation. And even if I do have an intention to work for the shop, or have a child, my obligation does not become moral in quality any more than a shop's terms and conditions are universal commandments.

I also have never signed a contract promising not to rape a woman if we go on a date, yet such a "contract" certainly exists, according to UPB.

Here it seems that, in the spirit of this chapter, Stefan has used UPB (again, a system for

evaluating moral propositions) as a system for creating arbitrary enforceable contracts. The reason someone who rapes another person on a date can be prosecuted is not his having entered into a certain “contract” with this person, but his having violated a universal moral rule (“thou shalt not rape”) primarily. Similarly, if he steals from a shop, he can be prosecuted for having stolen (moral rule) not for committing fraud within a certain arbitrary contract, which would be secondary. These things are simply not the same, but Stefan has equated them in order to infuse his idea of parental obligation with a universal moral quality. Besides, even if we could establish that all parents have voluntarily entered such contract, again, Stefan knows that “fraud” does not belong to the area of morality or universally preferable behaviour (to quote the book: “Thus fraud falls under the umbrella of “avoidability,” and so is in a fundamentally different category than rape, murder and theft.”, p.83).

Another way in which Stefan tries to make a moral case out of his proposition is saying that, by virtue of the parent’s implicit contract towards the child, they would be guilty of murder if they did not fulfill it – an immorality. And it seems perfectly fine to him to subordinate a universal moral rule to a particular contract. Let’s see the difficulties this creates:

“Since, through inaction, causing the death of someone completely dependent upon you is the equivalent of murder, parents are liable for such a crime. We could of course put forward the proposition that parents do not have to take care of their children, but that is far too specific a principle to be a moral premise – it would be the same as saying “parents can murder,” which is not UPB-compliant.” (‘Child Raising’, p.89)

Just as we saw above, “parents do not have to take care of their children” is not necessarily a “moral premise”, it is a statement of the mere fact that parents have free will; although it is understandable Stefan would see a moral premise in the opposite of what he proposes as a moral premise (“parents have to take care of their children”). Children are not “dependent upon you”; children are just *dependent*. One way parents would not have to take care of their children is simply giving them away to others who will – and who are obviously not their parents. Or, if the parents neglect or abandon their children, other people could take them away, which is *not the same* as prosecuting the parents for attempting to murder them. (One does wonder if the purpose of establishing moral obligations that focus on prosecuting offenders instead of defending victims is really that moral.) Quoting what he says previously in the same chapter:

Thus it is assumed that parents will feed and take care of their newborn baby. If said parents decide against such care-giving, then they are obligated to give the child up to other people who will care for it, or face the charge of murder, just as the manager of a home for the disabled must either feed those who utterly depend on him, or give them up to someone who will.

No, it cannot be assumed that parents will feed and take care of their newborn baby, just like it

cannot be assumed that anyone will obey moral rules, or contracts. Children do die and are abused and neglected all the time because of this, and we should do something precisely because they are people (universal) not because they might be your children (contract).

Again, all this happens because Stefan is blind – clinging to his 'a priori' family concept – to the fact that the dependence of children is universal or directed at anyone or anything that can possibly take care of them, not at the biological parents only. “Parents do not have to take care of children” only has a moral quality and equates “parents can murder”, as he suggests there, because it happens to be the opposite of his own original proposition “parents have to take care of children [within the family]”, which he automatically considers moral, valid, and supposedly UPB-compliant. Moreover, “parents can murder” is, according to him, “far too specific” to be a moral theory, whereas its exact opposite “parents cannot murder” or “parents have to take care of their children” is not (!!). We will see this in more detail in a moment, but let’s continue analysing this attempt to validate the proposition through the appeal to murder.

We know that the contract biologically “binds” parents to their babies, but now, according to Stefan, they can become immoral murderers just from the fact that babies are people; not from merely violating the contract but as a major consequence of violating it. Now babies are “people” enough to be objects of murder, but not to be subjects or actors; so parents have, through their actions, put people in their lives who will die unless they – and only they – do something. This is the same as saying that, through your actions, you have ended up with someone in some isolated place where he will die unless you – and only you – do something. If you assumed the task of saving him, you would be guilty of murder if you then decided to turn around and do nothing; which is very true, but can only be valid from the fact that you have *willingly* assumed the task, not from a pre-existing contract towards this person. Introducing such contract here would be like saying you are the one and only cause of this person being at risk of dying, because you knew your actions would lead irrevocably to that situation. This is the equivalent of having had an intention to murder in the first place! We all know this is not the case when conceiving children; people who have sex obviously do not do it with the certainty that it will cause a baby to be born – let alone with the intention to kill a human being. People become murderers when they *choose* to murder, either by direct action, or by responsible inaction after *choosing* to assume *sole responsibility*.

Thus, we have a conflict between this biological contract and the moral rule “thou shalt not murder”; they cannot simultaneously be valid. “Biology” cannot eliminate choice from morality and make anyone solely responsible for anything; if it doesn’t do it for your digestion, or for cancer, then it doesn’t for baby’s condition either. Nature cannot automatically blackmail you with the possibility of murdering someone.

This, again, is a consequence of Stefan’s own situation of captivity in the irrational institution of marriage and the family, that gets projected and effected onto the child. Women have been blackmailing and guiltning men with the caring of their children, and men managing and labelling this situation as one of “freedom” and “virtue” with their quests and philosophies for thousands of years. Not even famous philosophers seem to be able to stop this cycle.

But let’s forget this. Let’s forget all the previous stuff too. Let’s forget that you cannot create

arbitrary positive “oughts” out of the existence of a child; that you cannot even prove parents had a conscious intention to have a child; that a positive moral behaviour directed to one object cannot be required of two subjects; that children do not need to be dependent of their biological parents only; that fraud does not equal immorality, etc., etc., and assume that there is a moral rule – and its corresponding contract – that makes good, rational parents choose to take care of their babies, because doing otherwise would be murder. Let's also assume that this moral rule can apply only to parents and their children in dependent state, and still be UPB compliant.

Ironically, and perhaps not surprisingly, we only need to look at the chapter that follows immediately ('Don't eat fish', p.90) to find Stefan's own refutation of this:

The moral proposition “eating fish is evil” thus fails the test of universality because it is too specific to be generalized – it is like saying “my theory of gravity applies only to pink rocks.” If it is a theory of gravity, then it must apply to everything; if it only applies to pink rocks, then it is not a theory of gravity.

All we have to do is replace “eating fish is evil” for “murdering your children is evil” and read that again. Like the fish in that example, children are now the object of Stefan's moral rule. If not taking care of children is “evil” because it would be murder, then clearly this is invalid because a universal moral rule like “thou shalt not murder” cannot only apply to a certain object, but it has to apply “to everything” or to the action itself (not taking care of anything).

Stefan's proposition only refers to murder as a consequence of “not taking care”. The proposition is not “murdering is evil” but “not taking care [of your children] is evil”.

In other words, the UPB compliance of “thou shalt not murder” cannot be used here because it would only apply to certain people as subjects (parents) and as objects (children) of the moral rule, and violate the requirement of universality. The (arbitrary) moment a child stops being dependent, the action of “taking care” would change moral quality, and the same happens the moment someone becomes a parent, as the mentioned chapter fully illustrates.

But is this really a problem for moral propositions? Does the requirement of universality mean no moral propositions can be made about a subset of humanity? Of course not. Stefan knows this when introducing the idea of the “coma test”; or speaks about children being objects of murder (people) but not moral actors; or even talks about sharks being moral actors! (“This would include not just fishermen, but sharks as well – since if killing fish is evil, we have expanded our definition of ethical “actors” to include non-human life.” - ‘Animal Rights’ p.91)... the amount of incoherence here is staggering. Moral rules are for people who have rational consciousness and the capacity to choose, and they are a subset of humanity. As we have seen, Stefan's moral position of child raising is itself a moral proposition that applies to an even narrower subset. So why all this fuss with universality?

Again, the problem is Stefan's need to derive "oughts" from "is", which is something he shares with almost everyone who criticises UPB by mistaking it as a book of law. Universality in morality suggests equality and liability before a principle, but the principle need not bypass our ability to stop, think and choose. People hear "universal" and immediately think of obligation and compulsion because that is the nature of the false moral premises that have been inflicted on them since early childhood to dominate them, as they lose the ability to stop, think and choose. In this section ('More Challenging Tests of UPB', p.86) Stefan mistakes his own definition of UPB as a rational framework in exactly the same way, as he tries to make particular moral cases for the family (child raising) or against animal-rights (p.91) by fiddling with the definition of universality (for a full analysis of this please read my article 'What UPB is' at moraluniversal.com).

In sum, there cannot be a moral obligation to take care of children, according to UPB itself.

Finally, if we accept Stefan's own definition of love in his book ['Real Time Relationships', p.34](#) – and which I accept too – an interesting and central corollary can be derived in relation to all this:

1.

Love is our *involuntary* response to virtue.

2.

Obedying moral rules is *voluntary*.

3.

Therefore people who care for any child as a moral duty do not do it for love.

You might be wondering, if Stefan Molyneux's position fails so miserably, what makes anyone care for children in a rational and loving way?

Well, if you accept, as I do, that children are virtuous according to proposition 1 (a subject for another article) then we can come to a conclusion we all understand deep inside: love is the not the way to take care of children, but the way children get taken care of.