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BOOK REVIEW

Balancing Freedom and Responsibility: Ethics in the Age of New Reproductive Technologies

Battisti, D. 2024. *Balancing Freedom and Responsibility: Procreative Ethics in the Age of New Reproductive Technologies*. Routledge. ISBN 9781032652085.

M. Barış

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For most of human history, reproduction has been shaped not only by biological processes but also by cultural, political, and social forces. While procreation often involved two individuals, it was never solely a private matter—particularly for women, enslaved people, and other marginalized groups whose reproductive autonomy was constrained or denied. Until the late 1970s, reproduction was largely tied to sexual intercourse and occurred within the body, often the womb. However, with the expansion of biomedical knowledge and technological capability, we have entered a new era in which reproduction can be increasingly planned, externalized, and transformed—especially for some populations—redefining what it means to procreate.

Assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) are treatments and procedures designed to achieve pregnancy, and they have irreversibly transformed the landscape of human reproduction, altering not only its location and methods but also its components, collaborators, and very ontology. Though rooted in sexual reproduction in the biological sense, the process now extends far beyond traditional biological or moral frameworks. Today, reproduction is no longer a relatively private matter tied to sexual intercourse but has become a collaborative and collective endeavour, shaped by various technologies, involving multiple parties—whether biologically related or not—and subject to differing regulations across countries. As a result, it is now extensively examined not only in reproductive medicine but also in bioethics, public health, medical law, and sociology.

Inevitably, ARTs have profoundly reshaped and enriched our understanding of procreation, laying out novel responsibilities not only for the procreator but also for the health professionals and policymakers. This transformation has created a paradox: while these advancements enhance reproductive freedom of the procreator, they also introduce new procreative moral obligations—not only toward our offspring but also toward society- alongside new regulatory pressures in areas of reproduction that arguably should not be governed at the policy level at all.

In *Procreative Responsibility and Assisted Reproductive Technologies*, Davide Battisti (2024), focusing on "selection" through preimplantation genetic diagnosis, "reconstruction" through reproductive genome editing (rGE, also known as germline or heritable genome editing), and "replacement" through ectogenesis (development of an embryo in an artificial uterus), eloquently reflects on "the potential to radically transform our understanding of parenthood and our relationship with

M. Barış (✉)
School of Medicine, Department of Medical History & Ethics, Marmara University, Istanbul, Türkiye
e-mail: maide.baris@marmara.edu.tr

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progeny" (2) while offering a nuanced exploration of the ethical obligations surrounding assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). The central thesis that Battisti presents and defends in this exhaustive volume relates to what he calls the *Greater Moral Obligation View* which asserts that prospective parents—especially those undergoing IVF (in vitro fertilization) and other ARTs—have heightened ethical duties toward their future children. This view challenges the widely accepted *Minimal Threshold Model (MTM),* which only requires parents to ensure that their child's life is "worth living." Instead, Battisti contends that emerging technologies like rGE impose an obligation to actively prevent genetic conditions when possible. Battisti bases his main thesis on person-affecting morality, which is primarily concerned with the actions and omissions that can affect (or be directed at) actual people rather than those that aim at maximizing greater well-being for a community (2024).

This book is structured into seven chapters, each seamlessly building on the previous while preparing the reader for the next. In Chapter 1, Battisti explores current ARTs such as IVF and preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), alongside emerging technologies like reproductive genome editing (rGE) and ectogenesis. He examines how these innovations challenge traditional notions of procreation and parenthood, introducing new ethical dilemmas. For instance, he notes that "the new moral duties that could emerge from the development of ARTs could clash with parents' identities and values" (Battisti 2024, p. 56) or "a moral obligation to avoid certain conditions in offspring" can be normalized and become sources of further discrimination" (p. 58). Ultimately, the author advocates for ethical reasoning as a crucial tool for prospective parents, healthcare professionals, and policymakers to navigate societal pressures and make informed decisions. This argument is grounded in the premise that, given both the immediate and distant possibilities for the development of ARTs, it is increasingly important to explore the relationship between freedom and responsibility in procreation through the lens of bioethical and philosophical reflection. The author contends that through this approach can the concept of procreative freedom be reframed and rebalanced in alignment with the moral obligations of those preparing to bring new life into the world.

Chapter 2 distinguishes between procreation and reproduction, offering an original taxonomy of procreative responsibilities with varying moral relevance. Battisti grounds procreative responsibility in person-centred ethical theories, arguing that it should remain flexible—promoting reproductive freedom while addressing moral concerns. He emphasizes balancing the interests of parents, children, and society, contending that procreative responsibilities are *prima facie* obligations rather than absolute duties. For example, he discusses the ethical dilemma parents may face when deciding whether to undergo genetic screening for conditions that could affect their child's future well-being. While parents may feel a moral obligation to prevent certain conditions, the interests of the child and broader societal implications—such as the potential for discrimination—must also be considered, thus framing the decision as a *prima facie* obligation that requires careful weighing of competing moral duties. These foundational discussions set the stage for the ethical analysis in later chapters.

Chapter 3 examines and ultimately rejects the principle of procreative beneficence, a concept first formulated by Savulescu (2001) and later refined by Savulescu and Kahane (2016). This principle asserts that prospective parents have a moral obligation to select the child expected to have the best life, based on factors like health or intelligence, even if it involves genetic selection. Battisti critiques this principle for failing to distinguish between impersonal reasons, which concern societal benefits, and person-affecting reasons, which concern the welfare of the individual child. He argues that by conflating these two, the principle prioritizes societal good over the individual child's needs, potentially infringing on their autonomy and intrinsic worth. Furthermore, by focusing on an idealized notion of what is "best" for a child, procreative beneficence overlooks the more complex, person-centred moral obligations parents have in considering the specific circumstances and well-being of their future children. Battisti contends that this oversimplifies procreative decision-making and fails to address the unique, person-affecting considerations involved.

In Chapter 4, Battisti introduces *consequence-based person-affecting morality* and contrasts PGD with rGE. While PGD selects among existing embryos, rGE directly modifies an embryo's genome, impacting the future individual in a person-affecting

way. He argues that this direct modification imposes greater moral obligations on prospective parents to ensure their child's well-being. He then presents two models of procreative responsibility: the *Bold Restriction of Procreative Autonomy*, which applies the *Greater Moral Obligation View* to all parents, and the *Mild Restriction of Procreative Autonomy*, which limits these obligations to those undergoing IVF. Additionally, he challenges the *Minimal Threshold Model (MTM)*—which permits any reproductive choice as long as the resulting life is worth living—arguing that rGE creates a prima facie duty to avoid transferring embryos with genetic diseases when safe and legal interventions are available, particularly for those already undergoing IVF.

Chapter 5 critically examines whether the *Greater Moral Obligation View* withstands objections that consider rGE an identity-affecting procedure. The author acknowledges that this view depends on the assumption that rGE is *non-identity-affecting*—meaning it influences a future individual who is certain to exist, either harming or benefiting them in a comparative sense. However, bioethics literature raises multiple objections to this premise. Battisti engages with various objections raised in the bioethics literature, one of which comes from the "identity-affecting" critique. Some bioethicists argue that under a strict view of identity, any change to an organism's parts would result in a loss of its original identity. In the case of rGE, this means that if the embryo undergoes genetic modification, it would no longer possess the same genetic material as it did before. Consequently, the embryo would no longer maintain the same numerical identity as the future individual. Since the embryo and the future individual would be considered separate entities, the modification would not benefit or harm the future individual, but rather create a new identity altogether. As a result, this view rejects the *Greater Moral Obligation View*, as it claims that the procedure interrupts the continuity of development between the embryo and the individual who will be born. In response to critiques of his view, Battisti argues that rGE will likely involve only minor genetic modifications, such as replacing one or two genes, mainly to treat monogenic diseases. He maintains that these small changes would not fundamentally alter the individual's identity, given the vast number of genes in human genetic heritage. Battisti also notes that DNA naturally undergoes slight changes over time without changing identity, suggesting that minimal genetic modifications align with material continuity. He contends that the *Greater Moral Obligation View* cannot be definitively rejected for minor changes, but it would not apply to more extensive genetic alterations, as the ethical considerations would depend on the scale of modification (Battisti 2024, p. 154–155).

In Chapter 6, Battisti revisits the *Mild Restriction of Procreative Autonomy*, initially framed as a negative responsibility model focused on avoiding harm. He argues, however, that procreative-parental responsibility may also have a positive dimension. He investigates whether the *Greater Moral Obligation View* entails a moral duty to enhance future children through rGE, analysing the *Child's Right to an Open Future (CROF)*, originally developed by Joel Feinberg. The discussion considers societal factors and the dominant cooperative framework, assessing whether genetic enhancement constitutes an ethical obligation. Ultimately, the author concludes that such a duty, if it exists, applies only to parents already undergoing IVF. Battisti limits the scope of this duty to parents already undergoing in vitro fertilization (IVF) because IVF is an existing, highly interventionist reproductive technology. Since IVF involves medical procedures that already alter the natural reproductive process, he argues that introducing rGE in these circumstances might be seen as a continuation of the parents' responsibility to enhance their child's well-being. In contrast, for parents who are not utilizing such technologies, the moral obligation to use rGE may be less compelling, as their reproductive decisions do not involve the same level of intervention.

Chapter 7 moves beyond consequences to examine the moral significance of intentions and attitudes in procreative responsibility within a *person-affecting moral framework*, particularly in the context of PGD. Introducing the *Parent–Child Relationship* argument, Battisti contends that prospective parents are morally committed to holding certain parental intentions and attitudes in a way compatible with consequence-based person-affecting morality. Building on this premise, he argues that the *Greater Moral Obligation View* imposes broader ethical demands than the *Mild Restriction of Procreative Autonomy*, controversially suggesting that all prospective parents may have moral reasons to choose ARTs, such as rGE and ectogenesis, over traditional reproduction. This leads to a reassessment and partial reaffirmation of the *Bold*

Restriction of Procreative Autonomy, albeit with limited normative force (Battisti 2024, p. 214).

One of the book's most commendable aspects is its conceptual depth. Battisti excels in dissecting complex ethical issues—such as reproductive timing, embryo selection through *preimplantation genetic diagnosis* (PGD), *reproductive genome editing* (rGE), and *ectogenesis*—with clarity and precision. His articulation of procreative responsibility is both sophisticated and accessible, making a compelling case for why prospective parents must regard the well-being of their future children as a central ethical concern.

While the book's theoretical depth is commendable, it occasionally falls short in terms of practical applications. Battisti's examination of new reproductive technologies through the lens of procreative responsibility is undoubtedly insightful, but his heavy focus on abstract ethical analysis leaves little room for concrete guidance. This limitation may disappoint some readers—particularly policymakers, clinicians, and medical law professionals—who seek actionable insights for applying these ethical principles in real-world reproductive decision-making.

For instance, while the concept of procreative responsibility is well-developed, the book offers minimal guidance on how this principle should be operationalized in clinical and policy contexts. Beyond stating that a moral duty for procreators arises only when they are already undergoing the in vitro *fertilization* (IVF) process, the book does not sufficiently address how these ethical considerations should inform reproductive regulations, preimplantation genetic counselling, or the role healthcare professionals should play within such a framework. Additionally, it remains unclear how prospective parents—who may not be well-versed in bioethical discourse—are expected to engage with and act upon these moral obligations in their reproductive choices, particularly as these obligations pertain to their own procreative projects.

Additionally, the book does not sufficiently grapple with the socioeconomic and structural barriers that might hinder the equitable implementation of these ethical responsibilities discussed. For instance, the availability of technologies like rGE would be often limited to wealthier individuals or countries with advanced healthcare systems. In many low-income regions, rGE would be unaffordable, leaving large segments of the population unable to benefit from these advancements. This creates a divide where only those with financial means can make decisions in line with the ethical responsibilities outlined in the book, such as ensuring the well-being of their future children. Moreover, structural barriers like inadequate healthcare infrastructure and discriminatory practices within healthcare systems could further deepen these inequities, preventing marginalized groups from exercising the same reproductive choices and responsibilities. While Battisti's theoretical contributions are valuable, a more robust engagement with the practical implications of his ethical framework—such as policy recommendations, clinical guidelines, or considerations for equitable access—would have significantly strengthened the book's overall impact.

Lastly, while Battisti's reliance on person-affecting ethical theories offers a solid foundation for his arguments, the book does not sufficiently engage with critiques of these theories. Critics have pointed out that person-affecting approaches can justify controversial genetic enhancement practices by framing them as beneficial to future individuals. A more thorough engagement with these critiques would have strengthened the book's theoretical framework. This could have involved exploring alternative perspectives, particularly relational approaches to procreative ethics. A relational ethics approach could have broadened the scope of his framework by considering the dynamic relationship between parents, children, and society. Procreative decisions are not made in isolation; they affect familial relationships, societal values, and cultural expectations. Moreover, the shared responsibilities of communities and healthcare systems in supporting procreators. It could introduce ideas such as the moral duties of institutions and governments to help prospective parents navigate ethical decisions, not just the individual obligations of parents alone. Thus, by incorporating a relational framework, Battisti's argument could better reflect the interconnected nature of reproductive decisions and procreative responsibility, extending moral consideration to the broader social and relational context.

Notwithstanding these concerns, Davide Battisti's *Procreative Responsibility and Assisted Reproductive Technologies* is a significant contribution to the field of bioethics, offering a thoughtful and rigorous exploration of the moral dimensions of existing and emerging ARTs. By emphasizing procreative responsibility, Battisti's person-affecting *Greater Moral Obligation*

View provides a robust foundation for evaluating the moral dimensions of *assisted reproductive technologies* (ARTs) from a consequence-based perspective, while also recognizing the significance of procreators' intentions and attitudes. Furthermore, the book thoughtfully navigates the tension between individual autonomy and societal interests, examining how reproductive choices impact not only future progeny but also broader societal norms and values. In doing so, it offers a well-balanced and nuanced analysis.

To recap, Battisti develops a philosophically coherent thesis, *The Greater Moral Obligation View*, within the framework of person-centred ethical theories. His thesis confronts several existing theories and endures anticipatory criticism. This book will appeal to bioethicists, philosophers, as well as scholars interested in the societal impacts of emerging reproductive technologies.

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