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## Creating and Raising Humans: Essays on the Morality of Procreation and Parenting

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**CREATING AND RAISING HUMANS**

(Spine title: Essays on the Morality of Procreation and Parenting)

(Thesis format: Integrated-Article)

by

Jason Marsh

Graduate Program in Philosophy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
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## Abstract

It used to be widely held that procreation does not need a justification, that its moral permissibility is simply obvious. But things are different now. And the change is largely due to a number of arguments from Benatar, Shiffrin and Velleman. In response to this background my dissertation offers the beginnings of the first systematic defense of procreation, one that consists in four articles. Along the way it draws some implications for parenting, for bioethics, for normative ethics, and for political philosophy.

Article one presents a novel argument that our lives may be much more valuable than we think, one that stems from an overlooked connection between lotteries, value and the non-identity problem. Article two explores the relationship between happiness research and procreation and blocks an argument that our lives are much worse than we think, not good enough to start. Article three argues that certain leftover problems in our attempt to justify procreation create a new argument for the doctrine of procreative beneficence and reveal that strict deontologists should probably become moderate deontologists – at least if they wish to justify creating persons. Article four formulates a new challenge for moral and political philosophy about the extent to which parents may transmit rejecting and potentially harmful attitudes to their sexual minority children. Here I show that the way in which parents reason about rejection has bearing on whether they should create.

**Keywords:** Procreative ethics, parenting, happiness research, Benatar, anti-natalism, Kant, procreative beneficence, children, family rejection, the non-identity problem.

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## Introduction

Procreative ethics has traditionally concerned itself with questions about abortion, reproductive technology, and with Parfit's non-identity problem.<sup>1</sup> But recently procreative ethicists have turned their attention to a much more fundamental question about procreation: namely whether creating new persons is ever morally justified. On the one hand, there are the pro-natalists. These think, with common sense, that it is obvious that procreation is typically justified and indeed good. Pro-natalists rarely offer positive arguments for the truth of their stance, since they do not normally think that their stance needs to be argued for – pro-natalists do, however, occasionally try to answer anti-natalist challenges. On the other hand, there are the anti-natalists. These thinkers, who remain in the minority, think that procreation is never justified, given certain facts about harm, about value, and about the risks involved in coming into existence, and given certain empirical facts about how we overestimate the quality of our lives.

A third view, which I shall call 'Procreative Skepticism', has yet to be explored. Procreative skeptics, as I shall understand them, do not exactly deny that procreation is justified, but nor are they convinced that it is justified either; they find the issue hard, morally speaking. Put in a slightly different way, procreative skeptics, as I shall understand them, neither affirm nor deny the following proposition:

PROPOSITION: Most acts of human procreation, though especially acts of procreation in affluent nations, are morally permissible, and would continue to be morally permissible even if all of the relevant parents were informed about the ethical issues surrounding procreation.

In the most general sense, this dissertation can be seen as an attempt to better understand procreative skepticism and how we might respond to it. This task

will require thinking through and answering a number of arguments for procreative skepticism. I realize that some readers, outside of procreative ethics, might find the idea that procreation raises serious moral problems puzzling. But the puzzle should be over by chapter three. By then it will become apparent that a fundamental question for ethics (arguably its most fundamental question) is whether bringing persons into existence is something that can be justified. By then it will also be apparent that a justification of procreation will require endorsing a more demanding view of procreation and parenting than we are used to.

That is the more general way of describing what I am up to. The more specific way is this. This dissertation consists in four papers, each of which makes a distinct contribution to our understanding of the morality of procreation and/or parenting.

**Paper 1: Possible Persons and the Value of Life.** It was almost certain that none of us would exist. I argue that the improbability of our existence has overlooked implications for the value of our lives and offers a helpful tool in combating certain arguments for anti-natalism in procreative ethics – like the one discussed in paper 2.

**Paper 2: Quality of Life Assessments, Cognitive Reliability and Procreative Responsibility.** This paper explores the relationship between happiness research and procreation. More particularly, I explore an argument, first discussed by Benatar and Harman, that various cognitive biases keep us from seeing that our lives are not sufficiently good or harm-free to permissibly start. After clarifying various versions of the challenge, I argue that they all fail to show that our lives are bad or not worth starting. That said, these arguments do make it harder to know that our lives are good. For this reason we should seek new evidence that our lives are, in other respects, better than we think – like the evidence described in paper 1.

**Paper 3: Kantian Reflections on Procreative Beneficence.** This paper presents a number of Kantian and epistemic worries about procreation, worries that put pressure on us to either become procreative skeptics or to rethink the morality of procreation. In response to the dilemma, I recommend accepting a view like procreative beneficence, according to which parents should seek to create the best off children they can, while adopting a more moderate form of deontology. If I am right then procreative beneficence, though widely thought to be a consequentialist doctrine, can be given a Kantian foundation.

**Paper 4: Public Reasons, Sexual Justice and Upbringing.** This paper formulates a new challenge for moral and political philosophy about the extent to which parents may transmit potentially harmful beliefs, values or attitudes to their sexual minority teens. Although it might seem obvious to some liberals that parents should not display rejecting behaviors in the home, neglected worries about the metaphysics of harm, consequentialism and salvation, and something I call the problem of Pascalian parents show us otherwise. I thus respond to these and related objections and argue that parents do indeed have overlooked obligations toward their sexual minority child. In fact, the best arguments for family rejection commit parents to anti-natalism, the thesis that we should stop creating persons.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a simple explanation of the non-identity problem see endnote 2 from chapter one. Also, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nonidentity-problem/>

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## Chapter 1:

### Possible Persons and the Value of Life

**Chapter Summary:** It was almost certain that none of us would exist. I argue that the radical improbability of our existence has overlooked implications for the value of our lives and offers a helpful tool in combating certain arguments for anti-natalism in procreative ethics – like the one discussed in chapter 2.

---

#### *Introduction*

Case One: had your parents had sex thirty seconds earlier than they did you probably wouldn't exist, and something similar goes for your grandparents and their parents etc. Case Two: had biological evolution taken a slightly different course at various stages in the past, neither you nor your species would exist. Case Three: had the expansion rate of the big bang and numerous other factors connected to the fine-tuning of *this* universe differed ever so slightly, then galaxies and stars wouldn't have formed – and you wouldn't exist. What all of these cases seem to reveal is something I call radical contingency: it was radically improbable that you (or your species) would have ever existed. If someone were to have bet from the list of possible persons that you would have come about, they would be seriously irrational, for your existence is practically impossible. And yet you exist. This paper contends that radical contingency provides an important and overlooked contribution to the value of life. If I am right, then even if a somewhat gloomy picture of metaphysical naturalism<sup>1</sup> turns out to be correct, there is a straightforward way to more seriously value our lives that has to do with possible persons, life's goods, and existence lotteries. Put another way, the contingency of our lives, although it gives rise to a well-known problem – the non-identity problem<sup>2</sup> – also has positive implications for procreative ethics.

The plan of this paper is as follows. Section I puts forth the thesis I am calling ‘radical contingency’. Section II explores some claims about everyday contingency and everyday value to set up our discussion about life’s value. Section III draws upon a common distinction between the way we value our lives and the way our lives have their value and says that radical contingency has something to say about each of them. Section IV explores whether radical contingency makes the bad events of our lives even worse. Section V turns to the ethics of procreation and explains how the present claims, whether or not we can benefit and harm persons in creating them, represent good news for the morality of procreation. Section VI explores various objections to my claims, including what some might take to be their most serious threat: namely that inflationary cosmology reveals that our individual and collective existence was physically necessary. Lastly, I should mention that although my strategy can be interpreted as an attempt to offer a secular analysis of life’s value, my claims are also available to many religious persons.<sup>3</sup>

## I

How worried should we be if our existence turns out to be radically chancy? Many philosophers and scientists have answered or implied: very worried. Consider,

We evolved only because of a number of cosmic accidents....Nature shows us no particular favors: we get parasites and diseases and we die, and we are not all that nice to each other.... That, more or less, is the scientific picture of the world (Blackburn 2002: 1).

It seems obvious that I could have failed to exist. My parents could easily never have met, in which case I should never have been conceived and born. The like applies to everyone. More generally, it seems plausible that whatever exists in space and time could have failed

to exist. Events could have taken an utterly different course. Our existence, like most aspects of our lives appears frighteningly contingent (Williamson 2002: 233).

The recognition of how unlikely it was that one would have come into existence, combined with the recognition that coming into existence is always a serious harm, yields the conclusion that coming into existence is really bad luck (Benatar 2006: 7).

It is almost irresistible for humans to believe we have some special relation to the universe, that human life is not just a more or less farcical outcome of a chain of accidents reaching back to the first three minutes...the effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little beyond the farce, and gives some grace to the tragedy' (Weinberg 1977:155).

'Who am I...' 'Why am I here?' 'Where am I going?' Since the Enlightenment...man [and no doubt woman as well] tried to answer these questions without reference to God. But the answers that came back were not exhilarating, but dark and terrible. 'You are the accidental by-product of nature, a result of matter plus time plus chance. There is no reason for your existence. All you face is death'...(Craig 71: 2003).

...Inevitable humans in a lonely Universe. Now, if this happens to be the case, that in turn might be telling us something very interesting indeed. Either we are a cosmic accident, without meaning or purpose, or alternatively...(Conway-Morris 2003: xiii).'

It is doubtful that there is a unified thought here about why contingency is supposed to be bad news, but that it appears so to many seems clear. Some of the worries take on a religious flavour: if our existence were radically

contingent, and if contingency is thought to be incompatible with design, then the worry is that we are not the product of a divine plan. Others, like Benatar, imply that contingency renders an already bad situation worse, though the point is never developed. Other worries still seem to be non-inferential in nature: some, like Williamson apparently, just immediately feel frightened when thinking about how non-entrenched in the universe contingency makes us out to be. (It is worth noting here that Williamson's own thesis that we are all necessary existents needn't be thought to be in opposition to this paper's main claims about contingency)<sup>4</sup>. Lastly, a rather different worry about reproductive contingency, noted earlier, is that it generates the non-identity problem, roughly the problem of how to treat future persons any better than we do when most of our attempts to do so will pre-empt their very existence (Parfit 1986, Velleman 2008: 221).<sup>5</sup>

Of course, not everyone finds contingency worrisome. But those who do not find it worrisome typically also fail to see that contingency can benefit us.<sup>6</sup> It will be this paper's task to explain how contingency, whether or not it comes with any regrettable features, is the bearer of good news. If I am correct, then the same contingency that led Derek Parfit to claim that our beliefs about procreative responsibility may be radically mistaken has positive implications for the value of our lives and, as we shall see, for procreation. Also, if I am correct, then events that happen long before our birth, and not just events which take place after our deaths, can have bearing on how our lives go.<sup>7</sup>

### *1.1.1. Existential Contingency*

Let us begin with the following claim:

**Radical Contingency (RC):** your existence was vastly improbable.

Of course probability here is a relative notion. The claim that your individual existence is vastly improbable is supposed to be shorthand for the claim that

the prior probability of your birth relative to the world as it was at various stages before you were conceived was infinitesimal. For present purposes I take a statistical or logical interpretation of probability to be most relevant. Thus we might say that for any human person X, X's existence was vastly improbable relative to certain other statements of evidence or sets of logically possible states that precede X's existing.<sup>8</sup> Another way of describing RC would be simply to invoke the idea of luck. Here RC may be read as saying that our coming into existence was a vastly lucky event. Following Duncan Pritchard, I will define a lucky event as 'an event which is of some significance to the agent (or at least in some sense ought to be) which obtains in the actual world but which does not obtain in a wide class of nearby worlds where the relevant initial conditions for that event are the same as in the actual world' (2008 450). The most natural example of such an event in this context is winning a lottery, which suits present purposes, since I am concerned with a kind of existential lottery among possible persons. In the existential lottery, as with everyday lotteries, a natural response on behalf of a winner is to think that she barely won.

Lastly, if we understand contingency to apply not just to individual humans, but to our species as a whole, then humanity too was radically unlikely to emerge. In this case we get,

**Species Contingency (SC):** the existence of your species was vastly improbable.

I think that contingency applies both at the individual and species levels, though my primary focus here will be on the individualistic dimension. My aim is not to defend RC – I am mainly interested in its connection to value. That said, many people already believe in RC and see it operating at various levels, including the social (the dating lives of our ancestors), the biological (life's origins and evolutionary development),<sup>9</sup> and the cosmological (the existence and bio-friendliness of our universe). To cite just one example from the fine-

tuning literature, even a difference of a factor of one part in  $10^{40}$  in gravitation or electromagnetism would apparently have precluded sun-like stars and planets, pre-empting the prospects for life (Davies 1982). Facts about fine-tuning are sometimes invoked to argue for a cosmic designer or for multiple universes (White 2000), but one can also understand these facts as showing that our lives are simply improbable (White 2007).<sup>10</sup> Even if our universe were designed for life in general, however, it should be clear that our existence was improbable and that a gambler would have been wholly irrational to have bet on any of our births. As Gould puts it:

We are here because an odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because comets struck the earth and wiped out dinosaurs, thereby giving mammals a chance not otherwise available (so thank your lucky stars in a literal sense); [...]’ (1991: 33).<sup>11</sup>

Gould omits to mention other factors that have bearing on RC. But even if we get the right universe, with the right planet, with life and human beings for free, this would hardly make any of our individual lives likely. As Parfit notes, ‘[H]ow many of us could truly claim, Even if railways and motor cars had never been invented, I would still have been born?’ (1987: 361). Parfit is right. But even he under describes our existential odds. To see this, imagine the year prior to your conception. Given certain simplifying assumptions,<sup>12</sup> we get the following calculation: 1 female x 1 year of reproduction x 12 eggs per year x 1 male x 1 year of reproduction x 100 sex acts per year x 40 million sperm per copulation. The answer:  $4.8 \times 10^{10}$ . That is, 48 billion or more accurately, 47, 999, 999, 999 is the number of possible persons you had to beat to make it into existence. Once we appreciate that similar calculations apply to each of your ancestors – each of whom contributed crucial genetic information to your identity – then it should be clear that your existence was about as unlikely as anything could be.

## II

Let us now consider the question of how local or everyday contingency contributes to how we value individual goods, which will set up our discussion in section III about how RC contributes to life's value. Here it is important to appreciate that people often do ascribe extra value to goods they deem highly unlikely to be obtained, especially when a comparable good wasn't coming anyhow. I think we do this rationally, moreover.

### *1.2.1. Three Examples*

Consider three examples.

**Case One:** A well-known New York firm receives a thousand roughly equally impressive applications for a major position worth \$600,000 a year. As the committee sorts through the pile for initial screening, the CEO accidentally trips and spills his coffee all over the desk. Though the coffee surprisingly manages to miss most applications, one is thoroughly soaked. Feeling bad about the situation the CEO calls the relevant applicant to hire him on the spot. The candidate is informed about what happened and told that it must be his lucky day.

**Case Two:** You walk into a French casino just to see the place. You have a couple of drinks, but no plans to gamble. On your way out you notice one chip on the floor and decide to put it in to the nearest slot machine just for the heck of it. Lights and noises begin to go off and to your astonishment you've just won 4.8 million dollars.

**Case Three:** Your daughter has a ten percent chance of surviving a required brain operation. To your relief, a doctor comes out to report

that your child is going to pull through just fine.

In all of the above cases, that a given good is known to be improbable seems to contribute to its value for an individual. This assessment seems rational moreover; for although there may be constraints on how much extra value we can assign to improbable goods,<sup>13</sup> it seems reasonable to value a good more upon the discovery that one was almost certain not to obtain it. More accurately, it seems reasonable and certainly permissible to value a good more if one was not likely to receive it or anything like it.<sup>14</sup> As for case one, although we might have also valued earning the job because we value personal achievement, this does not detract from the value of a lucky win when pure achievement is unfeasible. As for case two, it's not just that the unexpected gambler is happy about the money, though she is that. It's that she is made even happier on account of the way in which she came to the win. Had she acquired the money in some less chancy way, say through an inheritance, she might well have valued it less. Finally, the good of having one's daughter survive a potentially fatal operation is clearly worth celebrating even when the odds of a successful operation are high. But the parents come to appreciate the outcome more when the survival odds are highly unfavourable. They would be happier, for instance, that their child survived a risky operation than a standard trip to the dentist.

To put the point another way, it seems permissible and even fitting to appreciate a good more upon the discovery that it was highly unlikely that one would obtain it or anything like it. In addition to appreciating a lucky good more, one might also reasonably come to value the fact that one has it more.<sup>15</sup> We can say more than this, though. We can say something about value and not just valuing. At least if we believe in objective value, anyhow, it is open for us to claim that the value of sufficiently improbable goods is intensified whether or not the individuals in question are aware of their luck in obtaining those goods. Thus even if the man in case one were never informed of his odds in getting the job – that is, informed of the background information about the

coffee or the equally talented application pool, etc. – many might be tempted to say that his job is nonetheless objectively more valuable for him than he realizes.<sup>16</sup> Such persons presumably think that there are externalist facts about value, facts that go beyond internalist facts about our awareness of luck or how we value in response to that awareness.

Lastly, the claim here is not that we should create more value for ourselves, or for the world, by continually chasing after improbable goods (like going to China to find an especially unlikely mate, for instance).<sup>17</sup> The claim is rather that when we come across sufficiently improbable goods, part of their goodness is explained by their chanciness, and/or by our perception of that chanciness.

## II

With the above claims in the background we are now in a position to reason about RC and life's value. The plausibility of my claims in this section will naturally depend, in part, on one's prior views about value, not least intrinsic value,<sup>18</sup> and to a lesser extent wellbeing.<sup>19</sup> My aim will thus not to be to convince every reader but to open up some possibilities for thinking about contingency and value. That said, if any of the options I present goes through for a sufficient number of persons, this would be significant.

### *1.3.1. Subjective or Internalist Options*

The first way of thinking about RC and value concerns the way we value our lives and takes the form of a conditional argument.

**Option 1:** If we accept the above claims about everyday contingency, then this should have bearing on how we see our lives as a whole, in light of RC. For once we come to realize just how improbable it was that we would exist to enjoy any of the goods we enjoy, we have a reason to value our lives more on account of this fact – a reason that

stems from the way we value in ordinary contexts

The above argument is straightforward. If we see the prior connection between the value of ordinary goods and everyday contingency, then consistency requires us to appreciate our lives more on account of RC. Of course, some may wish to make the opposite move, reasoning that since RC cannot influence the value of our lives, consistency requires us to abandon our intuitions about everyday contingency and value.<sup>20</sup> Such persons are free to do so. But I myself see no reason for denying that RC should influence our judgments about life's value. In fact, my way of obtaining epistemic consistency will be preferable, if we wish to be conservative about belief-revision, since it does not involve giving up an explicit or implicit belief about value.

Thus the first way of thinking about RC and value is inferential. The second way of thinking about RC and value is much more immediate than the first. It does not clearly rest on any inference at all.

**Option 2:** Forget about everyday contingency and everyday improbabilities. Don't you, if you're honest about it, just appreciate your existence more when you think about how radically chancy it was? Don't you further take a distinct kind of pleasure in being alive, even if you do not quite have anyone to thank for your existence? If you answer yes to these questions then you will plausibly value your life more on account of RC.

Such an option is both simple and attractive for those who enjoy their lives. For it can help people to enjoy more life-satisfaction by appreciating their lives more.<sup>21</sup> More accurately, given the present view, many people will not just non-inferentially *value* their lives more on account of RC, but will also non-inferentially come to *believe* that their lives are more valuable on account of RC. This belief will be justified, moreover, at least given a widely held conception of epistemic justification, according to which we are justified in

affirming P, absent known defeaters for P, if P seems true to us. As Chisholm puts it, ‘The principle [that whatever seems true to us has initial justification] may be thought of as an instance of a more general truth – that it is reasonable to put our trust in our own cognitive faculties unless we have some positive ground for questioning them (1992:14).<sup>22</sup> True, our positive intuitions about chance and value might also turn out to be irrational features of our psychology. But until we have reason for thinking so, then as is generally the case, it seems reasonable to trust our intuitions.

My claim, again, is not that option 2 will be available for everyone, at least not at first. For some, as mentioned earlier, may find our degree of contingency frightening. I suspect that the main reason for reaction is that we can psychologically feel that we are *supposed* to exist, just as we can feel that we are supposed to find a particular mate in life. But such intuitions seem guilty of a rather ‘promiscuous’ form of teleology, as cognitive scientists of religion will tell us.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, such intuitions seem to be good candidates for being unreliable – and this, we might add, given common naturalistic *and* religious views of the world.<sup>24</sup>

### *1.3.2. An Externalist Option*

The first two ways of thinking about RC and value are subjective or internalist in the sense that they presuppose an awareness of RC on our behalf and concern the way we value our lives. The third and final way of thinking about contingency and value, by contrast, is objective or externalist and so presupposes no awareness of RC on our behalf. It concerns the amount of objective value our lives have.

**Option Three.** One’s life as a whole is objectively more valuable on account of RC. This is the case even if we have never thought about our improbable existence and even if we (wrongly) have come to think that our existence was necessary or likely. Thus just as the

individual discussed earlier benefits from a lucky job, and benefits in part because of his objective luck, so too we can benefit from our lucky existence, in part because it was objectively lucky, whatever our beliefs or thoughts about RC.

The externalist option, though some will no doubt find it less credible than a more subjective option, is attractive for a variety of reasons. First, it permits more persons to benefit from RC than either of the previous two options. The reason for this is that many people never reflect on RC, never mind the connection between RC and value. It would be good if such individuals could benefit from contingency all the same. Second, the externalist option implies that even non-human animals, if their lives are sufficiently decent, may benefit from existential contingency. For although these animals probably can't have abstract thoughts about contingency and value, such thoughts aren't required, on the present view, for the connection to be real and beneficial. Third, the externalist option gives those who have thought about RC, and who reject it, a kind of insurance policy in case they are wrong. In a word, if the externalist way of thinking about value and contingency is on track there will be much more value in the world than we supposed prior to thinking about these matters.

### III

#### *1.3.3. Three Clarifications*

At this point I should clarify what I am not claiming in this paper. First, I am not claiming that the absence of life's goods is somehow bad for the never existent or the merely possible, only that the presence of life's goods is (noncomparatively) good for those who do exist. Here the words of McMahan are helpful: '...to be caused to exist with a life worth living seems to be good for the individual to whom it happens. There is no problem in identifying the subject of this good (2009: 2).<sup>25</sup> I agree with McMahan that existence can be noncomparatively good for us, though my claim is that its degree of goodness

may be objectively intensified on account of RC.

Second, I am not claiming that the externalist option is ‘objective’ in every possible sense of the term. Obviously, the universe, as opposed to myself, won’t care about whether ‘I’ come into existence over some other possible person. But if we adopt the standpoint of the universe, to borrow a phrase from Bernard Williams, then the universe might assign extra value to goods unlikely to emerge at all, whoever happens to obtain those goods. Alternatively, those who find these claims about objectivity and impersonal value too strong might say that the improbable lives we enjoy are valuable for *us*, not because the universe says so, but relative to our interests and relative to the interests of rational agents more generally. For if I am right that we implicitly assign extra value to goods that we were highly unlikely to obtain, then such goods will generally better satisfy our interests than similar goods that we were likely to obtain. This is objective because it permits that possessing improbable goods satisfies our interests, even in cases where we fail to realize their history. It is not so objective that things have their value for us whatever our interests are or might be.

Lastly, we must recall that some philosophers think that how much we value something can have bearing on how much value it has, which might lessen the gap between objective and subjective claims about value. For instance, consider Hurka’s claim (1998) that the intrinsic value of a painting may increase if its beauty is comprehended and appreciated. Although such views about intrinsic value are controversial, they show that even our internalist or subjective options may have objective consequences for the value of our lives, and not just for how much we value our lives, or for our beliefs about life’s value.

#### IV

But isn’t there a dark side to contingency? That is, does the reality of bad events, if contingent, make our existence more regrettable by intensifying the

bad things in our lives? And if so, wouldn't this fact simply neutralize the present strategy, leaving us with no net gain in thinking about contingency and value? The problem can be put another way: the examples discussed above concern improbable goods, but one can easily consider cases in which contingency seems to render bad things even worse. Consider,

**Case One:** A 14-year-old gets pregnant and infected with HIV following her first sexual experience.

**Case Two:** A thirty-year-old man is informed that he has a rare genetic disease that effects about one in 200 million people and that he has five years to live.

**Case Three:** A woman is fined \$ 1.9 million for illegal downloads – roughly \$80,000, each for 24 songs.<sup>26</sup>

The above cases confirm our basic idea that the value of something, and the degree to which we value it, can be affected by contingency.<sup>27</sup> But they also raise two potential worries. The first worry is straightforward and would arise even if RC were false. In particular, if someone suffers enough radically improbable minuses in life (like getting an extremely rare disease), then this would, given my reasoning, seem to make her life much worse. Thankfully, however, this objection is not too worrisome. Few people, after all, will ever suffer any radically improbable things (like those described in cases one through three), never mind many of them. Similarly, few will benefit very much from everyday contingency, in the absence of RC, since few win lotteries and the like. This is another way of saying that, in the absence of RC, most good or bad things that we face will not be terribly improbable.<sup>28</sup> It also means that the most interesting questions about contingency and value will concern RC.

The second worry is more troubling. The problem this time arises in

light of RC. If the improbability of negative events can contribute to their badness, this raises the prospect that all the bad things in our lives are made worse, in view of RC. Now suddenly every bad event in a life is intensified by contingency. But then we will be no better off overall in thinking about contingency and value.

Thankfully, for me, however, there are problems with this reasoning too. For one, if we already deem our lives worthwhile, then we are plausibly already supposing that the goods in life are greater in number, perhaps far greater, than the bad things in our lives. But then there will be more good that gets intensified than bad in light of RC, which does seem like a net gain.<sup>29</sup> To consider an admittedly simplistic analogy: if you have ten stocks, each worth \$10,000, you will be pleased to learn, at the end of a day, that seven of them increased in value by 25%, even if the remaining three have each diminished by 25%. For overall you will still be up by \$10,000. Something similar might be said about life's value and RC, on the envisaged view – though admittedly the book-keeping will be much more complicated in the case of determining the value of a life.<sup>30</sup>

There is another point worth mentioning as well. Given a certain conception of regret, it is not clear that we can rationally regret RC without also regretting our existence and life's goods (Smilanski 2005, Adams 1979). More accurately, although I am open to the suggestion that we can sometimes *blame* someone for doing something to us that we do not regret and are in fact glad about (Velleman 2008: 276), I am less confident that we can regret something that we are, all things considered, glad about. That is, I am less confident that we can regret RC on account of its negative effects on our lives. Lastly, it is worth mentioning that there is more than one way to conceive of the value of a life. We can see it as one total thing (the good of having a good life) that is affected by RC, or as a series of goods, each of which is intensified by RC: most for the good, some for the bad. If we see our lives in the former way, as a kind of single *all-things-considered* good that

gets intensified by RC, then RC will not have any negative consequences for our lives to be regretted.

#### ***1.4.1. The Bad News***

Of course, there is some bad news here. Those whose lives do not meet the threshold of being minimally worthwhile will no doubt see contingency as a horrible truth, one that renders their lives even worse. I grant and mourn over this result – and only take comfort in the fact that such persons will not likely read this paper. There is still much reason for optimism, however. For Darwin’s claim that ‘happiness decidedly prevails’ seems right or at least not too exaggerated. If that’s correct, then RC should come as good news, and potentially very good news, for most persons.

### V

This paper stems from the conviction that we need a much larger context in which to think about the value of life, one that takes into consideration our absurdly low existential odds. But such a claim, if true, would also seem to have bearing on the ethics of procreation.

#### ***1.5.1. Contributions to Procreative Ethics***

For one, my claims have positive implications for procreation since any argument that our lives are more valuable than we thought makes procreation more likely to be justified. After all, the better our lives go, the more likely it is that the harms of existence are sufficiently counterbalanced by good things. True, some will claim that all of this is unnecessary; that all it takes to justify starting a life is the simple expectation that this life will be worthwhile, even barely worthwhile. But many people find this zero-line view of procreative responsibility highly implausible (Shiffrin 1999, Archard 2004, Glover 2006:

58-63, Hare 2007, Harman 2009a, Roberts 2009).<sup>31</sup> If we thus reject the zero-line view of procreation, we ought to hope that people's lives are better, in many respects, than they sometimes appear. The reason for this claim, moreover, is that our lives do contain many bad things, things that we should hope are sufficiently counterbalanced by overriding goods. In a word, the more value our lives have, and can be shown to have, the more plausible it is to suppose that the harms of existence are counterbalanced, and not just barely, but by a decent amount, in most cases.

A related implication for procreative ethics is also worth stating. For my claims provide a way of softening a recent anti-natalist argument, according to which it is morally wrong to procreate. The objection, very roughly, goes as follows.

**Psychologically Based Anti-Natalist Challenge:** Many people think that procreation is justified because people's lives are clearly quite good on average. But this justification faces a problem: our confidence in life's goodness is plagued by various cognitive biases, and as a result, is insensitive to the serious harms of existence. That is, there is an increasing amount of work in the psychology of subjective well-being evidencing that people's optimistic quality of life assessments are actually much more optimistic than their actual environments warrant (Kahneman et al. 1999, Gilbert et al. 2002, Taylor 1991). For instance, most everyone, including torture victims and those who lose family members in an early death, are often surprisingly fine after a short period of time, despite their initial expectations to the contrary. But given the objective badness of life's losses, radical adaptation puts us out of touch with the badness of life's tragedies, as do other optimistic biases and our tendency to see almost everything as being for the best. The result is that we cannot trust our optimistic life assessments and indeed should probably distrust them. This in turn casts doubt on procreation.

I am doubtful that this argument, which is based in an argument from Benatar (2006), could show that our lives are bad. But the argument, if fleshed out, could do damage to our belief that our lives are good. In particular, our optimistic biases, combined with the reality of life's minuses, could show that our lives are worse than we think (Harman 2009b, Marsh, chapter 2) and could further make it more difficult to know that our lives are good. For this reason it is important to seek out new evidence that our lives are better, in some respects, than we think to restore our previous confidence in the goodness and permissibility of procreation. This paper can be seen as providing such evidence.

Lastly, my claims have significance for procreative ethics whatever we make of the non-identity problem. For even if we can neither benefit nor harm persons in creating them, throwing a child into existence and its predicaments without her permission (Velleman 2008), is going to sound a lot more plausible if her life is expected to have more as opposed to less value; that is, if the good of being alive in our world, is expected to be worth more rather than less. Now none of this shows, to clarify, that we have a new reason to procreate,<sup>32</sup> or that the morality of procreation is entirely straightforward,<sup>33</sup> only that the permissibility and goodness of procreation is more transparent in light of my claims about value.

## VI

### *1.6.1. Two Objections*

Let me close by considering two objections to the present project.

**Objection 1:** Though you do not seek to show that RC or SC are true, there are increasingly good reasons to think them false, reasons

having to do with evolutionary convergence and inflationary cosmology.

Response: beginning with the phenomena of evolutionary convergence, it is true that this makes SC less likely than it would otherwise be, but the difference is so slight that it does not affect the present argument. What does convergence show? It shows that similar traits (such as camera eyes and teeth) can independently evolve several times, despite dissimilar initial conditions (Conway-Morris 2003). So evolution may not be as contingent with respect to traits as we traditionally thought. But that does nothing to show that the human species – never mind the individuals that presently compose our species – is inevitable or likely. Conway-Morris thinks it shows that human-like creatures are inevitable. But even this weaker claim about human-like creatures is questionable (Sober 2003).<sup>34</sup>

Turning to inflationary cosmology, the worry here is potentially much more significant. After all, on certain interpretations of inflationary cosmology we live in an infinite universe or rather multiverse (Guth 1981), where everything that is physically possible has a probability of 1 (Bostrom 2002a, Knobe et al. 2006). But then the set of merely possible persons will be much smaller than we thought – indeed all physically possible persons will be actual at some place in the universe and we may in fact have an infinite number of genetic duplicates. I confess that such a picture, if true, would seem to seriously threaten my claims about the value of life. My response is two-fold. First: the above cosmological picture is still highly controversial among physicists and cosmologists, many of whom think it inherently non-testable. Second: a multiverse, if such there be, might be a radically contingent entity, unlikely to emerge in the first place.<sup>35</sup> Since the arguments for this last claim are a bit sketchy, however, I grant that cosmology could in principle weaken and perhaps undermine my claims, at least if people become sufficiently informed about it.

**Objection 2.** It is true that we lack the means of predicting which individuals or species will come into existence, but your claims about value require more than mere ignorance on our part. To get a more valuable existence our existence has got to be objectively unlikely in itself – not just relative to early events in the universe either, but improbable *simpliciter* (i.e. improbable relative to no initial conditions). Without this stronger conception of probability and contingency, then any event, looked at from some temporal perspective can be made out to have a prior probability arbitrarily close to zero or one. And surely nothing interesting could follow from that.

Although it would no doubt be better for my purposes if existential contingency had an objective, non-epistemic component and (if the concept is coherent) if our lives were improbable *simpliciter*, despite the objector's claims, I do not clearly require these things. For one of my goals, recall, was to highlight a subjective or internalist version of my thesis. But when we think about value along subjective or internalist lines, the claim that various events in the world are radically unpredictable to us is far from trivial.<sup>36</sup> It nicely captures our intuitions about lotteries and value, for instance. For imagine that someone reasoned in the following way in response to your winning the lottery: 'Why be extra excited on account of beating such odds? Looked at from *some* temporal perspective, if we are in a deterministic universe, you were clearly bound to win just now.'

Such a response would be strange indeed, for even granting that lotteries are subject to deterministic forces, why should *we* have been so determined to win? Indeed, *we* had every reason to think that we would lose, which many take to imply that playing the lottery is always irrational. Pointing out that there is *some* time at which our winning would not be all that improbable (say immediately before the final number in the following winning series is drawn: 7, 6, 9, 5, 5, 4, 2 ) does nothing to detract from the value of the

win. For it seems clear that there is an earlier stance that we have reason to adopt, one that should matter to us. So too with our existence. So I think that an epistemic conception of RC is sufficient to confer value on our lives, at least subjective value. But that is assuming that an objective version of my thesis cannot go through. This assumption is not obviously correct. For although I am not sure what to make of the idea that events could be improbable in themselves, some discussions about ‘metaphysical nihilism’ may lend support to a rather objective interpretation of RC.<sup>37</sup>

However objective our conception of RC, though, a certain discontinuity warrants mentioning. Unlike ordinary lottery wins, whose improbability we anticipate before we win, we were not around to see ourselves coming into existence. In fact, we could not help but observe ourselves existing, which uncovers a certain observation selection effect in the present case (Bostrom 2002). But this doesn’t seem to me relevant. To consider a variation of an example from Leslie (1989): if you learned that a trained firing squad, who always intend to kill, shot several rounds at your sleeping mother while she was pregnant with you and missed, you would rightly be amazed to learn of the outcome, even though you wouldn’t have been around to learn otherwise. Similarly, although the probability of our existing is 1 relative to our current knowledge, it is not 1 relative to our knowledge of the world as it was at various stages before we were born. In other words, we can rationally appreciate and value our improbable goods retroactively.<sup>38</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to one view, naturalism is the thesis that nature is a closed system, one that admits of no immaterial persons, whether gods or souls. Another way of defining naturalism is in terms of value. As Schellenberg notes, ‘If the physical universe and what it spans is all there is, nothing is *unsurpassably* excellent’ (2005: 27). Schellenberg may be right, but my claims could show that things on a naturalistic view are better than people sometimes think.

<sup>2</sup> The non-identity problem is best explained by the following case from Parfit. *Fourteen-Year-Old Parent Case*: A fourteen-year-old realizes that if she has a child now, as opposed to later, that her child will have a bad start in life. But she wants a child now. She has the child. The child suffers a very bad start in life, though its life is subjectively worth living. Most of us think that the mother does something wrong, and does something wrong to her child. But the child – call her Sally – also owes her worthwhile existence to her mother’s decision and thus to her bad start in life. Had the mother waited to create, then a non-identical child would have resulted instead – call her Sarah. The non-identity problem is the problem of explaining how the mother wrongs or harms Sally. The problem gets particularly hard when we

consider cases like contracting children into slavery (Kavka 1982). The reason that the non-identity problem arises, finally, is because our essences are fragile: a number of things could pre-empt our existence, which also makes our lives are improbable.

<sup>3</sup> In particular, it is available to theists who think that God's decision to create human beings was free, who affirm a libertarian conception of human free will, and who think that our genetic make-up is a necessary feature of our identity. Such theists will have to conclude that their particular lives are highly contingent.

<sup>4</sup> After all, Williamson's claim concerns logical existents, whereas we are concerned only with concrete existents. As he later puts it: 'On the envisaged view, two very different states are possible for one object. It is capable of being an embodied person, knowing, feeling and acting in space and time. It is also capable of being a merely possible person, disembodied, spatiotemporally unlocated, knowing nothing, feeling nothing and doing nothing. Thus we might say that 'Williamson is a contingent concrete existent but a necessary logical existent' (Efid 2009). Put another way, Williamson can still believe in contingency in my sense. For more on the metaphysics of contingency and what talk of possible persons might amount to see (Fine 2003).

<sup>5</sup> I owe this way of putting the problem to David Velleman (2008: 221).

<sup>6</sup> Dawkins is one exception. He states: 'We are going to die and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born [...]. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people.' (2000:1). On the other hand, Dawkins fails to explore any connection to value. He can further be quite pessimistic about chance. He says elsewhere: 'To return to this chapter's pessimistic beginning...in a universe full of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice' (Dawkins 1999: 113).

<sup>7</sup> For a challenge to the claim that events that take place after our deaths can affect our wellbeing see Bradley (2008).

<sup>8</sup> The reason that all X's are unlikely is that something necessary for their particular identities – namely, their genetic make-ups – was highly unlikely to assemble.

<sup>9</sup> See White (2007) and Beatty (2006).

<sup>10</sup> As Roger White has recently argued, a chancy origin, at the cosmic and biological levels, is no less likely than a law-like explanation: 'If life's existence is no more to be expected on the assumptions of either intentional or non-intentional biasing than it is on chance, then we have no reason to doubt the Chance hypothesis...So unless we suspect that life arose on purpose, we should be quite content to join Crick in seeing life as an extremely improbable "happy accident"(2007:467).' For further discussion on the issue of cosmic fine-tuning see Collins (2003) and Monton (2006).

<sup>11</sup> Gould goes on to remark that this is only superficially terrifying, but his reasons are not mine.

<sup>12</sup> The general example here is due to Shelly Kagan. The simplifying assumptions include (i) that each of the sexual encounters had the potential to result in a pregnancy; (ii) that only one sperm-egg combination would constitute you; and (iii) that your odds were no better than those of your possible siblings during the year leading up to your conception.

<sup>13</sup>For instance, it is natural to suppose that *how* much extra value we assign to goods in the relevant contexts roughly tracks how improbable the goods in question are – such that radically improbable goods are worth more, other things being equal, than goods that are more probable. Also, it is natural to suppose that there is an upper bound with respect to how much extra value we might assign to improbable goods. Here we might say that the extra value that good X gains on account of being improbable is never going to be worth as much as the value that the object X has in itself, independently of its probability (Similar motivations sometimes lead Mooreans to conclude that the joy somebody takes in another's suffering is never going to be worth as much as that suffering). Lastly, there will clearly be psychological constraints on how much extra value we can assign to radically improbable goods. As Huemer (2008) citing Broome (2004) notes, it can be difficult for humans to appreciate the difference between very high numbers, for instance the difference between millions and billions of years and, we might add, the difference between odds like in one in five billion and one in a five trillion. Despite these limitations, though, we can see that some things are highly improbable: for instance, our existence is much less probable than winning several lotteries in a row.

<sup>14</sup> This qualification might seem plausible in light of the following example. Imagine a society that prizes delicious and highly expensive fruits. Imagine further that every citizen randomly receives one such fruit, out of 10,000 possible kinds, for breakfast each month. It would be strange if these individuals all

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assigned extra value to the particular fruit they received each month simply because it was improbable that they should receive that specific fruit.

<sup>15</sup> Since I am inclined to think that our coming to value *X* more often leads us to more seriously value the fact that we possess *X* more, and vice versa, I won't say more about this distinction.

<sup>16</sup> The idea that things can be good for us whether or not we are aware of them may seem more plausible to some persons within thinking about how things can be bad for us whether or not we are aware of them. It might be objectively bad for someone, though all the more if they value honesty, that their partner has cheated on them from day one.

<sup>17</sup> Such a claim, aside from violating our claim that improbable goods may be assigned extra value only when a comparable good wasn't coming anyhow, has other problems. To generate the conclusion that we should focus on obtaining improbable goods, given my views, one would need to argue for a number of implausible claims. For instance, one would need to show that we should always create more value for ourselves, where we can do so. Second, one would need to show that other competing factors, such as our time, our money, and in this case, our desire to find a partner on account of other features besides his or her contingency etc, matter less than the extra value we might gain in obtaining an improbable good. Finally, goods that are highly improbable for us are goods that we plausibly couldn't obtain even if we tried. Although it is relatively easy to find a Chinese partner in our home country, it is hard to win lotteries or to gain jobs like the one discussed in case one, even when we try. Thanks to Matthew Liao for the Chinese mate example.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, some will dispute the claim that the value of intrinsic goods *could* be objectively intensified by certain facts about contingency, at least if we understand contingency to be an extrinsic property. For such persons, the intrinsic value of *X* is wholly determined by the intrinsic features of *X*, and so can never be affected by environmental or external factors like the likelihood of *X*'s arising for a given individual. It is not my wish to enter into the holism-atomism debate about value here, though needless to say, the idea that context matters in some way to value has been popular since Moore, who worried about whether pain, which is intrinsically bad, is made better or worse when someone else takes pleasure in it (Dancy 2003). What's more, some have claimed that extrinsic properties must be able to affect something's intrinsic value if we are to make sense of the notion of posthumous achievement (Hurka 1998). Finally, there are other claims about intrinsic value that would, if true, rule out some of my claims. For instance, if the concept of intrinsic value is incoherent, as a few philosophers suspect, it won't make sense to speak of valuing intrinsic goods more, or to speak of the value of intrinsic goods as being sensitive to environmental or causal-historical factors. In any case, I have made various claims about value and RC and not all of them are subject to these worries.

<sup>19</sup> Those advocating different theories of wellbeing might be attracted to different aspects of my claims, whether about pleasure, attitudes, life-satisfaction or retroactive desire fulfilment etc. I will leave it to others to sort out these details. But I suspect that my general claims would be compatible with various theories of wellbeing and that a main problem with most theories of wellbeing is that they, in failing to be sufficiently pluralistic, neglect dimensions of value that matter without justification.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Ben Sachs for helping me to see this point.

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, some research suggests that consciously appreciating and being grateful for the things we have makes us happier with our lives. Another way of describing the benefits of thinking about RC would thus be to say that awareness of it could increase our degree of life-satisfaction.

<sup>22</sup> For similar epistemic principles see, Huemer 2005: 99-127, Swinburne 1999: 141-145.

<sup>23</sup> Recent work suggests that children see teleology and purpose almost everywhere, that they are often hyper-creationists (Kelleman 2004). In addition, many, including many adults, display what Jesse Bering (2002) calls 'existential theory of mind' or 'EToM'. According to Bering, people, whatever their explicit beliefs, can easily sense that their lives are supposed to go as they do, right down to the tragedies. These biases could plausibly make the proposal that we are highly contingent potentially seem unnatural and frightening.

<sup>24</sup> The naturalist is likely to find 'meant to be' frameworks unreliable if only because naturalism is often described as a kind of hypothesis of indifference. The naturalist might also argue that there isn't any compelling evidence that we were supposed to exist, but that there is compelling evidence, by contrast, that we are evolutionary accidents. But it is not just naturalists that will doubt the intuition that our particular existence was inevitable and intended. As alluded to in note 2, many theists think that God's decision to create is free and further think that the free actions of human beings constrain which persons date and thus which persons come into existence. These theists have some reason to endorse a version of RC, which means that our claims about value are available to the theist.

<sup>25</sup> This would not be true, to be sure, given Benatar's claim that life can never be a benefit and is always in fact a harm. But such a claim faces serious objections (McMahan 2009, Bradley 2010, Harman 2009).

<sup>26</sup> This one is non-fictional. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/06/18/minnesota.music.download.fine/>

<sup>27</sup> These cases of course do not show that our reactions to bad events are always rational. For instance, although most of us may be more upset to miss a boat by three seconds than by three hours, this need not be rational on my analysis – since missing a boat by three seconds may not be unlikely or less likely than missing it by three hours. Thanks to David Wasserman for raising the boat example.

<sup>28</sup> More accurately, although some of these good or bad things might be quite improbable, *something like them* will not be.

<sup>29</sup> At least if we assume that the distribution between good and bad is tolerable.

<sup>30</sup> After all, leaving aside worries about incommensurable goods, the value of a life isn't just the amount of value divided by the amount of time. Perhaps it's worse for a life to progressively get worse than better, even if both lives have the same number and kinds of goods.

<sup>31</sup> After all, according to the zero line view, it's difficult to say that fourteen-year-olds shouldn't procreate and raise biological children, despite common knowledge that their children will likely have an impoverished start in life. Although we grant that the child may have a decent life on balance, we still typically conclude that it is wrong to knowingly create children who will suffer a bad start in life; at least, that is, if we could have created another life instead. Since teens can normally wait until they are older to have children, then this is typically the case.

<sup>32</sup> Though my claims could strengthen an already existing reason to procreate, if such there be.

<sup>33</sup> My claims are compatible with Shiffrin's (1999) idea that procreative harms may need to be compensated for, or that we ought to create persons expected to suffer less, as opposed to persons who will suffer more, harm where we can (Harman 2009a). Finally, I realize that my claims give us even stronger reasons than we already have not to start lives that seriously risk being bad, since such lives, if bad, will now be even worse. Although we shouldn't need further reasons for not starting bad lives, it is nonetheless worth knowing that such lives are worse, and thus even less permissible to start, than we thought.

<sup>34</sup> First, as Sober points out (2003), to show that certain traits are inevitable you need to know how often convergence failed to occur in the past, an issue which Conway-Morris never discusses. So trait-inevitability is far from obvious. Second, even granting trait-inevitability, there is a problem in the move from trait-inevitability to human-like-species inevitability, one that Sober also draws our attention to (ibid). Even if we grant that every step in the transition to some species type was highly probable, probabilities dwindle when you multiply them – the transition from the first to the last trait might still be radically improbable.

<sup>35</sup> For instance, some claim that the multiverse generator would itself have to be highly fine-tuned (Collins 2003: 191).

<sup>36</sup> I recall Daniel Dennett once mentioning that determinism wouldn't rob our lives of meaning, since we don't know how the story of our lives will unfold, and that this counts for something. Something similar might be said about value: if we lack knowledge that the story of the universe would have contained us, and if we have every reason to think that it wouldn't have, this can affect how much we value our lives.

<sup>37</sup> In particular, Van Inwagen's probabilistic argument against the claim that there could have easily been nothing (by which I mean no objects) would, if plausible, show that our world is highly unlikely. Van Inwagen (1996) argues that since worlds with objects are infinite in number, and since there can at most be one empty world, then the probability of there having been a non-empty world would seem to be zero. As Sorenson notes (2009), however, this particular non-empty world seems no more probable, on Van Inwagen's reasoning, than the empty world (assuming there is only one way to be empty). But then the existence of our world would, like the empty world, be as likely as anything could be.

<sup>38</sup> There are other possible objections too. For instance, it might be objected that my claims imply that the lives of necessary (or highly likely) existents, with lives very similar to our own, would be objectively worse than ours simply because they failed to satisfy RC – and subjectively worse than ours once these persons existents were informed of your claims about value. This objection seems to me misguided on a number of fronts. But perhaps most importantly, my claims do not imply that the lives of necessary existents would be less valuable than ours, only that such individuals would need to have come up with their own story, rooted in being necessary, for why their lives were as valuable as ours – and for why their lives were more valuable than they themselves thought, prior to thinking about value and necessity. Perhaps these beings could come up with such a story, but I am naturally interested in how *we* should

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think about our lives given that contingency seems to reign in our world. And it seems to me that if we barely made it into existence that this fact should not escape our assessment of our lives.

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## **Chapter 2:**

### **Quality of Life Assessments, Cognitive Reliability and Procreative Responsibility**

**Chapter Summary:** This paper explores the relationship between happiness research and procreation. More particularly, I explore and soften an argument that various cognitive biases keep us from seeing that our lives are not sufficiently good or harm-free to permissibly start. I also introduce and soften a case for procreative skepticism.

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#### ***Introduction***

Recent work in the psychology of happiness indicates that people are generally quite happy with their lives (Larsen & Eid 2008, Diener & Diener 1996).<sup>1</sup> It is tempting to celebrate, as opposed to analyze, evidence that most people are happy. But other factors should lead us to wonder about these results, and to wonder specifically about the causes of our optimistic life assessments. For instance, car accident victims who become paraplegic often spring back to their original level of happiness after only a year (Brickman et al, 1978). Other research indicates that almost nothing bad affects most of us beyond three months (Suh, Diener, Fujita, 1996), that we merely sense that negative events will have long-term impact (Gilbert et al, 1998). This problem, known in psychology as the problem of affective forecasting, suggests that we are bad at predicting what will make us happy. But there is a more serious problem lurking than our inability to accurately predict our future mental states. After all, events like becoming paraplegic<sup>2</sup>, and many more common ones, seem to be objectively huge losses. This matters because depending on how many bad events life presents us with we will have reason for thinking that our life assessments are unreliable and even deeply deceptive measures of how our lives go. Our beliefs about our lives will not, to borrow a concept from Robert Nozick, be truth-tracking.

I am not alone in raising the worry that our quality of life assessments might be unreliable. David Benatar (2006a) draws on similar research to argue that we are deceived about matters of objective value, so much so that we fail to see that our lives are in reality very bad and not worth starting – and this, we are told, is true on any of the standard theories of wellbeing, and whatever we make of Benatar’s much better known argument that the benefits of existence *couldn’t* counterbalance its harms.<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Harman (2009: 777), though she does not go as far as Benatar, nonetheless concedes that the relevant research shows that our lives are worse than we think. Benatar and Harman raise some important points for philosophers working on wellbeing and procreation to grapple with, though their arguments go by too quickly to really capture the problem. For there are at least four possibilities concerning happiness research and our optimistic biases that need exploring:

- (1) Our biases prevent us from seeing that our lives are bad.
- (2) Our biases prevent us from seeing that our lives are worse than we think.
- (3) Our biases show that we lack knowledge that our lives are good or worthwhile (however good they might in fact be).
- (4) Our biases show that informed persons lack justification for believing that their lives are good or worthwhile (however good they might in fact be).

Benatar seeks to establish (1) and (2), but isn’t sufficiently clear about why our lives are bad in the first place.<sup>4</sup> Harman concedes (2) but with minimal argumentation. Both Benatar and Harman, finally, fail to really engage (3) or (4). More accurately, despite the occasional (generic) remark about knowledge,<sup>5</sup> these thinkers largely ignore epistemic ways of thinking about the problem. In any case, all the above possibilities, given their importance, warrant further attention. Many of us, after all, think that the lives of people who enter into an experience machine take a serious turn for the worse, and this despite the positive experiences such a machine affords them.<sup>6</sup> Rarely do we consider that we ourselves might be in a similar predicament, not because we are in a machine that keeps us from objective contact with other persons

or events, but because the kind of minds we possess keep us from seeing the objective badness of our environments and our general predicament in *this* world. Equally rarely do we entertain the purely skeptical hypothesis that we are not well positioned to know or even believe that our lives go well.

My task will thus be to clarify and assess the worry that happiness research, when combined with life's minuses, has troubling implications for our lives or for what we can know or rationally believe about our lives. After exploring some relevant psychological research about optimism and human bias, I develop three arguments that might pose a serious problem for us: one concerning knowledge, one concerning justification, and another concerning likelihoods. The **knowledge argument** suggests that our belief that our lives go well is not sensitive enough to count as knowledge. The **justification argument** suggests that informed persons are no longer justified in believing that their lives go well, since their best evidence for thinking that they do – namely their strong intuitive sense that they do – is unreliable. The **likelihood argument** suggests that the relevant data about bias, combined with our knowledge of life's harms, substantially raise the likelihood that our lives are bad and lowers the likelihood that our lives are good or even worthwhile.

For various reasons to be explained, none of the proposed challenges, individually or jointly, establish (1), (4), or (3). That said, these arguments do probably establish (2), and further make it hard to rule out (3). This is unfortunate, moreover, both because of what it implies about our lives, but also because a sufficiently serious lowering of confidence in the goodness of life does seem to warrant a similar lowering of confidence in the goodness and permissibility of procreation. I thus invite the reader – including myself on future occasions – to provide further arguments for life's value. My claims, finally, challenge Fred Feldman's recent contention that happiness research lacks any interesting philosophical implications (2008: 25).<sup>7</sup> This research, if correct, does have interesting implications for ethics and epistemology. It just doesn't have the clear and radical implications that Benatar thinks it does.

### *2.1.1. Preliminaries*

Let me begin with some caveats. First, when I use the term ‘happiness’ I have in mind life satisfaction.<sup>8</sup> This is roughly what psychologists are seeking to test when they ask subjects to answer various questions about how satisfied they are with their lives<sup>9</sup> – though less cognitive tests ask subjects, not about their lives as a whole, but about how they feel on various occasions (Schimmack et al. 2002, Kahneman 1999). My claim is not that such accounts are problem-free (Haybron 2007a, Feldman 2008)<sup>10</sup>, only that they raise a worry that our degree of happiness is radically higher than our environments warrant. Since I think a version of this worry will emerge on any plausible conception of happiness, including emotional state conceptions, I will focus not on how best to define happiness here, but on the biases and processes shaping our sense that our lives go well.

Second, I am assuming with many philosophers that happiness and wellbeing are distinct. But some might insist that these things cannot come apart too much. A version of this worry finds support in the following remarks from David Velleman, which appear in a work on suicide:

...I think that we generally ought to defer to a person on the question whether his life is worth living, since the living-worthiness of a life measures the extent to which the continuation of that life would be good for the person living it. The person living a life is the best judge of the value that its continuation would afford him – not an infallible judge, of course, but usually more reliable than anyone else is likely to be. Indeed, his judgment of this value is to some extent self-fulfilling, since his merely liking or disliking aspects of his life can to some extent make them good or bad for him (1999: 608).

There is something plausible about these claims. People are often better positioned than outsiders to judge their own lives, and how well a life goes may, in part, be a function of one’s belief about how well it goes. But all of

this, note, is compatible with the claim that people in general are unreliable assessors of their lives, and that we could learn about this empirically. For the belief that one's life goes well, though arguably an important ingredient of wellbeing, is not sufficient for wellbeing; as with various kinds of judgments about happiness (Haybron 2007b), it is further capable of being false, subject to bias, or otherwise epistemically defective – at least, that is, if we assume that there are objective dimensions to wellbeing. Lastly, although some deny that wellbeing has objective dimensions, this paper is not addressed to such individuals.<sup>11</sup>

### *2.2.1. Psychological Immunity and Optimism: Five Biases*

In this section, I'll explore five biases that help to explain our optimistic life assessments. Many of these biases are discussed by Benatar. Others are not, but could be thought to help his case. The first bias, alluded to above, concerns perceived impact of negative events.

**Negative Impact Bias:** a tendency to see negative events as notably less bad shortly after their occurrence.

As mentioned, despite our expectations to the contrary, terrible events typically stop emotionally affecting most of us after three months.<sup>12</sup> Of course if you tell individuals that they won't likely be all that upset much beyond three months if they lose their job, fail to receive tenure, or even suffer locked-in syndrome<sup>13</sup>, they will not likely believe you. This is because people are typically unaware that they have a kind of 'psychological immune system' that regulates their subjective sense of wellbeing (Gilbert et al, 1998). The claim here is not that everyone's baseline happiness starts out the same, only that we tend to adapt fairly quickly, springing back to our individual or natural level of happiness, which for most is fairly positive. As one team of

authors put it: ‘Most people are reasonably happy most of the time, and most events do little to change that for long’ (*ibid* 618).

Now clearly there are going to be some benefits to resilience, which preserves us from much suffering. But there is also something normatively troubling about our immunity to long-term suffering, which keeps us out of touch with certain truths about value. One example explored by Dan Moler (2007) concerns spousal death and how living partners are often shockingly quick to re-marry or to find themselves in exciting new relationships.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many are quite prepared to move on after only a few months and sometimes less. The implication, as Moler notes, is that we seem incapable of holding our dead spouses in the regard they deserve, which does seem to devalue them. Moler’s point, to clarify, is not that we should wish to be exceedingly less (or more) resilient than we are: perhaps all responses to bad events have regrettable features. His point is rather that there is something deeply regrettable, even disturbing, about our long-term responses to the death of loved ones.

I agree with Moler that our psychological immune system can lead us to devalue others in their deaths, though I am interested in whether it also leads us to overvalue our own lives, by keeping us from appreciating the devastating nature of life’s tragedies, and by keeping us from realizing how many of our desires go unfulfilled. True, part of what’s bad about negative events and frustrated desires, again, just is our reaction to them. But many of us are deeply suspicious of the notion of ‘happy slaves’. And while we admire Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost* for concluding that ‘The mind is its own place, and in itself, Can make heaven of Hell, and a hell of Heaven’, we also worry that nobody outside of hellish contexts would reason this way.

Benatar discusses our impact bias and adaptive capacities, though his main concern is over a phenomenon called Pollyannaism. This bias, which goes beyond our general immunity to long-term loss, may be expressed as follows:

**Pollyannaism or Positive Bias:** a bias that leads us to focus on the good and to interpret whatever happens to us (or at any rate much of what happens to us) as being for the best.

No doubt some bad events do lead to new and even better realities. But even when this is not plausibly the case, many still feel that it is. To see a dramatic example, the original drummer for the Beatles is apparently glad that he was dropped from the band early on before they made it, since this freed him up to pursue other projects that made him happier than he would otherwise have been.<sup>14</sup> Now many of us find such claims difficult to take seriously, seeing them as clear evidence of self-deception. Part of what is going on here may have to do with a status quo bias, which leads us to prefer the way things are simply because they are familiar to us (Bostrom & Ord 2006). But beyond this, people often look back on tragic circumstances with a sense of thankfulness, whether following break-ups, jail time, or missed opportunities. Even where we are less than thankful for the bad things that befall us, however, it is important to keep in mind that ‘positive events are more frequently recalled than negative events’ (Myers & Diener 1997: 174).

Another bias worth mentioning in connection with Pollyannaism, but which gets unfortunately overlooked in the psychological and philosophical discussion about happiness, stems from the cognitive science of religion and in particular from something called existential theory of mind (EToM). Unlike theory of mind (ToM), which permits us to read the mental states of other persons through observing their behaviour, EToM leads us to judge, rather personally, that our life is supposed to go as it does (Bering 2002), that the bad events we face take place against the backdrop of a meaningful and directed life narrative. This brings about a perceived teleological dimension to our suffering, one that goes beyond merely seeing our suffering in a positive light – and one that is consistent with a natural tendency to believe in afterlife (Bering & Bjorklund 2004).

**EToM Bias:** a bias to think that our life is supposed to go as it does and that the way our life unfolds has an objective and worthy purpose that we may not fully understand.

EToM experiences, though discussed in the cognitive science of religion, ought to concern those interested in the psychology of happiness. The reason for this is that EToM experiences often function not just to soften tragedies, but to give a sense of ultimate meaning in life. In the words of Jesse Bering:

‘I define EToM, in a purposively general sense, as a biologically based, generic explanatory system that allows individuals to perceive meaning in certain of life’s events....(eg. ‘I was in a bad car accident when I was a teenager *because* I needed to learn that my life is fragile) (*Ibid* 4).

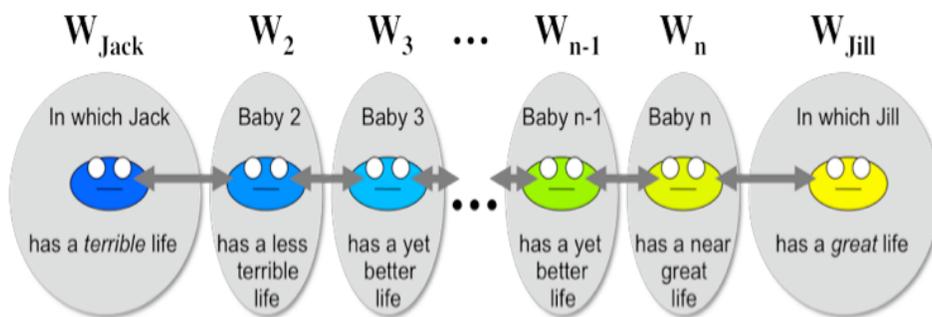
It is important to see that EToM experiences, as a feature of human cognition, are had not just by the deeply religious, but often by the non-religious as well. As such, it is not surprising that Bering, a self-described atheist, claims to have EToM experiences, while explicitly affirming that there is no grand reason for any of life’s events. The relevance for our discussion should be clear: EToM experiences plausibly make many much more optimistic and hopeful than they would otherwise be, and so have the potential to be highly deceptive.<sup>15</sup> In particular, those who think with Bering and Benatar that people’s sense of meaning and purpose is illusory face a potentially serious problem here.<sup>16</sup>

Moving along to our fourth bias, we often assume that, if we are doing better than others in various respects, that we are doing well. This judgment seems to fall prey to the following bias.

**Comparative Success Bias:** A bias that leads us to overlook the difference between doing comparatively well and doing objectively well.

Although certain goods may be essentially comparative or positional – such as being tall – many other goods seem to be different. Benatar’s most compelling example here concerns death: many people assume that one does well to live to a hundred, not because a hundred years is ideal in absolute terms, but because it seems like a long life relative to most members of our species (82). But at least those of us who think that wellbeing admits of non-comparative dimensions cannot just assume that our lives go well because they go better than the lives of most other people we are aware of in history or around the world. To better understand the worry in question, it is helpful to consider the following illustration.

Figure 1.<sup>17</sup>



If we assume that Jack and Jill are current or past humans, then it will be reasonable for many to assume that their lives are closer to Jill’s than to Jack’s in the above illustration. But why assume this standard of comparison? After all, there may be type 2 civilizations<sup>18</sup> or future humans who have lives that are *much* better than ours. Perhaps these individuals live several thousand years and have found ways of overcoming depression, boredom and disease, exchanging these for radically enhanced experiences, life-projects and

relationships. Why aren't these beings the relevant class of comparison? Or what about purely possible beings who think our lives rather unfortunate? If there are more objective facts about how good our lives go our local comparative success bias doesn't make it easy to worry about those facts.

Finally, the claim that we are deeply biased when performing quality of life judgments is confirmed in a general way by the presence of a Lake Wobegon effect. This effect occurs when most people in a group place themselves above average with respect to some factor. Since this is not strictly a bias, but an effect of other biases, I will call this the Lake Wobegon Happiness Effect,

**Lake Wobegon Happiness Effect:** a common tendency for people not just to think that they are happy, but to think that they are happier than most other people.

A similar error is often said to affect drivers and teachers: most of us allegedly think that we are far better than average and yet we cannot all be right. In fact, that people's confidence regarding some feature of themselves often fails to budge even when they are informed about the presence of a Lake Wobegon effect (Krueger & Dunning 1999) only confirms the presence of widespread cognitive unreliability in the relevant domains. This matters, finally, since even if a local comparative standard of happiness is the right standard to adopt, many will, to revisit our previous illustration, wrongly rank their lives closer to Jill's life than to Jack's.

### ***2.3.1. A Word About Life's Minuses and Evolution***

The above biases by themselves do not show that our lives are bad. When combined with the severity of life's harm, however, then we have – according to Benatar – a powerful reason for thinking that our lives are bad and a debunking challenge to our strong optimism about life and procreation.

Consider for instance life's minuses. Life presents us with very bad things: we get depressed, we get cancer, we often fail to get what we want, and we must eventually lose everything, including those who brought us into existence. Given the severity of these things, it might be wondered how our quality of life assessments could be high in the absence of serious biases. Part of the answer here is surely that we fail to fully appreciate the badness of life's harms.

Take the evils of aging, for instance. Though plagued by unfortunate social and gendered dimensions (Callahan 1999), some aspects of aging just seem bad for all of us (Overall 2003).<sup>19</sup> It might be thought, given bodily decay and the increasing number of funerals we attend as we age, that the elderly would be uniquely depressed. But it is interesting to learn that, on the contrary, many people feel happier as they become older (Carstensen, L.L. & Mikels, J.A., 2005, Kennedy, Q., Mather, M., & Carstensen, L.L. 2004).<sup>20</sup> To be sure, the optimism of the elderly should be understood against the backdrop of midlife depression and childhood joys, which are part of the so-called U curve theory of happiness. But one can easily imagine a skeptic asking the following question: why, if we are reliable assessors of our lives, doesn't our depression evenly worsen as we age, and just as soon as we leave childhood?<sup>21</sup>

Serious harms aside, we perhaps especially fail to appreciate the mild and mundane minuses in life, something that Benatar nicely draws our attention to. For instance, we tend to overlook the thousands of hours of boredom that we have all experienced; the fact that we are often too hot or too cold; that we often need to relieve ourselves, whether this be through going to the bathroom or scratching an itch. And yet these factors, when added up, may have significant impact on how our lives actually go. (If we were anywhere nearly as harsh and impartial as the average movie critic in assessing the narratives of our lives the results might be sobering.) To be sure, just how serious the problem is will naturally depend on one's prior theory of wellbeing. But I am willing to grant Benatar the claim that the biases in

question, combined with the harms of existence, create a worry on any of the main conceptions of wellbeing – whether mental state accounts, desire fulfillment accounts, objective list accounts, and we might add, authentic life satisfaction accounts. In fact, although I am not convinced that we yet have a good theory of wellbeing, any theory on which the harms and biases we have been discussing made little to no difference would be a deeply suspicious theory.

There are other data we could discuss before moving on to our arguments. For instance, there is worrisome evidence that we are not so good at knowing our moods and our emotional states, including negative ones (Haybron 2007b).<sup>22</sup> But instead of exploring this worry I want to briefly flag a possible Darwinian dimension to the problem. The issue here concerns our theoretical grounds for trusting our life assessments prior to looking at the above psychological data and life's harms. This worry, though briefly mentioned by Benatar, is nicely stated by Sharon Street:

Different evaluative tendencies, then, can have extremely different effects on a creature's chances of survival and reproduction...In particular, we can expect there to have been overwhelming pressure in the direction of making those evaluative judgements which tended to promote reproductive success (such as the judgement that one's life is valuable), and against making those evaluative judgements which tended to decrease reproductive success (such as the judgement that one should attack one's offspring) (2006: 113-114).

This 'overwhelming pressure' in the direction of optimism and procreation, combined with the claim that there is no a priori guarantee that our lives will come out good on a naturalistic view of the world, is worth reflecting on for a moment. Why think that evolution, if we assume with Benatar that it is unguided, has endowed us with dispositions to form correct value-assessments, if such there be, about our lives? Put another way, if we cannot

rule out that our value judgments about life and procreation are highly responsive to the ‘distorting pressures of Darwinian forces’ (109), then it might be thought that we will start out with less reason to trust those judgments or at least less reason to think those judgments are secure in the face of counterevidence.

### *2.4.1. Three Arguments*

#### (A) THE KNOWLEDGE ARGUMENT

The first argument I want to develop makes use of sensitivity accounts of knowledge, often referred to as tracking theories. Sensitivity accounts of knowledge, first developed in detail by Robert Nozick, make it a condition on knowledge that our beliefs track the truth. Here Nozick introduces the following modal condition on knowledge:

**Sensitivity Condition:** A subject S’s belief p in a true contingent proposition is sensitive only if in the nearest possible worlds in which p is false, S no longer believes p.<sup>23</sup>

This sensitivity condition is supposed to offer us a necessary, externalist condition on knowledge: one that could both help to challenge the skeptic and preserve our intuition that knowledge cannot be too lucky. This condition tells us to imagine a world very much like the present one except that some contingent belief that we hold is no longer true. The question is whether we would still hold this belief in the relevant world. If the answer is no, then our belief is sensitive. To simplify with an example: my belief that I have hands is not only true but sensitive, since I won’t believe it in any of the nearest worlds in which it is false – say in a world where I recently lost my hands in a biking accident. By contrast, take my belief that the next lottery ticket I purchase will be a losing ticket. This belief, though inductively justified, is

insensitive, since in the nearest worlds wherein my belief is false (because I really end up with the winning ticket), I will still believe it to be true.

The present worry is that our optimistic judgments about life's quality embody beliefs about life's quality that, even if true, are not sensitive. Such a worry can seem well-founded. After all, our capacity to adjust psychologically to divergent environments just is a way of being psychologically insensitive to those environments. But then in the nearest worlds in which our lives fail to be good, we will still believe them to be good. In fact, in the nearest worlds in which our lives fail to be worthwhile there is some reason to think that we still will believe them to be such. To see this, take a good candidate for a life that fails to be worth living – say an 18<sup>th</sup> century slave who is regularly beaten or raped, someone who suffers from Locked-In Syndrome, or someone who spends most of his life in prison for a crime he did not actually commit. There is some reason to think that many people in circumstances like these will, despite their hardships, think their lives very much worthwhile and even quite decent, and often as good as they were before (Bruno et al. 2011). We know this because individuals in similar circumstances very often believe their lives to be worthwhile and quite decent, including some who undergo years of captivity and torture (Charney 2004).<sup>24</sup> In short: since our optimistic life assessments are largely attributable to questionable biases, it seems like we are relying on rather defective processes or methods of belief-formation.

## (B) THE JUSTIFICATION ARGUMENT

Our first argument concerned knowledge. As an argument about knowledge, this argument of course leaves open the possibility that we might remain in some sense justified in believing that our lives are good. But the justification argument seeks to show that at least fully informed individuals are not even justified in *believing* that their lives go well. The conception of epistemic

justification I have in mind is both evidentialist and internalist, and goes roughly as follows:

One is justified in affirming some belief P at some time t, only if the belief that P is a suitable response to one's reflectively accessible evidence at time t.

Although there are many debates about evidence (Kelly 2008, Stich 2008, Williamson 2004, Feldman & Conee 1985), let us grant that intuitions count as evidence. We can thus grant that the belief that our lives go well starts out justified simply because it seems true to us, apart from inference. This standard, aside from making justification easy, might be thought to be the natural upshot of basic cognitive trust (Chisholm, 1992).<sup>25</sup> The problem, however, is that we have gained grounds for questioning the cognitive mechanisms giving rise to our target belief. Put another way, our best evidence for thinking that our lives go well – namely the persistent intuitive sense that they do – turns out to be unreliable given the biases described above. Of course there might be other factors *besides our sense that our lives go well* that justify our belief that they do. But the worry is that we currently lack such other evidence; that is, informed persons lack (unbiased) reflectively accessible grounds for believing that our lives are good or even all that decent.

### (C) THE LIKELIHOOD ARGUMENT

The likelihood challenge concerns not our beliefs, as such, or their epistemic status, but rather the hypothesis that our lives are bad and the hypothesis that our lives are good. More specifically, the concern is over whether evidence we have been considering is more likely on the hypothesis that our lives are objectively bad than it is on the competing hypothesis that our lives are good or worth starting.

So how does the likelihood argument go? Let H1 be the hypothesis that our lives are bad (where a life is bad, very roughly, if its bad features outweigh its good features or if the distribution between good and bad is too uneven).<sup>26</sup> Let H2 be the hypothesis that our lives are good or at least worth starting (where a life is good, very roughly, if it contains vastly more positive features than negative ones, and worth starting if it contains notably more positive than negative value, with a tolerable distribution between harms and benefits). Lastly, let E be the evidence that we have been discussing: namely our unreliable optimistic biases combined with life's harms, of which there are many. The likelihood argument goes as follows:

$$\Pr(E \mid H1) > \Pr(E \mid H2)$$

In short: the evidence we have been considering better supports the hypothesis that our lives go badly than the hypothesis that our lives are good or even worthwhile.

### **2.5.1 Replies**

Arguments like those above, if successful, don't exactly instill optimism. So how much should we worry about them? How successful are they? Here much could be said, but I will try to be brief. First, none of these arguments shows that our lives are bad, never mind very bad; nor do they show that our biases keep us from seeing that our lives are bad. Beginning with the last argument, showing that our lives are bad or likely bad with respect some evidence is hardly equivalent to showing that they are bad on our *total evidence*. Since the total evidence will include all of our evidence for life's goods, moreover, this makes it much less likely that we would get an all-things-considered reason for thinking that our lives are bad. Now if we accepted another argument from Benatar that the harms of existence *couldn't* be counterbalanced by life's goods, then we might have an all-things-

considered reason to think our lives bad. But I do not think we should accept that argument.<sup>27</sup>

Besides, other evidence that we have failed to consider raises the likelihood that our lives are in some ways better than we think, which creates trouble for the Benatar-style conclusion. This other evidence is perhaps best grasped by thinking more about affective forecasting. People do not just underestimate the impact of life's harms; they also overestimate the impact of life's goods. This is because we adapt to pretty much everything in our environments, and not just the bad. For instance, the study cited earlier that we get used to being paraplegic also evidences that we get used to winning lotteries. And although there can undoubtedly be negative aspects to winning lotteries that explain why they do not always give us lasting happiness, it is hard to think of many examples of objectively good things that we do not get used to and take for granted (Kahneman, D., & Thaler R.H, 2006).

It is for reasons like this that psychologists can often be found discussing the hedonic treadmill, which says, very roughly, that our chase after happiness is radically constrained by the kinds of minds we possess – minds that don't allow us to stay satisfied for too long. True, if our search for happiness were too constrained by the kinds of minds we possess, this would create a different problem for our wellbeing (in that case we would plausibly fail to obtain enough pleasure and fulfilled desires to have a good life). But given that people often feel quite decent in momentary affective assessments, which are not plagued by the distortions of recall that characterize whole-life judgments, this worry does not seem plausible.

Anyhow, Benatar does not pay sufficient attention to these dimensions of cognition or to their implications for the ways in which we underestimate our wellbeing. This is unfortunate for him, moreover, since these other features also could be called upon to soften the worries associated with Pollyannaism, which Benatar places the most weight on, EToM bias, and comparative success bias: although we often fail to appreciate the bad things in life, we also plausibly often fail to see the good things, many of

which may be non-comparatively good. We also tend to forget how much mundane pleasure we have experienced; for instance, how many decent movies we have watched or how many good conversations with strangers we have had. True, we still have reason to think that we are too optimistic, given the Lake Wobegon Happiness Effect. But it is difficult to go from the claim that we think our lives are better than average to the claim that our lives are bad. Although many teachers and drivers are worse than they think, most who think they are great probably aren't horrible.

What about the worries regarding evolution and EToM? As for the claim that we should be less confident in our optimistic life assessments, if evolution makes it likely that these assessments will be optimistic, this is far from decisive. After all, take our belief that we shouldn't attack our offspring – also mentioned in the above passage from Sharon Street. Few of us would find ourselves doubting this belief upon learning of its evolutionary foundation. So it's not obvious that we should have less trust in our positive life assessments simply because Darwinism predicts, or might predict, that most of us will have positive life assessments. Turning now to EToM, the worry here is that EToM is unreliable and in fact highly deceptive because as Benatar puts it our lives are objectively 'meaningless' (83). This may be true. But much hangs on what evidence we have for a religious interpretation of the world. (If there were evidence for a religious outlook, for instance, then this will be evidence that EToM is in fact reliable).<sup>28</sup>

Turning now to our comparative success biases, these are certainly revealing. They plausibly show that we do overestimate the quality of our lives. Still, we must not exaggerate the problem here. For one thing, our lives could clearly get much worse than they are. So the fact that they could also get much better does not tell us very much about how good they are. Second, we may still be confident that our lives are quite decent despite our inability to locate ourselves in a particular world in Figure 1. For we seem in general to be competent speakers who can *reliably* identify certain features, even when those features admit of various degrees. For instance, we can plausibly

identify Einstein as a genius, even though Einstein would surely know very little in comparison to physicists from, say, a type 2 civilization. Benatar retorts that ‘sometimes we should judge the brightest people by supra-human standards’ and that this can teach us ‘modesty’ (86). But the point is that Einstein, however modest, still meets the minimal threshold for being a genius. Similarly, our belief that human beings and dogs have moral status wouldn’t be threatened by the discovery of super beings. For although such creatures may well be more inviolable than us and dogs (McMahan 2009b), that wouldn’t show that humans or dogs were fully violable. Perhaps something similar could be said about life’s value. Perhaps we have a decent grasp of when life satisfies minimal goodness thresholds, despite our ignorance about the full range of possibilities for goodness.

I am thus highly doubtful that our evidence from psychology and life’s harms combines to show that our lives are very bad or not worth starting. And although I grant that this evidence shows that our lives are worse than we think, the problem is that it is difficult to say with any confidence by how much. My claims about the hedonic treadmill and our adaptation to good things seem to constrain any radical conclusions here, moreover.

Do our arguments show that we lack knowledge that our lives are good or even worthwhile? This issue is trickier and will be re-visited in our concluding section on procreation. I do think there is something to the sensitivity worry. Our quality of life judgments do seem, in many ways, to be counterfactually stubborn or insensitive. Even so, it would be premature to conclude that we lack knowledge that our lives go well, if only because the sensitivity condition is rather controversial as a condition on knowledge. For while the sensitivity condition currently enjoys some able defenders (DeRose, forthcoming), most epistemologists seem to reject it. Besides, our beliefs about our lives are not as insensitive as previous happiness research would have us believe. Recent international research on subjective wellbeing, in particular, indicates fairly vast differences in life satisfaction across various

countries and across time (Veenhoven 2010) – which is what we would expect if we were reliable assessors of our lives. And even in the wealthiest nations, some people commit suicide, and many more experience regular bouts of depression. So the human mind is not entirely insensitive to the harms of existence. Of course, if we are too depressed we will have a different reason for thinking that our lives are bad, but I do not think that most people are systematically depressed.

More generally, aforementioned claims about the hedonic treadmill and the ways in which we adapt to goods in the world complicate the sensitivity worry. Perhaps the real lesson, then, is that we are unreliable in two different directions: we both tend to underestimate just how bad the bad things in life are and, in many cases, underestimate how good life's goods are. Perhaps these effects largely cancel one another out, with the result that our quality of life judgments interestingly manage to be quite reliable, overall. Similar things might be said about the evidentialist challenge: as with the other challenges, this one is softened in light of the above claims. (True, there is still our adaptation to frustrated desires and the optimism of the elderly to wonder about, but these things too are complicated by other data).<sup>29</sup>

Still, the news here is not entirely sunny. That our lives are worse than we think is, if true, highly unfortunate. And even if sensitivity is not strictly required for knowledge or justification, awareness that one's beliefs may be insensitive could do epistemic damage and may create doubt. This is another way of saying that there still remains a worry about Pollyannaism, Comparative success, the Lake Wobegon Happiness Effect, and EToM. Lastly, even if our optimistic biases may be good, in one way, since we are here and want to make the best of our lives, these biases also encourage us to create new persons, which gives rise to a distinct problem of its own.

### ***2.6.1. A Final Problem: Procreative Skepticism***

In this last section I want to consider a final worry, which is that we still lack *knowledge* that our child's life will be good, or will likely be good, prior to creating her. I think this form of procreative skepticism is much more plausible than Benatar's claim that 'even the best lives are very bad' such that 'being brought into existence is always a considerable harm' (2006a: 61). It will thus be worthwhile to see if we can at least soften the epistemic worry, which can be stated as follows:

**P1:** I know that procreation is generally good and morally permissible only if I know that life in this world is normally quite good.

**P2:** But I do not know that life is normally quite good (I only know some lives are better than others, comparatively speaking, and that people normally believe their lives to be good).

**C:** Thus I do not know that procreation is generally good and morally permissible (which in turn implies that, other things being equal, I myself shouldn't procreate).<sup>30</sup>

I think this argument, which is generally neglected by ethicists and epistemologists, warrants attention. My response begins with P2. The first thing we might say here is that P2 is not clearly correct. For the most natural way of using happiness research to establish P2 is to be construed in terms of sensitivity. But sensitivity, as mentioned, is a highly contentious epistemic condition. If taken as a requirement on knowledge, most epistemologists seem to reject it, given its highly skeptical implications. For instance, my belief that I am not a handless brain in a vat, unlike my belief that I have hands, is not sensitive. In the nearest worlds in which I am a handless brain in a vat, I will still deny this claim (DeRose 1995). And yet it seems that I know that I am not a handless brain in vat, which seems in turn to undermine the sensitivity requirement on knowledge.

This makes it tempting to ask whether P2 could be construed in terms of safety, a notion that many epistemologists have thought might replace

sensitivity and might provide an analysis of what cognitive reliability amounts to (Williamson 2000). Very roughly, if my belief is safe, then it could not have easily been the case that my belief would be false. In close possible worlds, in other words, my belief will not be false. The safety condition is attractive because it seems to be less prone to skepticism than sensitivity (Sosa 2000). My belief that I am not a handless brain in a vat, for instance, seems safe. So the question is: is our belief that human lives are at least quite decent, at least on average, also safe? I suspect that it is. But the point I am making here is different. Even safety conditions are not without their critics (Sosa 2007: 28-29, Comesana 2005), which means that decisively establishing P2 will require some work on the part of the skeptic.

But suppose the procreative skeptic insists that the burden of proof is not on her to show that we lack knowledge, but on non-skeptics to show that they possess the relevant knowledge that life is good. (After all, we are the ones procreating). How, in that case, should we react, to procreative skepticism? One option would be to deny that procreative skepticism could go through. Here the following **Moorean Response** will no doubt be popular.

*Moorean Response:* That our lives are quite good, and that procreation is generally justified, are facts more obvious than any philosophical arguments that could be raised against them. If some theory or condition on knowledge (or wellbeing) implies otherwise, then that theory or condition is clearly defective. True, science can undermine common sense, but psychologically-based arguments for procreative skepticism are ultimately philosophical arguments. In short, skeptical arguments, whether they concern the external world or procreation, do not pose a serious challenge to knowledge or common sense.

Moorean responses have their appeal in certain moods. And if we think we know much we, Benatar included, are all probably Moorean sometimes (Kelly 2008, Kelly 2005). The Moorean move also accords nicely with a

certain view of the nature and role of skeptical arguments in philosophy, one that Benatar overlooks. According to this view, skeptical arguments function not to undermine knowledge, but to sharpen our theories of knowledge (Greco 2000). For instance, the general move toward externalism, on one reading of the history epistemology, was motivated by the fact that more internalist views had intolerable and far-reaching skeptical consequences (Bergman 2000).

Benatar does not discuss the literature on Mooreanism or skepticism. And although he does say that common sense strategies against his views amount to dogmatism (203-207), he needs to say more. For the question that he faces given his revisionist outlook is how to avoid skepticism in general, and not just skepticism about life's *goodness* and *procreation*. Does Benatar really think that the case for procreative skepticism is categorically more impressive than the case for all traditional forms of skepticism, all of which we take ourselves as rightly rejecting? Until we are given a principled way of deciding when skepticism can be rejected, and when dogmatism is a vice, it's hard to have confidence in Benatar's moral revisionism.<sup>31</sup>

Anyhow, despite these claims, I agree with Benatar that attempts to preserve common sense can amount to regrettable forms of dogmatism. I also think that there is a problem with Moorean moves in moral contexts more generally, a problem that makes it harder to apply them to procreative skepticism than to, say, external world skepticism. Procreation is a high-stakes case, one that involves imposing vast amounts of unchosen suffering, and not just goods, upon others. Since high-stakes contexts can, on some views,<sup>32</sup> make knowledge harder to obtain, this might lend some support to P2. Before committing ourselves to a Moorean response to procreative skepticism, then, more needs to be said about knowledge and action in contexts of harming.

A second response to procreative skepticism comes not from epistemology, but from ethics. Some ethicists will deny P1, or what we have called the knowledge condition on procreation. In particular, advocates of the

**Zero Line View** of procreative responsibility think that procreation is permissible so long as a child's existence is expected to be worthwhile, even barely worthwhile (Glover 2006: 58-63). Since we have not been given good reason to think our lives fail to be worthwhile, goes one thought, the zero line advocate might not feel too threatened by the claim that we lack knowledge that our child's life will likely be good. More accurately, she may not feel too threatened if she thinks that we already possess decent inferential or non-inferential grounds for believing that that our lives are worthwhile.

Again, this response is worth mentioning, but as with the Moorean response, it too can seem less than fully satisfactory and less than fully sensitive to the moral seriousness of procreation. The main reason for this is that many ethicists find the zero-line standard implausibly weak.<sup>33</sup> That said, if the zero-line view has anything going for it, its very existence makes procreative skepticism less plausible, and something similar could be said of the Moorean response to procreative skepticism.

Perhaps the best response to the procreative skeptic is to point to the positive features of our lives – which could help to lower the plausibility of P2 and perhaps offer evidence that our belief in life's goodness is epistemically safe. A version of this strategy is defended by Elizabeth Harman, who responds to Benatar by developing a **Millian defense** of procreation. According to this defense, once we realize that there are numerous higher order pleasures in life and few, if any, higher ordered pains, we can see that most lives are worth living and we might add quite good (2009: 783). Unfortunately, however, I am not as confident as Harman that pleasures are often of a different 'kind' than pains (*ibid*) or that we could acknowledge the reality of higher-order pleasures without also acknowledging the reality of higher-order pains (and I suspect that Benatar would agree).<sup>34</sup>

That said, I think Harman's claims invite a similar **quantitative response**, one that could help to preserve much of our confidence in the goodness and permissibility of procreation. This response grants that we often

think about wellbeing in comparative terms and that many good things in a life have a comparably frequent and a comparably severe negative counterpart. But it adds that we also have knowledge of life's non-comparative goods and that the very best goods in most lives typically outweigh any of the bad things – and probably outweigh most of the bad things all by themselves, even without the aid of many lesser goods. In fact, knowledge of life's goods, and not the bare sense that our lives go well, is our best evidence that our lives go well.

So what are these goods on which we can place this much weight? Here is one example. When I think about the value of our relationships with other persons – family, friends, partners, and certain communities – I cannot think of anything bad in a typical life that really competes in a quantitative sense. The best candidate is perhaps the loss of a loved one in a premature death or the reality that a bad ending probably awaits most of us. But we rarely reason that a death is so tragic that we would rather have never known the person who died, and it is hard to attribute this to simple biases. Similarly, although most of us probably face a lot of suffering toward the end of our lives, we doubt that this will pull our lives into the negative range of wellbeing, not least because of the value of our relationships with others. In fact, for many the value of their relationships makes their suffering more tolerable. As Christopher Hitchens, who died last month of cancer, recently put it: 'My chief consolation in this year of living dyingly has been the presence of friends.'<sup>35</sup>

The value we place on our relationships with others, finally, is not a mere intuition. It's a concrete good. The result of this claim should be clear. The **justification argument** mentioned above – which, recall, says that our best evidence that our lives go well is our intuitive sense that they do – is mistaken. In fact, if it is really true that we take many things in life for granted, then it's not implausible that we also take our relationships with other persons for granted. But if that's correct, then we have other evidence that our lives are, in some respects, better than we think. Lastly, although we

have seen particular psychological, epistemic and moral responses to procreative skepticism, it is worth noting that if there are other responses to procreative skepticism that could be called upon (See chapter 2, chapter 3), these would further diminish the plausibility of Benatar's strong claims.

### **2.7.1. Conclusion**

To sum up: although it is, thankfully, difficult to formulate a decisive anti-natalist argument rooted in psychology and skepticism, the claims we have been considering may nonetheless weaken our confidence in the goodness and permissibility of procreation. The reality of partial defeat, combined with the claim that there may be other difficulties for pro-natalism that I have failed to address<sup>36</sup>, means the morality of procreation is much more complex than many people realize. But I hope to have shown that psychologically and epistemologically based arguments for pessimism and procreative skepticism have important limitations.

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#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Consider: 'By the end of the 1980's, nearly 800 articles cited 'wellbeing' 'happiness' or 'life satisfaction' in published abstracts. From these studies, one finding stands out: most people in the industrial world consider themselves reasonably happy, contrary to a tradition of writers who rejected the possibility of widespread happiness' (Meyer & Diener, 1997: 174).

<sup>2</sup> Note that this need not imply that being born paraplegic is tragic or even bad for the person whose life it is. But I take it that most people will accept that it is bad to lose the capacity to move around freely where one has enjoyed this capacity and has an interest in maintaining it.

<sup>3</sup> Here I am referring to Benatar's asymmetry argument, which says roughly this: the absence of pain (and harm more generally) that would have obtained had we failed to come into existence would have been good, but that the absence of pleasure (and benefits more generally) that would not have been enjoyed by us had we never existed wouldn't be bad.

<sup>4</sup> It is clear that Benatar thinks that our lives are horrible even in the absence of his asymmetry argument. It is also clear that he thinks that happiness research can function as a kind of error theory that can explain (i) why we are so optimistic about life and (ii) why we are so resistant to anti-natalism. Finally, it is also clear that Benatar thinks that our lives go bad on any of the main theories of wellbeing. But unless we ascribe to Benatar the shoddy inference 'our lives go badly on all of the main theories of well being therefore our lives go badly', I am not sure how we would get the strong conclusion. Perhaps Benatar's point is just that our lives are full of harm, but given that he says very little about life's goods he hasn't shown that our lives are harmful all-things-considered – more on this in my response to what I call the likelihood argument in Section 4. In any case, there is lots of potential for creating trouble in this context that falls short of showing that our lives are bad. Most of the trouble, as we shall see, is epistemic.

<sup>5</sup> Benatar occasionally makes claims like the following: 'one cannot tell in advance whether a life one starts will turn out to be one that was worthwhile' (95). This sounds like a claim about knowledge, but it is not clear what conception of knowledge Benatar has in mind. Benatar's focus

is clearly on value. He thinks our lives are bad and cares about our biases because he thinks they keep us from seeing life's objective badness. Harman, following Benatar's lead, also focuses on value, and makes only one brief comment about knowledge (783). Her focus is on the following claim, which she rightly attributes to Benatar: 'Taking into account both the good and the bad aspects of a person's life, most lives are overall very bad and not worth having.'

<sup>6</sup> Not everyone thinks that we value 'being in touch with reality' (De Brigard 2010).

<sup>7</sup> My impression from correspondence with Fred Feldman is that happiness research doesn't have significance unless it can resolve or at any rate help to resolve which philosophical theory of wellbeing or happiness is correct. But I think that this standard of significance sets the bar far too high. Showing that our lives are worse than we think on various conceptions of wellbeing or that our beliefs about our lives aren't sensitive seems perfectly significant.

<sup>8</sup> For a philosophical account of life satisfaction that has interesting connections to the psychological accounts see (Sumner 1996).

<sup>9</sup> For example consider Diener's Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS):

- |                               |       |   |
|-------------------------------|-------|---|
| 1 = Strongly Disagree         | _____ | 1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.                   |
| 2 = Disagree                  | _____ | 2. The conditions of my life are excellent.                     |
| 3 = Slightly Disagree         | _____ | 3. I am satisfied with life.                                    |
| 4 = Neither Agree or Disagree | _____ | 4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.    |
| 5 = Slightly Agree            | _____ | 5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing. |
| 6 = Agree                     | _____ |   |
| 7 = Strongly Agree            | _____ |   |

<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/lifesatisfactionscale.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Some skepticism about whole life judgments is understandable. For although there is something good about letting people decide for themselves what matters in life, many may have shifting standards. For instance, consider an example due to Haybron. Imagine you start out with a six out of seven in life satisfaction. If you get a serious illness your wellbeing may go down, but you nonetheless might become more satisfied with life, given your new outlook on life, and may soon continue to score yourself a six on life satisfaction. But then what is a six, exactly? Also, when it comes to whole-life judgments, factors like the weather on a particular Tuesday may have notable bearing on how I see my entire life. Yet such factors shouldn't count that much. On the other hand, some of these errors may get weeded out in sufficiently large samples at the population level.

<sup>11</sup> In particular, radically subjective views, according to which there is nothing more to the question of whether our lives go well than our belief or disposition to believe that our lives go well (or our disposition to like our lives), are not under consideration here. Then again, such views will no doubt seem unattractive to many, precisely because they make our lives so immune to empirical or even critical investigation. Indeed, even the mental-state hedonist recognizes that our beliefs about how much pleasure and pain we have experienced are distinct from how much pleasure and pain we have in fact experienced. Hedonism makes an objective claim about value, in other words, as do most plausible views of wellbeing.

<sup>12</sup> I realize that there will be painful counter instances that some could point to in their own lives. As is generally the case, these studies seek to make general claims about how most people react to one-time bad events that they can do nothing to change. Naturally, some things (like a bad relationship) are much more complex and may bring resentment and long-term psychological pain.

<sup>13</sup> Locked-in Syndrome occurs when an individual's bodily movement and communication becomes almost entirely restricted, say to eye movement or blinking. Many people with this syndrome report fairly high levels of subjective well-being, confirming the 'disability paradox' – although, to be sure, some remain depressed. See Bruno M-A, Bernheim JL, Ledoux D, et al. (2011).

<sup>14</sup> This example comes from Dan Gilbert.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, consider the words of an American idol contestant who recently got kicked off the show, receiving third place and missing the shot for a major record deal: 'I accepted (my elimination) very quickly, and I thought everything happens for a reason and this is a good thing. It means I am going to start my career as a solo artist even sooner,' she said. 'I would love to do an album that is sultry, bluesy, rock.' <http://ca.news.yahoo.com/country-teen-finale-american-idol-020122952.html>

<sup>16</sup> After all, people seem to care a lot about meaning and purpose, and perhaps even more so than pleasure (Seligman 2002). Seligman's claims about meaning are rather broad and permit claims like being connected up to a larger purpose and helping others; but surely meaning in the narrower sense of EToM is important to people too. Telling them that everything will not be all right in the end, that there is no reason for their suffering, will likely matter to them.

<sup>17</sup> This illustration is due to Caspar Hare (forthcoming).

<sup>18</sup> Type 2 civilizations harness the energy of an entire star.

<sup>19</sup> Here Arnold Schwarzenegger's recent testimony can seem sobering: 'I feel terrific about where I am in my life, when I look back at what I've accomplished,' the former governor tells Lloyd Grove. 'But I feel so sh\*tty when I look at myself in the mirror.'... 'I'm not competing, I'm not ripping off my shirt and trying to sell the body,' the former governor frets. 'But when I stand in front of the mirror and really look, I wonder: What the f\*ck happened here? Jesus Christ. What a beating!' <http://ca.news.yahoo.com/arnold-schwarzenegger-sad-he-is-not-young-anymore.html>

<sup>20</sup> At least if they lack knowledge of having a terminal illness.

<sup>21</sup> Such a question seems particularly pressing if the Romantics were right that our wellbeing plummets as we move from childhood to adulthood – and in light of recent philosophical claims about the many goods that are intrinsic to childhood (Brennan 2011, Skelton 2011). Though of course it would not be too surprising if our optimistic memories of childhood are filtered through many of the biases we have been discussing.

<sup>22</sup> Habyron argues that ‘widespread, serious errors in the self-assessment of affect are a genuine possibility – one worth taking very seriously’ (2007).

<sup>23</sup> For a clear discussion on sensitivity see Pritchard (2008).

<sup>24</sup> For instance, consider the case of Bob Shoemaker, who was studied by Dennis Charney and whose story is discussed in a PBS special *Rethinking Happiness – This Emotional Life*. Despite being imprisoned for 8 years in Vietnam, 3 of which were spent in solitary confinement, and despite being severely tortured, Shoemaker says that he doesn't regret the experience. He states: 'Paradoxically, I gained something out of this 8 years of experience.' He even adds that he would not now eliminate the POW experience if he could. Also see Dan Gilbert's TED Lecture 'Why Are We Happy?' for other examples of those glad to have been in prison.

<sup>25</sup> As Chisholm puts it, 'The principle [that whatever seems true to us has initial justification] may be thought of as an instance of a more general truth – that it is reasonable to put our trust in our own cognitive faculties unless we have some positive ground for questioning them (1992:14).'

<sup>26</sup> Benatar lists a number of other factors that can have bearing on how a life goes (61-64).

<sup>27</sup> For notable criticism of Benatar's asymmetry argument see McMahan 2009a, Bradely 2009, Harman 2009, and Campbell 2011. Of course there may be other asymmetries in value that have impact on our wellbeing. For instance, Tom Hurka (2010) discusses the Moorean idea that for any intensity  $n$ , a pain of intensity  $n$  is more evil than a pleasure of intensity  $n$  is good. But even if we accept this claim, as Hurka notes, some notable goods (like knowledge and achievement) have more positive weight than their absence has negative weight.

<sup>28</sup> Benatar, though he has much respect for religious ritual (2006b), simply presupposes that we live in an objectively meaningless universe (Benatar 2006a 82-83). Although this assumption will be granted by many philosophers, these same philosophers should be careful not to grant Benatar a much stronger assumption: namely the view there is no evidence for something like a theistic interpretation of the world. This matters because any evidence for theism, classically construed as a morally and ontologically perfect personal being, would seem to also be evidence for the claim that our lives are objectively meaningful and for the claim that something like EToM is reliable.

The point here is not just the simple one that theists and agnostics won't likely feel as troubled by Benatar's conclusions as Benatar. The point is much stronger than this. Whatever turns out to be the truth about religion, if there is evidence for theism now – which many, including reasonable non-religious people (Draper 2002), will admit – then this evidence also counts against Benatar's strong claims. For it seems very unlikely that a morally perfect being would create a universe in which sentient creatures shouldn't create because their lives are so bad; it seems comparably unlikely that a perfect being would create a world in which rational people would believe their lives to be bad or couldn't know them to be good. On the other hand, if Benatar's full-out religious skepticism could be shown to be much more plausible than theism or agnosticism, this would admittedly render his conclusions more likely. But I leave this complex discussion for another time.

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<sup>29</sup> Some studies suggest that people's desires for certain goods genuinely change in response to what becomes available to them (Lieberman, M. D., Ochsner, K. N., Gilbert, D. T., & Schacter, D. L. 2001) – and you can use patients with anterograde amnesia, who have forgotten about their earlier preference, to show this. Now this might look like another form of deception. We just adapt, once again, to our environments. But unless we give automatic preference to original desires, which I suspect is harder to justify than many think, then many frustrated desires might actually give rise to non-frustrated ones. Turning to the elderly, although we might be troubled, in one way, that they seem insensitive to the badness of aging, this issue is less than clear. A common explanation for the optimism of the aging mind is that people generally appreciate the time they have left on earth. Perhaps the elderly, knowing that their days are numbered, are extra sensitive to the objective goods of life and how they outweigh the objective bad things.

<sup>30</sup> It is possible that some in uniquely good environments could know that their child will likely have a good life. But the skeptic will claim that few, if any, are so positioned.

<sup>31</sup> His claims about the explanatory power of his asymmetry argument, moreover, won't help to tell us much if that argument is rejected – and if various other skeptical conclusions that we all (reasonably seem to) reject have much explanatory power, among other explanatory virtues, in their favour.

<sup>32</sup> Hawthorne and Stanley, adopting the *stake-sensitivity strategy*, think that if 'knowledge is constitutively related to one's practical environment' that one may 'lose knowledge once one enters an environment where a good deal is at stake as regards the truth or falsity of the proposition that p' ,

<sup>33</sup> Most of us think that young teens and those with serious temporary genetic conditions shouldn't procreate – and this despite our belief that the lives of the children would likely be worth living. In fact, some will be attracted to David Archard's claim (2004) that children not expected to satisfy at least most of their basic childhood rights should not be created. Other challenges to the zero-line view may be found in Shiffrin (1999), Harman (2006), Velleman (2008) and Hare (forthcoming). All of these authors agree that more than a zero-line standard is required if we are to responsibly create persons.

<sup>34</sup> The only justification we get for the claim that there are not any higher ordered pains is thin: 'It seems to me that there are not [any higher quality pains], although a possible case might be: knowing that one's children are suffering horribly.' Now perhaps Harman could, if given the chance, provide additional justification for her claims. But since there are also general problems facing qualitative hedonism, I think we should look elsewhere for a response to the worry. To be fair, Harman does say: 'We need not go so far as Mill in saying that there are higher quality pleasures that are more valuable, regardless of amount, than lower quality pleasures. But we can say that some features of a life are very valuable, and can easily outweigh many mundane discomforts.' Although I am not sure this is a correct interpretation of Mill, Harman's qualification does seem to bring her response closer to mine; but then I am not sure why she needs to talk about different kinds of pleasure, as opposed to different amounts of pleasure or value among different kinds of goods.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2011/12/In-Memoriam-Christopher-Hitchens-19492011>

<sup>36</sup> Some of which arise even if we think we know that our lives are good. See Shiffrin 1999 and Velleman 2008: 251.

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### Chapter 3

#### **Kantian Reflections on Procreative Beneficence**

**Chapter Summary:** This paper presents a number of Kantian and epistemic worries about procreation, worries that put pressure on us to either become procreative skeptics or to rethink the morality of procreation. In response to this dilemma, I recommend accepting a view like procreative beneficence, according to which parents should seek to create the best-off children they can, while adopting a more moderate form of deontology. If I am right then procreative beneficence, though widely thought to be a consequentialist doctrine, can be given a Kantian foundation.

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#### *Introduction*

The story that I want to tell begins on a dark note in 1791, with Maria von Herbert, who writes the following words in a letter to Kant.

...I call to you for help, for comfort, or for counsel to prepare me for death...[For] I have found nothing, nothing at all that could replace the good I have lost, for I loved someone who, in my eyes, encompassed within himself all that is worthwhile, so that I lived only for him, everything else was in comparison just rubbish, cheap trinkets...that inner feeling that once, unbidden, led us to each other, is no more—oh my heart splinters into a thousand pieces! If I hadn't read so much of your work I would certainly have put an end to my life [.....]. I've read the metaphysic of morals and the categorical imperative, and it doesn't help a bit. (Letter to Kant, 1791, cited in and translated by Langton, 2007: 158).

Kant's categorical imperative is supposed to give Maria every reason to live, but her desire for death remains unmoved and in fact grows stronger. In another letter to Kant, two years later, she writes:

I feel that a vast emptiness extends inside me, and all around me—so that I almost find myself to be superfluous, unnecessary. Nothing attracts me. I'm tormented by a boredom that makes life intolerable. [...]. I'm indifferent to everything that doesn't bear on the categorical imperative, and my transcendental consciousness—although I'm all done with those thoughts too. You can see, perhaps, why I only want one thing, namely to shorten this pointless life, a life which I am convinced will get neither better nor worse. If you consider that I am still young and that each day interests me only to the extent that it brings me closer to death, you can judge what a great benefactor you would be if you were to examine this question closely. I ask you, because my conception of morality is silent here, whereas it speaks decisively on all other matters. And if you cannot give me the answer I seek, I beg you to give me something that will get this intolerable emptiness out of my soul (Letter to Kant, 1793, translated by and cited in Langton, 2007: 159).

Maria's suffering raises a number of interesting questions.<sup>1</sup> But what most interests me about her suffering is what it can teach us about the morality of procreation. For there is something troubling about the thought of creating someone with a life like Maria's. If we add that Maria's parents, along with the rest of us, cannot rule out ahead of time that our children will come to feel this way about their lives, this only suggests that there is something troubling about procreation in general. My basic task here will be to argue that what's troubling about procreation, something that various Kantian and epistemic claims can help to illuminate, provides overlooked support for the doctrine of procreative beneficence. According to this doctrine, prospective parents should seek to

create or genetically select the child with the best chances of a good life.

I will argue for this claim about procreative beneficence in Section III. Sections I and II provide the groundwork: these seek to convince my reader that procreation raises important **moral** and **epistemic** problems. Some of these moral problems will be familiar to some readers, though the way I combine them and introduce Kant into the discussion is novel. The epistemic problems are novel, beginning with an overlooked tension in our beliefs about procreation and the problem of evil, and turning to some neglected worries about knowledge, action and harm thresholds. Finally, since a complete justification of procreation may have to make appeal to the distant consequences of our procreative actions, my claims also have normative significance. They imply that moderate Kantians and consequentialists will be much better positioned than strict Kantians to justify procreation – and this even after we have factored procreative beneficence into the equation. I will explain these remarks in Section IV.

### ***3.1.1. Moral Problems***

I mentioned earlier that procreation raises moral problems. The first problem worth mentioning concerns consent. As Kant puts it in his *Metaphysics of Morals*, procreation is an act by which we ‘have brought a person into the world without his consent and on our own initiative, for which deed the parents incur an obligation to make the child content with his condition so far as they can’ (6: 280-281). Kant’s worry that we do not choose to come into existence may arise in any world, if we value autonomy enough. But it is clearly worrisome in risky worlds like *this* one.

So how should one respond to the worry? Kant reasons that parents acquire a duty to secure their child’s wellbeing or, as he puts it, to make them as ‘content’ with their condition as is feasible. For Kant this includes many things<sup>2</sup>, but the main point that I am interested in is the connection between what is worrisome about procreation, on the one hand, and potentially

demanding parental duties, on the other hand. I will revisit this connection in my section on procreative beneficence, but first I should point out a problem with Kant's solution to the problem that no one chooses to come into existence. Although Kant's claim that parents owe their children a good upbringing is plausible as far as it goes, the worry is that it does not go far enough. In particular, Kant's claims overlook just how easy it is for persons not to be content with their condition, and this despite the best efforts of their parents.

We can suppose that this was the case for Maria von Herbert, mentioned earlier. It is troubling to think that Kant never replied to Maria's second letter. It is even more troubling to learn of Maria's eventual suicide in 1803. But my focus here concerns not Kant's failure to help Maria but what is troubling about Maria's creation. Of course, the traditional Kantian may wish to stress that self-killing, at least as a means of ending one's suffering, is wrong and that we must be careful not to reduce the value of a person to the value of her life. But showing that Maria was responsible for her death does not make her creation wholly unproblematic. In fact, the wrongness of suicide, if anything, renders Kant's worry that people do not choose to come into existence more worrisome. For it is one thing if we do not choose our existence. It is quite another thing if, in addition, we have no morally permissible exit plan if life becomes unbearable.<sup>3</sup> That there are also powerful psychological barriers to self-killing is also relevant here. For then evidence that few commit suicide will not be evidence that few suffer seriously.

Thankfully, few of us suffer as much as Maria. In fact, as Maria notes, most are 'glad to be alive' (1793). But it would be a mistake to infer from the claim that people often feel satisfied with their lives to the claim that the suffering that people face is therefore less than morally serious. For all lives contain great suffering, which is to say that there is probably a little bit of Maria in all of us. For instance, many people, including some philosophers,<sup>4</sup> have wished for death at certain points. Relatedly, up to thirty percent of adolescents admit to having wished they had never been born, at least according to one study (Ruth Shonle, 1932). And although young persons can

admittedly have an immature perspective on the world, adults are not wholly immune to such thoughts. Perhaps the best-known example from Hebrew literature is the case of Job, who curses the day of his conception in response to his great suffering (Job 3:1). As the story of Job illustrates, many of the trials that befall persons are unchosen and result from a combination of environment, entropy, chance and we might add genes. If we factor in a counterfactual analysis of causation (A causes B if had A not occurred B would not have occurred) <sup>5</sup> then the problem only gets worse. Given such a view, the distinction between unchosen and chosen suffering becomes somewhat blurred, since all of the suffering and particular harm that people face in the world will depend, causally, on their parents' decision to procreate.<sup>6</sup>

Suppose, though, that we reject a counterfactual analysis of causation. Suppose, moreover, as is plausible, that all of us, including Maria (Mahon, 2006)<sup>7</sup>, must share some responsibility for how our lives go and for the choices we make. These claims hardly show that procreation is problem-free. For there is something troubling about forcing persons to face so many trials in the first place, including moral trials. As David Velleman notes, tossing a child into the 'predicament' of life, where the stakes are high, where persistent effort and striving are required to flourish and to avoid failure and suffering is itself morally mixed (2008). Velleman's claims reveal that procreation is worrisome even if people make bad choices. But they also reveal, as Velleman is careful to point out, that procreation is morally mixed even if we cannot harm and benefit persons in creating them. Velleman's last claim is of particular interest since, if correct, it shows that the widely held view that we can no longer speak of procreative responsibility until we answer Derek Parfit's **non-identity problem** is mistaken. The non-identity problem says, roughly, that we cannot mistreat persons in creating them, if their lives are tolerable, since our attempts to make them better off in creating them will often preclude their very existence. But even if our identities are extremely fragile such that someone else could have easily been born had our parents done anything differently than they did, someone is always tossed into a risky environment in coming into

existence, as Velleman notes, whoever they are.

There are other Kantian problems raised by procreation, too. For instance, Kantians care about motives in general, so they ought to care about motives in procreative contexts. When it comes to procreative decision-making, however, questions like, ‘Do we want a child?’ ‘Should we get a dog instead?’ ‘What will our parents, friends, rabbis, and priests think if we do not have a biological child?’ unfortunately appear to be commonplace. I say ‘unfortunately’ here because the above questions fail to reflect the moral seriousness of bringing persons into existence. They also fail to be sufficiently child-centered. There is of course a question here about how, exactly, to have a child-centered outlook of procreation. We do not know who our child will be prior to creating her – and ‘who’ she will be is extremely sensitive to the timing of our reproductive acts, as the non-identity problem reveals. These things make it hard to display *de re* concern for our child, prior to creating her. They are consistent with our displaying *de dicto* concern for our child in procreative contexts, however. As Caspar Hare puts it, the latter concern ‘involves caring, not that the occupant of a certain role be as well off as possible, but that a certain role be filled by someone as well as possible’ (Hare: 2008, 518-19).<sup>8</sup>

In any case, if many parents fail to display proper motives in procreative decision-making, a proper care for human life, then we have a quick argument for the claim that many acts of procreation are not clearly permissible.

### ***3.1.2. First Objection***

Some may object that these remarks miss the most obvious justification for procreation, which is that life typically contains great goods, goods that outweigh, and outweigh to a significant degree, the bad things in life. That is, some may wish to defend what I shall call the **counterbalancing justification** of procreation, according to which what makes procreation morally permissible

is the fact that most lives, at least, are quite decent overall. A slightly different version of the counterbalancing justification of procreation is nicely stated by Jeff McMahan as follows: ‘What makes procreation morally permissible in most cases is the reasonable expectation that the bads in a possible person’s life will be outweighed, and significantly outweighed, by the goods’ (2009).

I am not sure whether McMahan seeks to endorse the counterbalancing view.<sup>9</sup> Such a view faces problems, however. Leaving aside our Kantian worries about risk, consent and motive, it ignores what we might call the problem of **impermissible benefitting**.<sup>10</sup> According to Seana Shiffrin, a contemporary Kantian, some ways of benefitting people are morally suspect. For instance, if a gold brick falls and lands on your head, this may compensate you for your suffering, if you get to keep it, but it does not clearly justify that suffering. You could rightly hold the individual who let the brick fall on you accountable for wrongdoing, even if you turn out to be better off overall as a result of what happened. Shiffrin doesn’t merely imply that some ways of benefitting people are impermissible. She also distinguishes between pure benefits, which are pure goods that someone seeks out in order to improve their lives, and impure benefits, which involve removals or preventions of harm. When we combine these insights we get:

SHIFFRIN ASYMMETRY: benefitting people in order to keep them from suffering a greater harm (e.g. performing painful surgery on someone to save her life) is very different, morally speaking, from causing someone to suffer, without her consent, for the sake of benefitting her (e.g. breaking your daughter’s arm because doing so makes it possible for you to get her a large sum of cash to put away for her college funds).

Shiffrin here presupposes a non-comparative account of harm, according to which something can harm someone if it causes her to be in a sufficiently bad state, whether or not it makes her worse off all things considered. A non-

comparative account of harm is also defended by Elizabeth Harman (2009), who uses it to resolve the non-identity problem and to establish the following four claims: (1) an action can harm someone without making her worse off; (2) an action that harms an individual has a strong moral reason against it; (3) the bare fact that an action also benefits the person that it harms is insufficient to justify the harm; and (4) the bare fact that an action will benefit a future person more than it will harm her is ineligible to justify the harm if failing to perform the action would result in another person's being similarly benefited.<sup>11</sup>

If correct, the Shiffrin-Harman view shows that procreation is hard to justify because it shows that all of us are harmed in being brought into existence, and because it shows that the benefits of existence, even where they have more value than the harms of existence, do not automatically justify the harms of existence. To be sure, some will dislike a non-comparative account of harm. And some deny, recall, that we *can* harm and benefit in creating (Velleman 2008, Parfit 1986). I have no interest in arguing for a particular definition of harm here. But for those who reject non-comparative dimensions of harm, the Shiffrin-Harman worry can also be recast as a worry about suffering: the suffering and risks of suffering we impose on innocent persons in creating them is not automatically justified in virtue of the great opportunities we give to them.

Put another way, the Shiffrin-Harman worry creates trouble for the **counterbalancing justification** of procreation, mentioned earlier. It does so because, even if we can expect our child to have a decent life, there is something troubling about causing persons to undergo much suffering for the sake of benefitting them, particularly when possible persons neither (1) seek out nor (2) consent to the benefits in question nor (3) suffer from their absence. There are other asymmetries that intensify the worry. Consider the following asymmetry, which finds clear expression in a recent article from Jeff McMahan (2009).

MCMAHAN ASYMMETRY: Our reasons against harming (or causing

suffering) are stronger than our reasons for benefitting (or giving someone an opportunity to flourish).

Many people would grant the truth of MCMAHAN ASYMMETRY, though fewer have appreciated its implications for the counterbalancing justification of procreation. If our reasons against harming are stronger than our reasons for benefitting, then the lives we start will have to contain even more benefits than we thought if they are to be justifiably started. Lastly, consider another asymmetry, which has gone especially neglected by procreative ethicists:

HURKA ASYMMETRY: 'For any intensity  $n$ , a pain of intensity  $n$  is more evil than a pleasure of intensity  $n$  is good' (Hurka 2010).

HURKA ASYMMETRY is so called because it derives from Thomas Hurka, who finds motivation for it in the following words from Moore, '[t]he study of Ethics would, no doubt, be far more simple, . . . if . . . pain were an evil of exactly the same magnitude as pleasure is a good.' If pain has greater value than equivalent amounts of pleasure, or even if the worst pains are worse than the best pleasures are good, this makes it plausible to suppose that our reasons against harming will be stronger than our reasons for benefitting. That is, MCMAHAN ASYMMETRY, which is deontic and so concerns duty, is explained, at least in part, by HURKA ASYMMETRY, which is axiological and so concerns value. Both asymmetries, moreover, have overlooked significance for our discussion. For both asymmetries, although they do not exactly show that the counterbalancing justification of procreation is false, do make it harder to satisfy. In fact, even if HURKA ASYMMETRY is rejected, a related asymmetry seems plausible. The worst events we can imagine (being tortured) are plausibly worse than the best events we can imagine are good (winning the lottery or falling in love). This isn't to say that pleasure and pain are everything in a life.<sup>12</sup> It is simply to acknowledge that they matter. The result: if the above asymmetries have anything going for them, they make it

less likely that procreation is permissible.

### ***3.2.1. Epistemic Problems***

It is natural to move from the moral problems that we have considered, and the case of Maria Von Herbert, to the problem of evil. Indeed, the first epistemic worry that I want to raise for procreative optimism concerns an implicit tension in our beliefs about procreation and the problem of evil – or whether the evil we see offers evidence against the existence of a divine being. Whereas discussions about procreation tend to be cheery, it is interesting to consider how we reason about the world in other contexts. Consider the following words from Plantinga,

Our world contains an appalling amount and variety both of suffering and of evil...I'm thinking of suffering as encompassing any kind of pain or discomfort: pain or discomfort that results from disease or injury, or oppression, or overwork, or old age, but also disappointment with oneself or with one's lot in life (or that of people close to one), the pain of loneliness, isolation, betrayal, unrequited love; and there is also suffering that results from awareness of others' suffering...(2000: 372)

Plantinga's words are nicely corroborated by Peterson,

Something is dreadfully wrong with our world. An earthquake kills hundreds in Peru. A pancreatic cancer patient suffers prolonged, excruciating pain and dies. A pit bull attacks a two-year-old child, angrily ripping his flesh and killing him. Countless multitudes suffer the ravages of war in Somalia. A crazed cult leader pushes eighty-five people to their deaths in Waco, Texas. Millions starve and die in North Korea as famine ravages the land. Horrible things of all kinds happen in our world—and that has been the story since the dawn of civilization

(1998: 1).

The above claims are telling. For when it comes to the problem of evil, people tend not just to say, ‘the world could be better.’ They tend to display a certain degree of moral outrage: ‘the world is in many ways quite horrible.’ Such claims are not made just by non-believers either, but as the above passages illustrate, they are also made by many theists. Kant, another theist, was no stranger to the world’s suffering. In his 1791 essay ‘On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy’ (which note was published the same year that Kant received his first letter from Maria Von Herbert), Kant deems that there is no successful theodicy or known explanation ‘of the highest wisdom of the creator against the charge which reason brings against it for whatever is counterproductive in this world’ (8: 255, cited in Pereboom 1996). As Pereboom rightly points out, moreover, Kant’s endorsement of the Categorical Imperative, and in particular the formula of humanity, leaves him with little tolerance for greater-good theodicies, wherein the ‘method for securing the greater goods involves using people merely as means’ (1996:9).

Kant’s skepticism about theodicy is now commonplace among philosophers. For instance, Plantinga has famously remarked that theodicies tend to strike him as ‘tepid, shallow and ultimately frivolous’ (1985: 35).<sup>13</sup> Eleanor Stump in addition reveals Kantian sympathies when she argues that a divine creator would permit undeserved, involuntary human suffering only if such suffering produces a net ‘benefit for the sufferer’ and if the benefit couldn’t be gotten except through the suffering (1985: 411). Interestingly, although some find Stump’s agent-centered condition too strong (Mawson 2011), Shiffrin’s reasoning, recall, suggests that, taken by itself, it is too weak. I confess that I am somewhat sympathetic with Shiffrin’s views. But the main point should be clear. Although almost no one seems to notice it,<sup>14</sup> the very existence of the problem of evil, and our inability to resolve it, makes it less likely that we can justify human procreation. For it would be surprising if our world contained so much bad that even the best philosophical minds, including

Kant, could not justify divine creation, but not so bad as to have any bearing whatever on whether we ourselves should bring new people into the world. These things lead me to find the following asymmetrical principle puzzling.

EVIL ASYMMETRY: The amount and kinds of evil and suffering we see provide strong, and many will say decisive, evidence against the very idea of divine creation. But this same evil and suffering does not have any bearing on the general morality of human procreation whatever.

Though implicitly held by many if not most philosophers, I find it difficult to motivate EVIL ASYMMETRY. This invites the following argument.

ARGUMENT: Unless a belief in EVIL ASYMMETRY can be epistemically motivated, then those who think that the problem of evil is serious should also think that the problem of procreation is serious. But a belief in EVIL ASYMMETRY cannot be motivated, at least on first glance. Thus we have some reason to expect that procreation will be difficult to justify.

The most obvious way to motivate EVIL ASYMMETRY would be to appeal to asymmetries between human and divine attributes. The problem of evil, it might be argued, arises because God is supposed to be perfect. We, being finite, cannot be held to this standard. But there is a problem with this response. Although it is true that we cannot be expected to be perfect, this doesn't show that there is no problem of procreation. Even minimal benevolence, power and knowledge, after all, can be enough to generate serious moral obligations in ordinary moral contexts, not least when it comes to preventing or eliminating the suffering of innocents (Hare forthcoming; 2007).

There is another problem with EVIL ASYMMETRY, however. The problem of evil does not arise *merely* because the divine, if such there be, is

supposed to be perfect. It also arises, recall, because there is supposed to be something deeply wrong with the world. More accurately, although traditional logical arguments from evil would arise even if there was just one evil in the world (viz. even if the world was very very good), such arguments have largely been abandoned for evidential arguments, according to which the world looks very very bad, at least in a number of respects. In fact, one common complaint made by critics in the literature on natural selection and the problem of evil is this: even we limited beings could design a better world than the one we inhabit, something that might have bearing on whether we should take a part in designing our children, if we can (more on this later).

The most obvious justification for EVIL ASYMMETRY, then, which is that God and humans are different, is problematic at best. Even minimally decent beings should worry about the suffering they impose on innocents. Actually, when it comes to the morality of procreation, being limited in knowledge and power works *against* us in one respect. For unlike a divine being, if such there be, we cannot rule out or make good on horrendous evils, should they arise in our children's lives. To borrow a phrase from Marilyn Adams, horrendous evils threaten the meaning and positive value of a life (here the case of Maria Von Herbert comes to mind again). These claims reveal that the problem of procreation is, in one respect at least, harder to answer than the problem of evil.

There are other responses to EVIL ASYMMETRY including the claim that the real lesson is that the problem of evil is not so serious after all. I am not convinced by this claim. I also am not convinced by a possible 'skeptical theist' way of defending it.<sup>15</sup> But my argument here is conditional: if the problem of evil is nearly as serious as most philosophers think it is, this will make human procreation harder to justify. If that is correct, then there is a sense in which one cannot get rid of the problem of evil by becoming an atheist.

### ***3.2.2. More Epistemic Problems***

One of the issues just alluded to but which deserves more attention concerns knowledge and harm. We seem to lack knowledge, prior to creating our child, that she will not suffer life-ruining harm. After all, many epistemologists doubt that we can know that the next lottery ticket we purchase will be a losing ticket (Hawthorne 2004, Pritchard 2008). But if we cannot know that we will lose the next lottery we play, then surely we cannot know that our next child will have a good life or even that she will not have a bad life (the chances of one's child having a bad life, if one procreates, are plausibly much higher than the chances that one will win a lottery, if one buys a ticket). If that is right, then depending on our view of the relationship between knowledge and action, we should not *act*, in procreative contexts, on our belief that our child will have a good life. Depending on our view of knowledge and assertion, moreover, we should not *assert* that our child will have a good life.

The claim that we lack the knowledge in question, if true, would be a problem. For the following conjunction can at best seem difficult to endorse: 'We do not know that our next child will not have a horrible life but it is perfectly permissible to start her life.' In fact, according to the stakes-sensitivity condition on knowledge one might know *p* in a situation where little is at stake, but fail to know *p* in situations where a lot is at stake (Stanley 2007). But then the claim that procreation is permissible will plausibly be harder to know, since procreative contexts, given the risks of existence, seem clearly to be high stake contexts. True, some might reject the idea that knowledge and action are intimately connected and might reject the related stake sensitivity condition on knowledge. But even if these views are remotely plausible, they should lower our confidence in the claim that procreation is permissible and can be known to be such.

In addition to the knowledge-action connection, there seems to be a relevant **knowledge-blame** connection worth mentioning. Here it is helpful to call on the words of Hawthorne and Stanley:

Consider next how blame, judgments of negligence and so on interact with knowledge. If a parent allows a child to play near a dog and does not know whether the dog would bite the child, and if a doctor uses a needle that he did not know to be safe, then they are *prima facie* negligent. Neither the parent nor doctor will get off the hook by pointing out that the dog did not in fact bite the child and the needle turned out to be safe, or by pointing out that they were very confident that the dog/needle was safe. Of course, some excuses are acceptable but these too are sensitive to the facts about knowledge. If the parent knew that they didn't know that the dog would bite the child, and if the doctor knew that he didn't know that the needle was safe, we will deem the action inexcusable. If such second order knowledge is absent we will be more open to excuses (2006: 572).

These claims invite similar thoughts about procreation. Even if a child ends up having a decent life, if her parents lacked knowledge of this fact prior to creating her, then they may still be culpable, in some sense, for creating. To be sure, many parents will not *know* that they lack the relevant knowledge, perhaps because they have never thought about the matter. But once they become more informed, they can, given a tight connection between knowledge and blame, be accountable for their procreative decision.<sup>16</sup>

### ***3.2.3. Second Objection***

It might be objected at this point that procreation is justified, not because we have a solution to the problem of evil nor because we know that our next child will have a decent life, but because we can know that our next child will likely have a decent life. Unlike the counterbalancing justification, mentioned earlier, this view is attractive because it requires knowledge on behalf of parents; it is further very possible to satisfy. Unfortunately, however, this justification is not decisive.

After all, the problem is not just that we cannot rule out that our child will suffer life-ruining harm. A skeptic might further argue that we cannot rule out that she will suffer too much harm *even if the harm in question is not life-ruining*. Shiffrin, remember, called into question the idea that a decent or worthwhile life, from the standpoint of value, is automatically a justified life, from the standpoint of duty. MCMAHAN ASYMMETRY and HURKA ASYMMETRY also raised complexities for the counterbalancing justification of procreation. These claims raise moral problems. But part of the problem is epistemic. For if our reasons against harming are stronger than our reasons for benefitting, we should have less confidence that our child's life, even if decent, will be good enough to start. Also, if pain has more disvalue than comparable amounts of pleasure have value, we will have less reason to think that the average life is nearly as decent as common sense would have us believe.

A final epistemic worry for the above justification of procreation concerns harm thresholds and knowledge. If there are harm thresholds (or, if one prefers, suffering thresholds) in procreative contexts, then why think that only a small percentage of lives violate them? Even knowledge that a life would be worthwhile will not settle the question of whether that life can be permissibly started, on this view. We need to know more about how much harm or suffering we can impermissibly impose on others in our attempts to benefit them. That is, we need to know if some harms are so serious that nothing can justify causing them.

To clarify, I have no idea whether there are truths about how much harm we may permissibly impose on others in various contexts, including procreative contexts. (Leaving aside the non-identity problem, and certain **vagueness worries**,<sup>17</sup> the question of their truth seems as perplexing to me as the question of whether there is an objective standard of goodness to measure our lives by). But our normative uncertainty here, though surprisingly overlooked by moral philosophers,<sup>18</sup> is precisely what creates the problem. For we want confidence that human lives do not typically contain too much harm to start. This is not to say that we are entirely in the dark about value and harm.

Surely, *pace* a well-known argument from Benatar,<sup>19</sup> an absolutely amazing life with one minor harm will not violate the relevant harm thresholds, if such there be. What about more mixed lives like our own, however? Even the best lives seem inescapably mixed, after all, containing both great goods and great suffering.

### *3.3.1. From Skepticism to Beneficence*

We have seen that a plausible case can unfortunately be made for procreative skepticism, the thesis that informed persons should be uncertain about the moral status of procreation. Procreative skepticism is weaker than anti-natalism, the thesis that we should stop procreating, but it is troubling all the same. I now want to suggest that the above remarks, though depressing all by themselves, create an overlooked argument for procreative beneficence, the thesis that couples should create the best-off child they can. This will let me defend a position that we might label **qualified pro-natalism**.<sup>20</sup> But first let me clarify what I am not doing in this section. I am not suggesting that procreative beneficence is problem-free (there are worries about genetic justice and feminist considerations about invasive technologies that trouble me, for instance).<sup>21</sup> I will leave these and other issues for another time, however. My present aim is merely to show that procreative beneficence, whatever its overall merits, is more likely in light of my claims.

Also, I am not suggesting that anti-natalists (who think we should stop procreating) and Mooreans (who think that philosophy cannot ultimately overturn common sense), couldn't see my earlier arguments as evidence for their views. I will address these individuals on another occasion, however. My aim here is to provide the best pro-natalist solution to the problem at hand, one that, contra Mooreanism, requires acknowledging the existence of a problem. Finally, I am not suggesting that the solution I offer is immediately practical, at least not for everyone. It may be, for all that I say, that the practical import of my claims lies largely the future, when we come across safer, less invasive,

more effective and more affordable reproductive technologies. In the meantime my arguments would show that our limited capacity to choose better off children is an unfortunate fact.

I should clarify, also, that my arguments might support more than one demanding conception of procreative responsibility. In particular, my arguments might support not just a maximizing conception of procreative responsibility, like procreative beneficence, but also a minimizing view, like the **minimal harm condition on procreation** – or, if one prefers, the minimal suffering condition on procreation.<sup>22</sup> According to the minimal harm condition on procreation (hereafter MH), parents have strong, albeit defeasible, reasons to create or genetically select not a best-off child, but a child expected to suffer the least harm in life. Procreative beneficence and MH are clearly similar. And although it is an interesting question just how often these principles would give one different advice about which children to create, I will ignore this question here. I will also ignore the related question of which principle has priority in the case of a clash.<sup>23</sup> My goal is only to show that our earlier arguments raise the likelihood of a maximizing conception of procreative responsibility, though I also think it raises the likelihood of a minimizing view as well. In fact, since procreative beneficence is clearly a pro-enhancement principle, those resistant to the idea of human enhancement may prefer MH to procreative beneficence. But I will focus my remarks here on procreative beneficence (hereafter PB).

### ***3.3.2. The Inference to PB***

The basic argument to PB is simple. To the extent that we are uncertain about the moral status of our procreative acts – that is, to the extent that **procreative skepticism** is a plausible response to the arguments in Sections I and II – we ought to do what we can to minimize what is morally and epistemically troubling about procreation. But one way of softening skepticism, and of restoring confidence in procreation, is to create better off children where we can, which is what PB is all about.

I will soon explain these remarks in more detail. But first it is important to get clear on what PB says. According to PB, in the absence of defeating considerations,<sup>24</sup> couples or single reproducers who plan to procreate ought to create or genetically select the child expected to have the best, or tied for the best, life they can. The claim here is not that we can know, prior to creating our child, exactly what her life might be like, or that all who seek to satisfy PB will in fact give rise to a best off child. Rather the claim is that prospective parents should draw on their available evidence and capacities to bring about those children, among the possible children they could have, with the best chances of a good life. Thus, for instance, if a couple is left with a decision about which of two embryos to implant – A or B – and if embryo A and B are alike in every morally relevant respect except that A carries a strong genetic disposition to develop breast cancer, then PB assigns couples a strong reason to implant embryo A instead of embryo B. The claim here is not that parents need to take every extreme step to improve all chances of a good life to a future child (Some ways of acting here are so unlikely to be successful or so unlikely to make a detectable difference in wellbeing as to carry virtually no moral weight). The claim is rather that known or easily known opportunities to create better-off children give couples defeasible reasons to act.

The above remarks can make PB seem obvious: Do we really lack even defeasible reasons to create a best-off child? But recall that PB is highly controversial. Some think that we only have reasons to create a life that is good enough. Perhaps such persons shouldn't think this way. Perhaps the reason they think this way is that they assume that maximizing principles like PB are bound to be consequentialist principles. But the last claim is false, for reasons described by Savulescu and Kahane, the two main defenders of PB.

...let us correct the mistaken impression that because PB is a maximizing principle, it must belong in a consequentialist ethical theory. Both consequentialists and the vast majority of their opponents agree that there is moral reason to promote the good. Where they differ

is over whether there are moral constraints that limit the promotion of the good. In fact, within total act utilitarianism, PB could not be an independent moral principle but only a label for one kind of value that needs to be weighed in utilitarian deliberation. Indeed, the right act for a total act utilitarian will some times be to create a child with prospects for a poor life, if this will lead to a higher aggregate level of wellbeing....(2009: 283).

Savulescu and Kahane go on to provide their own grounds in favor of PB. But given their openness to pluralistic justifications of PB, they should be open to Kantian and skeptical justifications of PB. Unfortunately, however, they write off procreative skepticism without argument and so fail to see the support that it provides PB. For instance, in arguing against what I earlier called the minimal harm principle of procreation or MH, they say: ‘...parents are exposing children to risks of suffering and frustration simply by bringing them into existence. If procreative choices were constrained this way, there could be strong presumptive reasons to abstain from procreation altogether’ (282). There is a problem with this reasoning, though. That some view implies that there might be strong presumptive reasons to abstain from procreation doesn’t show that this view is false. But even if we assume that procreation must remain justified, ‘the risks of suffering and frustration’ involved in a life could give us reasons to minimize these risks and to create better off people.

In a word, procreative skepticism provides an overlooked foundation for procreative beneficence. The reason for this should now be clear. All of our earlier moral and epistemic worries would seem to be softened if PB were true – and if PB could be successfully implemented to create better-off children. Those convinced that procreation is clearly justified, therefore, have reason to think that PB is true and have reason to hope that it can be successfully implemented to create better-off children. Take, for instance, the worry about motive, raised earlier. Those who generally fail to appreciate the moral severity of starting lives, and who wonder about their motives in procreative contexts,

have a way out of the problem in PB. In particular, accepting and seeking to implement PB, and doing so *in order to* soften the moral and epistemic worries we have been describing, would seem to take care of the motive problem. Such parents, notice, will be very different from parents who seek to follow PB for the wrong reasons. As Sally Haslanger notes, the trend to create designer babies for aesthetic reasons is troubling (2010). I agree with Haslanger's concern. But whereas the motive described by Haslanger would intensify the motive problem, the motives I have envisioned would answer it.

What about the problem that we do not choose to come into existence? Of course nothing about PB can change this fact. Recall, though, that the consent worry is troubling, in no small part, because existence in this world is risky. If we can thus minimize the biological and health-based risks associated with coming into existence, then we would do better in procreative contexts. This solution, unsurprisingly, goes beyond Kant's solution that parents must make their children content in upbringing. I say 'unsurprisingly' because Kant, living when he did, was not positioned to think about choosing better-off children through genetic selection. Even so, PB provides a way to further satisfy Kant's concern about parents and contented children. True, we could debate whether our reasons to create better-off children, like our reasons to treat existing children better, can be grounded in the interests of our child (or whether the former reasons for satisfying PB are wholly impersonal). It is worth noting that PB is compatible with different views here, however.<sup>25</sup>

What about the worries connected to SCHIFFRIN ASYMMETRY and MCMAHAN ASYMMETRY? I grant that these views all raise a problem even if we accept and successfully implement PB. But the problem does seem to be softened in light of PB. For surely the more we benefit someone, in cases where we also harm them, the more permissible the harm is likely to become. Surely this is the case, anyhow, if we are moderate deontologists (more on this in a moment). As for the claim that our reasons against harming are particularly strong moral reasons, this may be right. But it is important to consider that choosing a best-off child will typically help us both to harm our child less and

to respect our reasons to benefit. That is to say, a best-off child will very often be a least-harmed child.<sup>26</sup> After all disease, and many other painful conditions, tend to be bad and worth eliminating precisely because they detract from wellbeing. I realize that some claim that suffering is, paradoxically, good for us (Parker 2010) and can contribute to soul-building (Hick 1977). Such claims are unsurprisingly highly controversial, both in procreative ethics and in the literature on the problem of evil. But even if they are accepted, there will be plenty of pain in a human life to build our souls, even after we have selected the best-off child we can.<sup>27</sup>

We come now to our epistemic problems. Recall our discussion about the problem of evil. The claim here is not that PB will fully eliminate the evil in the world, though it does have the potential to lessen it. The claim is rather that some of our most popular responses to the problem of evil may commit us to PB. Consider, for instance, the following complaint from Philip Kitcher in the literature on evolution and evil: ‘Had a benevolent creator proposed to use evolution under natural selection as a means for attaining his purposes, we could have given him some useful advice’ (2004: 268). Kitcher’s words are revealing, not just for divine creation, but for human creation. After all, we give rise to children who suffer from comparably cruel chance processes all the time – in the natural genetic lottery of reproduction. But if we are going to complain that we would design the living world to contain less suffering, then consistency requires us to say something similar about human procreation. True, our prospects for wellbeing are largely social, but we should not underestimate the biological underpinnings of wellbeing. If depression is largely biologically based, then Maria’s proneness to depression, for all I know, had biological roots. She also complains about her ‘chronic poor health’ in her 1793 letter, which, for all I know, had biological roots.

Turning now to worries about knowledge and action PB also has relevance here. For although nothing about PB will lead us to know that our child will have a good life, if responsibly implemented, it will make us better positioned to expect that she will. But surely this counts for something. Surely

procreation is more likely to be justified if the gift of life comes packaged with fewer liabilities. One might claim that parents remain culpable for creating given the knowledge-blame connection. But we must be careful not to make blame too easy. Otherwise, one could blame parents for taking their child for a walk on a sunny day. For in such a case the parents arguably lack the knowledge that a plane won't fall and kill their child prior to going for the walk. But we surely wouldn't blame them for acting despite their ignorance. Of course, children are much more likely to suffer life-ruining harm than they are to die from falling planes. Also, unlike existing children, the lives of possible people will not be impoverished if they don't take daily risks, like going outside. These things show that Hawthorne and Stanley's claims still have bite in procreative contexts. But the more evidence that we have that our children's lives will be good, prior to creating them, the less culpable we seem in starting their lives.

Finally, PB helps to soften the worry that we lack knowledge that our child will suffer too much harm, even if the harm is not, on balance, life-ruining. For even if it is difficult to know where the relevant harm thresholds lie, in general or in a specific case, we can be confident about this much: the more likely it is that your child will suffer less, the more likely she will not violate the relevant harm thresholds. But then PB will become relevant, since successfully adhering to it will likely generate less harmed children. I realize that new modes of procreation could also contribute to new forms of harming, whether social or biological. This does not give us a reason to stop caring about the wellbeing of future persons, however. Rather, it gives us reason to proceed with caution to ensure that we really make better-off people. For those who are not confident that they could genetically select a better-off child, which for now is most of us, then leaving their child's initial biological prospects to chance will be the best way for them to satisfy PB.

### ***3.4.1. The Move to Moderate Deontology***

In closing let me briefly explain why a move to PB may not be enough to justify procreation and what we might do about it. Here I will seek to show that problems in procreative ethics should convince classical deontologists to become moderate deontologists. The distinction between the two kinds of deontology may be found in the following passage from Shelly Kagan:

Those [deontologists or Kantians] who reject the absolutist attitude toward the constraint against harming are moderate deontologists. They believe that the constraint has a threshold: up to a certain point, the threshold point, it is forbidden to kill or harm an innocent person, even if greater good could be achieved by doing it; but if enough good is at stake, if the threshold has been reached or passed, then the constraint is no longer in force and it permissible to harm the person (1977: 79).

I agree that constraints on harms have thresholds: consequences matter. What's puzzling to me is why more Kantians who think that procreation is justified aren't moderate Kantians or deontologists. It might be suggested harming innocents in order to benefit other non-identical persons is, for the Kantian, troubling in a way that procreation is not, since in procreation the same person who is harmed is also the person who is benefited. But this response has limitations.

It is of course true that the standard debates about moderate deontology concern interpersonal aggregation or trade-offs between **different persons**; they involve questions such as: 'can I kill one to save two (or two thousand)?' 'Can we trade human lives for headaches?' It is also true that harming someone for the sake of benefiting a non-identical person or group is a particularly troubling form of harming for the deontologist. But these things do not show that intrapersonal trade-offs (harming someone to give that **same person** an even greater benefit) are entirely innocent. For what if we have overriding or categorical reasons against benefiting innocent persons, where doing so requires causing them enough unchosen suffering? To clarify, I think a version

of this question arises for all deontologists, including moderate deontologists. But the moderate has a response available to her at this point that the strict deontologist or Kantian lacks. Since the moderate deontologist denies that constraints on harming are absolute, she can make the justification for procreation, in part, a matter of interpersonal **aggregation**.

According to this view, it is significant that many people, besides the child we create, will benefit from our procreative acts. The beneficiaries in question might be a child's parents (Brighouse and Swift 2006) or future friends, but they might be, most importantly from the standpoint of the numbers, future descendants whom our child shall never meet. Here it is helpful to consider the following remarks from Peter Singer, in response to the question whether this should be the last generation:

I do think it would be wrong to choose the non-sentient universe. In my judgment, for most people, life is worth living. Even if that is not yet the case, I am enough of an optimist to believe that, should humans survive for another century or two, we will learn from our past mistakes and bring about a world in which there is far less suffering than there is now.

Despite the questionable assumption that worthwhile lives are automatically lives that we may start, Singer's remarks are of interest. For underlying Singer's claims is an optimistic expectation that people in the future will suffer less and will lead better lives. If we add to this expectation that the human population increases exponentially over time, then the benefits of procreation now may lie largely in the future, a fact which could help to justify procreation now. Of course, some will seek to dismiss Singer's optimism as nothing more than an unfounded enlightenment trust in progress. Others may deny that the population will continue to increase or may claim that because it will increase the quality of life will go down, making procreation even harder to justify, on my reasoning. But these remarks overlook other factors. For instance, everyone

was poor ten thousand years ago, and as for the worry about over population, we shouldn't rule out that we might learn to colonize empty planets (Bostrom 2003).<sup>28</sup> Anyhow, my aim is not to defend Singer's optimism about the future, only to point out its significance to the question of whether procreation can be justified in the present. The suffering we cause persons in creating them is likely to be more (or less) justified if in light of its distant consequences.

The moderate deontologist, then, can say that distant future goods, whether or not these goods give us a reason to procreate, as Singer seems to think, make procreative acts more likely to be justified. The reason that they make procreative acts more likely to be justified is that they make it even more likely that the suffering we impose upon persons in procreation will be justified. So is this view attractive? I think that it is worth taking seriously, especially if we reject PB. But it is also worth taking seriously even if we accept PB. For although our earlier remarks about PB soften the moral and skeptical worries facing procreation, they do not eliminate them entirely. People still do not choose to come into existence; parents still take serious risks with persons in creating them etc. If we add that our capacity to create better-off children now is highly limited, then the need for other justifications of procreation becomes apparent. The moderate deontological justification of procreation is of interest because it says that the procreation can be interpreted as part gift, part trade-off. In fact, even if it takes five hundred years for humans to be able to create better-off children, this claim, on the present view, could be relevant to the justification of procreation now.

Some may worry at this point that we have left Kantianism altogether, insisting that the admission of any kind of aggregation into our picture of normative ethics amounts to an outright departure from Kantian ethics. No doubt some Kantians will insist on this point. But we should not ignore recent attempts to show that moderate deontologists can take numbers seriously (Brennan 2009, 2004, Liao 2008). This is because for the moderate deontologist consequences matter – and matter a great deal – to ethical deliberation. They just aren't the **only** things that matter, which in turn implies

that future consequences alone do not justify procreation. If the lives we start are expected to be bad, then we shouldn't start those lives, even if by doing so we could make the world a better place. More accurately, absent unusually severe circumstances,<sup>29</sup> the Kantian constraint against knowingly starting a bad life will remain authoritative for the moderate deontologist.

Lastly, I should make it clear that my moderate deontological justification of procreation does not imply that everyone we create will themselves have biological children. For recall that other people benefit, on the present view, besides distant generations. In any case, since it is reasonable to assume that most people we create will have biological children of their own, the present strategy is far from empty, even when judged from the standpoint of goods in the distant future.

These remarks, combined with our earlier claims, give rise to a qualified version of pro-natalism. According to this view, creating in order to give *someone* the gift of life, in order to enjoy a child-parent relationship, and in order to benefit future generations, does seem to qualify as a decent justification for procreation – especially if we also seek to create the best-off children we can. Perhaps the strict Kantian will feel that she can defend procreation without becoming a moderate and without accepting a view like PB or even the weaker principle MH. I invite her to do so. But in the meantime, we have come across a reason for all Kantians to accept a more demanding view of procreation and a reason for strict Kantians to become moderate Kantians. More accurately, Kantians who wish to resist both procreative skepticism and consequentialism have reasons to make these revisions.

### ***3.5.1. Conclusion***

To sum up: we have carved out a basic path from procreative skepticism to procreative beneficence and moderate deontology. Our arguments for procreative skepticism were not rooted in recent anti-natalist arguments

(Benatar 2006), but in various Kantian and skeptical worries, worries that were brought into sharp-relief in the case of Maria Von Herbert, and in the problem of evil and the limits of reason. Thankfully, the move to PB helps to soften these worries and the pessimistic outlook they invite. But a complete justification of procreation, as we saw, encourages optimistic Kantians not just to accept a view like PB, but to become moderate deontologists with an eye toward future goods. To be sure, some will deny that the required belief in progress is realistic. Others may be skeptics about our ability to ever identify, let alone actually create, better-off children. But such persons surely have less reason to procreate.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> About Kant, about the limits of philosophy, and about women's experiences in 18<sup>th</sup> century Austria, see Langton (1992) and (1994) for more details.

<sup>2</sup> Kant uses this passage to explain why children cannot be treated as property or neglected. More positively, he sees it as grounding a parental duty to take care of their children until they are mentally and physically developed and capable of self-governing.

<sup>3</sup> Shiffrin makes a similar point (1999: 133).

<sup>4</sup> Consider the following words from David Velleman: 'My birth hasn't figured much in my life, other than having begun it, whereas my death will have figured far more than just ending it. It's been on my mind, one way or another, ever since I learned what death is. I've wondered about it, worried about it, once or twice wished for it, and in any case constantly sensed its presence in my future' (2011:1).

<sup>5</sup> This is a very rough way of putting it. For more sophisticated ways see Menzies (2009),

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Harman also makes this point (2009).

<sup>7</sup> Much of Maria's troubles may stem from a lie. On the other hand, Maria also notes in her first letter that morality is not her main problem 'Don't think me arrogant for saying this, but the demands of morality are too easy for me. I would eagerly do twice as much as they command.' It is no wonder that Langton refers to Maria as a 'Kantian saint' (1994).

<sup>8</sup> This permits Hare to explain procreative responsibility in light of the non-identity problem. Even if one's child can never (or can rarely say) 'you should have done better with me in creation', it can still be the case that one has an obligation to create a better-off child, given Hare's framework.

<sup>9</sup> Though others do. For instance, David Wasserman states: 'In assessing possible grounds for complaint, I will argue that the most plausible role [for] morality is a permissive one, placing few constraints on the kind of children parents have, as long as they are expected to have lives worth living (and as long as their parents provide loving and adequate care, which I will, however unrealistically, assume). What it does require is that if people bring children into the world, they do so in part for certain reasons, reasons that concern the good of those children. All prospective parents should expect their children to face significant hardships—death, loss, frustration, and pain—that dwarf the specific hardships associated with most impairments. They must be able to justify the decision to subject their children to those hardships, and they can do so only if part of their reason for having those children is to give them lives good and rich enough to offset or outweigh those hardships (2005: 135-36).

<sup>10</sup> A version of this problem also finds expression in Brennan (1994). As Brennan notes in her Bad Haircut Edward case, if I violate your rights and benefit you, it might still be wrong.

<sup>11</sup> I have followed Harman's wording closely here.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, there may be other asymmetries that are good for our wellbeing, which could be called upon in attempts to justify procreation. As Hurka notes, the absence of knowledge seems less bad than the presence of knowledge is good. But given the sheer importance of pleasure and pain in a life, HURKA ASYMMETRY, if true, is troubling.

<sup>13</sup> Plantinga has recently shifted a bit on this point. He now seems to think that if there is a successful theodicy, it will consist in the claim that all of the best worlds will contain the towering goods of incarnation and atonement. But see Marilyn Adams (2008) for a response.

<sup>14</sup> For a well-known exception that seriously engages procreative ethics and the problem of evil see Adams (1979).

<sup>15</sup> To do this, one could always be a ‘skeptical theist’ who thinks that we don’t always need knowledge of why X is justified to rationally believe that X is justified. The claim here, which is not entirely without Kantian epistemic support, is that our failure to come up with a justifying reason for evil X does not imply that there is no such reason or that a divine being, if such there be, wouldn’t be aware of it. But this response fails to help secure the permissibility of procreative acts for the following reason: if we are to bring about X, and X causes known suffering to innocents, then we plausibly ought to have known reasons for why bringing about X is permissible, reasons that explain why the suffering in question is justifiably imposed on another. This skeptical way of reasoning about evil has some foundations in Kant, who insists that our inability to justify the evils we see may just be ‘our presumptuous reason failing to recognize its limitations’ (224). If Kant is right, then our inability to see how the world might be ultimately good, and good for us, will *not* be evidence that the world is not ultimately good, impersonally or personally. It will just be evidence that our cognitive capacities to reason about goodness are limited – which is the foundation of a recent movement called skeptical theism in philosophy of religion.<sup>15</sup> But then the lesson behind EVIL ASYMMETRY, it might be argued, is not that human and divine creation are not morally analogous in various respects, but that neither raises serious problems.

<sup>16</sup> Actually, given how easy it is for horrible things to happen in the world – a procreative skeptic might reason – many parents may be culpable for their ignorance, since they *should* have thought more seriously about the morality of procreation prior to starting a life

<sup>17</sup> Consider the following sorites-style argument.

1. A person who experiences only one harm during her life does not violate harm thresholds in procreative contexts.
2. For any natural number  $n$ , if a person suffering  $n$  number harms does not violate harm threshold, then neither does a person who suffers  $n+1$  number of harms.
3. Therefore, a person who suffers twenty billion harms during her life does not violate permissible harm thresholds.

The point here is not that the conclusion is true. The point is rather that it is difficult to have confidence about the precise point at which someone would violate the relevant harm thresholds, assuming there is such a point. To better appreciate the problem in question we can ask a parallel question about how many hairs a given person would have to lose before he becomes bald. Although many think that there are no truths about such matters (and thus no possibility of ignorance), the epistemic point should be clear. If there are truths in this domain, they seem bound to be beyond us (Williamson 1994), something that is consistent with Kant’s own views about the limits of reason. These things, finally, whatever they imply about baldness, are surely bad news for procreation.

<sup>18</sup> I for one am puzzled that so many moral philosophers speak as though there are clear truths about harm threshold. For instance, consequentialists and deontologists often reason as though there are clear truths to be had about which actions are permissible in trolley cases etc. Turning to procreative ethics, Benatar thinks it’s a fact, given his well-known asymmetry thesis, that even one harm in a life would render that life impermissible to start. According to advocates of the zero-line view, finally, so long as the life is worthwhile, it is supposed to be a fact that the life in question is sufficiently harm-free to start.

<sup>19</sup> Here I have in mind Benatar’s asymmetry argument, according to which the absence of pleasure is bad only when someone is around to be deprived, whereas the absence of pain is good even where no one is around to enjoy its absence. This suggests that even one pain couldn’t be counterbalanced by an infinite number of goods. See Benatar (2006). For recent criticisms of Benatar’s asymmetry argument see Brown (2011) and McMahan (2009).

<sup>20</sup> I owe this phrase to Jon Marsh.

<sup>21</sup> Many suspect that procreative beneficence tells us to select against persons with disabilities and worry about it for this reason. I share this concern. I am not as confident as some that procreative beneficence really does have this consequence, however – it all depends on one’s conception of wellbeing and on one’s conception of how to best eliminate social injustices. Many will doubt that the best way to eliminate social injustice is to prevent the existence of certain kinds of people. Also, even if procreative beneficence gave us a reason to select against persons with disabilities – or rather certain disabilities – it is possible

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that this reason could be counterbalanced by other moral reasons, like the worry that selecting against certain kinds of persons makes a harmful statement about living persons with the relevant disabilities. Anyhow, I am more sympathetic to those who say that disabilities are not misfortunes, except in an unjustified social sense, than those who say disabilities are intrinsically serious misfortunes, but that there is nothing wrong with creating persons with serious misfortunes. There are also feminist worries surrounding procreative beneficence. At least some present technologies will be invasive for women, after all. More generally, it might be said, to borrow a phrase from Caspar Hare, that women are ‘not a *baby machine*, whose job it is to make the best possible person’ (2007:500). There is something to this claim. On the other hand, it is not part of procreative beneficence that we have to create many people or any people for that matter. The relevant question is whether the suffering that could be prevented or the wellbeing that could be secured for one’s child by procreative beneficence outweighs the extra burden assigned to women in procreative contexts. I suspect that it will in some cases.

<sup>22</sup> Buchanan et al. (2000: 24) refer to a similar anti-suffering principle as Principle N .

<sup>23</sup> As Savulescu and Kahane note, MH or ‘the Prevention of Harm View is not the same as giving priority to the prevention of harm. Even if in procreative choices prospective parents ought to give greater weight to preventing suffering and hardship, it hardly follows that they ought to give no weight to selection of non-disease characteristics that will result with a life with greater benefits, large or small.’ This is consistent with MCMAHAN ASYMMETRY mentioned earlier.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, someone might object to the means of selection, on moral grounds, in cases where this would involve abortion. Alternatively, someone might be willing to select a child, but genuinely unable to afford to. These could be defeating conditions. There are no doubt others as well.

<sup>25</sup> Savulescu and Kahane make this point (2009). I might add one point here. If part of what we are concerned about doing in arguing for PB is reducing the risks that our child will suffer life-ruining harm, this strikes me as a person-affecting claim, and not merely impersonal claim about promoting the good.

<sup>26</sup> But even in cases where a best-off child is not also a least-harmed child we may prefer a best-off child. For the suffering we face is often more justified if our lives go well enough, which gives us more reason to favor PB.

<sup>27</sup> This point is also made by Savulescu and Kahane (2009).

<sup>28</sup> Some also claim that we become much less violent over time (Pinker 2011).

<sup>29</sup> If there were only five people left on earth and we needed to rebuild the population, then the constraint against creating a child with a less than decent life would plausibly be overridden by value-based considerations. That is to say, even the deontic constraint against starting a bad life will have thresholds for the moderate Kantian. But such thresholds will surely almost never be reached.

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## Chapter 4: Public Reasons, Sexual Justice and Upbringing

**Chapter Summary:** This paper formulates a new challenge for moral and political philosophy about the extent to which parents may transmit potentially harmful beliefs, values or attitudes to their sexual minority teens. Although it might seem obvious to some liberals that parents should not display rejecting behaviors in the home, neglected worries about the metaphysics of harm, consequentialism and salvation, and something I call the problem of Pascalian parents show us otherwise. I thus respond to these and related objections and argue that parents do indeed have overlooked obligations toward their sexual minority child. In fact, the best arguments for family rejection commit parents to anti-natalism.

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### *Introduction*

Parents take on important obligations when they decide to have a child. This is true because of the kind of beings children are – children are highly vulnerable beings – but also because of the inevitable challenges and hardships they face in coming into existence; an existence that we must recall they didn't choose. Claims like these have led some philosophers to argue that (i) procreation is a morally mixed act and (ii) that this has bearing on what we owe to children in upbringing. Here it is worth quoting David Velleman at length,

What is equivocal about procreation is not that it confers both benefits and harms on the resulting child; what's equivocal is that it throws that child into a predicament, confronts it with a challenge in which the stakes are high, both for good and for ill. Moreover, it is a challenge that no child can meet without the daily-assistance of others over the course of many years (2008: 251).<sup>1</sup>

To further explain the connection to upbringing, Velleman adds,

Consider the hackneyed example of a child who is drowning at the deep end of a swimming pool. People lounging around the pool obviously have an obligation to rescue the child. But the obligation to fish the child out doesn't fall on the bystanders equally if one of them pushed the child in. The one responsible for the child's predicament is not just a bystander like the others, and he bears the principal obligation....Likewise with procreation and parenting. In my view, parents who throw a child into the predicament of human life have an obligation to lend the assistance it needs to cope with that predicament, by helping it to acquire the capacities whose exercise will enable it to flourish and whose lack would cause it to suffer. By choosing to create a child, perhaps even by choosing to have sex, adults take the chance of incurring this obligation (*Ibid*).

Although some may wish to dispute the implicit claim that biological parents are more responsible for their children's flourishing than adoptive parents, I take it that Velleman is right about one thing. Parents have serious responsibilities to help, and certainly not to further hinder, their children in the face of life's most serious predicaments. What will interest me here is what these responsibilities look like when children develop, sexually, in ways that run strongly against the preferences of many in society, including their parents.<sup>2</sup> Though such a topic is rarely mentioned let alone explored in moral and political philosophy,<sup>3</sup> this is unfortunate. For as we shall see, some of the earliest lessons in intolerance begin in the home, with the result that many sexual minority children fail to flourish later in life. The worry is particularly severe, in light of Velleman's claims, once we consider the potential causal role that parents have on their child's sexual development. (For how many parents can honestly say that some combination of their genes, prenatal hormone levels,<sup>4</sup> or the upbringing they provide their child

has nothing to do with his or her sexual orientation?)

### *Plan*

This paper is divided as follows. Section I explores recent empirical work on parental rejection and disgust: two of the main sources of injustice toward sexual minorities in the home. Section II develops three anti-rejection arguments: one general in nature, another rooted in Velleman's claims, and a third rooted in the value of parenting. These arguments all concern teens who are known to be sexual minorities, but they also give parents a reason to tread carefully and compassionately when speaking about sexual differences even when their children are very young. Sections III and IV, which constitute the most philosophically interesting portion of the paper, develop some objections to my claims. These objections are hard and liberals are not typically equipped to deal with them. That said, I think they are answerable and will do what I can to declaw them in the space allotted to me here.

One surprising lesson, as we shall see, is that the best public defenses of rejecting attitudes toward sexual minority youth – namely the defense of Pascalian parents who wish to maximize their child's expected utility, and the conscience-based defense of some traditional religious parents – have the unacceptable consequence that the relevant parents should stop procreating. For this reason, discussions like the present one cannot clearly be set apart from discussions about the morality of procreation.

## I

A set of foster parents were recently forbidden from caring for a child on the grounds that their traditional beliefs about homosexuality could prove damaging to that child.<sup>5</sup> I will not be suggesting that we should prohibit individuals from parenting simply because they *believe* homosexuality to be wrong. I will be arguing, however, that all parents have reasons to worry about rejecting behaviors,

if any do. Before doing this, though, it is helpful to think about standard cases of rejection:

**Standard Case 1:** Lisa is fourteen and her parents discover that she is sexually and romantically attracted to other girls. They tell her that she is a disgrace to the family. After having had some time to calm down, Lisa's parents apologize for their initial outburst, but insist to Lisa that she nonetheless needs to get over her struggle and learn to like men.

**Standard Case 2:** Lisa is now seventeen, her orientation hasn't changed, and she wants to go to the prom. Her parents seek to talk her out of it and when they see her prospective date – Sarah – at the mall, they say to her: 'we question your influence on our child and please know that you're not welcome in our home.' Lisa's parents have no problem that her older sister went to the prom with Bob last year and quite like Bob.

Case one concerns Lisa's sexual orientation (desires), case two concerns her behavior (dating life). The worry in these cases is not whether teens should be having sex, an issue that arises for all parents, but rather how parents should treat their sexual minority children. When we ask that question, it seems clear that the above parents discriminate against their child. If we think that teens possess a certain degree of agency (Brennan 2002)<sup>6</sup>, moreover, then the above parents further fail to respect their child's choices, in case two. But perhaps the most serious worry about these cases concerns harm and wellbeing.

#### ***4.1.1. Family Rejection<sup>7</sup> and Moral Psychology***

For instance, according to a recent study (Ryan et al. 2009), common rejecting reactions toward sexual minorities in the home risk damaging their lives in various ways. In particular, young adults who reported regular, as opposed to little or no, family rejection as teens were 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide, 5.9

times more likely to be prone to high levels of depression, 5.6 times more likely to engage in suicide ideation, 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs, and 3.4 times more likely to engage in unprotected sex, on the most recent occasion.<sup>8</sup> The forms of rejection noted included (1) emotional distancing, (2) exclusion from family events, (3) trying to get a child to change her orientation; (4) refusing a child contact with peers of a similar orientation; (5) refusing a child access to information about her sexuality, and (6) making regular comments about the shamefulness and general undesirability of a child's life on account of her sexuality.

True, as is generally the case, the correlations mentioned above do not entail a causal connection between rejection and wellbeing, but the links are certainly disturbing, particularly when we consider that 40 percent of participants from rejecting homes had already attempted suicide at least once.<sup>9</sup> This combined with evidence that 40 percent of Americans think that 'homosexuality is a way of life that should be discouraged by society' (Pew Forum on the Study of Religion, 17-18) should give us further pause. If many parents believe that such discouragement ought to begin in the home, then given the general influence of parents over the lives of their children, combined with teen sensitivity to rejection, it would hardly be surprising if there were a widespread causal story to be told about rejection and wellbeing. Indeed the absence of a causal story would be surprising. Many parents who were told about the study seemed to agree, and were shocked to hear the results.<sup>10</sup> Many after all had intended to help their children to live good, healthy and happy lives. These well-meaning parents were horrified to think that their efforts along those lines might have had the opposite effect.

On the other hand, many parents are not so gracious, with some even kicking their children out of the home or subjecting them to forced heterosexual marriage.<sup>11</sup> So why do many parents, including secular parents, have such strong feelings toward their sexual minority child? Although there are no doubt many factors at play here, people's disgust responses may well be among them. We know, for instance, that disgust-sensitivity often leads people to make harsh moral

judgments about interracial relationships, same-sex marriage and homosexual acts (Inbar, Pizzaro, Bloom, 2009, Nussbaum 2004). In fact, disgust can even lead liberals to implicitly judge that gay kissing in public is immoral, despite their explicit beliefs to the contrary (Inbar, Pizzaro, Knobe & Bloom, 2009). Since conservatives, if anything, appear to be notably more disgust-prone than liberals (*Ibid*), as determined by their reaction to the disgust sensitivity scale (DSS; Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994), then we might expect more disgust-driven rejection in conservative homes.

Now these empirical results won't likely settle any deep normative disputes about the nature of morality. But they are important for our discussion all the same. First, as mentioned, disgust may help to explain family rejection. Second, the above studies give parents, not least secular parents, a reason to ask themselves the following question: 'How do we know that it is not merely or largely our disgust talking when we strongly discourage our sexual minority child?' This is a challenge because, however they react to strangers, few parents would presumably want their relationship with their child to be largely defined by disgust. Lastly, and most importantly, parental disgust plausibly constitutes a distinct and unexplored form of harm toward sexual minority children. For sensing that members of your family are disgusted at you for some deep feature of your identity does seem to be harmful in its own right. It is further deeply rejecting. Parents thus have a normative reason to override their disgust reactions, or at any rate, the visibility of such reactions.

## II

### *4.2.1. Three Arguments*

We are now in a position to state our first anti-rejection argument.

**First Argument:** To the extent that rejecting behaviors toward one's sexual minority child cause her harm, carry a morally significant risk of causing her harm, violate her developing agency or autonomy, or are

otherwise unjust and discriminatory, parents have strong moral and political reasons not to engage in them. But rejecting behaviors do have at least some of the above properties, and in some cases may have them all. Thus parents simply because they are moral and political agents have strong, multiply attested, reasons to avoid rejecting their sexual minority child.

The above argument points out a number of plausible worries about parental rejection. But it says nothing of the distinctive responsibilities of parents as parents – as opposed to the responsibilities of parents as moral or political agents. We can thus supplement the first argument with a second argument that makes use of Velleman’s account of parental responsibility.

That account, recall, stems from the basic idea that to create someone generates strong obligations toward her because it is to assign her a lot of unrequested work ‘with a promise of great rewards for success, a threat of great harm for refusal, and a risk of similar harm for failure’ (250). We might add, in this context, that being adopted into a family with specific values and expectations, though it has its rewards, also involves a lot of unrequested work, promises and threats, and also generates parental obligations. In both cases, then, parents in virtue of a distinct parental role have a responsibility not to stand in the way of their child’s capacity to flourish. Thus,

**Second Argument:** Since parents have obligations, given their role as parents, to help their children flourish, they clearly ought not stand in the way of that flourishing. But displaying rejecting behaviors or attitudes toward sexual minority children plausibly stands in the way of their flourishing. Thus parents should not display rejecting behaviors or attitudes toward their sexual minority children.

Now I realize that some may wish to say that anti-rejection arguments are not enough, that we also need a pro-acceptance argument. These persons might

reason, perhaps in light of Velleman's claims, that parents owe their sexual minority child a supportive environment, to help her positively obtain the capacities she needs to flourish.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, some may further argue that anything short of acceptance is a kind of rejection,<sup>13</sup> and may claim that sexual minority children ought to be assigned a right to a supportive home. Such individuals may be right. But given the severity of disagreement in contexts like these, I think a discussion like this one should focus on the negative question of how not to treat one's child. Even this more restricted focus, as we shall see, has difficulties that need to be sorted out before we can have confidence that our reasons against rejection are overriding reasons.

Turning now to our third argument this one concerns not what parents owe to children, but the value of parenting. As Brighouse and Smith (2006) argue, a parent-child relationship makes possible a distinctive kind of value, one whose realization is often required for the lives of adults to fully flourish. Although Brighouse and Smith use the above claims to ground the rights of adults to have children, they also generate a third argument against rejection:

**Third Argument:** if the value of a parent-child relationship is such that it uniquely contributes to the flourishing of many adults, and perhaps grounds the right to become a parent in the first place, then a parent's reasons for preserving a parent-child relationship are very strong. But rejection of one's child for features as deeply rooted and difficult to override as her sexuality strongly risks weakening, if not undermining, the parent-child relationship. Thus parents have good parent-centered reasons not to reject their child: their lives will likely go better if they do not reject their child.

One of the main problems with family rejection, according to our third argument, is that it threatens the value of parenting itself, and by extension the value of the family. And unless we think, implausibly, that parents and children must have identical interests, values and identities in order to have a good

relationship, the personal risks of rejection will be too high for reasonable parents to take.<sup>14</sup> This matters because even if it could be shown that rejection falls under the scope of parents' rights to raise their children on their own terms, argument three shows that rejection would still not be advisable. To clarify, I am doubtful that parental rights, which are not normally thought to justify harming children, could justify rejection.<sup>15</sup> But my point here is different. Rejection, whatever its effects on children, and whatever its moral, legal or political status, is highly burdensome for parents.

### III

Some, as alluded to earlier, think that the claims I have made are TOO EASY. Those who say this think it obvious that parents should not reject their child in the ways we have described – and think that I do not go far enough in my conclusions. By contrast, those who think my topic is TOO HARD will claim that I have said too much. I confess that were we in a fully secular world I would side with those who think my claims are easy, and would agree that even in an initial discussion like this one, we should make the case for a child's right to a supportive home. When I think seriously about the perspective of many religious parents, however, the case for thinking that my claims are too strong can be tempting. This temptation thus needs to be explored. Thus,

**Worry:** Velleman's account of parental responsibility, and most of the above claims about harm and flourishing more generally, could be called upon to support rejection. It just depends on what is basically true about the world.

To appreciate the worry, imagine a set of conservative parents who, after reading Velleman's claims about parenting, conclude:

**Conservative Parents:** Velleman's analogy is apt. Our child is drowning

and we may well be partially to blame. She is drowning because she has come to have sexual desires that could easily lead her astray from her true self – as a child of God – and from her ability to obtain salvation. So we had better discourage her, if we are to fulfill our parental obligations toward her. And if our attitudes seem rejecting, then much as we detest this, it is better that our child feels rejection *now* rather than *later*; that is, in the home rather than before the judgment seat of God, which after all could separate us from her forever. In fact, rejection might not be the best word to use here, for our discouraging attitudes are really intended as a means of helping our child flourish and stem from parental love and hope for our child in the face of what we fully acknowledge is a serious predicament. Besides, our child will come to agree with our point of view one day in heaven, if she does not already. Given that her future self will retroactively consent to our tough parenting on earth, moreover, we needn't worry about violating her developing autonomy or otherwise harming her.

Responses like these do not show that rejection is justified, but they are important for other reasons. First, they make it harder to convince those with certain traditional religious beliefs that rejection is altogether impermissible or unloving – as opposed to say just having some possible reasons against it. Second, the conservative parents remind us to think about the metaphysics of harm. Claims of the form X is harmful (or X is impermissible, or X is contrary to flourishing etc) are often sensitive to what world we are in. If there is an afterlife, and if the divine has very definite views about sexuality and punishment, it could be argued that our conservative religious parents would not be harming their child in rejecting her, since they do not clearly make her worse off, and may indeed benefit her. To be sure, this last claim takes for granted the standard account of harm, according to which we must make persons worse off to harm them. But even if that account of harm is too restrictive (Harman 2009), and we can harm persons by causing them to be in a bad state, our conservative

parents may deem the harm they cause their child permissible, analogous to the case of a doctor who performs a painful surgery on a patient to avoid a much greater harm.

Finally, the conservative parents remind us that identity is complex. At least some of the children who are rejected will claim to authentically hold their parents' religious values, but will be facing an internal conflict over their religion and their sexuality. This last claim poses a problem, not just for the familiar reason that the interests and identities of parents and children can be difficult to separate out, but for a less commonly appreciated reason. It turns out that religious and secular individuals may disagree on the question of which identities are more basic, sexual or religious, in the case of a conflict (Knobe 2011). The reason for this, we are told, is that people tend just to say that the identity that they ascribe more value too is more basic or 'true to their self'.

#### ***4.3.1. How Shall We Proceed?***

Again, none of this shows that rejection toward sexual minority children is morally or politically justified. It does, however, raise the question of how to proceed given the reality of disagreement. At this point many philosophers will be tempted to simply presuppose that at least one of the substantive metaphysical or religious doctrines held by the traditional religious parents is (i) false and so not to be acted on, and/or (ii) not known to be true and so not to be acted on and/or (iii) not sufficiently epistemically clear or justified to be acted upon. But while there is no shortage of academics willing to explicitly or implicitly affirm (i) (ii) and (iii), I think that we should proceed in a less dismissive fashion. Here are five possible options:

- (A) **Meta-Epistemological Approach.** Argue that at least one of the relevant metaphysical or religious beliefs of parents that might justify rejection is (i) false and so not to be acted on, and/or (ii) not known to be true and so not to be acted on and/or (iii) not sufficiently clear or

justified to be acted upon.

- (B) **Anti-Enrolment Approach.** Argue that the problem dissolves once we appreciate that parents in a diverse liberal society cannot legitimately enroll their child in any comprehensive doctrines, whether religious or humanistic. Add that what children need transmitted to them above all is a sense of justice.
- (C) **Constraints on Apparent Harm Approach.** Argue that while providing one's child with a religious upbringing is fully permissible, parents cannot use religion to justify seemingly harmful or discriminatory behaviors toward their child. According to this view, we should not even hear religious justifications for parental rejection in a liberal society, if rejection appears clearly harmful in the absence of controversial religious claims. Add that denying these claims has unacceptable conclusions for what would be permissible in society.
- (D) **Burden of Proof Approach.** Argue that parents who wish to reject their child need public arguments for why this should be tolerated, arguments that do not presuppose the truth of their religious views.
- (E) **Religious Approach.** Argue that there are powerful religious reasons against rejecting sexual minority children.

Of these options, I think C, D, E are the most promising. Option A, as a meta-epistemological option, would at best be highly time-consuming and at worst be unfeasible. It would be time-consuming because it would require answering many epistemologists who think that religious beliefs are easily justified, through testimony or experience (Greco 2008, Plantinga 2000, Alston 1991), with some adding that such beliefs, if true, are probably often known to be true in some externalist sense of 'know' (Plantinga 2000).<sup>16</sup> Option A, finally, risks being

unfeasible because many of the relevant religious beliefs (e.g. the belief that God dislikes homosexuality) lack clear empirical content and so may be resistant to falsification.<sup>17</sup>

Option B is more political. It says that parents should not be in the business of providing their children with a religious upbringing in the first place, at least not until such a practice can be shown to be compatible with the ideals of liberalism. Such a claim finds some interesting lines of support in Matthew Clayton (2006, 2011), though the anti-enrolment stance is likely too controversial to be of much help. For most of us think that parents can legitimately raise their child in a comprehensive doctrine and do not see a clear conflict between autonomy acquisition and religious upbringing (Mills 2003). Put more carefully: views as strong as option B should not be called upon unless necessary, but B is not necessary for our purposes, in light of option C, D and E.

Turning to C: this option permits that children may be given a traditional religious upbringing. It adds, however, that parents cannot legitimately do or teach just anything in the name of religion. The idea that apostates from one's religious tradition should be killed, for instance, is doubtfully something that a liberal society should tolerate being taught to children. Something similar may be said of the idea that practicing homosexuals should be killed. Other non-violent, and much more common, claims about the morality and value of homosexual relationships are naturally going to be trickier.<sup>18</sup> But we should not let the difficulties undermine what is clear. Even if parents can permissibly transmit their religious and moral views about homosexuality to their child in a general way, morality and politics still place constraints on the kinds of personalized remarks and behaviors that parents can exhibit toward their children.<sup>19</sup>

Lastly, there is the claim, in C, that if you permit acts that clearly look harmful, in the absence of a controversial religious story about why they are permissible or even required, you will run into intolerable socio-political consequences. This is something that most religious persons should be able to accept. For instance, most traditional Catholics or Muslims would presumably agree that Jehovah's Witnesses should not be permitted to refuse their child life-

saving blood transfusions on theological grounds. But their reasons for agreeing on this point, if they are to be *political* reasons, will plausibly implicate their own Catholic or Muslim justifications for rejecting their sexual minority child. Put another way, everyone, including religious parents, can see that rejection has properties that make it bad and potentially harmful. By contrast, not everyone can see that rejection has properties that make it good or at least permissible. When it comes to how we treat others in a political society, this asymmetry matters, moreover.

As for D, this says not that parental rejection cannot be justified, but that it now, for the first time in history, needs to be justified. According to this view, the burden of proof is on rejecting parents, and those who wish to defend them, to justify rejecting conduct toward children. Thus unlike C, D says that the moral and political discussion about parenting and homosexuality can and should continue, at least until we can sufficiently rule out that any decent public justifications for rejection are forthcoming. True, some may claim that public reason requirements in contexts like these bias the discussion toward secularism (Fish 1999), but advocates of D might say that this depends on what reasons pro-rejection citizens are able to come up with.

Finally, option E seeks to deny the claim, implicit in A through D, that traditional religion and toleration are at odds in the first place. We do not need to push for liberal interpretations of scripture or tradition to demonstrate this, either. For instance, rejection, it might be argued, is highly impractical. Even if things would be *better* if a child's sexuality could be controlled, rejection just seems a bad way of controlling another's sexuality: it just seems likely to make her feel bad, and seems unlikely to change her in the long run. But even if we suppose that rejection were a highly effective way of controlling another's sexuality over a lifetime, there would still be some widely accepted religious reasons against it. After all, too much rejection would compromise something that most traditional religions tell us to uphold: namely an individual's capacity to choose her own religious path, in the absence of external coercion. Although we might doubt that respecting autonomy would continue to be a priority if *that* much future wellbeing

were at stake, traditional religious individuals typically think otherwise. They almost always think that we should respect people's decisions for or against salvation, for instance, and will often grant that teens are developed enough to make decisions about salvation and should not be coerced when it comes to religious matters. If choosing to identify as a sexual minority is an inherently anti-religious decision, then it too should be tolerated.

So E gives us two more reasons against rejection: one practical, the other theological. When we combine strategies C, D and E, moreover, we get more reason to think that rejection is impermissible.

#### IV

In this last section, I want to explore how rejecting parents (and those who wish to defend them) might seek to satisfy the public reason requirement discussed in C, without seeking to persuade others of the truth of their religious outlook. One option here, likely to be adopted by new natural law theorists, runs as follows:

**Natural Law Worry:** the picture you have been sketching leaves out the dark side of homosexuality, which is worth seriously discouraging because it frustrates the procreative function of sex and because of its negative impact on human flourishing (Finnis 1997). We wouldn't fail to seriously discourage children from other forms of sexuality with similar consequences, say bestiality, so we shouldn't fail to seriously discourage them from homosexuality either.

The problems with this general line of argumentation are well-known (Macedo 1996, Corvino 2005), so I will merely mention a couple of points. First, even if we assume that the alleged dark side of homosexuality extends much beyond the social rejection faced by sexual minorities,<sup>20</sup> it is far from clear that communicating to sexual minority children that they cannot have a good life if they pursue a same-sex relationship will do very much. For it is not as though the

relevant individuals, upon hearing about the need to repress their sexual desires in order to really flourish, could thereby simply succeed in doing so (this is the practicality objection to rejection again). Second, requiring that people never engage in same-sex relationships, aside from being absurdly demanding for those with same-sex attractions, is bad for society. For having sexual minorities brought up thinking that their only acceptable options in life include celibacy or marrying members of the opposite sex – and struggling over whether or not to tell them about their sexuality – hardly seems like the mark of a healthy society. Previous societies were better off in many respects, no doubt, but this is not clearly one of those respects.

#### *4.4.1. Two Pro-Rejection Arguments*

I want to now consider two more sophisticated pro-rejection arguments, either of which could threaten the existence of a liberal state if left unanswered.<sup>21</sup> The first argument makes use of religious conscience and moral subjectivism. The second argument is pragmatic or decision-theoretic. As we shall see, these initially threatening arguments for rejection end up revealing that the cost of rejection is much higher than we have imagined. (But even if my arguments for that claim fail, we will still come across some reasons for thinking that the two following pro-rejection arguments fail and that rejection thus remains unjustified).

**The Argument from Conscience:** The above anti-rejection arguments not only downplay the value of conscience, they also make morality unacceptably demanding for parents. For if you genuinely believe that action X seriously risks contributing to the eternal damnation of your child, and that action Y can help to discourage X, you have an obligation, rooted in your conscience, to perform Y. This is true, given a subjective conception of ‘ought’, even if turns out that there is, in fact, no afterlife or damnation to be had by anyone. A parent’s obligation to obey her religious conscience is not going to be overridden by other factors either. For otherwise we get the

following strange and indeed ‘abominable conjunction’ for ethics<sup>22</sup>: ‘You genuinely believe that X risks damning your child forever and causing her to miss out on eternal salvation, but you should fail to seriously discourage your child from X.’ This conjunction is abominable because morality could not possibly demand of you that you fail to do what you think is required for your child’s eternal wellbeing, and if politics or law requires you to do otherwise, so much worse for these things. In that case, you should just do what you can to follow your conscience and try not to get caught.

There are many things one could say in response to this argument. One could deny the truth of subjectivism about moral responsibility, and so deny that beliefs or convictions, all by themselves, give people reasons for action (Zimmerman 2008). Alternatively, one could grant that conscience gives reasons for action, but insist that there are serious constraints on what conscience, religious or otherwise, can permit us to do to others in a liberal society (Gutman 2003, McLeod 2010).

There are other possibilities too. But before describing what I think is the most telling objection to the above argument, let us consider our second pro-rejection argument. Unlike the above argument, this argument does not require the belief that one’s child faces serious risks of a bad afterlife, only the belief that these risks are possible, however unlikely.

**The Argument from Pascalian Parents:** We realize that when we were speaking simply as conservative religious parents that our beliefs about rejection and salvation appeared dogmatic and poorly evidenced to outsiders. We also want to offer public arguments for our conclusion, so that others too can see its plausibility. Our argument is simple: there is a non-zero chance that the story we told for why ongoing rejection is justified is true, which recall was that our child’s infinite wellbeing is on the line: she could miss out on salvation and suffer hell. But this means that there is a non-zero chance that our child will be much better off if she is successfully discouraged from becoming a practicing lesbian, and

infinitely worse off if she is not successfully discouraged. True, our efforts in discouraging our child might fail. We are painfully aware of this. But it seems more likely that our child will stay away from same-gendered romance if we discourage her now, when she is young and impressionable, than if we do nothing (that is, if we remain neutral or silent about homosexuality) or if we accept her no matter what she does. Since expected infinite utilities trump all competing demands on action, moreover, our best bet for our child is to go with rejection – and this even if afterlife turns out to be a hoax, and even if our actions do some harm to our child. In short: if we are rational and if we care enough about our child to maximize her expected wellbeing or utility, we will reject her.

We can be a bit more precise here. Assume that you are a Pascalian parent and thus a certain kind of consequentialist.<sup>23</sup> Assume that traditional religious beliefs might be true, even if highly unlikely. Assume that heaven is of infinite utility. Assume further that hell is roughly as bad as heaven is good. Also assume that homosexual behavior would, if God exists, make it very hard to obtain heaven and very easy to go to hell. Finally, assume that rejection might successfully help your child to resist repeated homosexual behavior over her lifetime. To calculate the expected utility of rejection you need to do various things. First, you need to think about your subjective probability that your assumptions about homosexuality and afterlife are true. You then need to multiply this by the utility of rejecting your child (on the assumption that homosexuality is bad and that there is an afterlife). The next step is to think about your subjective probability that persistent practicing homosexuals fail to obtain salvation and go to hell. Then multiply this subjective probability by the utility of rejecting your child (this time on the assumption that there is no afterlife or at least that your child will not have a bad afterlife either way).

Now you are in a position to compare your expected utilities and to see that rejection has infinite expected utility. Here we can put our decision-matrix in a form familiar to the literature on Pascal's wager.

**Figure II**

	Scenario A	Scenario B	Scenario C	Scenario D
	<i>God exists and rejecting your child would work. Your child would overcome her homosexual struggles and persevere in faith.</i>	<i>God exists but rejecting your child would fail. Your child would rebel and fail to overcome her homosexual struggles, suffering both a damaged parent-child relationship and eternal damnation.</i>	<i>God does not exist and there is no afterlife, but rejecting your child would successfully discourage her from homosexual behavior. Your child would be romantically frustrated.</i>	<i>God does not exist and there is no afterlife. Rejection would fail to successfully discourage your child from homosexuality. Your parent-child relationship would also suffer some damage.</i>
<i>Wager for Rejection</i>	Eternal Gain	Eternal Misery	Some Temporary Harm	Some Temporary Harm
<i>Wager against Rejection</i>	Eternal Misery	Eternal Misery	Neutral	Neutral

We could add some other scenarios no doubt,<sup>24</sup> but this does not matter so much unless they change the present outcome, which is that rejection carries the most expected utility.

I will assess this argument in a moment. But first it is important to see that it is stronger than Pascal's Wager, at least in one respect. Pascal's wager, recall, says that agnostics and atheists ought to do what they can to form a belief in God, since belief as opposed to skepticism is in their best interest. What I am calling the argument from Pascalian parents is interesting, in part, because it avoids what is sometimes thought to be the most serious problem for Pascal's Wager (Moughin & Sober 1994: 382): namely, the classic version of the 'many gods objection'. This objection says that Pascal's theology is too restrictive because it neglects to factor in the possibility that Allah, and other historically affirmed deities, will punish individuals in the hereafter if they do not affirm Islam, or some other religion, as opposed to Christianity. Such an objection does not arise for Pascalian

parents because Allah, and other widely affirmed deities, for all of their differences, tend to agree about homosexuality and afterlife. In fact, some religious diversity, if anything, strengthens the argument from Pascalian parents, since any of the gods that Pascalian parents might be inclined to worry about, will, should they exist, be more likely to be merciful to their child if she has managed to refrain from becoming a practicing homosexual. (True, one might rework the many gods objection to focus on possible gods who punish people for failing to follow their sexual desires, but I will ignore this and the related question of whether these gods are as probable as the gods people actually believe in).

#### ***4.4.2. Replies***

How shall we respond to our two pro-rejection arguments? I mentioned earlier that there are a number of ways to criticize the argument from conscience. I think the most telling objection, however, is this: if you really believe your child's eternal wellbeing is at stake and that she might be forever damned if you do not successfully shape her in the right ways, then you have what appears to be a decisive reason not to create her in the first place, one that should also trouble your conscience. More accurately, if the beliefs held by the kinds of parents we are talking about gave them a strong reason to reject their child, they would also give such parents a strong reason not to create children – and a possible reason to regret having created. To clarify, this response does not exactly show that a parent shouldn't reject a child once she exists. Our earlier anti-rejection arguments were intended to do that. Rather the argument shows that parents should probably not use arguments like the argument from conscience to justify rejection, unless they are also willing to become anti-natalists.

Turning now to our second, pro-rejection argument, again, there are various ways that one could respond. For instance, many philosophers think that there are telling problems with Pascal's wager (Hájek forthcoming, Hájek 2003, Moughin & Sober 1994, Hacking 1972). One way of challenging the argument from Pascalian parents would be to show that it succumbs to some of these problems.

Alternatively, one might suggest that there are deontic constraints on obtaining good outcomes, particularly where those outcomes are only claimed to be ‘possible’ outcomes. Instead of developing these approaches, however, I want to reiterate my response to the argument from conscience: if parents genuinely worry about the eternal wellbeing of their child, and claim that this is what justifies them in doing seemingly harmful things to control her life, then why create her in the first place? Although Pascalians have neglected to think about procreative decision-making, this seems an oversight on their part.

To see the problem, imagine that our Pascalian parents are now deciding whether or not to create another child (or that they are reflecting back on whether they should have created their actual child). These individuals, being recent converts to Pascalianism, want to reason about whether procreation is advisable. It seems that they should reason as follows:

**Prospective Pascalian Parents:** We have come to see that procreation is too risky in light of our commitment to Pascalian-style decision theory and in light of a certain plausible asymmetry in the morality of creating people. For there is a non-zero chance that our child, if created, will turn out to be a practicing homosexual who fails to obtain salvation – and goes to hell as a result. In fact, whatever might lead people to go to hell, if such there be, it can be said of our child that there is a non-zero chance that she will end up in hell. That would be a horrible outcome: the worst imaginable outcome for our child. True, there is also a non-zero chance that our child will end up in heaven, so it might be thought that expected infinite utility considerations cancel one another out in procreative contexts. But that would be to ignore a common sense asymmetrical view about the morality of procreation. After all, we do not normally think that our expectation that someone will have a happy life gives us a reason, or at any rate a strong reason, to create that person. By contrast, we do normally think that our expectation that someone will have a miserable life gives us a strong reason not to create. So too when we are talking about risk and infinite

utility. The fact that someone has a chance of having an infinitely wonderful life does not by itself give us a reason to create, or not a very strong reason to create. The fact that she risks having an infinitely horrible life does, by contrast, by itself give us a very strong reason not to create, one that is not overridden by other factors. Given these things we should clearly not procreate.

Pascalian decision theory does not normally need to concern itself with asymmetries in the morality of procreation because it is not normally applied to procreative decision-making. But now that we are considering procreation, we should factor in all of our relevant information about procreation. This includes the following two widely held claims, which give rise to what Jeff McMahan (2009, 1981) calls Asymmetry:

(1) That a person would have a life that is not worth living – a life in which the intrinsically bad states outweigh the good – provides a moral reason not to cause that person to exist, and indeed a reason to prevent that person from existing.

(2) That a person would have a life worth living – a life in which the intrinsically good states sufficiently outweigh the bad – does not, on its own, provide a moral reason to cause that person to exist.

As McMahan notes, (1) and (2) although they raise puzzles of their own,<sup>25</sup> are hard to give up. This is because (1) and (2) are part of our common sense morality, and so would presumably be endorsed by Pascalians. The question now becomes how (1) and (2) are relevant. Since our Pascalian parents, and maybe Pascal himself,<sup>26</sup> are sensitive to even the tiniest risks of hell, it seems that they should factor in risk-based versions of (1) and (2) when thinking about procreative decision-making. On these risk-based versions of (1) and (2), we get the following:

(1)\* That a person would have a chance, however small, of ending up in hell – where hell has infinite expected negative utility – provides a reason not to cause that person to exist, and indeed a reason to prevent that person from existing.

(2)\* That a person would have a chance, however small, of ending up in heaven – where heaven has infinite expected positive utility – does not, on its own, provide a reason for causing that person to exist, or at least not a very strong reason.

The claim here is not that everyone is committed to (1)\* and (2)\*. Rather the claim is that those who buy into Pascalian reasoning, and who accept (1) and (2), are committed to (1)\* and (2)\*. This matters, moreover, because (1)\* and (2)\* lead straight to anti-natalism. Such a consequence will no doubt tempt some Pascalians to reject the above asymmetry. (I will consider one way they might do this in a moment) But even if these asymmetries could be rationally rejected, I think there are other ways of showing that Pascalians are committed to anti-natalism.

Given what we have said, it appears that Pascalians should assign *more* weight to the prospect of hell than to the prospect of heaven, in contexts of procreative decision-making, and so should not procreate. If we add with Hurka (2009), following Moore (2009), that ‘suffering is more bad than happiness is good’, such that ‘any intensity  $n$ , a pain of intensity  $n$  is more evil than a pleasure of intensity  $n$  is good’ (Hurka 2010), then we have another way of reaching the same conclusion.

To be sure, these reasons against procreation might be overridden if the expected cost of failing to procreate was higher than the expected cost of procreating. But it isn’t. Most importantly, when it comes to the possible child in question, there is no cost at all associated with the failure to come into existence: someone must exist or have existed before something can be bad for her. This

includes a total lack of expected utility and a lack of opportunity to make choices for oneself about one's expected utility. True, there may be some cost for parents in failing to procreate, at least if they desire to have a biological child. But this won't compete with the cost of risking a child's eternal wellbeing in creating her, given Pascalian assumptions, not least since such parents can adopt. Lastly, the problem here is not just for Pascalian parents, but for Pascalian reasoning in general. For any decision procedure that by itself, or when combined with plausible views, implies that you shouldn't procreate, even if there is the tiniest risk of a bad afterlife for your child, seems clearly defective.

#### ***4.4.3. Super Natalism or Near-Anti-Natalism?***

Now all of this could be avoided if Pascalians endorsed the following principle:

**Impersonal Utility Principle (IUP):** one should maximize the amount of expected utility there is in the world in general, and not merely one's own utility or the expected utility of one's actual children.

Although Pascal seems to have been silent on whether we should accept IUP, this principle amounts to a rejection of 2\* and has bearing on the size of the population. If Pascalians were to adopt it, they could set aside the reasons they have *against* procreation in (1)\*, by stressing the stronger reasons they have *for* procreation in IUP – reasons rooted in the amount of expected utility there will be in the world, if we procreate. More accurately, Pascalians could rationally procreate if, in addition to accepting IUP, they were to accept the following principle.

**The priority of expected utility principle (PRU):** One should, in contexts of decision-making, prioritize infinite expected utility over infinite expected disutility.

PRU and IUP, taken together, would not only block the inference to anti-natalism, but would give Pascalians reasons to procreate. But the problem with this move should be apparent. For, given PRU and IUP, Pascalians would be committed to the view that we should create as many persons as possible, since any person we might create would enjoy infinite expected utility simply by coming into existence. The reason for this is because, as Hájek notes (2003), it is *easy* for an act to have infinite expected utility, since pretty much any act we do, including having a beer, has a non-zero chance of producing belief in God<sup>27</sup> or, we might add, of satisfying any other requirements of salvation. But then acts of procreation too will have infinite expected utility. For if you procreate, your child will have a non-zero chance of deciding to believe in God, or of doing whatever it is that she needs to do to go heaven, if such there be. The problem of course is that this super-natalism would be every bit as much a *reductio* to Pascalian reasoning as anti-natalism. (Even those who say that birth control is immoral do not normally say you should procreate as much as possible).

So I think that there are troubles about Pascalianism and procreation, troubles that Pascalian parents should think about before proceeding with their pro-rejection argument. True, it is open to the Pascalian to reject IPU or PRU. But even if she can resist these principles, along with super-natalism and anti-natalism, comparably intolerable views may emerge. One such view might be near anti-natalism – the thesis that we have no reason to prefer seven billion persons to just one person. I raise this near anti-natalist possibility because, according to Pascal's view, a single individual already accrues infinite expected utility. But this degree of expected utility cannot be improved upon:  $n \times \text{infinity} = \text{infinity}$ , no matter what the size of  $n$  is. If we grant the apparent assumption that infinities are all the same size, anyhow, then a world with one person on it will be, from a purely Pascalian point of view, just as good and rational as a world with seven billion people.<sup>28</sup>

So, again, Pascalian reasoning seems to have unacceptable consequences for procreation. Suppose I am wrong about that, however. If there are fundamental problems with the claim that rationality requires us to maximize

expected utility in the first place, then the argument from Pascalian parents will be in trouble. I think there are such fundamental problems. Consider the following scenario.

**Coin-Tossing Scenario:** Imagine that God tells you that whether or not you will receive an afterlife is entirely up to you. You can say ‘yes’ to afterlife or ‘no’ to afterlife. If you say no to afterlife you will cease to be conscious upon death, which is the status quo. If you say yes to afterlife God will flip a coin and you will either go to eternal heaven, if it lands heads, or suffer eternal damnation, if it lands tails. (Imagine that God is in a cheery mood and will shift the odds in your favor by using a biased coin that lands heads 51% of the time). Should you play? If you could play on behalf of your young child too, would you do that? (Forget about whether God would actually do this).

The coin-tossing scenario will not likely occur to most Pascalians, since most Pascalians are used to thinking of the chances and expected utilities connected to heaven and hell as working together to produce a single rational outcome: belief in God (or at any rate trying to believe in God). But in the coin tossing case, the expected utilities connected to heaven and hell put rational pressure on us to act in different ways. This makes the coin-tossing case like procreation in a relevant respect, since a single act simultaneously creates new chances of heaven and hell for persons.

So how should a Pascalian act? It seems to me that the Pascalian faces a dilemma here. Pascalian reasoning either tells us that we *must* toss and hope for afterlife, or it gives no advice at all about how to act in this case – say because  $\infty - \infty$  might be said to produce indeterminate expectation. But here we run into a trouble either way. The idea that we must choose to coin-toss, if we are rational, despite how much is at stake, seems way too strong.<sup>29</sup> Would you honestly play in this case? If, like me, you think that coin-tossing with your eternal existence is way too risky, then you shouldn’t be so confident in the claim that rationality

always requires us to maximize expected utility.

These remarks suggest that the Pascalian might be attracted to option two, according to which the coin-tossing scenario gives us no advice about how to act. But this gives rise to the other horn of the dilemma. If the coin-tossing scenario gives us no advice about how to act in this case and gives no advice *because* it produces indeterminate expectation, then it seems that Pascalian reasoning never gives us advice about anything at all. Why? As Hajek's work (forthcoming) demonstrates, practically everything we do has a non-zero chance, both of causing us to believe in God, which has infinite expected utility, and of causing us to disbelieve, which has infinite disutility. But then, given Pascalian reasoning and a traditional theological conception of afterlife, practically everything we do will have expectation  $\infty - \infty$ . But then we will get indeterminate expectation all around the board, on the present reasoning, in which case Pascalian reasoning will in general give us no guidance for action – ruling out both Pascal's wager and the argument from Pascalian parents in one fell swoop.<sup>30</sup>

For various reasons, then, Pascalian reasoning seems to be more trouble than it's worth. As with our earlier argument from conscience, it is not something that pro-rejection advocates should wish to align themselves with in their public defense of rejection. In fact, matters of sexuality aside, parents more generally should avoid Pascalian strategies in defense of controversial forms of parenting.

#### ***4.5.1. Conclusion***

In sum: although a number of difficult theoretical and practical questions remain,<sup>31</sup> my task was to introduce the problem of how parents should treat their child when she develops, sexually, in ways that run radically contrary to their interests, beliefs and values. As we saw, even in an initial discussion like this, we can see that there are important constraints on parental rejection. We demonstrated this by considering three anti-rejection arguments. Our main pro-

rejection arguments, by contrast, were less promising, and have unacceptable consequences for procreation or rationality. Lastly, if I am right that Pascalian reasoning in general is committed to anti-natalism (or super-natalism or near-natalism or rationally required coin-tossing), this would arguably be the most important and most overlooked objection to such reasoning. For most people will wish to reject a decision procedure that has any of these implications.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In his *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant says, somewhat similarly, that procreation is an act by which we ‘have brought a person into the world without his consent and on our own initiative, for which deed the parents incur an obligation to make the child content with his condition in so far as they can’ (64). The main difference between Velleman and Kant is that Velleman’s claims, being Aristotelian, focus on flourishing not contentedness.

<sup>2</sup>I am focusing on LGB youth in this paper, since the data I discuss below concern them, and because I think that the topic of parenting transgendered youth warrants a discussion of its own. It is worth pointing out that LGB persons are increasingly coming out during their early and middle teenage years.

<sup>3</sup>Philosophical literature on children and sexuality, more generally, is sparse (Archard 1998).

<sup>4</sup>One possible biological cause of sexual orientation that is not linked to genetics concerns prenatal hormone levels in the womb, which correlate in interesting ways with orientation.

<https://www.msu.edu/~breedsm/pdf/BogaertCommentary2006.pdf>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8353512/Foster-parent-ban-extreme-distress-of-anti-gay-Christians-over-ruling.html>

<sup>6</sup>On Brennan’s view, children’s rights can protect choices and not just interests. Although I am not focusing on rights here I accept the claim that parents can fail to respect their developed child’s choices and not just her interests.

<sup>7</sup>I realize that some may worry about the ‘rejected teen’ model that characterizes many studies, and which could underplay the positive changes that are being experienced by other teens at home and in society. I agree that there is a danger here, but I think the greater danger lies in the other direction. In particular, given that many teens do experience serious rejection, pointing out that others have an easier time does little to help their situation.

<sup>8</sup>Other findings included increased substance related problems, patterns of risky sex over the last six months, higher likelihood of STD diagnosis, and heavy drinking. For similar studies see Ueno 2010, Poon & Saewyc 2009, McDermott, Roen & Scourfield 2008.

<sup>9</sup><http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/articles>. Some suggest that LGB persons aren’t clearly more likely than the average teen to actually – viz. successfully – commit suicide. But their attempts (all the more when combined with the other stats cited) are clearly worrisome.

<sup>10</sup><http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/articles>

<sup>11</sup>These problems are more likely to emerge in families that have immigrated to a liberal society. See the BBC article ‘Gay Muslims made homeless by family violence.’

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/england/8446458.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/8446458.stm). See also the BBC documentary ‘Gay Muslims.’

<sup>12</sup>Unsurprisingly, family acceptance predicts higher levels of wellbeing among sexual minorities (Ryan et al. 2010).

<sup>13</sup>It may be that silence toward one’s sexual minority child is rejecting and that neutrality in contexts like these is unfeasible. These claims may reveal that rejection is easier than many might think. But some forms of rejection are clearly more worrisome than others, and I am focusing on explicit rejection.

<sup>14</sup>I grant that having some shared interests, values and identities with one’s child could make a relationship with him easier and more valuable. But consider the words of Brighouse and Swift: ‘A good parent should be able to sustain a successful relationship without any particular shared interest or values. On our view, the parent who cuts off a child for marrying out of the faith, for refraining from

joining the military, for entering a religious order, or for apostasy fails as a parent' (2006: 105). It is tempting to add that those who reject their sexual minority children also fail as parents.

<sup>15</sup> I am highly doubtful that parental rights could justify rejection. To see why, it is helpful to think about the foundation of parental rights to raise their children on their own terms. Three views here are often put forward: (a) child-centered approaches, (b) dual-interest approaches and (c) public-goods approaches. I will now argue that that none of the proposed approaches relieves parents of their duty to respect the interests – and perhaps choices (Brennan 2002) – of sexual minority children. Beginning with (a), given a child-centered justification for parental rights, rejection would have to (demonstrably) be in the best interests of children to be justified. But that seems highly unlikely, given what we have said. Perhaps the best strategy here will be indirect: too much regulation and interference with the parenting process could actually be harmful to children. As Noggle (2002) has suggested, more than anything else, a stable family is effective in satisfying children's interests. To further limit the scope of parental control, we run the risk of doing more harm than good, by increasing the burden on the parenting process. A somewhat related strategy, which shows up in Sandel (1982, 32-5), holds that too much focus on what parents owe their children could detract from family love, since children might too often seek to hold their parents accountable for their parenting choices. I do not find these worries convincing. For when we are talking about rejected children, we are talking about families that are already plausibly divided. And while family love might, in the context of a perfectly stable home, conquer the need to talk about what parents owe their children, when we are dealing with contexts of injustice, we are dealing with a situation that is far from ideal. It thus seems implausible that child-centered approaches could be used to justify rejecting behaviors.

A different way of using parental rights to challenge my claims would be to argue, in line with (b), that rejection can be justified on the basis of parental interests to raise their children according to their own values. The dual-interest view, after all, states that the interests of both children and parents matter when it comes to thinking about their rights; it further states that parental interests can, in some cases, trump the interests of children. The problem, however, is that even if the dual-interest view is correct, it does not justify rejection. As Brighouse and Smith point out (2006), knowing that parental interests have weight, does little to fix the scope and content of child rearing rights – and they call it a common mistake to think otherwise. All that such a dual-interest view tells us is that parents can *sometimes* set aside the interests of children in place of their own, not *when* this is permitted. There are going to be serious constraints on parental control in a just society, moreover (Clayton 2006).

For instance, we do not think that parents in a liberal society can legitimately choose their child's sexual partner (Brighouse and Smith 2006: 102). So why suppose that parents can legitimately decide the gender of her partner – or strongly attempt to do so? There are other constraints on parental rights too. Brighouse and Smith deny, for instance, that parents' rights purchase parents the control to confer their wealth on their children or to transmit comprehensive values to them. Although there is no time to reproduce their arguments here, it would be rather strange if parents' rights, while failing to justify the transmission of parental wealth or comprehensive values to children, somehow justified transmitting rejecting, discriminatory and even harmful attitudes or behaviors to their children on the basis of their sexuality.

Moving finally to (c), it is also very difficult to see how a public-goods account of parents' rights could justify the negative treatment of sexual minority children. According to this view, parents' rights exist for the good they bring about in society. To interfere too much with the parenting process, it might be argued, could detract from the many goods that the family makes possible. Though there may be some merits of a public-goods account, it is not supposed to justify seemingly harmful and unjust treatment of children. Besides, if we are interested what is good for society, we will do well to think about what is bad for society. And it would be bad for society that it failed to value diversity and to protect its minorities. It would also be bad for society if many of its future citizens failed to flourish because of a bad start in life in the home.

<sup>16</sup> Plantinga defends a proper functionalist version of externalism, but many externalists could make his 'if true, then likely warranted' style argument. Option A would also be time-consuming because some philosophers think that beliefs do not need to be true or known to be true before they can turn out strong reasons for action.

<sup>17</sup> True, one could seek to show that such beliefs are incoherent or that their foundation in traditional interpretations of scripture is mistaken, but all of that seems likely to be tricky.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, does merely telling a child that homosexuality is deeply wrong count as rejection? What about bringing her to church where the minister is known to regularly preach vigorously against the

value and permissibility of homosexual relationships, threatening those who engage in them with hellfire? If these things count as rejection, moreover, does that mean that some forms of rejection are permissible? Or do we underestimate how troubling and difficult to justify these common practices are? Unsurprisingly, these questions lead to others. Should parental rejection, short of severe abuse, ever be penalized, and if so, how and at what point? Alternatively, should there be public policies in place that motivate, as opposed to coerce, parents not to reject their sexual minority children? Lastly, how much freedom does religious freedom purchase parents in this context? Although such questions all need discussing, they would require many other papers.

<sup>19</sup> Although the distinction between general and personalized remarks may not prove defensible after sustained reflection, we should start with a weaker claim until we think we are committed to a stronger one.

<sup>20</sup> I grant that it could be a burden for homosexual individuals not to be able to naturally produce children with their romantic partners, though this burden is shared by infertile heterosexual couples. I also grant that the risks of HIV are higher for male homosexuals than for heterosexuals (and lesbians, who face the least severe risks here). But given that rejected teens are more likely to engage in risky sex and to get STD's, rejection is hardly a solution to the problem. A better response would be to talk to one's child about safe practices and about the benefits of monogamy.

<sup>21</sup> These arguments, aside from justifying injustice toward children, could be re-formulated to undermine the doctrine of toleration. Some of my worries here were confirmed, recently, when I came across Duncan (2007).

<sup>22</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Keith DeRose (1995) who uses it to denote the following conjunction: I know that I have hands, but I have no idea whether I am a brain in a vat (BIV), even though my having hands entails that I am not a brain in a BIV.

<sup>23</sup> Namely a kind of consequentialist that seeks to maximize expected utility as opposed to actual utility.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, perhaps everyone goes to heaven, or perhaps your child is lucky and suffers no damage from rejection.

<sup>25</sup> See McMahan (2009) for a discussion of these various puzzles, including a general anti-natalist puzzle from David Benatar (2006).

<sup>26</sup> There is a controversy over whether Pascal factored in the prospect of damnation into his decision matrix, and a further controversy about whether Pascal thought that hell had infinite negative expected utility (Hájek forthcoming). But whatever we make of these interpretive issues, Hájek argues that incorporating eternal damnation helps to render Pascal's wager valid (ibid). Besides, our Pascalian parents already incorporate the chances of eternal damnation into their decisions about upbringing, so consistency requires that they also factor these chances into their decisions about procreation.

<sup>27</sup> Hájek states this as part of his mixed-strategies response to Pascal's wager.

<sup>28</sup> The objection discussed in this paragraph is wholly due to Hájek who raised it in personal correspondence.

<sup>29</sup> I confess that my resistance to coin-tossing here is largely intuitive. But some intuitions seem rather solid and rather likely to be widely shared. In any case, the general lesson that rationality doesn't require us to maximize expected utility should be familiar. The St Petersburg game teaches us this, too.

<sup>30</sup> One way out of the dilemma would be to say that we should choose afterlife in the coin-tossing scenario. After all, some have considered that our tendency to be less willing to take risks with losses than with gains is irrational in some contexts (Khaneman and Tversky 1979). Some Pascalians, moreover, may be committed to choosing afterlife in the coin-tossing scenario, at least where there is a greater than 50/50 chance of heaven (Bartha 2007: 36-40). But cases in which life-ruining outcomes are on the line, I confess, again, that the coin-tossing option seems way too risky to be rationally required of anyone. Another way out of the dilemma would be to assign finite but very very large utilities to hell (a trillion trillion of years of absolute bliss followed by extinction), and infinite utility to heaven to hell. This seemingly unorthodox picture of afterlife would strengthen the argument for coin-tossing. But because coin-tossing would still very very risky, and because there are other problems with the idea that we should maximize utility, I do not recommend it. Finally, even if coin-tossing could be justified, this would not automatically justify the argument from Pascalian parents: making risky decisions for oneself is not morally equivalent to deciding for others.

<sup>31</sup> See footnote 18.

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## **Chapter 5: Concluding Remarks**

In sum, I presented four papers that made the following contributions:

- (i) A novel argument that our lives are much more valuable than we think (one that can help to counterbalance a certain psychologically based argument for anti-natalism).
- (ii) Dealing with an underexplored argument for anti-natalism, one rooted in happiness research and one that gave rise to a new form of scepticism: procreative scepticism.
- (iii) Showing that procreative scepticism provides a novel motivation for procreative beneficence (and for moderate as opposed to strict deontology)
- (iv) Raising and treating an unexplored topic in the ethics of upbringing: namely, how sexual minority children should be treated in the home and what the implications are, either way, for procreation.

The unifying theme was the morality of creating and raising humans. Although much of the dissertation was theoretical, some of its claims, not least about parenting, have practical significance as well.

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AOC: Epistemology, Moral Psychology, Political Philosophy,  
Philosophy of Religion

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## Awards (By Amount)

1. Junior Scholar's Grant, University of Oxford, (competitive)  
\$15,500
  2. Ontario Graduate Scholarship, (competitive) \$15,000
  3. Selected Researcher for Canadian Institutes of Health Research  
(CIHR) Project, "Conscientious Refusals in Reproductive Health  
Care" \$8,000
  4. SEED grant, Rotman Institute of Philosophy (competitive)  
\$4,500
  5. NYU Conference Travel Grant \$750
  6. Graduate Student Teaching Award, UWO, \$500
  7. Dean's Honours Roll for Teaching Excellence, King's University  
College (2x)
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## Selected Presentations

1. 'Why the Locked-in Patient Case is Hard' *Persons and their Brains*. Ian Ramsey Centre Conference. St Anne's College, University of Oxford, July 2012.

2. 'Quality of Life Assessments, Cognitive Reliability and Procreative Responsibility' *Canadian Philosophical Association Meeting*, Fredericton, University of New Brunswick (refereed), May 2011.
3. 'Possible Persons and the Value of Life.' *Valuing Lives: A Conference on Ethics in Health & the Environment*. New York University, Bioethics Center, (refereed), March 2011.
4. 'When Cognitive Science Explanations are Debunking Explanations: Two arguments' Merton College, University of Oxford (invited), June 2010.
5. 'Darwin and the problem of natural nonbelief' *150 Years after Origin of a Species: Biological, Historical, and Philosophical Perspectives*, University of Toronto (refereed), Nov 2009.
6. 'Posthumans and Present Evidence: Exploring Future Enhancement,' *Canadian Bioethics Society Conference*, Hamilton Ontario (refereed), June 2009.
7. 'Dennett, Plantinga, and the Tricks of Belief Maintenance' *Human Persons and the God of Nature. Ian Ramsey Centre for Science & Religion*, University of Oxford, Sept 2007.