

Children and Hope

February 8, 2007

Recently, I went to see the Academy Award-nominated film *Children of Men*. This film is adapted from a dystopian thriller by the novelist P. D. James. “Dystopia” literally means a sick or ill place, and dystopian works of fiction are a way criticizing current trends in a society by imagining a world where such trends are taken to their logical conclusion. In the case of *Children of Men*, the sickness of the imagined future is a childless and polluted world. It is story about the loss of hope, a world in which an entire generation can no longer have children. The question is: what current trends in our society is this dystopia criticizing?

Dystopian films and novels are good for freshman college courses. These imagined dark futures provide a ready starting point to get students thinking. One of the many issues *Children of Men* raises is how children provide hope for the human community and in doing so, help create and structure our shared moral world. P. D. James supposes that in a world without children, people would become apathetic and self-absorbed, and the world would spiral into the fear and grime of moral and environmental decay. But is James correct in placing so much importance on the role of children? How do children help create and shape our moral world?

Many of you will relate to the experience of a day, most likely sometime between the ages of 30 and 50, when a light goes on and you say to yourself, “wow, life really *is* short.” This realization sometimes leads to the depression and self-absorption of a midlife crisis. It is true that the life of any one individual is short; however, our shared lives of families, communities, nations are comparatively long.

One way children help create our moral world is by keeping us from becoming too self-absorbed. A key point in moral development is learning to think of the needs of others. Anyone who has had a baby in the house knows that children do an outstanding job teaching us this lesson. They demand it. Those midnight feedings and all that changing of diapers (not to mention college tuition later on) help us get our priorities right. This is true not just of parents, but of the community as a whole, as we are constantly investing in the future of our children through schools, playgrounds, and the like.

For the most part, moral philosophers do not spend a lot of time talking about children. One exception is the agrarian philosopher and essayist, Wendell Berry. Children are at the center of Berry’s conception of the moral life. In part, this comes from the fact that Berry’s writing focuses on threats to the local community, and what causes them to flourish. One of the keys to having a healthy, flourishing community is considering how present actions affect future generations. Berry writes, “People will be more strongly motivated if they can reasonably expect that their children and grandchildren will live on [on the land] as long as they live. In other words, there must be a mutuality of belonging: they must feel that the land belongs to them, that they belong to it, and that this belonging is a settled and unthreatened fact.” Considering how present actions affect future generations helps us to act morally. So another way children shape our moral world is by providing direction to our actions.

There is a key distinction in agrarian thought that is helpful in understanding these ideas: the difference between “place prosperity” and “individual wealth prosperity.” When we invest in place prosperity, we invest in the goods that both present and future generations can enjoy. We do this when we build beautiful architecture, start universities, and create public parks, national forests, and plant orchards. We seek “individual wealth prosperity” when we merely try to maximize our individual wealth over the short run. The people who built the striking, historic downtown stores and theatres must have had some notion of place prosperity. It is hard to imagine the current crop of “big box” stores ever being as appreciated; they are built with individual wealth prosperity in mind. Much of our current commercial activity ignores place prosperity, as we seek individual wealth prosperity instead. Hence, we often prioritize our present desires and ignore what might be good for our children and for future generations.

Returning to the original question, what trends in our current society is this fictional future criticizing? I cannot be sure precisely what P. D. James had in mind. But regardless of her intentions, a trend that fits is our focus on short-term individual wealth at the expense of long-term place prosperity. In making decisions this way, we forget our children: it is as if they do not exist.