

Jessica Valenti

Why Have Kids: A New Mom Explores the Truth about Parenting and
Happiness

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"Valenti's conversational, anecdotal style not only reads much like an American television talk show but also allows a large enough sampling of contemporary experiences (and studies of American life) to provide intuitive insights about the state of the parenting culture."

Jessica Valenti's book exposes the contemporary social myths prevalent in American culture that, despite the opening up of opportunities to women thanks to feminism's influence, still pressure women to retain traditional parenting roles. In place of these myths, she offers many "truths" about parenting, derived from both plenteous experiences and social and psychological research, which should assure women that they may make personal, rational, or moral choices whether to have children or not, and under varying familial and social circumstances.

Valenti's new work appeared in the same year as the synonymously titled *Why Have Children?* by Christine Overall (Overall 2012). Although the two works differ widely in scope, method, and style, the coincidence in theme and publication date call for some informative comparisons between the two. Their coincidence may well be a sign of a "zeitgeist." Perhaps as persons in resource-use-intensive cultures grow more self-conscious about their uncomfortable position among the world's peoples (while their own cultures undergo moral transformations), they feel the need to ask whether they should reproduce. Should they be adding to that intensive use by adding more users? Should their new kinds of lives require child-rearing? By bringing in another work in a book review of a book, I hope not to detract from the latter but instead to position and illuminate it better.

Overall's work is philosophy, subtitled *The Ethical Debate*. Valenti's subtitle also tells much and signifies the contrast: *A New Mom Explores the Truth about Parenting and Happiness*. Overall's book is clearly in a recent tradition of reproductive, environmental, and population ethics that has arisen notably since the 1960s when writers and researchers began observing the heavy permanent footprints that industrial culture stomps upon the planet. Although Overall's book is hardly impersonal--in fact, it is pleasantly personal for philosophy--it is still structured around argument and refutation. Valenti's book is as personal as daily experience-sharing blogs, which she steadily quotes and dissects. Instead of pure argument, she provides much about the experience--including her own--of being a parent. Readers can take these experiences and then, perhaps with an intuition informed by these experiences, piece together for themselves whether parenting is appropriate in our current social context.

As work such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* helped spread awareness of population and limited resources, philosophers began debating whether and to what degree humans should reproduce. After nearly a half-century of ever-increasing discussion, Overall provides an effective "state-of-the-debate," and with some tentative answers: Each of us, especially in industrialized societies, should indeed undergo deep ethical accounting before reproducing. Maybe Malthus overshot his predictions, but our potential self-extinction looms. Reproduction in these circumstances, though, done in moderation, from the right motivation, meanings, and values confirms our human value.

The evolving current social context itself is more Valenti's focus of concern about whether to have children, contrasted with Overall's more global concerns about the state of the planet. Valenti looks first at certain long-standing social myths of modern Western culture--which in her entertainingly blunt style she calls "lies"--and finds them largely unsubstantiated, if not contradicted, by research facts. One myth is that children make one (a parent) happy. Contemporary, highly competitive society brings its own anxieties that are only compounded by bringing children into the household. Not only is one's own time already siphoned

elsewhere, leaving little for the kids, the kids are also stressed by the competition and so demand more and more from parents. Studies reveal that modern parents are actually less happy than nonparents.

Another myth is that breastfeeding is better than the bottle, a topic that can generate plenty of heat. Throughout the book Valenti takes brave stances not merely for controversy's sake but out of well-substantiated belief: She takes on La Leche League and other advocates, citing experiences and studies to show why breastfeeding is not always sufficient, may need supplementing, and is not for everyone. Not only are some bodies not physiologically suited for breastfeeding, but some lives are not--and neither the children nor the mother will suffer by resorting to alternatives such as a good formula. In fact, a social movement like that of pro-breastfeeding, although itself initially a "back-to-nature" alternative to the faceless industrial establishment, in its dogmatic insistence ends up becoming just another "way 'to tie a woman to the child and the home'" (34) and thus effectively serves as a tool of that establishment. Valenti finds this irony typical in the peculiarly American milieu in which the open market of ideas dangles the vision of new ways of living, but one in which strong conservative traditions allow at best ambivalence about change. Other lies include that children need *their* parents and that mother knows best and is *the* natural parent.

This particularly American--US, and perhaps Canadian--focus of the book is both a strength and a flaw. Valenti's conversational, anecdotal style not only reads much like an American television talk show but also allows a large enough sampling of contemporary experiences (and studies of American life) to provide intuitive insights about the state of the parenting culture. The problem is that the result is almost too current, so current that the reader might well wonder whether all these social contingencies (childless couples, one-parent households, gay parenting) could take other directions next year. In other words, the book might have been more effective if it were to have delved beyond the dazzlingly lit stage of the talk show and into human needs and concerns stretching to the whole species, both back and forward in time and across cultures. By contrast, Overall offers a broader, transcultural view, through which it does become evident that our way of life, not just in the US but in any industrial culture, has developed the social changes, amenities, and options with which Valenti is grappling. That broader view may better help readers respond to (at least for themselves) some of the issues Valenti brings forth.

For example, in the second half of the book, "Truth," in the final chapter, "Why Have Kids?" she sums up the concerns she has evinced about the myths and truths of parenting in a modern industrial world like the US: "Seeking out an ideal that most of us can never reach is making us, and our kids, miserable" (166). The "reality of our lives"--jobs, aspirations, competition, anxiety--is "enough" to fill one's life as it is. She does offer pointers on how to retain control over our lives, vis-à-vis choosing parenting or not, given these social conditions: 1) recalling the idea that "it takes a village . . ." and childrearing is "a community exercise"; 2) there is no "'natural' way to parent"; 3) "America parents need to support one another"; and 4) "the world is changing, and there isn't one kind of family" (166-67). These pointers are appealing, and some of her previous material has offered some support for them. But a broader, transcultural perspective could have helped readers see just what is involved in each pointer. The US has few villages left, and the definition of "community" has been so stretched as to include online groups who have some intersecting interest, hardly a three-dimensional environment for a child. If there are no "natural" ways to parent, are there more than those that our not-terribly-in-tune-with-nature culture has come up with? Do American parents need to support only other Americans? Indeed the world and the family are changing, as they likely have since Hominids arose, but there are other ways of changing than what is seen now through American media.

For all its care, heart, and kindness (much like the stereotypical American), the book remains defiantly American in its isolationism and culture-centrism. The issue of having children is one of the most deeply human of all concerns, for all cultures. The further tough problem of global population offers the nation with the largest per capita resource-use a chance to step out of its isolation and recognize that its own question about whether to add more consumers (by procreating) is increasingly asked by other nations. Women's education has been seen as a surefire method to lower population growth. But educating women worldwide just to lower fertility is morally dubious (ideally, education should be for the sake of individual improvement), and is correlated to industrialization, which means higher per-capita resource-use. Without introducing these transcultural elements into the discussion, Valenti's book remains limited to American

audiences, American trends, American moods--which can be whimsical and self-obsessed. The issue of reproducing and parenting is inherently about others, where self-obsession can be counteractive. Valenti rightly concludes that parenting is about more than the moments of joy. But her final word is that "We deserve, and can get, a life of them" (167). But then, the issue falls back to *our* joy, that is, "*my*" joy. It must be about other than my joy.

Although not a direct contribution to philosophy, *Why Have Kids?* can be useful for feminist philosophers interested in the recently mounting ethical debate over whether humans should reproduce *tout court*: Within the American context it offers a broad range of women's experiences, and a helpful compilation of relevant studies, which can be important for philosophers concerned about how personal experiences bear on ethical theory, and vice versa, as in care ethics. It would have been more useful if the author had looked beyond North America and into the range of women's experiences in the world's varying cultures.

References

Overall, Christine. 2012. *Why have children? The ethical debate*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Lantz Fleming Miller has articles recently published or forthcoming in *Human Rights Review*, *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, *Philosophical Inquiry*, and *Business Ethics Quarterly*. His areas of interest include normative ethics, applied ethics (business, environmental, technological, and bioethics), rationality, human rights (especially of indigenous peoples) and music aesthetics. He is completing his dissertation on the morality of human reproduction at City University of New York Graduate Center.
