



Advancing technologies as both our saviour and our doom

doi:10.1136/medethics-2021-107284

Jesse Wall

Olaf (from Disney's *Frozen 2*) has a theory about advancing technologies being both our saviour and our doom. While we ought to avoid over-analysing claims of fictitious snowmen, we can pause to consider whether it is possible for an advancing technology to be both *our saviour* and *our doom*. I will maintain that it is. But for now, note how it is tempting to resolve the overlap by thinking about advancing technologies and individuals. In a possible reformulation of Olaf's claim, advancing technology can be one person's saviour, but in being so, is another person's doom. This reformulation is a type of an 'individualisation argument' against advancing technology. Specifically, it is the claim that while an individual's use of technology may solve their iteration of a problem, it may also undermine a societal response to the broader problem.

Peterson, in this edition's Feature Article, has this type of 'individualisation argument' in his sights when he considers its application to non-medical egg freezing (NMEF). That is, freezing an egg for social reasons (such as, to provide for more time to find a partner and/or to establish a career before embarking on parenthood) rather than medical reasons (such as, to treat a potentially threatening medical condition). Peterson formulates the 'individualisation argument' in the following way¹:

P1: It is morally wrong to let individuals use technology X—in order to try to handle a problem that is social in nature—if the use of X will somehow work against a social solution to a social problem P.

P2: If individuals make use of a technology like NMEF, this will work against a social solution to P.

C: It is therefore morally wrong for individuals to use NMEF.

Seger reminds us that this type of argument is a reoccurring one. The same tenor of argument was raised in the "early days of Assisted Reproductive Technology" and continues to be debated in the context of artificial womb technology.²

Peterson goes on to isolate three different iterations of the individualisation argument. These vary in terms of *how*

an individual's engagement with NMEF is counterproductive to the social solution to a social problem P, by leaving the 'social injustice unaddressed, "draw *attention and effort* away from social solutions", or furthers the oppression of disadvantaged groups.¹ Being unconvinced by all iterations of the individualisation argument, Peterson formulates two moral responses to the claim. The first is (what I call) 'the moral arithmetic objection'. According to Peterson, there:

seem to be many cases where it appears morally acceptable for individuals themselves to try to deal with the causes of social/political/structural problems, even if this will *not address* or *draw attention away* from the social problems, or even if it will *further oppress* some women.¹

In other words, there is no reason to object to NMEF if, once we have done our moral arithmetic properly, NMEF does no more harm than good.

The second objection is (what I call) the 'compatibility objection'. Namely that:

we should accept that women are entitled to use NMEF if they believe this will benefit them. At the same time, however, we ought to combat a damagingly unfair labour market through politics and social change—and make that labour market as attractive for women as it is for men.¹

According to this objection to the individualisation argument, individual use of NMEF is not incompatible with engagement in political and social reform.

There is, however, a tidiness about Peterson's formulation and objections, with neat distinctions between the individual as against the group, and between what is morally acceptable as against politically and socially problematic. It is a tidiness that feminist scholarship often seeks to complicate. Hence, Campo-Engelstein objects to Peterson's reconstruction of the feminist scholarship to which he attributes the individualisation argument. According to Campo-Engelstein, the positions of the feminist scholars that Peterson cites "cannot be reduced to the individualization argument".³ While such scholars will agree with the premise that "NMEF is

an 'individualistic and morally problematic solution to the social problems that women face'", Campo-Engelstein argues that "this does not mean that they agree with the conclusion that 'women should not use NMEF'".³

Campo-Engelstein offers a reconstruction of the individualisation argument that does not rest on "the presumed dichotomy between individual and social solutions to gender inequality".³ According to her reconstruction³:

P1: NMEF is being portrayed as a panacea for gender inequality.

P2: NMEF alone will not engender gender equality and it may impede social solutions to gender inequality.

C: We (as a society) should take a holistic approach to combating gender inequality that includes social solutions, not just technological solutions, and we should be cautious about how NMEF is portrayed and utilised within our society.

This reformulation is less concerned with a moral wrong and more concerned with how NMEF is portrayed and engaged with in society. It is less tidy, but perhaps it is a more faithful interpretation of the scholarship.

In comparison, Martin Moen and Seger take direct aim at Peterson's moral objections to (his construction of) the individualisation argument. There are two points that I wish to amalgamate here. The first is that if NMEF is counterproductive to the social solution to a social problem, it is because the individuals who engage with NMEF (who I speculate to be otherwise the more socially and politically dominant agents of change) are no longer pursuing a social solution to a social problem. Seger reminds us that while NMEF may be a solution for some women, we should not "pay less attention to existing social hierarchies, inequality, and respective (reproductive) justice concerns".² This has the effect of silencing protest, as Martin Moen explains, "by improving the situation for at least some individuals so that protest is no longer so urgent".⁴ Not only should our moral arithmetic be unable to work with the silencing of protest, it may also

mean that individual solutions are incompatible with social solutions.

The second point is that the social problem that motivates the individualisation argument might be collective action problem. That will depend, according to both Martin Moen and Seger, on the type of good or benefit that is obtained from using NMEF. If the good is absolute – such as using NMEF to buy time to find a suitable partner – then NMEF is a saviour for some couples who seek *biological* children, perhaps without impeding social solutions to social problems. If the good is “positional” – such as some women putting themselves in a better career position relative to others (even if men might ordinarily be in that better position) – then we “risk moving in the direction of society where the majority of women must use NMEF to be competitive”.⁴ It is, by analogy with the Prisoners Dilemma, encouraging women

to ‘confess because her co-accused will, and thereby forgoing on a “solution that would be better for everyone else because of conflicting interest that discourage joint action”.⁴ Contrary to the ‘arithmetic objection’, the motivations behind the individualisation argument is the pursuit of a solution to a societal problem, and not just to make the most of a problematic social setting. Moreover, contrary to the ‘compatibility objection’, if the social problem is a coordination problem, we cannot pursue both individualism and coordination simultaneously.

Which takes us back to Olaf. We can maintain that NMEF is both our saviour and our doom, without having to rely on the dichotomy between the individual and the social. If the good of NMEF is positional, then NMEF is closing the gap between men and some women (our saviour), while leaving social solutions to gender inequality *frozen* (our doom).

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests None declared.

Patient consent for publication Not required.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

© Author(s) (or their employer(s)) 2021. No commercial re-use. See rights and permissions. Published by BMJ.

REFERENCES

- 1 Petersen TS. Arguments on thin ice: on non-medical egg freezing and individualisation arguments. *J Med Ethics* 2021;47:164–8.
- 2 Segers S. Discussing social hierarchies and the importance of genetic ties: a commentary on Petersen. *J Med Ethics* 2021;47:169–70.
- 3 Campo-Engelstein L. Disentangling the individualization argument against nonmedical egg freezing from feminist critiques. *J Med Ethics* 2021;47:171–2.
- 4 Moen OM. Individual solutions to social problems. *J Med Ethics* 2021;47:173–4.