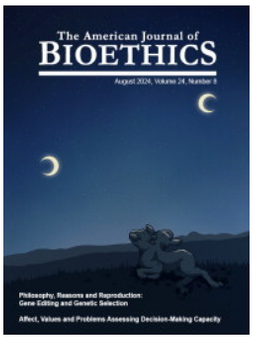


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# Place-Based Thoughtfulness and Decision-Making in Gene Editing and Genetic Selection

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Renown Oxford philosopher Derek Parfit became obsessed with the superiority of external reasons for action. At gatherings he would implausibly insist that moral philosopher Bernard Williams, who disagreed with Parfit on external reasons, did not actually have a concept of a normative reason (Edmonds 2023, 263). The authors of *Philosophy, Reasons and Reproduction: Gene Editing and Genetic Selection* may or may not agree with Parfit on this point (McMahan and Savulescu 2024). In their paper the authors certainly evidence the pervasive spirit of Parfit's obsession with consequential normative reasons. The authors provide some interesting thought experiments and cleverly apply Parfit's early consequentialist claims about reasons for causing people to exist, or not, to gene editing and genetic selection. In the end they argue that a more general use of gene-editing is preferred over an embryo selection process. They claim that such a view is better both impersonally and in person-affecting terms. The authors claims are technically sound. For us, they are morally inconclusive. A thoughtful consideration of place provides a more realistic and inclusive focus. Such inclusive reasoning is most efficient when it is not articulated as a solely impartialist analysis. A level of partiality is also important. Effective reasoning about serious matters must be enacted with a broader view and overt acknowledgement of what it means to be human. This requires a reflection on life in all its diverse forms. It is Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge, cultural expression and human connection to self, others and place that create meaningful human lives that enable effective and thoughtful moral reasoning, deliberation, and decision-making. When impartialist critical reasoning is abstracted and disconnected from the aforementioned realities, then moral reasoning and deliberation about, if and when, gene editing should be preferred over embryo selection becomes reductive and potentially meaningless.

To be sure, we acknowledge that in certain situations where it is clear that hereditary disease can be significantly mitigated, then an innovative gene-editing method may be a better option than an established practice involving preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). If human dignity is preserved, autonomy and integrity of the future person is assured and no discrimination of people with a disability or unethical use of technology is evident then gene-editing is likely to be ethically acceptable (see Hammerstein, Eggel and Biller-Andorno 2019). Importantly, in other certain situations PGD may be preferred. Our point is that determining what is the most ethically acceptable choice between editing or selection will vary. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine that what is best can be answered solely by consequentialist critical reasoning. Such reasoning is important, but the identification of best ethical outcomes will always involve much more. If we are interested in what is morally right and wrong in life, or whether embryo selection or gene-editing is preferred in a particular situation, then critical thinking will be of use, but it may not, as Aristotle argued, make us any wiser, make us morally better people, or even determine which choices are best (Aristotle 2020, XXV).

Influenced by a place-sensitive virtue ethics approach (Gildersleeve and Crowden 2022), we argue that it is human connections and relationships with self, others and place that create meaningful flourishing human lives and evidence a more comprehensive form of thoughtful moral reasoning and deliberation. An analysis of Hannah Arendt's ideas about thoughtlessness and how the virtue of thoughtfulness can help

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matters in bioethics are explored in more detail in our forthcoming book (Gildersleeve and Crowden 2024).

Our related views on place-based thoughtfulness and how it applies to ethics were initially informed by Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas who says place "is constantly before us, in which we are always situated, and yet from which we often seem estranged" (Malpas 2012, 14). It appears that the authors of *Philosophy, Reasons and Reproduction: Gene Editing and Genetic Selection* exemplify this estrangement reflected in their lack of openness to possibilities that can be presented through the specifics of place. In other words, these authors have not considered Derrida's philosophy and essay on différance where "his coinage alludes simultaneously to difference and deferral" (Chandler and Munday 2011, 100). Différance is important as it indicates that meaning is never fully present because it depends on and arises through contextual differences so "presence or fullness of meaning is always deferred from one sign to another in an endless sequence" (Baldick 2008, 67). This suggests that readers of *Philosophy, Reasons and Reproduction: Gene Editing and Genetic Selection* cannot accept the authors recommendation for genetic editing over embryo selection because the meaning, or ethically correct choice, will always depend on the context or situation involved. As each potential situation differs, an absolute or universal decision cannot be made for the choice of gene-editing over embryo selection. Instead, we recommend that place is a more realistic guide for ethical decision making compared to their consequentialism. The resonances between Malpas and Derrida are clear when the former states that place "is a constant and multiple occurrence rather than a single founding or positing" (Malpas 2012, 38). Furthermore, it is important to firmly lodge 'place' in ethics conversations to oppose the reductionistic views of some scientific thinking because "under the reign of technological modernity, our relatedness to place is not obliterated, but is rather covered over, ignored, made invisible" (Malpas 2012, 63). Malpas goes as far as saying forgetting place is "the nihilism of modernity" (Malpas 2012, 98). However, he does recognize "it is only in the direction of the thinking of topos, itself an essential form of questioning—of holding open a free-play of possibility (a 'play-space')—that any proper response to the overpowering movement of nihilism can be found" (Malpas 2012, 111). This highlights why decisions about the ethics of gene-editing compared to embryo selection need to open conversations, listen to and thoughtfully consider the unique contextual perspectives and place of others to inform the right decision to make. This is especially important as some parents are likely to have different views to McMahan and Savulescu (2024) being more aligned with someone like Jürgen Habermas who highlights that gene-editing obliterates "the boundary between persons and things" and that it fundamentally "intervenes in the somatic bases of another person's spontaneous relation-to-self and ethical freedom" (Habermas 2014, 13). The ethical and ontological issue is sharply brought into focus when Habermas states, "when one person makes an irreversible decision that deeply intervenes in another's organic disposition, the fundamental symmetry of responsibility that exists among free and equal persons is restricted" (Habermas 2014, 14). This is not something that can be easily resolved by genetically editing in more 'autonomy' which has been previously suggested (Schaefer, Kahane, and Savulescu, 2014), as no matter how much more 'autonomy' is added, this will never remove the fact that someone had the power over another human to select their genetic makeup. This is the irreversible asymmetry that prevents an edited ('made' and 'manufactured') person from becoming 'free and equal' compared to 'grown' (Habermas 2014, 44) persons. It would be hypocritical if we believed that this argument could be made for others in an absolute or universal sense. The point we want to make is that place is constantly changing and "thus cannot be assumed in advance, nor can it be taken to arise out of only one set of structures or elements alone" (Malpas 2012, 156). Therefore, a decision to preference gene-editing or embryo selection is not something that can be made in the abstract, impartially disconnected from the partialist lived experiences of those involved. Such decisions are matters of ethics that require deep thoughtful reflections that allow for careful reasoning and deliberation to ensure that, culture is respected, dignity is preserved, autonomy and integrity of future people is assured and discrimination of people with a disability or unethical use of technology does not occur. Importantly, relevant contextual features of those involved must be detailed and analyzed so that virtuous decisions are realized. If we recognize this then we will better engage with the challenges of contemporary genomics and make ethically sensitive decisions about whether gene-editing is preferred over embryo selection processes in specific situations. Doing so will ensure that the possibility for 'place' to be respected will be increased. This will mean that the communities, groups, and individuals who are involved in the processes or outcomes of genetic and genomic decision-making will be more likely to flourish.

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# Better than What?: Embryo Selection, Gene Editing, and Evaluative Counterfactuals

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McMahan and Savulescu argue that gene editing "out" a genetic disorder like cystic fibrosis

> is, in one respect, morally better than selecting an embryo that does not have that disorder. This is because editing out the disorder would be *better for* the subsequent person, whereas selecting the unaffected embryo would not be (McMahan and Savulescu 2024, 15 my italics).

In other words,

> whereas gene editing improves the condition of one and the same individual relative to certain alternatives, embryo selection only causes a better-off individual to exist rather than a different, less well-off individual (McMahan and Savulescu 2024, 9; see also Gyngell and Savulescu 2017).

According to McMahan and Savulescu's "Two-Tier View," an action that makes somebody *well off* by virtue of making them *better off* is, *ceteris paribus*, morally better than an action that makes somebody well off by virtue of *bringing them into existence* (McMahan and Savulescu 2024).

As McMahan and Savulescu (2024) themselves point out, "better" and "worse" are comparative terms. Thus, their claim that gene editing makes a person's life *better* for her invites the question: better than what? What is the "implicit, normatively salient alternative" or alternatives (McMahan and Savulescu 2024, 16) in comparison to which one should evaluate the possible world in which one engages in gene editing, in order to decide how much—if at all—it benefits the person whose genes are edited?

According to one possible answer to this question, "the correct alternative for determining whether an act was better or worse for someone affected by it is what *would* have been done otherwise" (McMahan

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