

He's the favourite. No, she is.



In his new book, *Against Fairness*, Stephen Asma argues that favouring family, even one child more than another, is natural. Even Jesus and Buddha each had a 'best' friend.

Love means nothing if it does not mean loving some people more than others.
—George Orwell

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE the birth of a child to get a philosopher thinking about the gulf between our deeply held notions of fairness toward all and our natural inclination to identify our nearest with our dearest. After all, as Columbia College Chicago philosopher Stephen Asma points out, if our mothers, icons of selfless and nurturing love, had not been so preferentially—and, when necessary, so ferociously—dedicated to us, there would be far fewer of us around to bemoan the unfairness of life.

A few years after his son's birth, Asma found himself at an ethics conference, horrifying fellow panel members, including a priest and a "revolutionary Communist" egalitarian, by blurting out, "I would strangle everyone in this room if it somehow prolonged my son's life." He was laughing as he said it, Asma recalls in an interview, but he soon realized he wasn't really joking. "I knew I meant it on some deep level, and I wondered, 'Why not embrace the natural?' Why is this preference cast as a struggle between primitivism and

our higher principles?" The eventual result is the newly released *Against Fairness*, Asma's cheeky but thought-provoking inquiry into the tension between "two competing notions of the good."

Start, Asma writes, with the notion that bias is primitive. Does humanity have more fair-minded and self-sacrificing exemplars than Jesus and Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha? The latter metaphysically demolished the Indian caste system, declaring women and untouchables capable of attaining enlightenment, and declared the equality even of animal species. Yet the Buddha had a best friend, his first cousin, Ananda. Jesus not only had a special group of 12 followers, he had three favoured Apostles—"a posse within his posse," as Asma puts it—and one "beloved disciple" (the Apostle John) among them.

And then consider, the philosopher continues, that modern Westerners are none too precise when they speak of "fairness," a word loaded with emotional weight but slippery in its usage. We are certainly all for it—some Westerners, Asma notes ironically, think their culture is superior to others precisely because of its commitment to equality. But fairness as a matter of equal shares—Asma's six-year-old

son explained to him how everyone in a school foot race had "won" the sprint—rubs up against a competitive society's acceptance of the principle of winner take all (or at least the lion's share). In other words, equal opportunity versus equal outcome. "We often deliberately blur one concept of fairness with the other," Asma says. "Few people are prepared to argue against equal opportunity, but far more are suspicious of equal-outcome policies."

Asma realizes, with a sigh, "that I will be seen as some conservative Ayn Randian and my book read as a social-Darwinist screed," merely for telling his son that it's not possible for *everyone* in a race to win it. But that will miss his main point, Asma continues: he's not arguing for a *Little Red Hen* merit-based fairness over a prizes-for-all equal-shares fairness; he's arguing for a favouritism that flies in the face of both concepts, one that privileges our tribes (by blood or affiliation).

Asma is primarily a philosopher of the life sciences, and he explores at length the new neurological research demonstrating the pathways by which human bonding, part chemical and part psychological, is established. And how the more deeply the bond is made—the more our brains are made opiate-happy by



Who's on top: One study found 65 per cent of moms and 70 per cent of dads had a favourite

daughters. Sometimes the favouritism, or perhaps more accurately, its opposite, is complicated in its origins, sometimes it's as simple as the result of humanity's hard-wired preference for the beautiful over the less so. And what's more, every child in the family knows their parents' "worst-kept secret," who the golden child is. They are generally acquiescent in the parental choice, although they do assign a reason for it, usually something natural, something an unfavoured child can do nothing about: of course Mom prefers her only girl to my brothers and I; she's prettier than I am; he's the smart one.

There's no doubt that parental preference is universal, in the sense that it cuts across all human cultures and it has, in some times and places, taken extreme forms. Kluger cites the lengths some Japanese parents went to during the Tokugawa shogunate (1603 to 1868) to ensure their families followed the model of *ichihime nitaro* (daughter first, son second). Although the eldest son was the keystone child, the future of the family, he was so important that he had to wait for an older sister to help raise him: first-borns who were boys were thus often subject to infanticide. Today, bioethicists still debate the morality of so-called saviour siblings, children selected through IVF to have tissue that is a perfect match for an existing and ill sibling. (Stem cells from its umbilical cord are then used for life-saving transfusions.) Talk about favouritism.

But that's not the sort of favouritism most parents search their souls about. Most people mean situations in which some children can do no wrong, and receive a disproportionate amount of their parents' (particularly their mother's, it seems) care and attention, while others are ignored and some constantly compared, to their detriment, to the golden child. The aftermath, according to Purdue University sociologist Jill Sutor, who has extensively studied parental favouritism in families where the parents are elderly and children adults themselves, is almost uniformly bad sibling relationships. As for the individual fates of the children, clinical psychologist Ellen Libby, author of *The Favorite Child* (2010), says the results are mixed.

Some unfavoured children achieve later success precisely because their family situation insulated them against the hard knocks of adult life, although far more suffer. Some favoured children, including a disproportionate number of political leaders, flourish because of the inexhaustible confidence instilled in

the mere presence of those we have bonded with—the more open humans are to extending their ties outward. We literally get high with a little help from our friends.

Asma knows, again, that he is open to criticism for scandalously reducing humanity's tenderest impulses to "simple rat chemistry." (One of *Against Fairness's* earliest reviews did, in fact, denounce Asma's "neuromaniacal" reasoning.) But such higher-principle arguments seem "quaint" to him, given the profound similarities in all mammalian biology. And yes, Asma is also quite aware that "linking biology and ethics has not gone well in the past"—in its most malevolent form, it was a Nazi speciality—but he is writing about the importance of attachments in universal human biology. Our emotional brains are "natural nepotists," making us kin-biased by our deepest natures, and we need a body of ethical thought that doesn't make us feel guilty about it.

So far, so good. But returning to that discussion room, who in it exactly—besides an

unlucky priest and a Communist—might Asma be willing to throttle for the good of his son? A brother, a niece, a second child of his own? Asma, father of one, has little to say about the twists and turns of family fairness. But the favourite child, and the siblings in his or her shadow, are the complex stuff of classic literature and everyday conversation between parents, and parents and children.

Jeffrey Kluger, a senior writer at *Time* magazine, received a lot of attention for his 2011 book *The Sibling Effect*, much of it for the "Golden Child" chapter on favourite kids, and most of all for a comment still reverberating around parent blogs: "It is my

belief that 95 per cent of the parents in the world have a favourite child, and the other five per cent are lying."

Favouritism is natural and well-nigh universal, Kluger says, citing one study that found 65 per cent of mothers and 70 per cent of fathers admitting to having a favourite, often but not always within the classic tropes: mothers and first-born sons, fathers and youngest

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them by parental preference. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, like William Lyon Mackenzie King, grew up as his mother's favourite. King, notoriously, remained a lifelong bachelor, while FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt had one of the most famous political marriages of all time, one which wreaked havoc among their five children, who amassed 19 marriages, 15 divorces and 29 children between them.

Libby, who practises in the U.S. capital, writes that many of her patients are Washington power players infused with the confidence that being favourite children gave them, even while they are "ethically, psychologically or morally wounded" by that same consequence-free indulgence. And she is open about her own brother-in-law, Scooter Libby, chief of staff to George W. Bush's vice-president Dick Cheney, who was convicted in 2007 of perjury in the scandal that swirled about outing Valerie Plame as a covert CIA operative. Ellen Libby pins her brother-in-law's reckless belief that he faced no consequences for lying to a grand jury on his favourite-son status with his mother. As she and her husband, Hank, Scooter's elder brother, watched the golden child rise in Washington political circles, "increasingly, we were bothered by Scooter's lack of communication with us, his growing feelings of entitlement and his seeming inclination to spin stories to further his interests."

Ellen Libby's personal experiences have clearly influenced her professional take on favouritism. But she is scarcely alone in her belief that "every family has favourites," even if she is rare in believing that open communication within the family about who's in and who's out and why, would help salve the wounds. Even Kluger, who agrees with Libby's universalism, doesn't join her on that. And ordinary parents seem appalled at the very notion of telling the children.

In September, Calgary radio host Buzz Bishop, a father of two boys, announced on a parenting blog that "I have a favourite son and I'm not ashamed to admit it." (Bishop prefers his eldest, five-year-old Zacharie, to his youngest, two-year-old Charlie, because the elder boy "can do more things—he's more fun." Bishop, 42, received worldwide attention, almost all of it condemnatory. Not for having a favourite, but for admitting to it, and in the eternal world of the Internet. "Why admit that publicly?" posted one respondent.

The aftermath of favouritism, when the parents are elderly and the kids are adults, is bad sibling relationships

siblings caused by childhood favouritism, asks why any parent "would say hurtful things when they are not necessary?" Sociologist Suitor, whose work deals with baby boomers at another transitional point in their lives—when the largest cohort of siblings in society are coming together, after decades apart, in order to care for their elderly parents—sees plenty of damaging conflict rooted in the deep past.

Sibling relationships in adulthood are better when they believe they were all treated not necessarily equally, but equitably as children. On the flip side, nothing is more predictive, notes Suitor, of reduced close-

ness and increased conflict among adult children than recollections of favouritism in childhood. It's even more disruptive than parental favouritism late in life. In those cases, adult children tend to shrug it off; half the time they cannot even identify mom's current favourite, in part because elderly mothers tend to have one child (usually the eldest or eldest daughter) to whom they turn for practical matters, and another (usually the youngest or youngest daughter) with whom they are emotionally closest. (Middle kids get the short end once again.) Parents openly admitting to past or present favouritism, Suitor says, "worsen an already bad situation." And this conflict matters, not just for the sake of the parent, but for that of the siblings, because good sibling relationships later in life have powerful, positive health effects.

None of that would surprise Asma, even if his son currently has no siblings with whom to compete for parental attention. Just as we naturally gravitate to kin, creating a closeness that benefits us all through life, the better angels of our nature prompt us to shrink from anything that would disrupt those family connections. Sometimes the ties that bind us are tied wrongly, too loose or too tight, but decades of research point to the conclusion that the key to happiness—to what a philosopher would call the good life—is not wealth or social achievement, but strong social bonds. And few are stronger than the oldest ones any of us will ever experience. **BRIAN BETHUNE**



Momma's boy: Franklin Roosevelt, here with Eleanor, was, like many politicians, a golden child