TOWARD A VIRTUE-CENTRED ETHICS OF REPRODUCTION

by

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Abstract

When it comes to potential children, is to love them to leave them be (nonexistent)? I examine the possibility of virtuous reproduction, as well as some more basic theoretical issues surrounding the nature of moral goodness and obligation generally. Currently, there is a large body of literature in the field of reproductive ethics on questions of what considerations and practices ought to guide reproductive decision-making. The appropriate use of testing technologies to inform such decision-making, for instance, has been widely debated. Much smaller and less visible is the debate surrounding the prior question of whether reproduction itself is morally appropriate or desirable. I am particularly interested in how consequentialist strategies for including considerations of beneficence in reproductive decision-making have shaped moral approaches to reproduction. The principle of procreative beneficence (PPB), which mandates potential reproducers to select the best possible child, highlights the problematic nature of these strategies. The limited conceptual resources and problematic normative foundations of such strategies have stymied the development of a robust discussion on the ethics of reproduction itself. Other types of ethical approaches, loosely defined as deontological, offer superior accounts of what is at issue in reproduction, but also draw on some flawed background assumptions regarding, for instance, the nature of the moral agent and the scope of the moral sphere. The question of the morality of reproduction itself thus leads to an examination of far more basic issues in ethical theory: namely, the significance of meta-ethical commitments, and the desirability of a normative framework that offers a rich and agent-focused account of moral goodness and badness. I therefore argue that a virtue-centred ethics, grounded in neo-Aristotelian naturalism,
accomplishes just that. And it is well-equipped to provide a meaningful and helpful analysis of the morality of reproduction, both holistically, in terms of the potential virtuousness of reproduction generally, and in terms of how the virtues of courage and benevolence may be expressed in reproduction. I conclude that a virtue-centred assessment of reproduction offers a sound and practical form of evaluation and that a virtuous character may indeed be expressed through reproduction.
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Statement of Originality

I hereby certify that all of the work described within this thesis is the original work of the author. Any published (or unpublished) ideas and/or techniques from the work of others are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices.

(Katherine Alexis Wayne)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Introduction: On the very idea of morally assessing reproduction

The body of literature in the broad field referred to as reproductive ethics\(^1\) has grown exponentially in the past three decades, and now boasts a vast collection of studies, polemics, and critiques offered by a diversity of scholars and health care practitioners. Arguably the most common topics within the field are abortion and new reproductive technologies (NRTs), particularly genetic testing. The ethics of reproduction itself has maintained a conspicuously low profile in the literature; even (the many) commentators who have argued some position on the morality of introducing future people into existence through reproduction do so almost uniquely with the assumption that what could prohibit reproduction would be a contingent feature of the anticipated future child. More specifically, these authors and their interlocutors debate the issue of whether potential reproducers must have the best possible child, all things being equal. My decision to focus on the ethics of reproduction itself reflects dissatisfaction with the stream of debate around the moral obligations of potential reproducers to create a particular kind of child. As I will explain below, my worries about the debate culminated

\(^1\) I will be using the terms “ethics” and “morality” interchangeably, although I realize this may be regarded as contentious, particularly given my commitments to a neo-Aristotelian approach in the later sections of this work. Ethics is sometimes distinguished from morality in the sense of involving questions about the good life rather than questions about what is right or wrong and what we are obliged to do. I tentatively accept the soundness of this distinction, but do not think that it will bear on my project’s concerns. For we can talk about some act or attitude being ethical or moral, and we can also define the moral in terms of ethics—that is, we can define rightness and wrongness in terms of how something contributes to or hinders the good life.
in the view that arguments supporting an obligation to have the best possible child do not capture what is morally at stake in reproduction. In turn, dissatisfaction with those approaches to childbearing led me to think more deeply about the basis and significance of morality, an examination that led, in turn, to consideration of what sorts of grounds for morality may and should be postulated. Thus I became concerned with four distinct yet related problems with this particular debate in reproductive ethics: its practical implications, its conceptual resources, the normative theories it invokes, and the meta-ethical position on which it rests.

Aims and structure

I intend this project to contribute to the field of applied ethics in two broad ways: by expanding the discussion of the morality of reproduction itself and by outlining and defending the value of a moral framework, virtue ethics, to form the foundation of the discussion. To pursue these goals I shall first provide a critical overview of the arguments about the principle of procreative beneficence (PPB), and argue that recent critiques of this principle have failed. Despite the inadequacy of these critiques, the principle as it stands is deeply flawed. I will argue that the central problem currently stagnating debate about the PPB and the morality of childbearing generally concerns a misguided theoretical approach to beneficence and moral obligation, which is the result of a problematic meta-ethical as well as normative position.

The central problem can therefore, I will show, only be addressed and resolved through examination of some underlying theoretical issues in ethics—otherwise there is little hope for significant progress in developing an account of the morality of
childbearing. I contend that a contemporary naturalist virtue-centered ethics avoids those theoretical issues that have hindered successful rejection of the PPB in its current state and provides a more plausible and desirable account of the morality of childbearing and the norms that ought to guide potential reproducers. I now turn to a more detailed breakdown of the project’s tasks.

Chapter 2

Julian Savulescu’s recent introduction and defense of the PPB (2001, 2007) have sparked ongoing and intense debate in the field of reproductive ethics. The PPB requires that all potential reproducers act beneficently toward their potential offspring by only bearing the child who will have the most well-being of the possible children they could have. Arguing that potential reproducers have a moral obligation to select the best child they could possibly have, Savulescu’s writings—and those of his interlocutors—and showcase the academy’s range of reactions to and hopes for a rapidly developing medical technology. While some scholars have been keen to defend some binding notion of procreative beneficence (e.g., Elster 2011), many others have applied forceful critiques to the principle (e.g., De Melo Martin 2004, Parker 2007), often by demonstrating what they view as its problematic implications for the way we value persons with disabilities, as well as our most basic ideas of the good life. The central worry motivating many of these critiques is the PPB proponent’s assumption that there exists a high and growing number of detectable traits, such as the chromosomal aberrations causing Down Syndrome, cystic

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2 According to Savulescu, the preferred method of achieving this goal is through the use of IVF followed by pre-implantation genetic diagnosis and selective implantation—though his argument may also mandate prenatal testing followed by selective abortion of the less than best fetus.
fibrosis, asthma, etc., whose presence we can reasonably conclude will result in a life with significantly diminished well-being.

While the debate remains active, little progress has been made in establishing a mutually intelligible conversation among the opposing camps. I will thus begin this project with a critical overview of the debate surrounding the PPB in order to clarify what the debate so far has accomplished and to help illuminate a path forward. Despite the regularly launched critiques of the PPB since its introduction just over a decade ago, the principle maintains strongholds of acceptance within the academic community.\(^3\) Moreover, motivating the principle is a more general acceptance of responsibility for procreative optimization borne by potential reproducers, which has been empirically demonstrated among both health care practitioners and the public (e.g., Lawson 2003). And yet the PPB is deeply problematic, both as a theoretical principle in ethics and as a guide to practice and policy.

**Chapter 3**

My third chapter focuses on uprooting and critiquing the PPB’s grounding assumptions; doing so will involve examination of a more basic debate in ethics, which concerns what Parfit has dubbed the Non-Identity Problem (NIP). The NIP emerges in the context of considering the morality of actions that influence how many and what kind of future lives will exist. This problem is relevant to the morality of reproduction. If harm matters just when some *particular* individual is being harmed, then only in cases where

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\(^3\) I say this because not only has Savulescu remained committed to the principle; he has gained defenders of the principle or a comparable version of it, such as Guy Kahane (with Savulescu, 2009) and Jakob Elster (2011).
existence *itself* counts as harmful for a particular individual (meaning that the individual’s life is not worth living) can we say that harm has been done when the individual is brought into existence. If her life is worth living, she could not have avoided harm by not coming into existence. The NIP thus comes about because if future people are harmed only when they have lives that are worse than non-existence, reproductive actions that result in lives that are worse than other lives that *might have* come into existence are not properly considered harmful.

Consideration of NIP resolution strategies is important because these responses have created the path on which most debates concerning future people have developed. The PPB emerges from Parfit’s NIP resolution strategy, which is to postulate a notion of impersonal harm\(^4\) that allows condemnation of actions that create less good lives that are still worth living. It thus operates from a utilitarian moral framework. PPB defenders, again, argue that potential reproducers have a strong moral reason to have the best possible child. I will show how some of these basic assumptions necessary to defend the PPB’s tenability rely on a misguided pronatalist\(^5\) perspective; if these are removed, the PPB collapses into an antinatalist position similar to the kind offered by David Benatar (2006).

What was unforeseen in the initial stages of the procreative beneficence debate was that having the best possible child—the child with the most well-being—could mean

\(^4\) Impersonal harm is harm that can be ascribed to states of affairs rather than persons. So if some state of affairs is worse than another one (e.g., a population of somewhat grumpy people rather than a population of consistently ecstatic people), we can say it contains impersonal harm.

\(^5\) The term describing the attitude that having children is a good thing that people ought to do. Various scholars have pointed out that our culture is deeply pronatalist, and considered how this affects reproductive decision-making, particularly in regard to women (e.g., Cassidy 2006, 40-42).
having no child at all. According to antinatalists such as Benatar, an obligation to refrain from reproducing derives from the general obligation to refrain from causing avoidable harm. I argue that the PPB requires potential reproducers to refrain from reproducing in order to avoid causing harm. While this entailment does not exactly render the PPB self-defeating, it certainly ought to be of concern to the principle’s proponents. The moral requirement to refrain from causing harm is assumed to be stronger than the moral requirement to cause benefit—so that if one may do harm by bringing a child into existence, the benefits that one may bestow upon the child, no matter how significant, will be insufficient to justify—much less laud—that act of procreation. Such an entailment threatens the principle with absurdity, given that it would seem very strange indeed to attribute beneficent action to, for instance, the potential mother who aborts a fetus with Down Syndrome.6

Because it seems prima facie desirable to reject the antinatalist position as untenable (assuming that we wish to avoid condemning all acts of childbearing as morally wrong), it should come as a relief that the reason for this potential collapse concerns a problematic moral framework and approach to the concept of beneficence—specifically, one that defines and interprets the concept as mere benefit-b bestowal. In this vein, I argue that the procreative beneficence debate so far is limited by its failure to interpret beneficence within a broad scheme of moral demands and to define its relationship to the will. With this project I will outline and defend an alternative account of doing good for others, which will not be vulnerable to the charges directed at it in the

6 This action seems better categorized as “non-maleficent,” given that beneficent action seems to require an actual beneficiary whereas the principle of avoiding harm may apply to non-existents.
PPB debate. Ultimately, I will suggest that beneficence is rightly replaced by benevolence.

In sum, my position is that the PPB fails largely because of deeper difficulties with the ethical framework from which it has emerged and within which it is interpreted and applied. In particular, there are serious problems with this approach’s notion of moral obligation, which are most clearly manifest in the claim that one “ought to have the best possible child” if and when one chooses to attempt to reproduce. While previous critiques of the PPB have challenged its assumptions about the “best possible child,” my main worry centers on what sense we can make of the imperative to have any kind of child.

Chapter 4

Previous critiques of commonly accepted notions of moral obligation, such as that of G.E.M. Anscombe in her influential article “Modern moral philosophy” (1952), as well as Bernard Williams’s critique of utilitarianism (1973) and Michael Slote’s critique of contemporary moral theory (1992), inspire my identification and analysis of the problems with recent interpretations of the moral realm. I argue that defending an alternative account of the morality of reproduction, while preserving a robust role for beneficence in childbearing and rejecting the antinatalist position, is facilitated through commitment to a neo-Aristotelian framework of the kind advanced by Philippa Foot (2001). Foot critiques contemporary interpretations of the foundation and nature of moral obligation, and advances a naturalistic ethics that interprets morality as rational response to human needs.
As a meta-ethical position, naturalism is most broadly concerned with establishing that the grounds of morality are found in natural facts, explicating morality as an extension of the natural world. It postulates moral judgments as both objective and motivating, and can therefore be contrasted with positions such as emotivism, which understands moral judgments as expressions of feelings or attitudes, and rationalism, which understands moral judgments as emerging from independent grounds that are external to the human mind. Hume’s and Kant’s theories provide a paradigmatic example of this latter distinction. According to Foot, it has been frequently assumed that moral theories must follow either Hume or Kant in the sense of postulating moral judgments as necessarily motivating but not objective, or vice versa. She and other naturalists such as Peter Geach (1967) reject the presumed disjunctive relationship between objectivism and motivatingness. She believes that these characteristics may be mutually satisfied, and argues for their compatibility by introducing a revised notion of practical rationality that includes moral reasons as rational reasons. Moral reasons are rational (are truly *reasons*) because they are based in non-negotiable and universal human needs—for cooperation and security, for instance. According to Foot, all humans will be motivated to recognize and respond to moral reasons; in failing to do so a human is defective in just the same way that an owl without night vision is defective. Morality is not subjective because it is grounded in the objective natural fact of human needs; to make a moral judgment is not, as Hume argued, equivalent to affective (i.e., emotion-based) endorsement or condemnation of some action or thing. Rather, it is based in the universally observable fact of human vulnerability and corresponding need.
Chapter 5

Contemporary virtue-based ethical theories are not uniform. But the primary goal of this chapter is to focus on what unites scholars who subscribe to a virtue-based ethics and on how this loosely defined framework may be distinguished from the utilitarian and Kantian normative moral theories.

Some advocates of a virtue-centered ethics, such as Iris Murdoch (1997) emphasize the importance of attentiveness in one’s attitude and conduct. Others, such as Michael Slote (1992) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), critique the vocabulary and concepts of contemporary morality as unjustifiably narrow, formal, and rigid, and advocate a move to the more malleable and applicable language of virtue. What these perspectives share is an approach to the notion of moral obligation that is both theoretically plausible and practically desirable. I begin the chapter with an overview of two central features of a virtue-centred ethics: The primacy of character as a locus of moral goodness and badness, and a distinct role for practical reason in morality. I will appeal to an analysis of how virtue is learned and expressed in order to explain the nature of virtuousness and the virtues. Foot’s notion of moral goodness as a particular response to need that is available to humans given our particular form of life informs the account of virtuousness I endorse. The virtuous character responds to need in a rational and appropriately affectively engaged way. My general aim in this chapter is to show how contemporary virtue ethics more accurately captures what is important about and in morality, what guides action generally, and what moves us closer to the larger goal of understanding the morality of childbearing.
I end this chapter with an overview of what I take to be the most challenging criticisms of those theories. Specifically, I discuss the issues of alienation and unconditional commitments, and the notions of moral development and the ideal moral agent implied by utilitarianism and Kantianism.

Chapter 6

I begin this section by identifying and responding to potential barriers to assessing the morality of reproduction. I take the justification of my project to be important; for different reasons, including both the dearth of commentary on the subject as well as its deeply controversial nature, its legitimacy as an academic line of inquiry invites defence. I therefore consider whether there might be political or ethical reasons to forego such a project, and explain why these reasons can be rejected.

Feminist scholars such as Rebecca Kukla (2005) have addressed some of the historically-rooted problems with the idea of a moral obligation to have a particular sort of child. But while I am certainly concerned about the patriarchal and androcentric ideological roots of this supposed obligation, in this work I focus on more basic issues with the peculiar notions of morality and obligation that wrongly inform the moral assessment of reproduction. Having described and defended the desirability of a naturalistic virtue ethics, I apply these theoretical conclusions to the practice of reproduction. First, I explain and justify how virtue in a holistic sense may help evaluate the decision to reproduce, and question whether and how reproduction is something the virtuous individual, or trainee in virtue, might pursue. I then apply two specific virtues of character, courage and benevolence, to reproductive decision-making. My conclusions
support the possibility of virtuous reproduction, but more importantly, are meant to
demonstrate how a virtue-centred approach to reproduction may take shape in a way that is sensitive to the human predicament’s complexity and limitations while maintaining an appropriately demanding nature of striving for moral goodness.
Chapter 2
The Principle of Procreative Beneficence

Introduction

According to the principle of procreative beneficence (hereafter the PPB), potential reproducers are morally compelled to select the child, of the possible children they could have, that is predicted to have the best life (Savulescu 2001, 2007). This selection may be accomplished at the embryonic stage, through in vitro fertilization (IVF) procedures that allow for pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) of available embryos and subsequent implantation of that embryo or those embryos that are predicted, on the basis of their identified genetic traits, to be likely to have the best possible life or lives. Selection according to the PPB may also be accomplished post-conception, if the pregnant woman pursues prenatal genetic testing (PGT) and opts to abort her fetus if the results of those tests are not representative of a child that can be predicted to have the best possible life.

Savulescu endorses the PPB not only as a sound moral principle, but as one already ingrained within so-called common sense morality. The PPB is, moreover, a rationally compelling principle according to Savulescu. Indeed, he views morality as essentially a form of practical reason, and understands “… morality to require us to do what we have most reason to do. In the absence of some other reason for action, a person who has good reason to have the best child is morally required to have the best child” (2001, 415). With this view there is always good reason to have the best child (i.e., the most genetically advantaged) in just the same way as there is always good reason to
choose, between two hidden prizes, that prize which one knows will be increased by one hundred dollars. Savulescu writes, “Choosing genes for non-disease states is like playing the wheel of fortune. You should use all available information and choose the option most likely to bring about the best outcome” (2001, 414). Given that there is always good reason to have the best child, the moral requirement to do so is thus firmly in place.

Critiques of Julian Savulescu’s arguments for the PPB and the principle itself have been launched regularly since the original article defending the PPB was published in 2001. Responses include justice-based critiques of the principle, which highlight its arguably eugenic (and ableist) motivations and implications, feminist critiques of its obfuscation of the nature of pregnancy and childbirth, critiques focused on epistemological issues that inevitably arise when using individual genetic traits to predict a life’s well-being, and critiques concerned primarily with normative theoretical issues faced by the principle. Together, these lines of critique take issue with the PPB both in terms of its theoretical tenability and in terms of its practical desirability and applicability.

The flurry of scholarly activity in reproductive ethics catalyzed by the PPB’s introduction clearly renders the debate worthwhile to consider and critique in depth. And beyond the significant impact this debate has had in academic circles, the PPB is necessarily intimately linked with controversial medical practices and health care policy, as well as being deeply political in terms of its assumptions and implications. With a decade of literature now available on the PPB, it is also timely to consider what the debate so far has accomplished. It is clear that Savulescu has altered his initial position on the nature and role of the PPB in response to the myriad critiques his original arguments
faced, and he has recently re-opened the debate with a fresh characterization of the principle. Savulescu now argues, with Guy Kahane, that potential reproducers have “significant moral reason” to have the child with the “best chance at the best possible life” (2009, 274), thereby shifting the normative language with which the PPB operates. Arguably, however, this revised formulation of the principle fails to respond adequately to critics’ concerns, and falls short of prescribing the sort of behaviours and attitudes that seemed central to Savulescu’s original principle. It may even be the case that critics of the PPB’s original formulation have already—or should have—celebrated a victory in rejecting what they viewed as an unjust and untenable principle for guiding reproductive decision-making. This reformulation’s inadequacy confirms the principle’s justified rejection. I count myself among the PPB’s critics and take my survey of this critical literature to be a necessary step in achieving greater recognition and deeper understanding of the principle’s implausibility.

At this juncture in the debate, therefore, it is crucial to take stock of what precisely has been accomplished in terms of rejecting the PPB’s original formulation, and what requires further examination and critique as the debate surrounding moral responsibilities in the procreative context progresses. With these aims in mind, I begin this project with a survey of the critical literature in order to clarify and categorize the primary objections put forth in the procreative beneficence debate.

**Background**

In Savulescu’s original article defending the PPB, he argues that “couples (or single reproducers) should select the child, of the possible children they could have, who
is expected to have the best life, or at least as good a life as the others, based on the relevant, available information” (2001, 415). There is, of course, no such thing as a single reproducer, but the message in his statement is otherwise clear: selection of particular fetuses over others is what is good, rational, and right. (Maximally) selective behaviour is contrasted with non-selective behaviour in the sense that the latter, unjustifiably, leaves “to chance” or to evolution what sorts of beings come into existence (Savulescu 2007, 285). Moreover, as noted above, this selective behaviour is intuitively morally compelling, according to PPB proponents; common-sense morality guides potential reproducers to aim to have the best possible child (Savulescu and Kahane 2009). According to Savulescu and Kahane, it is widely accepted that parents who are indifferent to the well-being of their potential children are morally defective, and it follows that it is acceptable to attribute moral defectiveness to those who fail to select the child they will bear on the basis of her genetic advantages (2009, 276). The authors assert: “Once the question of the moral permissibility and opportunity costs of certain means of selecting children is set aside, commonsense morality seems committed to favouring selection of children who are more advantaged…” (276-77). Perhaps the moral unease with which critics respond to the PPB can be explained away as rooted in concern for how this principle may be practically implemented; the principle itself contains a

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7 I take Savulescu to be referring, in his use of this problematic term, to situations wherein a single party is in charge of the reproductive decision-making (for instance, in a conception through sperm donor scenario). The term is problematic not only because it is inaccurate, but because it lends credence to the misguided notion that the moral burden of reproductive decision-making can fall onto a single party. Moreover, as Christine Overall points out, Savulescu and Kahane’s insistence on this gender-neutral language indicates a failure to recognize that it is women who bear the burden of fulfilling the PPB (e.g., 2012, 127).

8 It is not clear to me that this characterization of the principle’s criticisms as being rooted in practical concerns undermines their importance. Surely theoretical plausibility cannot be the
widely recognized plausibility that overshadows concerns surrounding its application requirements.9

Other scholars defend the idea that, as parents or potential parents, we are instinctively driven to want “the best” for our children, and that this drive is expected, condoned, and encouraged by the public (e.g., Buchanan et al. 2000, 156-159; Davis 2001, 47). This state of affairs is seldom critiqued as being merely descriptive of culturally motivated tendencies expressed by reproducers and normatively inert in the sense of lacking any moral authority. Rather, it is taken seriously as rationally compelling evidence for the moral desirability of striving for the so-called best for our progeny and expecting others to do the same. Notably, it is parents’ attitudes, character, and behaviour that typically provide the basis for judgment under this moral outlook. As the creators and caretakers of new lives, biological parents have special responsibilities to their offspring. For many parents, such responsibilities include the pursuit of genetic as well as environmental interventions aimed to avoid harm or bestow benefit (e.g., Buchanan et al. 2000, 159-160). But whatever obligations may be derived from the general requirement to pursue that which is best for one’s children, the basic operating assumption behind the PPB is that there is an obligation concerning what kind of child one bears.

9 Such concerns may be grounded in fears of, for example, the hypermedicalization of reproduction or a new eugenics project imposed by the state. They may also be grounded in recognition of the disproportionate burdens placed on women by the PPB. Feminist critics of the principle, such as Christine Overall (2012), have detailed the various ways in which adherence to the PPB imposes serious risks and harms on women in a way not experienced by men. Overall believes that these inevitable unfair burdens on women must provide strong reason for rejecting the PPB (169-176). Savulescu’s limited discussion of such concerns, combined with his consistent separation of the principle’s (currently) contentious applicability and its desirability, suggests he believes these issues to be auxiliary to whether the principle itself is plausible.
Metaphysical issues

The beneficence-derived obligatoriness of selecting one potential life over another arguably encountered its original challenge in what Derek Parfit (1984, chapter 16) identified as the Non-Identity Problem (hereafter the NIP). The problem is essentially this: unless existence itself can be characterized as harmful for a particular individual (meaning that the individual’s life is not worth living), then that individual cannot be said to have been harmed by being brought into existence. One does not avoid causing harm by refraining from bringing one potential being into existence in favour of another (say by selecting one embryo over another). Those embryos are two distinct (potential) beings; therefore the being not brought into existence is spared no harm. Furthermore, no harm is caused in cases where the selected life is much worse than some other potential life, as long as the selected life is not so bad as to be not worth living.\(^\text{10}\) This is because that selected individual could not have existed without this worse life; the worse life, as a necessary condition, enables her existence.\(^\text{11}\) The NIP reveals the impossibility of comparing different potential (worthwhile) lives in terms of harm; the life that may seem better is merely a different life. Parfit and others take this metaphysical problem to have a serious implication for the morality of childbearing and, more generally, actions affecting potential future people (e.g., Kavka 1982, Parfit 1984, Savulescu 2001, Parsons 2003).

\(^{10}\) It may be a mistake to think that it is reasonable to compare actual and potential lives. In order for potential lives to be reasonably compared to actual lives, some non-arbitrary limit needs to be placed on the set of potential lives under comparison. Otherwise, the potential lives one is comparing the actual life or lives to must be infinite in number (because there is always some other potential life that could have been actual). In the next chapter, I will point out that it is difficult to see how this non-arbitrary limit may be identified and discuss an undesirable implication of this problem.

\(^{11}\) Thus the individual, as Parfit explains, could not coherently wonder what things could have been like and whether her life would have been better had she not been born with the qualities that made her life worse. That imagined life would not have been hers; it would be that of a different individual (1984, 351).
That is, given this feature of non-identity between the actual life and the other, better, potential life, it appears as if there is no (moral) reason to try to avoid having a child with a disability or some other debilitating condition, as long as that child’s life will be worth living. That child could not have existed in any other way, and another, better-off child would be just that: a different child. So it seems as if there is, at least in terms of harm considerations, no reason to prefer that the child with less well-being not be brought into existence. Of the young girl who chooses to have a child despite the likelihood of that child having a significantly worse life than a child born later, for instance “[w]e cannot claim that this girl's decision was worse for her child” (Parfit 1984, 359).

Scholars have presented a variety of responses to the NIP and its moral implications. Parfit himself proposed that while particular individuals cannot be harmed by being brought into existence (assuming they are born into lives worth living), harm has been done in some sense when the potential individual with the worse life becomes actual; he calls this harm non-person affecting, or impersonal, harm. As stated in Chapter 1, impersonal harm is defined as harm that pertains to states of affairs rather than identifiable individuals. Accepting this notion of harm allows one to condemn some given situation wherein individuals have less well-being than other individuals might have had; no one need be worse off for a situation to contain impersonal harm. The introduction of impersonal harm is what leads Parfit to make the following moral claim: “If in either of two possible outcomes the same number of people would ever live, it will be worse if those who live are worse off, or have a lower quality of life, than those who would have lived” (1984, 369). Other scholars, however, challenge the NIP’s legitimacy, citing its detachment from the vast majority of actual reproductive decision-making and
its misguided moral conclusions (e.g., Shiffrin 1999). Some others, meanwhile, challenge the metaphysical basis of Parfit’s proposed solution. Theoretically, they take issue with the notion of non-person affecting harm (e.g., Bennett 2009). I will explore this latter point in the next chapter.

Whether or not the NIP’s claim that it is impossible to harm a particular child by bringing her into existence is correct, the implications of this view run against some deeply held intuitions regarding the clear wrongness of some actions. In the following chapter, I will provide a more detailed analysis of Parfit’s claims in order to assess the NIP’s plausibility and relevance to the broader procreative beneficence debate. It was important to introduce the NIP here in order to demonstrate the PPB’s metaphysical roots; it is only through accepting the notion of impersonal harm, as a resolution strategy for the NIP, that the PPB can gain credence.

I will now examine the contentious and widely discussed moral principle, defended most visibly and vehemently by Savulescu, that has emerged from Parfit’s proposal of the NIP and the notion of impersonal harm as antidote to the problem’s supposed moral implications.

**The proposed principle**

Whatever the NIP’s role in assessing procreative behaviour, Savulescu is clearly proposing a much stronger obligation than the kind derived from Parfit’s examples and arguments. Savulescu also advances a far broader set of considerations relevant to choosing the best possible child than may be immediately accepted under common-sense
morality.\textsuperscript{12} The child with the best life is not only the child who is healthiest, but who, more generally, has the most well-being.\textsuperscript{13} Having provided a brief overview of the nature and origination of the PPB, now I wish to turn my attention to the PPB debate and provide a detailed critical review of its surrounding literature.

**Debate Overview**

I will lay out five different strands of critique in the PPB literature. The first four strands concern implications of the principle, and the last concerns the theoretical foundations of the principle. First, I will demonstrate how arguments supporting the PPB are criticized for being grounded in an implausibly rigid public/private and legal/moral distinction. Second, I will examine a cluster of critical considerations pertaining to the

\textsuperscript{12} The term “common-sense morality” is clearly philosophically loaded. I take, and perhaps not typically, the term to represent those attitudes toward right and wrong that emerge from commonly held emotional reactions to particular categories of acts, in combination with some reasoned reflection on the source of those emotional reactions. So for instance, the reaction of disgust and indignation to an act of gratuitously inflicted suffering, combined with some understanding of the creative factors behind those emotions (such as the notion that pain is generally bad), suggests that with common-sense morality, acts of cruelty are condemned. By contrast, reactions of disgust and indignation to, for instance, homosexuality, may not be appropriate candidates for common-sense morality because even if and when widely held, there are no clear and plausible values undergirding those emotions. So it is a necessary but not sufficient condition of common-sense morality that its constituent attitudes be widely held. (Note that this does not mean that they must be widely \textit{practiced}—there is frequently a wide gap between what people believe is right and how they behave. Note also that I do not wish to defend common-sense morality as exhaustive of morality itself). My own thinking about common-sense morality is just that it may operate as a useful heuristic against which to test proposed moral principles or theories; if some proposal deeply and clearly violates common-sense morality, there is a reason to question that proposal.

\textsuperscript{13} Most recently, Savulescu defines well-being as contextually determined, so that particular traits will be viewed as desirable in their character as increasing well-being in the given set of circumstance (with Kahane, 2009). Generally, however, he has shied away from providing any robust characterization of the term, clearly wishing to convince readers of the principle’s flexibility in terms of accommodating a range of value theories with different notions of well-being. In his original article (2001, 419-420), Savulescu claims that value theories as diverse as hedonism, objective list, and preference approaches can all be inserted into the PPB in order to define the well-being for which reproducers strive.
PPB’s practical implementation. Third, it has been argued that the PPB is harmful to
women. Fourth, PPB defenders may have underestimated the principle’s scope. Finally, the PPB is charged with being grounded in an untenable notion of harm and having its
appeal rely on moral theoretical resources that are in tension with the principle itself.

**Objection 1: Overestimation of the public/private and legal/moral distinction**

Some argue that support for the PPB depends on an implausible public/private
and legal/moral distinction in order to avoid potentially devastating charges of
perpetuating oppression, homogenizing the population, and encouraging eugenic policies
(e.g., Sparrow 2007, 2011; Bennett 2009). The distinction’s legitimacy and strength are
relied upon in arguments for the PPB because otherwise, acceptance of the principle
would entail public participation in couples’ reproductive decision-making as well as
legal repercussions for failing to fulfill the principle’s demands. Adamant that individuals
must be and are free to reject their conclusions (Sparrow 2011, 36), PPB proponents
defend the principle against charges that it unjustifiably interferes with and limits
procreative freedom. They argue that the principle essentially concerns individual
decision-making and morally guides (rather than legally sanctions) reproducers to make
particular choices. Reproducers may be subject to moral reprimand for failing to adhere
to the PPB, but conforming to the PPB cannot and never will be legally enforced, nor will
reproduction come to be systematically exposed to public inquiry and criticism, because
the principle recognizes reproduction as an essentially private enterprise (Savulescu
2001, 424). The public/private distinction implies that, despite what critics suggest, no
state meddling in couples’ reproductive affairs is mandated or permitted.
Nevertheless, for some critics such as Rebecca Bennett, “the PPB necessarily commits us to infringing Reproductive Autonomy” (2009, 271). Building from her critique of the PPB’s basic premise, the plausibility of impersonal harm, Bennett argues that commitment to avoiding impersonal harm must include a concern for the public’s welfare that cannot be justifiably overridden by concerns borne out of respect for individual freedom. If there is a moral obligation to avoid causing impersonal harm, prohibition of state interference in reproduction will be more difficult to justify. While it is compatible with the PPB that state interference may be justifiably limited in some ways out of respect for procreative autonomy, blanket prohibition would seem to render the PPB’s application incoherent. It is dubious that a moral obligation carried by such a vast population as potential reproducers could plausibly be detached from any legal implications, particularly given PPB proponents’ insistence on the morally equivalent nature of harm caused to currently existing and to future individuals.

PPB proponents do little to resolve this issue by claiming a moral equivalence for committing harm and failing to avoid harm. For instance, Savulescu claims that “A parent who intentionally inflicted deafness on his or her child, or failed to treat it, would be abusing the child” (2007, 286). Bennett points out that if the state is obliged to intervene in a situation where parents intentionally deafen their existing child, then given the moral symmetry of committing and failing to avoid causing harm assumed by PPB proponents, the state must also be obligated to intervene in cases of so-called procreative
abuse where a deaf child is selected (271, 2009). And perhaps more worryingly, this state obligation would apply in cases of much milder ailments as well.

Moreover, public policing of reproductive decision-making, no matter what the acknowledged role of the state in such matters, is an inevitable result of testing technology’s availability. PPB adherence is necessarily encouraged in a context that has medical practitioners endorsing actions that systematically entail selective abortion. Robert Sparrow argues for the impossibility of maintaining reproductive freedom in the face of opportunities for genetic manipulation: “Once enhancement becomes possible, refusal to adopt it will become unreasonable; because the welfare of the children is at stake, parents’ failure to ‘do the right thing’ will appear especially egregious” (2011, 40). Prenatal genetic tests cannot be neutral because their being offered to patients by medical practitioners—experts in a position with greater knowledge and power—clearly suggests to the patients that it is not only reasonable but desirable to take such tests.

To this claim, one may reasonably object that it is surely not obvious that just because such tests are offered by socially authoritative individuals, reproducers will feel pressure to conform their reproductive decision-making on PGT to the PPB. But this objection fails to take into account existing social conditions. As Abby Lippman suggests, it is a mistake to ignore the influence of social context on individual decision-making and public attitudes: “Prenatal testing has a valence that varies with time and

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14 The suggestion that this distasteful implication could be avoided given the distinct and more powerful counter-consideration of procreative autonomy compared to parental autonomy, for instance, seems to me unhelpful for PPB proponents. If bringing a deaf child into existence is truly a form of abuse just like inflicting deafness on an existing child, state intervention in such cases must be justified. If the act of bringing a particular being into existence is truly abusive, and therefore morally condemnable, what grounds could we possibly maintain for prohibiting or even discouraging state interference in that abuse?
place. It is developed and applied with inherent expectations of how, when and why it will be used that are tied to attitudes about women and disability…. Use and misuse are not separable” (Lippman 1993, 61-2). If test results indicating the presence of some genetic abnormality were typically followed by, say, a diverse set of behaviours including acceptance or even celebration of the future child, the PPB’s socially coercive nature would remain contentious and Lippman’s claim would be unjustified. Currently, however, when test results indicate the presence of some supposedly undesirable genetic trait, the vast majority of potential parents choose selective implantation (of embryos without the undesired trait), or abortion. Given the persisting climate of stigmatization surrounding disabilities, the offering of such tests is essentially normative. Thus as Dena Davis explains, “for the woman who would not contemplate abortion, or for whom Down syndrome is one acceptable (if not desirable) outcome of pregnancy, the existence of this [testing] technology can be oppressive” (2001, 17). And for those women who have no settled views on abortion or raising a child with a disability, health care practitioners’ recommendations for testing will inevitably take the form of pressure tactics. I take this preceding discussion to show that the PPB cannot be forcefully defended through the public/private distinction.

However, it is possible that this worry regarding the PPB’s potentially coercive nature in the current social and political context is concerned with the tacit pressure on reproductive decision-making and behaviour that will unavoidably result from the very possibility of genetic manipulation, as opposed to a (far more troubling) publicly

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15 For instance, a recent meta-analysis of studies on post-genetic testing decision-making in pregnant women indicated that of the women who received a positive diagnosis of Down Syndrome, 89-97% opted for abortion (Choi, Riper, and Thoyre 2012, 156).
acknowledged state role in regulating reproduction. But clearly, an obligation to have the best child can only be derived from a context in which one’s reproductive activities are legitimately public matters. Moreover, the proposal of a moral obligation to monitor one’s reproductive activities—particularly in regards to choosing when to conceive, whether to continue a pregnancy, and to which tests one will subject the fetus or embryo—assigns a great deal of responsibility to the prospectively pregnant woman and poses a threat to her bodily autonomy.

Moreover, even if state interference in procreative activities is not entailed by acceptance of the PPB, informal social pressure tactics would seem to be. Sparrow argues that, for instance, PPB proponents are at least committed to approval of old eugenics tactics, such as distributing educational materials on the benefits of creating better people: “Presuming that social campaigns conducted by private citizens have some capacity to influence behaviour, then we have an obligation to initiate, fund, and take part in them” (2011, 37). Sparrow grounds his criticism in what he views as the essentially consequentialist nature of the PPB. The implications of the PPB’s essentially consequentialist approach run deep according to Sparrow. He claims that there is an inherent tension between consequentialism’s roots in a strongly reformist ideology of harm reduction through wealth redistribution, and the individualism with which proponents of genetic manipulation attempt to sell their argument. For instance, Sparrow accuses genetic enhancement proponents Harris and Savulescu of failing to recognize the incompatibility of the consequentialist grounds from which their argument gains coherence and their libertarian political stance from which their argument gains palatability (2011, 33).
Regardless of whether there is some internal tension in the PPB proponents’ position, it seems clear that some practical implications of any social pressure to have the best child possible will be damaging to a variety of populations. Various critics (e.g. Bennett 2009; Sparrow 2007), perhaps most visibly disability theorists and rights activists, have condemned the PPB as fostering discriminatory attitudes towards disabled persons and reducing disabled persons’ opportunities for participation and assistance. For instance, in one of their articles on the disability rights critique of PGT, Adrienne Asch and Erik Parens explain that selecting against fetuses with disabilities sends a message to existing persons with disabilities: that their lives are worth less than nondisabled lives (1999, s2). Termed by these critics and widely cited by other scholars as the expressivist objection to prenatal testing, the objection suggests that it is deeply discriminatory to disabled persons to condone or encourage the practice of selective implantation and abortion. As Asch and Parens also point out, some critics worry that beyond enduring subjection to these discriminatory messages, disabled persons will also suffer from diminished social and economic support as a result of increased testing.\(^{16}\)

In a similar vein, Bennett argues that the PPB itself is premised on the comparatively low value of disabled lives to nondisabled lives. The reason is that disabled lives must literally count for less in the calculation of impersonal harm that is

\(^{16}\) Both of these claims have been challenged. In response to the expressivist objection, for instance, James Nelson (2000) argues that it is misleading to suggest that the selective acts of particular reproducers send meaningful and discriminatory messages to disabled persons. Individual acts usually cannot and do not send clear, definable messages to populations. Even if they did and could, however, selective acts by particular reproducers would not represent a class of viable candidates for such message-sending, because such so-called messages would be essentially non-intentionally sent, as well as essentially unclear in meaning. With regards to the second concern, Christine Overall (2012, chapter 8) suggests that the significantly improved situation of disabled persons that has been realized over the past several decades undermines claims regarding the likely diminishment of resources devoted to and, in turn, quality of life for disabled persons as a result of testing availability.
intended to show how and why it is better to bring nondisabled lives into existence. The existence of moral reasons to choose one state of affairs over the other is based on the impersonal harm score, which is lowered with the introduction of disabled lives.

Therefore, Bennett claims, “… the impaired count for less and, if this calculation denotes something that should guide our moral judgments, then they must count for less morally speaking” (2009, 270).

Other populations may be harmed by the PPB’s implementation as well. If it is true that potential reproducers have a moral obligation to refrain from bringing any child into existence that will not be the most advantaged and have the best possible life, then members of any marginalized group will, at least in certain cases, be morally prohibited from reproducing. It is far from clear, for instance, how members of stigmatized racial groups could avoid being viewed as legitimately subject to moral condemnation for reproducing, given that their children will carry genetic traits that put them at a disadvantage. Indeed, Savulescu and Kahane explicitly admit that critics may complain that the principle suggests that “… mixed race couples have a reason to have children with lighter skin because having darker skin is socially disadvantageous” (2009, 290 fn. 60). Their response is that while there may be such a moral reason, it may be outweighed by competing considerations such as the desirability of “changing pernicious attitudes” (ibid). Clearly, however, given the maximizing nature of the principle and Savulescu’s claims regarding the relative unimportance of avoiding the exacerbation of existing social disadvantage.

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17 Dena Davis attempts to resolve this issue through her introduction of a “voluntariness” criterion, in order to distinguish between reproducers who could not have avoided having disadvantaged offspring and those who could have (2001, 66). Such a criterion is clearly problematic given, for one, the wide interpretive possibilities of having “no choice” but to bear a less than optimal child.
inequity to increasing individual well-being, such competing considerations would (or ought to) be swiftly dismissed.

Savulescu has responded to some of these worries, claiming that the availability of genetic manipulation technologies for reproducers will not necessarily contribute to the population’s homogenization or perpetuate oppression.\(^{18}\) First, he argues that different potential reproducers will have different ideas of what it would mean to have the best possible life. With Kahane he claims that “… aiming at the best is compatible with thinking that the concept of the most advantaged life is plural and open-ended. If different forms of life are equally good, or if the amount of well-being realized in each is incomparable, then parents can reasonably choose either option” (2009, 279). Appealing once again to what he understands as an important distinction between the private and public spheres, Savulescu claims the PPB allows for plenty of individual preference expression. For instance, some aspiring parents will select for musicality rather than extraversion or math aptitude rather than running stamina. All of these traits could be viewed, according to Savulescu, as conducive to a high level of well-being.\(^{19}\) If potential reproducers use PGD for selection purposes, adherence to the PPB will frequently leave open the possibility of morally equivalent choices between embryos so that a diversity of individuals will be selected for existence.

\(^{18}\) It is notable, however, that Savulescu has also defended the legitimacy of the PPB despite its potential to exacerbate existing inequity, claiming that the moral obligation to have the best possible child will stand in the face of worsened oppression for already marginalized populations (2001, 424).

\(^{19}\) Given the PPB’s maximizing requirement, however, parents selecting for some well-being producing traits rather than others are engaging in morally dubious behaviour; they should in fact select for all beneficial traits.
Sparrow, however, rejects this supposed virtue of the PPB claiming that its wide acceptance will, unavoidably, practically entail a significant reduction in diversity. “Even though there will often be reasonable disagreement about which is the best embryo to implant after PGD, there will almost always be a right answer to this question” (2011, 36, emphasis added). In any given environment, one particular gene type is likely to be the most beneficial. It is therefore disingenuous to claim that adherence to the PPB is compatible with the selection of a rich diversity of individuals for existence within the same social, economic, and political context. Rather, potential reproducers will in all likelihood have their hands tied when selecting for a particular life and be forced to choose that set of genes that will be the most advantageous within their particular context. It seems regrettable that genetic roguism, which I define as the practice of attempting (intentionally or not) to encourage genetic non-conformity of one’s offspring (e.g., by seeking out a mate with atypical eye colour, aptitude, or personality traits) as an essential sustaining force behind evolution, seems incompatible with PPB adherence. Indeed, enacting any rebellious (and even, not entirely conforming) preferences through one’s procreative behaviour would almost always be condemnable to some degree, and often completely unjustifiable.

It is precisely this problem of precluding the development of a diverse population through the incorporation of reproducers’ preferences as morally considerable that helps motivate charges against the PPB that it perpetuates oppression. Rebellious preferences matter morally because they may lead to the creation of a being that is less than maximally advantaged. Consider the following example: I, an urban Canadian, may prefer that my child possess great mathematical prowess, but choosing the child with
such talent may not ensure that she is advantaged. If I also want to have a female child, for instance, it is quite possible that bestowing a strong aptitude for math may make her life more difficult. Some may disagree with this assessment regarding the disadvantageousness of mathematical prowess, of course—but we can easily imagine a multitude of scenarios where acting on my personal preferences for a future child is at odds with that child’s likely future well-being, and therefore in violation of the PPB. It is important to notice that a great variety of rebellious preferences—characterized here as those whose enactment will result in a being who is less than maximally advantaged in the particular environment in which she is brought into existence—will run contrary to the PPB. Violation of the PPB is inevitable when the rebelliousness of the preference is defined by its conflict with maximized advantage within a particular environment. The implication is that preference for, for instance, a female child or a non-light-skinned child, will be barred from realization. Moreover, a failure to enact non-rebellious preferences that support the status quo will also be condemnable. Thus, a failure to recognize that putatively detached private decisions by individual reproducers in fact have public consequences prevents PPB defenders from recognizing that implementation of the principle will inevitably reinforce oppressive structures.

**Objection 2: practical implications**

There is another side to the issue of the PPB’s condoned discrimination against members of oppressed groups. Given that there will almost always be a right answer to what sort of child one ought to bear, widespread adherence to the PPB will, as we saw earlier, create a less diverse population. And whether or not this reduction in human
diversity is an undesirable result in itself, it may expose the principle as practically self-defeating. Immaculada De Melo Martin (2004), for instance, charges PPB proponents with neglecting the problem of aggregate effects. One reason the PPB fails, De Melo Martin argues, is that Savulescu fails to acknowledge the significance of the positional nature of many goods (2004, 78-80). The reason that many traits are advantageous to individuals exhibiting them is precisely that those traits are uncommon. Tallness, for instance, is advantageous in many urban industrialized environments, but would lose this advantageousness if the majority of the population were to become tall. So in some sense the PPB’s success in achieving its goal depends on its (mitigated) failure to encourage the creation of beings with so-called advantageous traits.

Savulescu might respond to this concern by emphasizing the point that traits are always chosen to promote well-being, *other things being equal.* While it is almost always the case that one cannot know with *certainty* which traits will actually make lives go better, it is not a retrospective evaluation of lives that should guide procreative decision-making; rather, it is a forward-looking evaluation of which traits tend to be conducive to more well-being (Savulescu 2007, 284). Savulescu could, in other words, claim that some traits, such as intelligence or good eyesight, are of the sorts that are reliably conducive to well-being, and that it is these traits with reasonably predictable influences for which reproducers ought to select. So the worry that selection of traits is desirable only by virtue of their uncommon nature is resolved with the simple fact that couples will cease selecting such traits once they cease being advantageous. The population, and potential reproducers’ decisions, will be self-correcting. For instance, according to Savulescu, though it may be the case that in some environments male fetuses will be consistently
selected over female fetuses, thus creating a severely imbalanced sex ratio in the population, we need not worry about this result because life would become “intolerable” with so few women around, and reproducers will eventually start making different decisions in order to alleviate the imbalance (2001, 423-424).

However, this sort of response, whether effective or not, seems to conflict with the PPB’s most recent formulation, which more strongly emphasizes the importance of the particular context into which the child is born. In this formulation, the principle regards disability as a “species of instrumental badness”—and therefore as a condition that is undesirable because it reduces the affected individual’s chances for the greatest possible well-being within a particular environment (2009, 286). The “other things being equal” clause noted above is effectively meaningless if the PPB is meant to be applied with such focused attention to the particular surroundings of the potential reproducers. 20

It will, at the very least, radically restrict the set of traits within which potential reproducers will be morally obligated to select across environments. There is, then, an essential tension between two versions of the PPB that concerns the nature and degree of the principle’s context-sensitivity.

In a related line of critique concerning the principle’s impracticality, Michael Parker claims that the best life cannot be one that contains maximized well-being, because “both strengths and weaknesses of character, and of our lives more broadly, are essential and interdependent elements of the good life” (2007, 281). His worry is that,

20 Clearly, it is both possible and desirable that any decision-making procedure regarding reproduction will be attentive to context. And for the PPB to go through, it must operate under consideration of the material context in which, for instance, tallness, intelligence, maleness, etc., are socially constituted as advantages. But the PPB’s recent formulation goes further than this, I am arguing, to reduce the desirability of a trait to its social currency.
given the essentially paradoxical nature of the good life and human flourishing, aiming to create the best possible lives defined by the greatest well-being is misguided and motivated by a basic misunderstanding of reproducers’ roles in achieving the creation of good lives. According to Parker, “while it may be possible to delineate some conditions conducive to good lives, it is not going to be possible to relate the testable features of embryos in any useful or determinative sense to concepts as rich and complex as that of the ‘good life’” (ibid). According to this objection, the operative concept in Savulescu’s argument is underdetermining.

Similarly, a variety of disability scholars have rejected the notion that a particular trait or set of traits reliably provides legitimate evidence for the kind and quality of life a given individual will have (e.g., Asch and Parens 2000, 20-22). The kind of knowledge available to potential reproducers (i.e., regarding a widening but still very limited range of traits) is not, according to some, really of the kind helpful in predicting the well-being of a potential child. It is not clear that, for instance, discovery of a potential child’s predisposition to mild depression provides meaningful information on the basis of which to predict that child’s well-being (even taking into account the particular context into which that child will be born), and in turn on which to base reproductive decisions. Savulescu takes for granted that every piece of genetic information available to potential reproducers must be relevant to their procreative decision-making process; to believe otherwise would be irrational. This assumption is well illustrated in Savulescu’s analogy, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, which purportedly demonstrates the irrationality of failing to select foetuses using all available genetic information. To show that choosing a child with a known undesirable trait is irrational, Savulescu uses a wheel
of fortune analogy. The decision, he says, would be equivalent, in a game of wheel of fortune, to choosing the prize box that, of two unknown amounts, will not have 100 dollars added to it. In sum, Savulescu’s argument is that presumed genetic advantage is desirable in just the same way as increased monetary value, and more genetic information is always desirable, as it reliably contributes to greater genetic advantage and greater well-being.

For some critics, this approach is deeply misguided. Of the supposedly uncontroversial and direct contribution of every fact about the potential individual’s genetic traits to sound reproductive decision-making, Abby Lippman poses the question, “…gene maps will give us information about ourselves, but is it really very interesting information or more precisely, to whom will it be interesting?” (1993, 63). The concern grows clearer with a new analogy: imagine you have to choose between two hidden prizes. They are both cars, and the only thing you know about them is that car A does not have automatic transmission. So you do know something extra about car A, but is this necessarily going to be a relevant piece of information in your decision? In other words, does the fact that car A is deficient in the trait of “automatic-ness” make it an unreasonable decision to choose car A, in the same way as it would be unreasonable to reject an extra hundred dollars, all other things being equal?  

It does not, and this point matters for Savulescu’s argument because while some pieces of information can count as objective indicators of levels of well-being, many others cannot (for reasons previously

\[\text{\textsuperscript{21}}\text{If it is true that what are prima facie desirable traits, such as mathematical prowess, are disadvantageous in certain environments, or that neutral traits, such as skin colour, are disadvantageous in certain environments, Savulescu cannot defend himself by replying that the lack of automatic transmission is disanalogous to the traits for which he claims potential reproducers ought to select.}\]
noted), and therefore the wheel of fortune situation is not truly analogous to the situation of potential reproducers in general.

A final practical problem with the PPB is that its implementation would mandate a massive shift and expansion in health care spending. As Overall argues, “implementing PB [Procreative Beneficence] on a wide scale would—despite Savulescu’s disclaimer—affect public policy, for it would require a massive redeployment of medical resources and health care personnel” (2012, 176). It would require such redirection in part because of IVF’s enormous expense and low success rates. In 2004, De Melo Martin pointed out that “the use of IVF to treat infertility has become a $2 billion-a-year industry [in the U.S.]. We can only imagine the costs of using this technology if everyone wishing to have children were using it” (74). Not only would health care spending have to radically increase or be radically redirected, but implementing the PPB would also directly entail a greater commitment in medicine to research and development in genetics. Given that acting on the PPB mandate requires the use of information available only (and only to a very limited extent, for now) through consultation with highly trained experts and the use of technologically advanced equipment, there must follow an obligation to vigorously train geneticists and prioritize research projects aimed at expanding the pool of identifiable genetic traits.

**Objection 3: PPB as harmful to women**

Overall points out that since the PPB is meant to constrain *all* potential reproducers (albeit in a prima facie sense), any decision to procreate but not to select the individual who is likely to have the best life must consist in some moral failure: “Hence,
we could interpret the inability or unwillingness to abide by PB as providing the basis for an obligation not to procreate. If achieving PB is a necessary condition for justifying procreation, then if you cannot or will not adhere to it, you ought not to procreate” (2012, 169). Because the PPB is a maximizing principle of selection, moreover, it is, according to Overall, “primarily an expression of utilitarianism,” despite PPB proponents’ claims to the contrary. It is the principle’s maximizing feature that is at the root of its practical implausibility and undesirability. As Overall claims, “In the particular case of PB, it is simply unreasonable to expect that all women, or even most women, who want to have a child should use in vitro fertilization to (supposedly) maximize the wellbeing of their future offspring” (2012, 171). IVF procedures, required in order to effectively adhere to the PPB22 without undergoing a potentially vast number of abortions, are extremely risky, arduous, expensive, and yield low success rates (171-172). Moreover, under the PPB, women’s responsibilities would certainly not stop at the use of IVF and PGD (though this alone would seem to provide clear reason for rejecting the principle as both practically unfeasible and unjust); women would be required to exert vigilance in all activities that could affect the potential child, which in some cases would require radically altering their lives and priorities.

22 As previously noted, Savulescu has argued (2001) that selective abortion is also a method of PPB adherence. But it now seems clear that this is a contentious claim for a couple of reasons. Overall explains that there are a variety of non-negligible burdens and serious health risks associated with IVF procedures (2012, 127). There is, I believe, a further issue. In the case of IVF use, multiple fertilized embryos can be selected from for gestation, creating an identifiable set of possible lives. Each one of these embryos represents an actual potential life, and in this way can be coherently (if not legitimately) brought into comparison to the other embryos in the set. There is some way we can assess the selective action as “choosing between” possible lives. In the case of abortion, however, there is in fact only one actual potential life. I will be exploring this issue and its problematic implications in the following chapter.
Objection 4: PPB as too narrow

According to Jacob Elster (2011), while PPB proponents rightly defend the appropriateness of a *maximizing* principle of selection to guide reproductive decision-making, they flounder in their exclusive focus on maximizing the potential individual’s benefit. This exclusive focus on the potential offspring is not justified, says Elster, and thus the PPB must be revised into the PGPB, or the Principle of General Procreative Beneficence. The revised principle, an adaptation of Savulescu and Kahane’s most recent formulation of the PPB, goes as follows: “If couples (or single reproducers) have decided to have a child, and selection is possible, then they have a significant moral reason to select the child, of the possible children they could have, whose life will maximize the expected overall value in the world” (2011, 483). Like the PPB, the PGPB constitutes a non-absolute moral obligation that may be overridden by competing considerations.23 Also like the PPB, the PGPB purportedly gains plausibility through its compatibility with common-sense morality. Elster claims, “Just as prospective parents hope for healthy and happy children, they also hope for children who will make a positive difference in the world…. They certainly hope that their children will not become criminals, or immoral persons who make their environment miserable” (485). Thus just as parents have the moral obligation to maximize their future child’s as well as their existing child’s benefit, they are also obliged to maximize overall benefit as well as the created individual’s benefit. This could mean, for instance, using PGD to select not only the child with greater

23 So that, for instance, the future individual’s welfare need not be compromised under the PGPB, though “[P]GPB may sometimes outweigh [P]PB” (2011, 485). Elster also qualifies his argument along similar lines as do Savulescu and Kahane when he notes (implausibly, according to the above discussion around the first objection to the PPB) that “… any practical conclusions that follow [from adoption of the PGPB] concern only the parent’s moral duties, not the law” (488).
athletic ability, but also the child with a blood type that will maximize her future donation opportunities (483). Despite the PGPB’s purported aim to maximize the total value created by selecting a particular life, Elster rejects a straightforward utilitarian interpretation of his proposed principle, and points to two dissimilarities to support this rejection. He claims that “total act utilitarianism” (TAU) is tied to a particular theory of value, first, which does not apply to either PPB or PGPB, and, also unlike the PPB or PGPB, may not be outweighed by competing considerations (3).

While the PGPB undoubtedly falls prey to the same criticisms as the PPB (for instance, unjustifiably claiming that state interference is unnecessary in order to facilitate adherence to the GPB, mistakenly assuming the plausibility of ranking genetic traits likely to contribute to the world’s total value, etc.), the PGPB is clearly a more plausible principle than the PPB. I applaud Elster for realizing that if general well-being levels are of primary concern (as they must be, under the impersonal harm doctrine adopted by PPB advocates), stopping short at consideration of the potential individual in reproductive decision-making is simply unacceptable.

**Objection 5: Failed analogy/impersonal harm**

This final critique concerns the metaphysical and normative foundations of the PPB and is the most fundamental objection for the purposes of my project. Since Parfit identified and attempted to resolve the NIP by postulating the notion of non-person affecting harm, it has generally been taken for granted in the procreative beneficence debate that moral condemnation of actions causing so-called impersonal harm is possible

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24 According to Elster, “TAU states that couples have an all-things-considered obligation to select the child whose life will maximize expected aggregate well-being in the world” (2011, 484).
within a consequentialist framework (e.g. Purdy 1996). The moral requirement to refrain from causing avoidable harm is therefore not limited to identifiable individuals, but rather applies to states of affairs, so that we may evaluate one state of affairs as preferable on the basis of its levels of well-being or harm. Bennett suggests that it is precisely this notion of impersonal harm that is crucial to the PPB’s viability, because it is the PPB’s “ultimate theoretical foundation” (2009, 265). So while numerous critiques of the PPB are accurate and often compelling, they have also been unsuccessful in achieving the principle’s outright rejection. Previous critiques’ failures to compel rejection have, according to Bennett, resulted from targeting the principle’s implications and reasoning, as opposed to its theoretical core (266). In this vein, Bennett argues that the PPB’s central problem is its commitment to impersonal harm, which precludes realization of the fact that if the lives that come about as the result of our choices are worth living, moral criticism of those choices is untenable. Reactions to the examples designed by Parfit to encourage acceptance of impersonal harm’s plausibility are, Bennett claims, actually indicative of preferences for certain states of affairs and not legitimate moral judgments about the wrongs committed in those cases. She writes: “So long as we expect the lives to be created to be worthwhile (i.e. not dominated by pain and suffering) then it is a matter of moral indifference which lives we choose to bring to birth” (2009, 269). The evocative nature of Parfit’s analogies distracts the reader from the otherwise universally tacitly accepted assumption that intrinsic to the idea of harm is that it affects the welfare of a

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25 Philippa Foot questions the plausibility of evaluating states of affairs in terms of levels of well-being. According to Foot, states of affairs can only be evaluated for goodness or badness in regard to how they affect individuals. Otherwise, there will always remain an open question regarding whom that state of affairs is good for. Her criticism thus targets the basic idea of impersonal harm (2002, 66-68).
given individual; that harm’s realization necessitates the decrease in welfare of some already-existing individual. In fact, the only situation in which future or potential individuals may be harmed by our choices (either by reproduction or by some future population affecting policy) occurs when those choices make those individuals’ lives so bad as to be not worth living. All other choices affecting future individuals must be morally neutral: “If it is true that no particular person is harmed by a choice … then this choice is outside the realms of morality: it is a morally neutral choice, a preference” (269). Bennett claims that the impersonal harm thesis is appealing only because it validates our intuitive condemnation of actions that result in lives that, while worth living, are worse than the lives that could have been.

Bennett’s critical approach is appealing partly because it concisely showcases the PPB’s problematic assumption regarding impaired lives and its implication of mandated state interference in reproduction. But her central claim, that impersonal harm is an implausible theoretical foundation for deriving obligations, so that all future-person affecting actions must be morally neutral (as long as they create lives worth living), may be regarded by some as deeply counter-intuitive. If any choice to bring a worthwhile life into existence must be immune to moral condemnation, then some arguably distasteful conclusions may have to be drawn. For instance, the rubella sufferer’s decision to conceive now as opposed to three months from now (at which point she will not pass on the disease to her child and its severely disfiguring symptoms) is rendered morally neutral. Her decision will be morally neutral even if she makes the choice with some kind of malicious, sadistic, or indifferent attitude. This implication may be difficult for many to swallow. Bennett’s argument invites the question of whether it is truly a mere
preference for non-severely disabled individuals that provokes condemnation, or if there in fact something morally problematic about failing to attempt to avoid causing a life that, while worth living, would involve immense suffering. Whatever one’s position on the PPB, it seems that given a choice between two lives to bring into existence—one being just barely worth living and the other being a life of near unadulterated joy and success—an attitude of neutrality would be misguided.  

Despite these concerns, I am in agreement with Bennett that the notion of impersonal harm is both deeply problematic and largely responsible for the PPB’s continuing acceptance. In the following chapter I will examine some problems faced by those wishing to reject the notion of impersonal harm, such as the potentially entailed difficulty of condemning certain actions that may cause prenatal injury, and provide some suggestions for how these problems may be resolved. Again, however, I concur with Bennett’s rejection of the claim that “it matters that there is a greater total of happiness in the world even though the welfare of no individual is influenced by this choice [to not select a particular embryo for implantation]” (2009, 273).

It may also be possible to challenge the PPB through another criticism of impersonal harm, and without subscribing to Bennett’s preference thesis. It may be the case that choosing one worthwhile life over another can be morally important but for reasons unrecognized within a consequentialist framework. According to Sarah Stoller (2008), for instance, Savulescu’s argument for the PPB fails because his analogies fail to support the principle; they are too dissimilar from the use of PGD in morally relevant ways. She writes, “Savulescu fails to acknowledge the fact that his examples evoke

26 As I will show in the following chapter, however, the idea that one is ever choosing between lives belies a misguided view of how reproduction works.
deontological and virtue ethics concerns that are absent in the context of PGD” (2008, 365). Not only are these deontological and virtue ethics concerns relevant in such cases, but in fact they are the considerations doing the justificatory work in motivating condemnation of actions such as choosing to conceive when one knows the resulting child will be severely disabled. Thus, says Stoller, Savulescu defends the PPB by smuggling in a different theoretical framework (or frameworks): “he relies on one theory [consequentialism] to explain our intuitions, when the remaining two theories [deontology and virtue ethics] better account for them” (366).

With a virtue-centered ethics, for instance, parental attitude toward the potential child is of serious moral importance. In this vein, Stoller argues convincingly that the reason we condemn the woman with rubella who refuses to wait to conceive is related to the woman’s intentions and preferences and not the reduced general well-being that her action supposedly produces. The fact that she chooses to bear the severely disabled child indicates a morally deficient character (or at least, a problematic attitude likely symptomatic of moral deficiency). Moral deficiency is properly attributed because potential reproducers should care about the sorts of lives their potential offspring will have. This is not to say that any preference for a disabled child will be morally condemnable. The issue here is with the agent’s intentions and motivating preferences and attitudes, which, if suggestive of carelessness, maliciousness, or indifference, are morally problematic and condemnable. Such moral assessment is outside consequentialism’s scope because that framework is limited to evaluating an act’s results.

I agree with Stoller that PPB proponents have smuggled in a consequentialist approach to the assessment of childbearing by pumping readers’ intuitions against certain
behaviours. Indeed, my forthcoming critique of utilitarianism will concern its failure to capture what is truly morally at stake in both reproduction specifically and leading a good life generally. I will argue that the source of badness and wrongness in unconcern for the harm that reproduction may cause is most importantly located in the quality of the potential reproducer’s will, rather than in outcomes.

**Conclusion**

The preceding critique and discussion are intended to provide an introduction to the debate surrounding procreative beneficence and to ensure an informed grounding for the project of identifying what is morally at stake in childbearing. Savulescu’s proposed moral principle, and its precursor, the metaphysical problem introduced by Parfit, have now undergone a basic critical treatment in order that I may look more deeply into the problem of understanding whether and how pursuing reproduction could be morally appropriate or desirable. In the following chapter I will look more closely at the NIP and its relationship to antinatalism and ask whether and how considerations of beneficence may be introduced within the debate’s currently active but unsatisfactory moral frameworks.
Chapter 3

Is it always wrong to reproduce?

Helping and harming potential existents

Introduction

In the preceding chapter I conducted a survey and analysis of the debate surrounding the PPB. I will now move on to a broader critique of the principle, which will set the stage for analysis of the morality of childbearing. In this chapter, I argue that the PPB, and maximizing impersonal consequentialist strategies for resolving the NIP more generally, entail commitment to some version of antinatalism. Given that the PPB is a maximizing principle, the moral difference between bestowing benefit and avoiding harm should have PPB proponents prohibiting all actual reproduction. PPB endorsement presents a practical as well as conceptual issue: the nature of actual reproductive practice precludes any remotely reliable and non-arbitrary identification of the relevant set of possible lives within which the potential offspring will either be better or worse. Even if there is some corresponding obligation to the PPB to create a relevant set of embryos from which the best possible life can be selected (e.g., by also requiring the use of IVF), there can be no justifiably limited set assumed in reproductive decision-making, rendering all or almost all actual reproduction morally regrettable, and possibly also condemnable.

I will begin by examining the form of the PPB to question whether it is indeed vulnerable to the charge that it entails a universal ban on reproduction. Once I have shown that the PPB is indeed at risk of collapsing into antinatalism, given the
impossibility of non-arbitrarily restricting the principle’s scope to pre-existing decisions to reproduce, I will offer some insights into the underlying causes and implications of this collapse. Doing so will involve examination of some alternative approaches (provided by Rebecca Bennett and Seana Shiffrin) to the problem of doing harm in the procreative context. Such alternative approaches, particularly Shiffrin’s rights-based account, provide comparatively compelling analyses of the moral obligations of potential reproducers, but leave the question of beneficence’s true role in reproductive decision-making inadequately addressed. Moreover, these alternative accounts provide a similarly bleak picture of the moral value of reproduction. Ultimately, I will insist that it is far more difficult to reject the antinatalist stance than has been imagined by participants in the procreative beneficence debate thus far. The antinatalist conclusion seems an inevitability given the theoretical tools employed and available in this debate, a fact that suggests there is strong reason to seek out alternative approaches to assessing the practice’s morality.

Bestowing benefit and avoiding causing harm
to current and potential existents

Reproduction and the Non-Identity Problem

In Chapter 1 I explained that Parfit’s argument for the NIP emerges from a basic observation about the nature of harm: that the harm we may cause to currently non-existing future beings matters morally (1984, 356-357). This claim challenges assumptions regarding the nature of harm as potentially affecting only currently existing,
identifiable individuals, or, if harm to future beings is plausible, the lesser moral wrongness of causing harm to future beings.

Recall that the NIP emerges from a particular conception of the nature of harm: in maintaining the person-affecting intuition about harm, which regards morality as essentially grounded in that which affects particular and identifiable individuals, a problem arises in reproductive scenarios. It is natural to assume that some harm has been done when a less good life is brought into existence. However, no harm is caused, even in cases where the selected life is much worse than some other potential life, as long as the selected life is not so bad as to not be worth living. This is because that selected individual could not have existed without this worse life; the worse life, as a necessary condition, enables her existence. The NIP is therefore metaphysical in nature because it reveals the impossibility of comparing different potential (worthwhile) lives in terms of harm; the life that may seem better is merely a different life. Parfit and others take this metaphysical problem to have a serious implication for the morality of childbearing and, more generally, actions affecting potential future people (e.g., Kavka 1982, Parfit 1984, Savulescu 2001).

**Applying impersonal harm and benefit**

Recall that according to the PPB, potential reproducers are morally compelled to select the child, of the possible children they could have, who is predicted to have the best life (Savulescu 2001, 2007). This selection may be accomplished at the embryonic stage, through IVF procedures that allow for pre-implantation genetic diagnosis of available embryos and subsequent implantation of that embryo or those embryos that are
predicted, on the basis of their identified genetic traits, to be likely to have the best possible life or lives. Selection according to the PPB may also be accomplished post-conception, if the pregnant woman pursues prenatal genetic testing followed by selective abortion in cases where the test results do not predict a child that can be expected to have the best possible life. Parfit argues that a fourteen-year-old girl who has the option of either choosing to (attempt to) conceive now or choosing to (attempt to) conceive in several years, when the life she creates is likely to be better off, *seems* clearly morally compelled to wait to conceive. In this way, she is obliged to try to create the better child (1984, 358-361). The NIP applies because “[w]e cannot claim that this girl's decision was worse for her child” (1984, 359).

There is an important divergence between Parfit’s and Savulescu’s arguments concerning what precisely is required of potential reproducers given the moral significance of impersonal harm. What Parfit’s example, above, does *not* suggest is that the potential reproducer is obliged to try to create the best child, or even the best possible child given her particular circumstances. Even if it were certainly the case that between the two possible children she could have, the child born later would be better, the three-month wait is underdetermining in the sense that it does not make the child born later the best possible. Parfit’s suggestion that there are some clearly compelling reasons to choose not to conceive at a particular time is relatively uncontroversial. If, for example, one is receiving medical treatment with proven severe teratogenic effects, it seems plausible that one ought not to try to conceive at that time. Accepting Parfit’s point regarding the possibility of a moral responsibility to refrain from having a child at some particular time does not settle whether Savulescu is right to endorse the PPB. The difficult and primary
question is whether, outside clearly compelling and accessible reasons to choose not to conceive at a particular time, there could be a general moral requirement to decide against chance and try to have the best possible child. This general moral requirement is precisely what I will argue the PPB untenably endorses.

So far it has been assumed that life can only be bad for someone if it is not worthwhile. The precise meaning of a “worthwhile” life remains unclear and generally ill-defined (if defined at all) throughout most of the procreative beneficence debate. Frequently, the term is assumed (legitimately or not) to indicate a certain level of well-being. The life worth living contains an amount of well-being that surpasses any amount of badness, broadly defined, by a satisfying degree, so that one maintains an acceptable quality of life. To illustrate what this badness might look like, Parfit notes some ways in which the quality of life might be lowered, suggesting “[t]here might be worse housing, overcrowded schools, more pollution, less natural beauty, and a somewhat lower average income” (1986, 385). I take the sort of life that would be deemed not worth living to be not only primarily defined by suffering, but also lacking in significant accomplishments (relative to one’s circumstances and abilities) and a variety of experiences. An individual born with Tay Sachs disease, whose experience of life will not only be cut drastically short but will also be defined by near unremitting pain and systematic organ collapse, provides a paradigm example of a life that would uncontroversially not be worth living (Parens and Asch 1999).27 Indeed, it seems Parfit appeals to this condition as an exemplification of what he calls the Wretched Child, whose knowing conception would

27 Notably, deciding on other conditions that presented good reasons for selecting against a particular potential life was discovered to be next to impossible by the group of scholars and clinicians who debated the issue from a disability rights perspective (Parens and Asch 1999).
be unquestionably wrong (1984, 391). However, it is not unthinkable that the threshold of a life worth living is actually better placed significantly higher, and doing so would clearly have us re-categorize many current lives as not worth living. Some scholars believe, moreover, that even those of us who enjoy the exceedingly lucky circumstance of being born in the industrialized world into loving families and affluence are apt to radically overestimate how good our lives are, to a degree that has us only mistakenly evaluate them as worth living.28

Whether or not most lives are worthwhile, it can certainly be agreed that most current lives—even those that might be deemed best—contain a great deal of badness. It is also the case that future lives will inevitably contain a great deal of badness.29 Further, there may be little reason to value the goodness in many lives given that such goodness is pervasively contingent on the badness in many more. These are some considerations pertaining to harm that will inform the proceeding discussion. I will now turn to the issue of the PPB’s relationship to antinatalism.

The PPB and antinatalism

What is antinatalism?

Antinatalism may be broadly understood as the position that condemns procreation. Antinatalists may condemn procreation for a variety of reasons, including

28 This is obviously David Benatar’s position, but a weaker version of this view (holding most lives we consider best now as actually just barely worth living) is also endorsed by Tännsjö Torbjörn in his argument for the defensibility of the repugnant conclusion (2004).
29 Actually, this is only inevitable in a practical sense. Breeding programs that ensured the creation of constantly satisfied and docile humans could create lives that contained very little or no badness. Whether such lives could be deemed worthwhile remains an open question. Whatever the case, Savulescu may, through endorsing the PPB, be implicitly committed to such programs.
the diminishment of quality of life for those who decide to become parents, the health risks associated with gestation, and what is cited (according to some) as the essentially anti-feminist nature of bearing children (Overall 2012, 119-124). Most typically, however, antinatalism is defined as an ethically motivated position that portrays most or all procreation as morally wrong. This is the interpretation with which my analysis concerns itself. There are different views on the nature of the moral problem with procreation. Thomas Young (2001), for instance, argues that the moral wrongness of bearing children is derived from environmentalist concerns. Adopting antinatalism is characterized as a consistency requirement, so that it is only in the case that one is not an environmentalist that one may logically disagree that bearing children is wrong. For Young, having children is the (environmental) equivalent of overconsumption, so that as long as the latter is a moral wrong, the former is as well: “... consumption beyond a certain level is wrong and having however many children it would take to exceed that level is wrong” (190). Given Young’s assessment that it takes only one child to exceed the level of acceptable consumption, it follows that he is an antinatalist.

Most ethically motivated antinatalists condemn procreation for reasons pertaining to its associated suffering, deeming the practice wrong by virtue of the preventable and serious harm it entails (e.g., Häyry 2004, Benatar 2006). For instance, Häyry’s argument begins with the premise that it is morally wrong to cause avoidable suffering to other people. Häyry applies the maximin strategy, which was introduced by Rawls and “… tells us to choose… the option that maximizes the minimum outcome and to avoid options where the worst outcomes can materialise” (2004, 377), to procreative decision-making. Doing so, according to Häyry, will demonstrate the inherent irrationality of procreative
behaviour given its inadequate risk-averseness. And because every person suffers, parents are thus also morally condemnable (if they were able to choose against procreation) for bearing children. Moreover, potential parents can never even be assured that their child’s life will be better than non-existence: “Because of the uncertainties of human life, anybody’s children can end up arguing that it would have been better for them not to have been born at all” (378). If the primary moral concern is to avoid causing (serious) gratuitous suffering, all decisions to reproduce are morally wrong.

Failure to recognize the moral significance of suffering for reproductive activities is perhaps the product of a more general failure to engage one’s reason in reproductive decision-making. According to pessimists such as Schopenhauer, it is folly and selfishness that allow humanity’s perpetuation as a species: “If children were brought into the world by an act of pure reason alone, would the human race continue to exist? Would not a man rather have so much sympathy with the coming generation as to spare it the burden of existence? or [sic] at any rate not take it upon himself to impose that burden upon it in cold blood” (2004, 395). Thomas Ligotti offers a comically misanthropic interpretation of the human drive to reproduce despite the undeniable badness of life: “People get the biggest kick out of seeing the features of their faces plastered together onto one head” (2009, 25).

The most widely recognized antinatalist position is that espoused by Benatar, most thoroughly in his book, Better Never to Have Been: the Harm of Coming into Existence. Therein Benatar argues that no life is worth starting, because every life started will mean a great deal of harm. Moreover, it is not true that this harm may be balanced by life’s positive elements: as a result, it is always a moral wrong to procreate. Benatar thus
claims that the inevitable creation of harm-filled lives is what morally precludes reproduction, and provides a controversial argument for this claim from the asymmetry of pleasure and pain. This argument denies the badness of absent pleasure while affirming the goodness of absent pain (2006, chapter 2). It follows that the moral significance of bestowing benefit is intrinsically less than that of causing harm, and also that it is incoherent to suggest that one could be benefited by being brought into existence. By accepting this asymmetry, one should, according to Benatar, accept that bringing a person into existence always causes (net) harm, no matter how good the person’s life may be, and thus is always wrong. Avoiding harm must always take precedence over bestowing benefit, and thus the central concern of potential reproducers must be not to reproduce. As moral agents our primary concern must be to save potential people from the inevitable and profound harm that comes with being created, by refraining from creating them. For Benatar, non-existence cannot be a state enjoyed by an individual, but it can be an alternative for a potential individual (4-5).

I believe that Benatar’s argument is strong but ultimately unconvincing. I agree with one of his critics that it is not so intuitive as Benatar believes that we should not regret the non-existence of happy individuals, and that it is not coherent to deem the absence of existence (and therefore, according to Benatar, the absence of harm) good (Overall 2012, 97-106). I also concur with Overall’s claim that Benatar cannot refer to an absence as good (2012, 105). I believe that rejecting this notion of the absence of harm as good will make space for the goodness of existence, and I will explore this possibility further in Chapter 6.
The PPB as antinatalist

Obligatory adherence to the PPB is derived from a more general obligation to maximize well-being in one’s activities. This is why Savulescu and Kahane reject other forms of the PPB such as the satisficing version, which mandates only the choosing of any child whose well-being will meet some agreed-upon threshold (2009, 280-281).

According to their accepted formulation of the PPB, well-being must be maximized in reproductive behaviours because to do otherwise would create and condone a worse state of affairs—that is, a state of affairs containing less well-being.

If one is obligated to choose the child that will have the best possible life, it seems to follow that if all possible lives are very bad (or perhaps bad at all, at least in comparison to other possible lives), one is bound to refrain from bearing children. If this entailment is rejected, adherence to the PPB would be compatible with the creation of lives containing a great deal of harm (though not enough to make the life not worth living). In upholding the PPB, potential reproducers must choose to bear the child with the best possible life, which must entail choosing not to bear the child or children who does not or do not meet that comparative standard. In typical reproductive contexts, however, this entailment introduces a serious problem. I argue that rather than prescribing the effective prevention of particular individuals being brought into existence, PPB proponents should recognize that their stance justifies the prevention of any individual being brought into existence.
The infinite set problem

According to the PPB, the standard to which potential reproducers must conform is essentially comparative, and essentially maximized; they ought to refrain from bringing into existence some child other than the best possible. In order for potential lives to be reasonably compared to one another in a way that allows for selection of the best of these lives, some non-arbitrary limit must be placed on the set of potential lives under comparison. Otherwise, the set of relevant possible lives is as good as infinite. To discover that best possible life among a sea of inferior possible lives, in other words, one must be able to indicate which lives that best life bests. The PPB fails to meet this requirement and this failure gives reason for an antinatalist reading of the principle. This failure comes about as the result of the PPB’s obfuscation of the basic nature of human reproduction.

Because the standard of “best possible” is essentially comparative, conformity to the standard is contingent on the identifiability of a finite set of options from which to choose. Unluckily, the facts of typical human reproduction seem to preclude the identification of this set. The motivation for understanding the PPB as antinatalist should now be clear. Given that the set of possible children that one could bear is not defined, there is always and necessarily some loss of benefit when some particular possible

30 Here, the best possible child and child with the best possible life are understood as the same. I assume that the only way to identify the best possible child in PPB proponents’ terms is by identifying the child with the best possible life (again, in PPB proponents’ terms). I remain neutral on the question of some basic philosophical distinction between the best possible child and the child with the best possible life.

31 Of course, it is not actually infinite. No reproducer can reproduce infinitely; it is simply biologically impossible. But the set is as good as infinite because there is no identifiable and non-arbitrary limit that can be placed on the number of children some reproducing couple may attempt to bear.
individual is brought into existence. But any loss of benefit, for PPB proponents such as Savulescu, results in a less desirable state of affairs – one in which there is less well-being (or whatever makes life valuable) than there might have been had no actual individual come to exist. The bearing of any child therefore results in some (avoidable) impersonal harm and a moral loss. In contrast, there is not always a moral gain incurred through introduction of a new existence – it can only be less lamentable than some other existence that the reproducers might have created. This is because, from the notion that all new existences represent a moral gain there follows what Parfit calls the Repugnant Conclusion: “For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living” (1984, 388).

In response to this objection, PPB proponents may point out that certain real life procreative situations are indeed conducive to selection of the best possible life, because they involve an identifiable and finite set of possible lives among which reproducers may choose the best. In cases of IVF use, for instance, PGD is frequently employed to identify undesirable and desirable genetic traits in the various embryos, so that multiple fertilized embryos can be selected from for gestation. Each one of these embryos represents an actual possible life, and in this way can be coherently brought under comparison to the

32 Moreover, if the child’s life is so bad that it is not worth living, all-things-considered harm, which affects identifiable individuals, also results. The doctrine of impersonal harm and the PPB are unnecessary to condemn procreative behaviour that results in lives not worth living, because serious avoidable harm to actual children is prohibited on less controversial independent moral grounds.
other embryos in the set. There is, then, some room for the PPB proponent to assess the selective action as “choosing among” possible lives.

This response, however, fails to meet the charge. It is ill-advised to take IVF procedures as the paradigmatic scene of procreative decision-making, and equally ill-advised to attempt to derive a subsidiary duty always to employ such reproductive methods that do allow for the creation of a set of possible lives.\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, even in cases where some supposed set has been artificially created, it would clearly not render selection of the best possible child any more coherent, given that some other set could surely be created for selection that might be better. And of course, in the case of using PGT methods followed by abortion, there is in fact only one actual potential life that is being selected for or against. Thus, the typical case where procreation is successful, barring any theoretical worries about the PPB, could not coherently involve conformity to the principle in practice.

Moreover, if the PPB may mandate selective abortion (and its proponents do not deny that it may) it seems that couples always have a moral reason to abort the currently gestating fetus in order to try for a better one. Of course, this moral reason may be overridden by other considerations such as the woman’s welfare and procreative autonomy, but it surely must be admitted by PPB proponents that there is, necessarily, some loss incurred by failing to abort and try again. Because the PPB is a maximizing principle, the moral reason to have a better child never disappears, rendering all actual procreative behaviour condemnable or, at the very least, regrettable. PPB proponents should be willing to applaud those potential reproducers who resist the temptation to let

\textsuperscript{33} As I have mentioned, beyond the procedure’s well-documented severe health risks and burdensome demands on women, it also requires an enormous amount of resources.
other considerations, such as their desire for children, cause them to bring into existence non-optimal individuals. What reason could there be to believe that it is not better, and indeed more in line with the PPB, to bear no children at all, as opposed to using selection methods that will inevitably fall short of the “best possible” threshold? Simply put, if the “good enough” standard is not enough, then the safest option for reproducers wishing to avoid causing avoidable harm is to not reproduce in the first place.

Response: PPB as conditional

To this charge, Savulescu and company can respond by pointing to the obligation’s conditional and defeasible features (the latter of which I have already indicated is unhelpful to us here). The PPB, its proponents may remind us, is applicable only in cases where the decision to bear a child has already been made, so the principle could not be invoked against reproduction itself. The form of the obligation presented by Savulescu and Kahane can therefore be summarized this way: If you will bear a child, you are morally obliged to bear the child with the best possible life. So beneficent action in childbearing is mandated only if one has decided to bear a child. This condition is important because with it this form of the PPB precludes the obligation to bear children in order to bestow them benefit.

Surely, however, PPB proponents cannot claim neutrality on the issue of whether there may be an obligation not to bear children. If the principle’s purported aim of maximally reducing impersonal harm that may be caused by procreative behaviour is taken seriously, its conditionality seems a rather flimsy defense. Creating any child at all ensures the creation of (at least) impersonal harm given that all lives contain harm, and at
some times will ensure person-affecting as well as impersonal harm (in cases where the created life is not worth living). So on their own grounds, PPB proponents cannot immediately reject the obligation to refrain from reproducing possibly entailed by that principle. Notice that PPB critics like me are free to grant that the PPB does not necessarily prohibit reproduction, given that in some other possible world, the “best possible child” could be a plausibly achieved ideal in human reproduction. Moreover, I am not trying to argue that the PPB entails even a general prohibition of reproduction; rather, what I hope to have shown is that the PPB amounts to such a prohibition because it will just turn out, in every case of potential reproduction, that refraining from reproduction would be morally preferable.

The apparent conditional nature of the PPB does not, therefore, block its antinatalist implications. Potential reproducers cannot justifiably be absolved of the responsibility to take into account the impersonal harm created as a result of bringing a particular life into existence simply because they have not yet made a decision concerning whether they will reproduce. Unless there is some inherent moral value associated with reproduction that is not answerable to the (impersonal) harm potentially caused through reproduction, it stands to reason that all decisions to procreate must adhere to the PPB. Savulescu has failed to appreciate the practical fallout from this argument. As previously noted, the maximizing nature of the PPB assures that all actual reproduction will consist in a moral loss, since all reproduction is non-ideal and each instance of reproduction could have resulted in less impersonal harm than some other unrealized instance. Thus the PPB, in its maximizing form, is vulnerable to collapse into a general moral condemnation of reproduction.
Accepting the PPB as antinatalist

Until now the case I have been trying to make for the PPB’s collapse into antinatalism likely suggests to readers a generally critical view of antinatalism, in assuming that it is a serious problem for the PPB if the argument is successful. Of course, the badness of antinatalism has yet to be demonstrated. Nevertheless, even imagining for now that the antinatalist stance is theoretically sound, it could scarcely be a widely accepted foundation for reproductive decision-making. The primary issue with antinatalism is surely its problematic translation into practice. By virtue of the nature of human reproduction, the PPB places severe moral constraints on potential reproducers, but most especially women. Procreative autonomy is frequently painted as a basic right, at least in its negative form. Of course this assumption of procreative autonomy’s status as a basic right is perhaps why advocates of antinatalism as well as the PPB emphasize the rigidly separate nature of moral requirements and rightful state interventions in the name of those requirements. Antinatalism is also a potential threat to procreative autonomy. The very basis of the position is that potential reproducers ought to refrain from reproducing, no matter how central they may view the practice in their lives. Still, it seems plausible to grant legitimacy to the intuition that disallowing third party interventions in practices aimed at ending pregnancies (such as abortion) would be worse than disallowing those aimed at facilitating pregnancies (such as IVF).

The problem of overdemandingness seems also to plague the antinatalist conclusion in the same way it does traditional interpretations of the PPB. Any

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34 It seems just as clear to me that pronatalism could not be the foundation for reproductive decision-making. Unless there is inherent value to species propagation, even if reproduction itself has inherent value, lauding all reproductive acts remains dubious.
maximizing principle cannot avoid the charge, so this is a general problem with maximizing principles. Unless actions such as reducing avoidable harm or bestowing benefit are deemed supererogatory, all of us will not only fall short of the moral ideal but indeed will rightly be viewed as profound moral failures (e.g., Wolf 2010, 760-61). And when application of a principle results in such blanket condemnation there is usually reason to doubt the legitimacy of that principle.

Whether or not antinatalism is a plausible or desirable position, however, I take my characterization of the PPB as antinatalist to be important. It seems to me that PPB defenders should accept the antinatalist reading of the principle, and indeed would rightly endorse the PPB as offering positive argument against the moral acceptability of all (or almost all) human reproduction. Their defense of a moral obligation to have the best possible child translates nearly seamlessly to a utilitarian argument that is essentially the converse of that (also utilitarian) argument entailing the Repugnant Conclusion. The difference is that the PPB traps potential reproducers in the unavoidable undesirability of introducing harm into the world through life creation, instead of in the unavoidable desirability of introducing benefit through life creation. This translation is accurate because under the PPB reproducers are limited to maximizing well-being in terms of which individuals they choose to bring into existence, and, as earlier demonstrated, this optimized selection is typically impossible given the absence of any identifiable limited set from which to select the best being. And if such optimized selection is typically impossible, embracing some form of antinatalism seems unavoidable.

Nevertheless, many of those who are willing to accept the doctrine of impersonal harm in order to resolve the NIP also resist any remotely antinatalist conclusions. Bonnie
Steinbock, for instance, denies that procreation is intrinsically morally problematic, and
condemns only procreative acts that will likely result in less than minimally decent lives.
For Steinbock, there is something intrinsically problematic about prohibiting or
condemning procreative aspirations:

The question is whether individuals have an obligation to forgo
reproduction altogether, if the child is likely to experience
physical or psychological harm. It seems to me that the higher
one sets the bar, the less plausible it is that there is such an
obligation. Why are individuals morally required to give up their
dream of becoming parents, especially if they can become
wonderful parents, simply because the child is likely to have
more than the usual set of problems? (2009, 165, emphasis
added)

She also views this as a clear reason to reject a particular position as it would
suggest that “virtually all of us harm our children” (160). That the dream to become a
biological parent somehow has significant bearing on the morality of bringing people into
existence does not seem self-evident. For one, becoming a parent does not require
bringing an individual into existence. And even if it did, if bestowing existence turned
out to cause a great deal of harm, the moral import of the desire to parent would diminish.
Regardless of its tenability, this sentiment is manifest in a variety of other scholars’ views
as well, including that of virtue ethicist Rosalind Hursthouse, who argues for the
praiseworthiness of bearing and raising children. According to Hursthouse, bearing
children is in fact intrinsically worthwhile: “To do it, and do it well, is to have done
something morally significant” (1987, 315). Moreover, it follows for Hursthouse that if
she has not pursued other, alternative, worthwhile life activities (e.g., volunteering,
seeking truth, etc.), then a woman who has not borne children is less morally

35 Nevertheless, the separability of the desire to parent and to bear a child is also not
uncomplicated. I will discuss this issue in detail in Chapter Six.
praiseworthy than one who has: To the childless, Hursthouse asks, “As good as Mrs. Average? Why? She [Mrs. Average] has borne two children and done it well. What have you done to match that?” (317). If it is true, however, that it cannot be good to do a bad thing well, Hursthouse must be mistaken. I say this neither to imply my general condemnation of procreation nor to challenge the laudable nature of raising children well. I am merely struck by the equivocation of bearing and raising children that I believe is highlighted in these claims. As aforementioned, the desire (and right) to parent seems plausibly separated from the desire (and right) to bring an individual into existence, regardless of their respective moral legitimacy.

**Procreative beneficence and the Non-Identity Problem**

Having analyzed the PPB in terms of its antinatalist message, I will now take up the question of how this analysis relates to the NIP debate. I understand this difficulty with the PPB to be a direct product of its sensitivity to the NIP. Following Parfit, Savulescu subscribes to a doctrine of impersonal harm. This doctrine compels rejection of what Parfit has dubbed the person-affecting intuition, which assumes that “... what is bad must be bad for someone” (1984, 363). According to Roberts and Wasserman, Savulescu’s arguments represent one of three strategies of NIP resolution. Other than rejecting the person-affecting intuition as implausible and advocating the doctrine of impersonal harm, “we can retain the person-affecting intuition and accept the result the NIP seems to entail—that no one is harmed, or made worse off, or wronged by the act or choice under scrutiny... [or] we can accept the person-affecting intuition and reject the
claim that the apparent victim of the questionable act has not been harmed, or made worse off, or wronged” (xx-xxi).

The problematic implications of Savulescu-type of response to the NIP that I have been critiquing provide reason for seeking out alternative approaches to understanding and morally evaluating harm and beneficence in the procreative context. I will now turn to an examination of these two other strategies and their corresponding notions of harm and benefit with the aim of uncovering a more plausible and desirable picture of how we may assess the morality of reproduction. The first is exemplified by Bennett and the second by Shiffrin.

**Understanding harms and benefits: is the NIP really so serious?**

**Rejecting concern for (impersonal) harm**

Rebecca Bennett adopts the strategy that rejects the notion that the person-affecting intuition is problematic and concludes that “there is no individual who is disadvantaged by a choice to bring to birth a worthwhile but impaired life” (2009, 267). Recall that as explained in Chapter Two, for Bennett the only sort of harm that could matter in reproduction decision-making (as in all other sorts) is person-affecting harm, and if this is true the PPB is not a legitimate normative principle. The conceptual link between beneficence and non-maleficence is broken under the PPB so that the latter necessarily becomes the unique operating principle for procreative decision-making (in regard to whether or not to bear a child). Bennett argues that only in cases where the life

\[\text{36}^{36}\] The link to which I am referring implies that beneficence must be a concern for those concerned with non-maleficence.
brought into existence is not worth living is harm truly caused. The state of life cannot be worse for anyone whose life is worth living, so if what we care about avoiding is actual harm caused to individuals, potential reproducers are bound merely to the comparatively undemanding responsibility of ensuring that they bring only worthwhile lives into existence. Bennett concludes: “Once the fallacy of the Principle of Procreative Beneficence is recognized we can accept that what matters morally is the welfare of actual people. The moral imperative we need to follow is maximizing the welfare of actual people whatever their natural limitations” (273). Thus the requirements of non-maleficence are met at the stage of reproductive decision-making, and the role for beneficence proposed by Bennett is one that has parents striving to make their existing (and future actual) children’s lives the best they can.

Bennett’s proposed grounds for rejecting the PPB are intuitively appealing, but the problem of the badness inevitably experienced in all apparently worthwhile lives continues to complicate the question of the wrongness of reproduction. It is unclear to me why Bennett and any others convinced of the intractability of the NIP (e.g., Heyd 2009) believe that harm is not caused by existence if that existence meets the threshold of the worthwhile life. It is unclear, that is, why the fact of owing one’s existence to the willingness of some couple or policy maker to pursue or facilitate reproduction should effectively cancel out any claim to having been exposed to harm by virtue of being made to exist. Existence is a rather different thing, from say, a particular job for which
candidates legitimately vie. Unfortunately, there is a deep bias favouring existence that leads scholars to assume some similarity between these cases.37

Imagine, for instance, an individual who loves his job but, given some bad luck and problematic social practices in his employment environment (of which, let us suppose, he was at least to some extent aware prior to applying for the position), becomes a victim of sexual harassment. To suggest that he has not been harmed by this unfortunate happening seems absurd; whether or not he is on balance benefited by having obtained the job, the harassment counts as harmful. And given that coming into existence is surely much different than obtaining a position for which one has voluntarily competed, it would seem equally justifiable to count as harm those bad effects experienced by virtue of coming into existence, even if that existence is on balance good for the individual. In other words, if the individual who voluntarily participates in a situation that he understands may be harmful can be deemed wrongfully harmed if and when (apparent) harm occurs, surely the individual who has not chosen to participate in existence can be deemed wrongfully harmed if and when (apparent) harm occurs.

This point is similar to Shiffrin’s claim that bestowing pure benefit on a given individual, when that benefit is inextricably tied to some bad effect (such as when bodies are cut open to receive cosmetic surgery), is not reliably justifiable. This is because, first,  

37 For instance, in an example intended to demonstrate the NIP’s force, Roberts and Wasserman (2009) discuss the situation of a woman using the services of a fertility clinic who refuses selective fetal reduction, even though there is a good chance that one or more fetuses will have cerebral palsy or some other seriously debilitating condition. Clearly her refusal seems morally problematic to the authors, but they are inspired to ask: “Yet what chance do these identical offspring have of coming into existence in the absence of aggressive treatment? If the answer is little or none, it becomes difficult to argue that what has been done is ‘bad for’ those particular offspring” (xvii). It seems to me that this statement betrays commitment to an absurd notion that potential beings vie for existence.
denying that there is harm done reflects a misguided model of harms and benefits, and second, bestowing benefit in this way requires the individual’s consent (1999). In failing to obtain her consent, the acting agent is both wronging—violating her rights—and harming her when he causes suffering in order to bestow some benefit. According to Shiffrin, “[t]here is a substantial asymmetry between the moral significance of harm delivered to avoid substantial, greater harms and harms delivered to bestow pure benefits” (1999, 126). In the following section, I continue to explore Shiffrin’s account of harm and benefit in the procreative context.

Revising harm’s role in procreation

So far we have seen one way in which the PPB collapses into antinatalism as well as a response to the problem of impersonal harm that motivates the PPB’s rejection but also seems to hinge on commitment to an undesirable account of harm. But other relevant figures in the debate such as Shiffrin have provided an alternative view on the question of harm and benefit in the context of procreative behaviour. Shiffrin takes the third strategy of NIP resolution, and begins her critique by challenging what she explains as the mainstream view of the nature of benefit and harm as symmetrical in value and located on a continuum. According to Shiffrin, many believe that one who experiences some badness as a result of another’s actions but on the whole benefits from those same actions (for instance, in a case where one’s arm is broken in a successful attempt to rescue one’s life) is not harmed. She rejects this analysis and argues that it is (mistakenly) grounded in “the prominence of a certain comparative, symmetrical model of harms and benefits. To wit, many regard harms and benefits as though they represent two ends of a scale, like the
scale of positive and negative numbers” (1999, 121). Under this model, the way to judge whether someone has been harmed is with an all-things-considered approach, which demonstrates whether someone has been either harmed or benefited – but never both. In evaluating that individual’s situation, one uses a scale bearing positive and negative numbers, so that “if he has ascended the scale (either relative to his beginning point or alternative position), then he has been benefitted. If he moves down, then he has been harmed” (ibid).

Shiffrin rejects this model in favour of an asymmetrical account, which she argues is more in line with common sense evaluations of the differential degrees of moral wrongness in failing to benefit and failing to save from harm (121-122). She claims that this view is rejected largely because of the faulty identification of the justificatory source in actions that seem to cause both harm and benefit. She writes: “Although we sometimes speak as though removing someone from harm benefits that person, it does not follow that the beneficial aspect of the saving does the moral justificatory work for inflicting the lesser harm. Rather, I believe the fact that a greater harm is averted performs the justificatory service” (126). For Shiffrin, then, the moral requirement to refrain from causing harm (or to save from harm) is stronger than the moral requirement to bestow benefit (or not to impede the bestowing of benefit). The assumption that benefit can balance out harm in a way that renders that harm insignificant is the product of a mistaken view about how (lesser) harm is typically justified. Applied in the procreative

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38 As a working definition of “harm,” Shiffrin proposes that it “involves conditions that generate a significant chasm or conflict between one’s will and one’s experience, one’s life more broadly understood, or one’s circumstances” (123). Others who agree with Shiffrin include Elizabeth Harmon and Bonnie Steinbock, who argue respectively that a procreative act is harmful if it causes the child to be in a “bad state”, and if it creates a child whose important interests will not be satisfied (2009, xxviii).
context, this means that if one may do harm by bringing a child into existence, the benefits that one may bestow upon the child will be insufficient to justify, much less laud, that act of procreation.

Shiffrin’s approach stands out in the debate because it challenges the moral implication of the NIP that is presupposed by most scholars in the procreative beneficence debate: That a person brought into existence cannot be said to have been harmed by that act if her life is worth living, even if her life involves a great deal of badness, given that she could not have existed and experienced that overall worthwhile life without also experiencing that badness. She sets out to show that it should not matter to the moral assessment of an action whether its resulting benefit could not have been bestowed without the risks of some arduous burdens, or at least it does not automatically render that bestowal of benefit non-problematic.

Shiffrin’s example of a wealthy would-be philanthropist (Wealthy) who wishes to benefit a population and can do so only by posing a risk of serious harm to some of that population, is intended to demonstrate the lack of justification of this assumption in the procreative context (127). Wealthy wishes to benefit some island’s inhabitants who are comfortably well off already, and cannot do so by ordinary means. When one of Wealthy’s unsuspecting charity recipients, Unlucky, has his arm broken by one of the gold bars dropped from Wealthy’s aircraft, he is owed compensation whether or not that gold bar covers all the medical costs associated with his injury. Unlucky may have benefited, all things considered, by this gesture, but we should not say that he has therefore not been harmed or wronged. It is an unsupported leap from the metaphysical truth that any existent could not have enjoyed the benefits of existence were it not for the
burdens simultaneously placed on her through existence, to the moral claim that it must therefore be the case that the imposers of existence could not be charged with wrongdoing. Of this leap she writes: “[t]he Wealthy example is meant to challenge this; it is unclear what other reason there is to think the metaphysical impossibility at issue is morally important” (135).

I find Shiffrin’s argument for the moral asymmetry of harm and benefit convincing, and will provide two alterations of her Wealthy example to illustrate why. Imagine that the island’s population is not doing well but is rather stricken with a highly contagious disease for which they do not have access to treatment. Wealthy, instead of dropping gold bars, drops the necessary medicine on the island. One of the medicine packages falls on Unlucky and breaks his arm, but because of Wealthy’s gesture he is cured of his illness (that was much worse than a broken arm). Whatever amount Wealthy gave the inhabitants in Shiffrin’s original scenario, it seems that he has done something (at least) less morally problematic in the medicine dropping scenario.

Now imagine that instead of dropping the gold bars onto the island, Wealthy manages, through a great deal of diplomatic effort, to restore good relations with the island’s inhabitants, and then travels to the island to give his gold bars away safely. The bars he gives away are of significantly lesser worth (the difference being at least as much required to compensate for a broken arm) than those he gave away in Shiffrin’s original scenario. Moral equivalence of Wealthy’s actions in these two cases does not seem plausible, but would be implied with a symmetrical model of harms and benefits. It seems clear that Wealthy has performed a laudable act in the new scenario, and a (at best) morally mixed act in the original scenario.
Harm, rights, and the desirability of inaction: return to antinatalism

Given that existence is typically associated with non-negligible harm, then, in taking Shiffrin’s point seriously it would seem morally incumbent on potential reproducers to consider whether they may be engaged in wrongdoing through the decision to procreate. Indeed, such precaution is identified by Shiffrin as morally required given the essentially morally hazardous nature of procreation (137). And after all, inaction seems to be the only path immune to moral condemnation with her approach: “if procreation does not occur, there is no child whose life will go worse than it otherwise would had the benefit of existence been bestowed” (134). Potential reproducers are therefore obliged to recognize the weakness of beneficence’s pull and the exceedingly high demands of non-maleficence when deciding whether to bear children. Ultimately, I argue, Shiffrin’s position falls in line with Benatar’s antinatalism; refraining from procreation is a consistently morally attractive option. This reading is plausible because potential reproducers are not justified in assuming that their offspring would provide retroactive consent to being brought into existence, given life’s serious harms.39

I admit that my endorsement of Shiffrin’s account may be charged as in tension with my earlier criticism of antinatalism. My response to such a charge is simply that the possible yet undesirable legitimacy of antinatalism is more acceptably grounded in

39 Shiffrin arguably waffles slightly on her estimation of the seriousness of life’s harms. For instance, the preceding claim that harm can be avoided through avoidance of procreation seems to conflict with a later claim that she makes in order to diminish the potentially distasteful practical implications of her account. She states that her view “would not necessitate a radical change of practice. In most cases, the burdens of the typical life are fairly manageable” (140). This claim is obviously highly contentious itself, and also is in tension with the broad foundation of her argument, which encourages worry about the significant and inevitable harms associated with introducing new human life. As I will discuss below, Shiffrin’s resistance to the antinatalist conclusion is problematic, but, more importantly, is the result of a deeper problem with her rights-focused account of the wrongness in procreation.
Shiffrin’s asymmetrical model of harms and benefits where pure benefit is bestowed at the cost of causing harm than the PPB strategy. That is, she correctly identifies the foundation of the potential general wrongness of reproduction. As I will go on to show in chapters Five and Six, however, the impossibility of rejecting antinatalism with her rights-focused account ultimately undermines its strength and applicability.

The relatively weak pull of beneficence in the context of reproduction does not merely have to do with the wrongness of causing serious harm; rather, it concerns the wrongness of causing harm that was not consented to, for a benefit that was not agreed upon. Situations in which serious harm is caused in order to achieve some benefit where the recipient of that harm and benefit has explicitly agreed to it are not (always) condemnable in the same way. For instance, the transgender person who consents to an intensely physically and emotionally difficult medical intervention intended to result in a better overall life is not, according to Shiffrin, harmed in some way that renders involved parties condemnable. But the child who has clearly not consented to life’s burdens as a sort of fair exchange for enjoying existence is harmed by those burdens, and responsible parties are indeed condemnable as well as liable for that harm. She explains: “Even if that plaintiff could not have been born and enjoyed the benefits of life without his particular, concomitant burdens, it does not follow that he should be the one to foot the bill for these burdens” (1999, 133).

There is certainly a strong historical strand of political thought that views compensation of burdens faced by individuals as a result of bad luck—or at least bad brute luck—as the responsibility of the state. Perhaps one’s existence is the clearest form of bad brute luck! But Shiffrin’s insight is that reproducers themselves, as those most
directly responsible for the creation of a particular being, are the ones who should be
liable for the harms faced by that individual as the result of being brought into existence.
It could be the case that all or most children may be entitled to seek compensation from
those responsible for their existence. The pervasive failure to recognize this unhappy
upshot of such a ubiquitously pursued practice is likely the result of a variety of social
and psychological factors there is no space to discuss here. It seems reasonable, however,
to suggest that a deeply ingrained assumption that the proper attitude toward life is one of
profound gratitude for it is at least partly responsible.

40 It does not matter to Shiffrin that most people will say they are glad to exist when asked. She
writes: “I am not convinced of the principle that one may (without providing compensation)
inflict serious harm (or risk) on a person to bring about her greater benefit if, based on the
reactions of the general population, it is likely that she would consent. This deployment of
hypothetical consent procedures is rather extreme” (132). I agree with Shiffrin, not least because
surely those who fail to express gladness at being alive (or at creating another life, for that matter)
risk being stigmatized and ostracized. Moreover, adaptive preferences (e.g., see Benatar 2006, 64-
68) may help explain what we might describe as the pervasiveness of post-creation gladness to
have been brought into existence.

41 Then again, it might also be imperceptive not to interpret common attitudes of parents toward
their children and vice versa as reflecting just this stance. When something goes wrong in a
child’s life, it is not unusual for her parents to feel at least partly culpable for her situation (the
level of felt culpability changes, one would suspect, as the child’s age and independence
increase). But this felt culpability is balanced by the taboo nature of entertaining the notion that
one might have done something wrong in bringing one’s child into existence. Nevertheless, the
idea is not unthinkable for all. One potential reproducer notes in a comment on a recent New
York Times post by Singer discussing the merits of antinatalism: “I love my children so much I
didn’t have them” (MClass 2012). This assertion helped direct my thinking about virtue in
reproduction.

Problematising rights violation as the source of wrongness

Given Shiffrin’s argument for the wrongness of imposing non-consensual harm
on others for the sake of bestowing pure benefit, it is surprising that she seems to resist an
antinatalist reading of her conclusions. She claims that “one might hold that the
unconsented-to burdens of life do not make it wrong to procreate per se, but rather wrong

to procreate without undertaking a commitment to share or alleviate any burdens the future child endures” (139). While I would not suggest she is committed to an absolute condemnation of procreation, it seems odd to claim that rights-violating acts may be rendered permissible through acceptance of liability. That is, surely it would not be desirable to condone rights violations in cases where the violations result in serious harms, even when the violators in question will share the harms’ burdens. Here I am not taking issue with Shiffrin’s conclusion that blanket condemnation of procreation does not necessarily follow from its inevitable non-consensual imposition of harms. As I will be arguing in later sections, such harm imposition is not sufficient for an act’s wrongness. Rather, I take issue with her assumption that a rights-based approach to the morality of reproduction can do the work necessary for rendering some significant subset of procreative acts acceptable or desirable. What is required to reject a broadly antinatalist conclusion is, instead, a focus on the quality of the will of the potential reproducer.

The argumentative force of Shiffrin’s account is substantially located in her ingenious asymmetrical model of harms and benefits, and the moral implications of this model for procreation. She rightly claims that it is generally bad to cause harm in order to bestow unnecessary benefit. In my view, however, the badness of doing so need not be grounded in rights violation; what matters most morally are the agent’s attitude and reasons for acting. This is where Shiffrin and I diverge, as she claims that while motive may matter in character assessment, it carries little if any weight in regard to deciding what the benefactor may be liable for. Of the shared insignificance of motive for both the rescue and benefit case, she writes, “The motive will certainly affect our evaluation of … [the rescuer’s] character, but it does not seem to influence our sense of whether he should
compensate for the rescued person’s loss. Likewise, with respect to liability, Wealthy’s motive matters little. What matters is that he imposed risk and injuries on people without their consent and without the justifying reason that it was necessary to avoid a substantial harm” (129, fn 28).\(^{42}\)

While I believe that if liability is the main moral question at stake in procreation, Shiffrin must be right in claiming the agent’s motive’s insignificance, focus on liability ignores what is most relevant in moral assessment. If it is true that the primary variable determining the wrongness of a harmful action is the agent’s willingness to share in the harm she has created, we are committed to the moral acceptability of a variety of arguably questionable actions. Under Shiffrin’s view, the wrongness of imposing serious harms for the sake of bestowing some piddling benefit will disappear if and when the imposing agent agrees, for whatever reason, to share the harms’ burdens. But it is not clear that it should. Imagine a very emotionally insecure individual who wishes to pursue reproduction in order to feel needed and to feel as if she has a purpose in life; her decision to procreate will plausibly be accompanied by a willingness to share in her offspring’s burdens. She happily invites liability for the resulting life’s harms\(^{43}\)—the more, the better, perhaps, given her desire to feel needed—but surely this attitude cannot do any moral justificatory work in her choice to reproduce. Indeed, she has wronged the individual she has created in an important way; but this way has nothing to do with rights violation. She has acted wrongly in the sense of being motivated in the wrong way; she

\(^{42}\) In the same footnote, Shiffrin does allow for the potential wrongness of the beneficiary exercising his right to compensation (when the benefactor’s intention is clearly altruistic). But I am concerned with how the reproducers’ attitudes bear on the morality of their actions.

\(^{43}\) And, let us assume, she will be able to compensate her offspring for the harms of existence; she is not deluded about her abilities to share those burdens.
has acted on the wrong feelings and wrong reasons. But her rights violation has been appropriately compensated for, which for Shiffrin means that she has acted appropriately, and this evaluation seems mistaken. On the other hand, some individual who pursues reproduction with the view that she will not share in the harms that will befall her offspring will, according to both Shiffrin and myself, be acting wrongly. I am therefore in agreement with Shiffrin insofar as she argues that rights-violation presents a sufficient condition of an act’s wrongness.

A second problem with Shiffrin’s approach is that there is no mechanism by which to identify and give weight to the goodness that may partially characterize a morally mixed act such as reproduction. Her account allows no way for some potential reproducer to go about pursuing reproduction well; that is, the potential reproducer’s pursuit can only be more or less condemnable. And even if praising terminology could be applied to reproduction, it would be just in terms of the reproducer’s greater willingness to share the burdens of the harms experienced by her offspring. This acceptance of liability and willingness to provide compensation, however, as I claimed above, is not a reliable indicator of moral acceptability, so it cannot be one of moral desirability. In sum, the rights-based constraints proposed by Shiffrin, which are grounded in a broadly deontological moral picture, are sufficient but not necessary for proper moral assessment of the procreative act.

I have spent the preceding paragraphs explaining why I believe Shiffrin’s argument has antinatalist implications, and arguing that the rights- and liability-focused approach she takes fails to ground a method of evaluation that captures what is morally at stake in the context of reproduction. A lack of attention to the quality of the agent’s will
in substantive terms (e.g., how the agent feels while committing a certain act, what reasons for acting the agent has, etc.) entails an ultimately unreliable form of moral assessment. I will need to say more about why and how an alternative, virtue-centred approach to ethical evaluation is preferable. I hope, however, to have also made it clear that I believe Shiffrin makes a crucial move toward an accurate and productive approach to morally assessing reproduction through her asymmetrical model of benefits and harms. Explaining reproduction as an instance of causing harm in order to bestow benefit also encourages movement towards an emphasis on benevolence rather than beneficence; her argument helps illuminate the morally significant distinction between bestowing benefit and bestowing benefit under the right conditions, in the right way.

**Conclusion**

I have tried to show how three strategies applied to resolve the NIP in order to produce a plausible account of the morality of introducing new lives are vulnerable to an antinatalist reading (although it is clearly the case that the commentators I’ve discussed would and sometimes do explicitly disagree with that reading). What I hope to have shown more generally is that integrating a recognition of human suffering into one’s procreative activities is a complex matter. While life’s positive features usually introduce some truly pleasant experiences, suffering’s inevitability casts a dubious glance on the common reversion, when pressed on the moral complexity of reproduction, to the practice’s essential immunity to rational interrogation. We are perhaps left hopeless for the creation of a positive view of the morality of reproduction; that is, it appears as if we are stuck between, on the one hand, an ethic that prohibits reproduction altogether, and
on the other, an ethic that would have us maximize reproduction in various ways. It is clear that both of these strategies’ implementations would be deeply undesirable in the practical sense. Conversely, but to the same point, the disagreeable implications of applying the theories in which these strategies are grounded provides reason to question the appropriateness of these theories’ approach to ethical inquiry and evaluation.

Understanding the morality of reproduction has been largely focused on identifying and evaluating how the (predicted) quality of life or the rights of potential individuals affect the permissibility of their actualization. But given the difficulties discussed above, it seems wise to pursue a different sort of moral analysis in order to assess the morality of procreation and to guide potential reproducers. I will defend a central role for virtue-centred ethical analysis through appeal to neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism as the grounding metaphysical picture of the nature of morality and proper approaches to moral assessment. In the following chapter I examine a promising meta-ethical view that is better equipped to provide a foundation for an ethical outlook—that is, a virtue-centred approach—that captures goodness and badness in human life, and can more adequately assess the morality of reproduction.
Chapter 4

Goodness and need: neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism

Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to demonstrate some shortcomings of consequentialist and rights-based approaches in assessing the morality of childbearing. I now turn to the task of outlining a meta-ethical grounding for a distinct approach to ethical inquiry and demonstrating the advantages of virtue-centred ethics. This and the following chapter will contain little direct consideration of how the theoretical framework I advance will apply to the issue of childbearing; I leave that applied portion of my task to the last two chapters, and for now consider meta-ethical and normative theoretical aspects of the project. I do this for two reasons: First, I take the moral issue of childbearing to be not only a practically pressing concern, but also an opportune primer for independent development of the foundational revisions of moral philosophy pursued by contemporary scholars such as Foot. Second, a proper defense of a particular ethical approach to childbearing will benefit from a holistically developed alternative to the most vocal commentators on the issue.

This goal will be achieved, first, through an analysis and defense of ethical naturalism. My primary focus will be on neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism. This account will be helpful to the project of elucidating and defending a virtue-based ethics and, in turn, a virtue-centred approach to childbearing. I will thus spend this chapter examining Foot’s ethical naturalism, considering and responding to some concerns and objections to her naturalistic picture, and finally suggesting that a version of naturalism slightly
modified from Foot’s will be desirable. The three major features of her account that I will
discuss are the following: the non-autonomy of ethics, the rejection of a necessary
detachment of fact and value, and the appeal to an expanded notion of practical reason.

**Explanation and defense of ethical naturalism**

Most broadly, ethical naturalism can be defined as a meta-ethical position that
holds natural facts as appropriate grounds for establishing the nature and scope of
morality and for explaining the significance of moral norms and judgments. According to
Charles Pigden, it is a doctrine that is cognitivist, realist, and reductive (1991, 421). Ethical naturalists, while diverse in their normative ethical commitments as well as in
their interpretations of what a naturalistic ethics dictates regarding the status of moral
norms and judgments, are committed to the notion that ontological and epistemological
questions about morality are best pursued through the examination of empirical reality.
Ethical naturalism may be distinguished from any meta-ethical position or moral theory
that gives moral value and/or moral rules a priori status, and that views morality as
ontologically independent from the rest of the empirical world. The autonomy of ethics is
denied by naturalists through their claim that natural facts can dictate values and so

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44 He qualifies the last two features in the following way: naturalists must hold that *some* moral
judgments are true, thus denying that morality is mere fiction, and that moral facts are not
different in kind from other sorts of facts, and so may be explained and perceived through
language and a sense that is not specifically moral (1991, 421).
45 That is, they may disagree on what natural facts dictate to the relevant moral agents as well as
on whether moral norms and judgments are properly deemed objective and how they motivate.
46 For instance, in broad terms, how morality fits into the structure of reality, and how we may
come to know what sorts of things (be they reasons, feelings, desires, etc.) count as moral. Ethical
naturalism is most frequently defended in its cognitivist instantiation, but does have non-
cognitivist defenders.
rightfully inform moral thought (Pigden 1991, 423). Unsurprisingly, ethical naturalism is invoked as a position that may account for and provide guidance regarding our particular predicament as human beings, and its defenders often invoke this approach’s focus on humans as an advantage. Neo-Aristotelianism takes as central the needs, desires, and abilities of humanity, defining ethics itself as an offshoot of the human good. Thus for this position’s proponents, ethics is something we both should and do care about simply by virtue of being human. As John Hacker-Wright explains, neo-Aristotelian naturalists hold that “The goodness of moral virtues… lies in the fact that they allow us to meet human needs…. [E]ach human should develop the virtues because humans generally need them and this fact makes these dispositions, and their possessors, good” (2009, 413). Yet, importantly, it is humanity’s existence among other forms of life that lends explanatory and justificatory force to naturalism; morality, while particular to humans, is advanced as analogous to other (also normative) features of life itself.

Foot, the neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalist whose position I will take as paradigmatic of naturalism, and whose arguments I will focus on, offers a particularly elegant response to the Humean notion that one cannot derive “an ought from an is.” For Hume, moral goodness and badness are products of the mind with no objective existence. There is no matter of fact of wrongness or badness even in seemingly despicable actions, such as willful murder: “The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object” (1978, 468). Evaluations of acts are not derived from any natural fact, so that, for

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47 Ethics may, however, be *semantically* autonomous, according to Pigden. Moral (and other normative) facts may be different in meaning from other sorts of facts, in the same way that “water” is different in meaning from H2O (Pigden 1991, 35-37).
48 This is not to say that ethical naturalists must be committed to some form of virtue ethics, but neo-Aristotelians will be. Notably, it has been suggested that virtue ethics must be grounded in naturalism (e.g., Russell 2009, 100).
example, “when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it” (1978, 469). For Hume and his followers, then, the notion of deriving normative statements (e.g., it is good to help your fellow human beings) from descriptive statements (e.g., your fellow human beings need help to live well) is incoherent. It is incoherent because of the nature of moral judgments as essentially action-guiding; as a non-cognitivist and subjectivist, Hume maintains two commitments that preclude the possibility for an objective grounding for morality. First, he maintains that facts about the world are understood through the faculty of reason, and are motivationally inert. Second, he maintains that moral judgments must be motivating. Hume claims that “Since morals… have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv’d from reason” (1978, 457), which implies that “morality consists… not in any matter of fact, which can be discover’d by the understanding” (1978, 468). The essentially action-guiding nature of morality is taken by Hume and his followers to mandate endorsement of a non-cognitivist meta-ethical picture, wherein moral statements can only be about desires and attitudes. In sum, any account of morality’s grounding must meet Hume’s practicality requirement, which is just the idea that morality must serve to “produce and prevent action” (Foot 2001, 9), and this requirement can be met only through rejection of external and objective grounds for acting morally. The reason, as Foot explains, is that “Whatever ‘grounds’ may have been

49 Moral non-cognitivism is the meta-ethical position that has two central negative theses: semantic non-factualism, which holds that moral sentences are not subject to truth conditions, and psychological non-cognitivism, which holds that moral statements are not statements of cognitive attitudes such as belief, but are rather expressions of non-cognitive attitudes such as desire (van Roojen 2009).
given, someone may be unready, indeed unable, to make the moral judgement, because he has not got the attitude or feeling, is not in the ‘conative’ state of mind, is not ready to take the decision to act: whatever it is that the theory says is required” (2001, 8-9).

In Natural Goodness, Foot argues, contra Hume, for a notion of virtue and vice that is naturalistically normative (2001, 38). Her account “set[s] the evaluation of human action in the wider contexts not only of the evaluation of other features of human life but also of evaluative judgements of the characteristics and operations of other living things” (Foot 2001, 25). The purported incoherence of deriving moral judgments from objective states of affairs emerges from a fundamentally misguided understanding of the ground of moral judgment and the mechanism by which moral norms motivate. She advocates an empirically grounded understanding of morality, painting it as a necessary offshoot of the norm of goodness that inheres in living things as such. Foot argues that the evaluations of non-humans and of humans in their conformity to or deviation from natural norms are both concerned with goodness. An extended quote is fitting here to accurately characterize her approach:

Nobody would, I think, take it as other than a plain matter of fact that there is something wrong with the hearing of a gull that cannot distinguish the cry of its own chick, as with the sight of an owl that cannot see in the dark. Similarly, it is obvious that there are objective, factual evaluations of such things as human sight, hearing, memory, and concentration, based on the life form of our own species. Why, then, does it seem so monstrous a suggestion that the evaluation of the human will should be determined by facts about the nature of human beings and the life of our own species? (2001, 24)

In articulating this ground for morality, Foot offers an alternative approach not only, as she intends, to non-cognitivist meta-ethical theories, but also to normative theories of morality, such as utilitarianism. Foot wishes to advance a naturalistic account
of moral goodness and badness that clearly springs from Aristotle’s ethical approach, as evidenced, for instance, in his claims that that which is good for humans, and that we can therefore call good, is determined by the feature of human life that distinguishes it from other types of life. Humans, Aristotle argues, must have lives defined by reason, as reason is the one faculty we do not share with other types of life:

[L]iving is apparently shared with plants, but what we are looking for is the special function of a human being; hence we should set aside the life of nutrition and growth. The life next in order is some sort of life of sense perception; but this too is apparently shared with the horse, ox, and every animal. The remaining possibility, then, is some sort of life of action of [the part of the soul] that has reason. (1098a 1-5)

The human function is activity in accord with reason, and the human good is excellence in this pursuit; the role of reason in determining the good is grounded in the natural fact of humanity’s distinct possession of reason.

Reason plays a similarly crucial role in Foot’s view; humans, she argues, are distinct as a life form because of practical rationality. As rational creatures, we are able to reflect on the value of ends as well as decide how to prioritize ends and go about achieving particular ends. But for Foot, unlike for Aristotle, the relationship between morality and reason is not clearly grounded in self-interest; Foot has no account of a unified motivating force underlying virtue, whereas Aristotle explicitly conditions

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50 The crucial role of practical rationality in moral goodness will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.
51 I understand that this portrayal of Aristotle’s account of the relationship between morality and reason may be contentious. But I mean only to make a weak point regarding the upshot of the structural nature of Aristotle’s ethics: everyone has a reason to be happy, because happiness is the absolute good, and because virtue is necessary for happiness, everyone has a reason to be virtuous, whether they are otherwise moved by moral reasons or not. However, there is no overarching good that all humans have reason to pursue, according to Foot.
happiness, as a complete and self-sufficient end, on successful cultivation of virtue. Foot claims that for her and other ethical naturalists, “The problem is about the rationality of doing what virtue demands” (2002, 53). In situations where acting virtuously will be detrimental to one’s self interest, it is not clear how we could convince the Calliclean agent that she has reason to act virtuously. And if this is true, then it is not clear how Foot (and like-minded ethical naturalists) can be successful in their aim of providing an objectivist ethics that meets Hume’s practicality requirement of consistently motivating behaviour.

In the early years of her career, Foot believed that this problem motivated a concession on the part of ethical naturalists that rational humans are not motivationally compelled to act morally. In “Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives,” originally published in 1972, she writes: “The conclusion we should draw is that moral judgments have no better claim to be categorical imperatives than do statements about matters of etiquette. People may indeed follow either morality or etiquette without asking why they should do so, but equally well they may not” (1978, 164). She eventually changed her view; in a later section of this chapter I will return to this problem of how to justify a necessary connection between virtue and rationality, and her proposed solution. For now, I will continue with the task of laying out Footian ethical naturalism.

Deeming certain actions and attitudes to be commendable or deplorable, claims Foot, need not be and indeed should not be grounded in the foreign, external, or transcendent. Indeed, her meta-ethical position just as crucially rejects the Kantian

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52 Aristotle defines happiness as “a certain sort of activity of the soul in accord with virtue” (1099b26-27), and states that “happiness appears to be one of the most divine things, since the prize and goal of virtue appears to be the best good, something divine and blessed” (1099b16-18).
picture of morality’s non-human-specific and transcendental ground as the Humean account. She explains that Kant “seems to have gone wrong… in thinking that an abstract idea of practical reason applicable to rational beings as such could take us all the way to anything like our own moral code. For the evaluation of human action depends also on essential features of specifically human life” (2001, 14). The reasons to which we respond in order to act morally are and must be reasons because of the way that humans are. For Foot, ethics can be both action-guiding and objective—that is, operating from some source that is intrinsically as well as independently motivating—such that all humans must have reason to pursue the good because of the very nature of the good. This goodness and its opposite constitute both the content and form of ethics; that is, goodness and defect as such are structurally embedded in the natural order of the empirical world, specifically in humanity as part of that natural order.

We take considerations of virtue—the expression of goodness for humans—to be reason-giving because, as Michael Thompson (a former student of Foot’s) explains, doing so “is part of the constitution of this peculiar structuring of a kind of animal life. That we operate with these thoughts is thus a part of what makes these thoughts true” (2003, 7). Those capable of engaging with the ethical must be in some state of awareness of their natures—most basically, as living things (Thompson 1995). In a similarly neo-Aristotelian vein, Iris Murdoch claims that coming to grips with the significance of what

53 This issue represents the second critical point I will be making against a deontological moral framework, and it concerns a distinct feature of Kant’s deontological thought. In the preceding chapter, I raised some issues surrounding the rights-based approach to reproduction proposed by Shiffrin. These issues, I argued, pointed to the necessity of virtue-centred considerations in the context of morally evaluating reproduction. This second problem that I identify with deontology concerns a different aspect of deontological thought, and specifically concerns the nature and implications of Kant’s grounding metaphysics. As I will argue in the following chapter, this problem also gives reason to support a virtue-centred approach to moral evaluation.
it means to be in one’s particular life form is a condition for understanding and realizing goodness: “Goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience and only against the background of this acceptance, which is psychologically so difficult, can we understand the full extent of what virtue is like” (1997, 117). A grasp of what it means to be a living being in this world, to be vulnerable to its necessities and indifference, is that which conditions the possibility of virtue’s cultivation.

Foot’s naturalistic account of the good thus aims to provide, with a single stroke, both the metaphysical grounding and the practical efficacy necessary for a viably objective and legitimately action-guiding ethical system. She accomplishes this through a re-imagination of the relationship between the moral thought and the thinker, which is itself accomplished by virtue of questioning the oft-assumed supervenience of morality on rationality. For Foot, contrary to most modern moral philosophers, the establishment of objective moral norms is not something that must be preceded and informed (if not determined) by a theory of practical rationality. Such thinking suffers from a mistaken starting point: “One shouldn’t think that morality must pass the test of rationality, but rather that rationality must pass the test of morality” (Foot in Voorhoeve 2009, 102).

Having provided an overview of Foot’s position’s most basic features, I will now pursue a more detailed analysis of the ethical naturalist position that clearly lays out its justification.
Morality from need, recognized through practical rationality

For (biologically-based) needs to form the basis of ethical precepts, such needs require susceptibility to categorization according to some set of reliably identifiable and non-infinite criteria. If, for instance, every being’s needs were so disparate as to preclude overlap and in turn grouping of needs, the naturalist project would never get off the ground; that is, no coherent and objective ethical system grounded in the finite diversity of life forms would be possible, as we would be left with a mere assortment of needs. But of course Foot and other defenders of naturalism are interested in what is the case, not what could be in some world radically dissimilar to our own. And it so happens that biological beings (including plants) have largely, almost entirely, overlapping needs, such as for nutrition and protection, as well as distinct sets of less pervasive groupable needs, such as for touch and intellectual stimulation (e.g., most mammals).

One of the most basic needs of humans is arguably security, in both the straightforward physical sense (e.g., not being killed), and a perhaps more amorphous psychological sense (involving, for instance, understanding that the leaders of one’s society are not actively plotting against citizens, or a sense that one is not risking verbal abuse by simply being out in the world). From the need for security we may derive a number of what are usually taken to be foundational moral prohibitions and requirements, such as the prohibition of murder. And it is this need for security, combined with humanity’s deep interdependence, that gives weight and force to that fundamental moral and political norm, co-operation, which creates groups as communities rather than mere assemblages of individuals. So, it is good for beings categorized as humans to co-operate, and it is good that they co-operate. We can say the same for many other groups of beings,
such as wolves, bees, crows, and dolphins. The natures of these groups and their members are such that co-operation is required for their survival and flourishing; and for humans, that co-operation is biologically required renders it ethically required, so that its absence implies wrongness as well as signaling deficiency.

**Concerns and responses: rationality and moral motivation**

The idea of an essential way of life as that which grounds an empirically based ethical naturalism is problematized by critic John McDowell (1995). McDowell’s target is based in what he understands as a pervasive yet misguided interpretation of Aristotelian ethics, which grounds virtue’s necessity in the natures of biological beings. With this view, as creatures naturally endowed with reason as well as passion, humans require virtue for their lives to go well, and therefore have reason to be or to become virtuous. That is, the nature of humans is what confirms the grounding of ethical considerations in reason (1995, 152). But McDowell challenges this purported direct link between a natural aspect of humans and the ethical, and suggests rather that ethical thinking must involve not mere realization (or perhaps, acceptance of and co-operation with) of one’s nature, but more importantly some activity of reflection that consists in transcendence of that nature: “Reason does not just open our eyes to nature, as members of the animal species we belong to; it also enables and even obliges us to step back from it, in a way that puts its bearing on our practical problems into question” (154). Naturalists rejecting the preceding claim, says McDowell, would seem to be committed
to what he refers to as an “empiricistic naturalism”\(^{54}\) that is metaphysically shallow” (168), and remain bound to an unacceptably deflationary account of the significance and role of reason in ethics. Surely, according to McDowell, ethical conduct must involve something not reducible to conformity to one’s nature as a member of some biological category. The very essence (and advantage) of reason is its provision of the external viewpoint, which allows reason-endowed creatures to think and act in ways that are contrary to their natures by reflecting on the value of their natures’ dictates (170-171). Moreover, this faculty forms the most basic condition for moral reform, both individually and collectively.

Foot claims that practical rationality is a naturally endowed faculty; irrationality signifies a departure from goodness because of the intrinsic departure from what “comes naturally” for human beings. McDowell’s claims above may therefore appear to conflict with her view. But remaining a defender of some sort of naturalism himself, McDowell appeals to the notion of “second nature” as a way of reconciling his commitment to reason as that which “distances an agent from his natural motivational impulses” (178) with his regard for reason as a legitimate faculty that operates from within the agent, as opposed to an external force (174). He accordingly defines his conception of reason as “semi-naturalistic,” and argues that adopting this conception is crucial to creating a successful alternative to the non-cognitivist approaches rejected by Foot.

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\(^{54}\) According to McDowell, “empiricistic naturalism restricts us to the following options for ethics: deny that ethical truth would have to be practical, or, if we hold on to the idea of ethical truth, if any, as a species of practical truth, either force practical truth into the form of mirroring disenchanted nature or else—for those who doubt that that is feasible—renounce the aspiration to ethical truth” (1995, 168). So this form of naturalism denies the possibility of an objective ethics that is motivating.
I believe that McDowell’s claims are unevenly effective but instructive, and I will now go on to take up what I understand as his (separable) challenges to the so-called empiricistic naturalism project in order to show how those criticisms can help address an underlying problem with Foot’s approach, as well as help illustrate her interpretation of the role of practical rationality. To begin, I will suggest that McDowell’s critique rightly targets the difficulty of grounding ethical norms in group-specified rather than individual-specified needs. McDowell argues that we cannot derive a rational evaluation of what some particular individual within a group should do from the natural patterns pertaining to the group. Imagining that wolves, for example, have developed a capacity for reason (presumably, the sort of reason that we typically believe is restricted to humans), McDowell suggests that any given wolf can be confronted with a question to which he cannot respond through appeal to empiricistic naturalism. For instance, when about to participate in the co-operatively engineered hunt, as he is naturally inclined to do, some wolf may reasonably question whether it would not be better if he simply sat out and took his share of the kill anyway (153). The fact of his group being defined by the need for co-operative hunting, that is, cannot tell this individual what he should do, if, as McDowell explains, “our wolf has stepped back from his natural impulses and taken up the critical stance…” (ibid).

The mere knowledge, McDowell argues, that one is a member of some group and that members of that group are classified partly on the basis of sharing some particular need—for instance, to hunt co-operatively—does not direct one’s reason toward a

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55 There are various ways we can take “better” to mean here. In keeping with the interpretation of practical rationality as that faculty which allows humans to best serve their ends as individuals, in this case what is implied is that it would better serve that particular wolf’s interests to sit out the hunt.
particular choice when faced with the question of what one ought to do (154). The upshot of this criticism, of course, is that the Footian justification for humans’ need for the virtues cannot also serve as justification for any particular individual being moved by this fact of her, qua human being, needing the virtues in her decision-making. The question is how we can interpret the free-rider’s decision as irrational if it is made through consideration of what action will best serve her self-interested ends. In McDowell’s words,

> Even if we grant that human beings have a naturally based need for the virtues, in a sense parallel to the sense in which wolves have a naturally based need for co-operativeness in their hunting, that need not cut any ice with someone who questions whether virtuous behaviour is genuinely required by reason. (155)

Proponents of a self-interest based conception of reason will thus reject the possibility of legitimizing ethical claims and their motivational power through objectively identifiable and naturally determined norms rather than subjective attitudes. Humans’ “characteristic way of going on,” as Hursthouse puts it throughout her *On Virtue Ethics* (1999), concerns our capacity for rationality, and there may be nothing irrational about flouting those purported norms rooted in our biological natures—this is precisely the nature of reason. McDowell puts the problem this way, explaining that the “possessor of logos cannot be just a knower, but must be an agent too; and we cannot make sense of logos as manifesting itself in agency without seeing it as selecting between options, rather than simply going along with what is going to happen anyway” (152).

A similar concern is described by Gavin Lawrence (1995), when he interprets Foot’s mid-career work as admitting the contingency of virtue’s motivational force: “Moral considerations are thus reasons for those who have ‘standard’ interests in [for
instance] benevolence and justice, but not for those who do not. If so, moral considerations turn out to be hypothetical: their force as reasons depends on the agent having the relevant desires or interests” (1995, 93, emphasis added). Once again we face the problem of the individual’s extractability from her group: the fact of there being particular needs of others in her group as well as of the group itself need not rationally compel her to attend to those needs. Notice too that she is not freed from such considerations merely because her own survival or well-being is at stake, but for the much less appealing reason that she could receive greater benefit should she ignore these needs. Humans as an abstract group may need the virtues, but a wide variety of circumstances may render this fact moot as a reason for acting some way, for any given human. Foot herself raises this issue: “There will surely be objection to the idea that a natural form of life characteristic of humankind could determine what you or I ought to do. What does it matter to me what species I belong to? Should we not protest on behalf of individuality and creativity against bringing in the human species when asking what I myself—this particular person—should do?” (2001, 37).

Foot responds to this objection by making an argument for why any human failing to cultivate and express the virtues is defective from an expanded notion of practical rationality. She begins by identifying the traditional view of practical rationality as a stubborn bur embedded in moral theory’s paw (2002, 160). Inspired by Warren Quinn, Foot rejects a neo-Humean notion of rationality, as one that mistakenly portrays reason’s role as essentially one of servitude to the agent’s desires and preferences (2001, 62). We have already assumed that reason is the basic distinguishing feature of human beings, and that it is therefore deeply important. If this is true, then it seems strange to say that reason
is that which can and will dictate humans to behave in ways that are deeply harmful or unjust; why would we value that which is most essential to humanity if, as a capacity, it is uncontroversially manifest in disgraceful as well as noble actions equally (2001, 63)?

Beginning with the assumption that grounding and systematizing morality must answer to practical rationality’s necessarily indentured servitude to self-interest has created effective but illegitimate barriers to ethical naturalism. She explains: “there seems to be a mistake of strategy involved in trying to fit the rationality of moral action into either theory [of self-interest or rationality]: such an enterprise implying that we first come to a theory of rational action, and then try as best we can to slot in the rationality of acts of justice and charity” (2001, 10). For Foot, such a strategy flagrantly disregards the significance of what belonging to some kind implies for any given individual of that kind. Or rather, it disregards the significance of belongingness to some kind in the particular case of virtuous behaviour in humans.

Foot’s critics would presumably be ready to accept the relevance of a cow’s being a cow to assessing her defectiveness or lack thereof on the basis of whether she is able to exercise her kind’s capacity for providing their young with milk. Being as they are, calves need their mother’s milk to live well. Failure to provide for that need, barring mitigating circumstances (such as those present in modern agriculture), is indicative of

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56 Clearly, this is not a moral defectiveness displayed by the cow. The claim is that her defect is analogous to the defect expressed by, for instance, cruelty in humans, given that each of these indicates a failed response to need. Foot and other ethical naturalists such as Thompson (1995) wish to argue for the shared structure of biological norms such as milk-provision and moral norms such as compassion. Because our species needs compassion in much the same way that others need milk provision, and because humans are able to identify appropriate objects of compassion and what compassion requires through reason, it is a sign of defect to fail to express compassion. The possibility that such norms may be unjustifiably demanding or rigid is explored in a later section of this chapter.
some defect. But if the virtues are necessary for our kind’s living well, and the virtues are made possible through our kind’s particular capacity for reason-responsiveness, we should not think it plausible to place this very reason-responsiveness in the role of antagonist.

This criticism also disregards what is entailed by the evaluation of imprudent acts as irrational. Again, Foot defends her view of practical rationality’s role in morality by endorsing Quinn’s criticism of the Humean notion of practical reason as essentially and exhaustively instrumental. If practical reason is Humean, and only concerned with means, she explains that we “would therefore be indifferent to nastiness or even disgracefulness in an agent’s purposes” (2001, 62). Given that humans have needs that require attention from others to the same extent that they have needs that require prudence and effective means-end reasoning, a view of practical rationality that systematically prioritizes the latter over the former seems wrongheaded. That is, if a person who behaves imprudently (for instance, favouring present desires over long-term interests in risky ways) is easily charged with irrationality, and therefore with a defective will, there must be reason to evaluate a failure to comply with reasons for acting in a certain way towards others in a similar fashion. And if this is true, there is an “intrinsic link” between reasons for action and moral goodness (2001, 63-64). The upshot of denying a principled distinction between what is in operation when an individual recognizes reasons for acting in self-interest and reasons for acting in the interest of others is the view that “the rationality of, say, telling the truth, keeping promises, or helping a neighbour is on a par with the rationality of self-preserving action, and the careful and cognizant pursuit of other innocent ends; each being a part or aspect of practical rationality” (2001, 11). The failure
to recognize some need and act accordingly signifies a failure to conform to an essential way of life, and that failure signifies a retreat from the good, in the form of instantiating a defective will.  

For Foot, then, it is always rational to express virtue rather than vice; moral reasons are always reasons. She sees any further questioning of this claim as unanswerable: “If the sceptic…goes on saying that he has not been shown that there is a reason for acting as a good person would act, it is no longer clear what he is asking for. To ask for a reason for acting rationally is to ask for a reason where reasons must a priori have come to an end” (2002, 65). While some individual may very well act contrary to the virtues, by breaking promises, for instance, her doing so (again, barring mitigating circumstances) must be indicative of some defect—a defect in rational thinking. The thought that the individual may free herself from the bonds of virtue through rational thinking is perhaps, as Foot suggests, evidence of residual attachment to psychological egoism (2001, 16). As John Hacker-Wright argues, “as practically reasoning creatures we cannot avoid adopting some interpretation of our own form of life and how we interpret ourselves determines how we evaluate ourselves, including how we evaluate our practical reasoning” (2009, 417).

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57 Alasdair MacIntyre’s argument for the human need for virtue buttresses Foot’s ultimate response to the issue of practical rationality as antagonist to virtue, by emphasizing the significance of human vulnerability in moral theory. Humans are not social animals in some merely superficial sense of generally benefiting from co-operative behaviour; we are radically dependent on one another for our survival and well-being. In this vein, MacIntyre advances a revised priority of autonomy and rationality, arguing that “the virtues of independent rational agency need for their adequate exercise to be accompanied by what I shall call the virtues of acknowledged dependence and that a failure to do this is apt to obscure some features of rational agency” (1999, 8).
Nevertheless, it might be objected that if facts about human nature are that which ground ethical, and consequently rational, demands, it seems that we can only avoid condoning if not mandating seemingly appalling behaviour on the grounds that such behaviour is not rooted in facts about humans. The worry is that carving up the set of facts about human nature in a way that allows for non-arbitrary selection of traits that ought to inform our decision-making (such as empathy) and rejection of those that we think ought not to (e.g., violent urges) will be impossible. On what grounds may we condemn sexual assault, for instance, if the ethical norms guiding us are presumably based in the natural fact of sexual aggression? It seems to me that we can quite easily distinguish between natural facts that ought or ought not to inform our behaviour by taking up Foot’s needs-based account. We can reject the notion that humans have needs to commit violence; indeed it seems as if any notion of natural need that allowed for this would be deeply suspect.

**Revising the life form: a more expansive naturalism**

I will now suggest that in order to be rendered most convincing and applicable, Footian naturalism demands a revision of the categories that form the architecture of natural normativity. Rather than draw natural norms along species lines, ethical naturalists should examine *individual* biological traits that are shared among beings in order to ground virtue in a way that more clearly heeds the connection between need and morality. By broadening Foot’s notion of needs and paying greater attention to the significance of pervasive interdependence among both individuals and other species, I
argue that a more palatable naturalism, which can ground a normative theoretical ethical view and be action-guiding in reproductive decision-making, will become available.

Group-based needs remain a contentious candidate for grounding virtue because of the way that groups are identified along species lines. Our needs are perhaps better grouped along lines that create, for instance, groups much larger than species. Foot herself likely realized this. In an interview with Foot, Alex Voorhoeve questions the necessity of her commitment to the notion of species as the group designator which informs virtue, suggesting that deriving natural norms along species lines, particularly in regards to humans, inadequately addresses the vast difference among humans of different cultures and eras. Foot’s response reveals what I understand to be her willingness to abandon a species-focused approach to judging the good:

Perhaps there are no strict boundaries here. This is not of very great importance…. There are many things that all humans need, though some amount of relativity does emerge from different ways of life in different times and places and different social, economic, and cultural circumstances. I think it is one of the advantages of this approach that it doesn’t have to claim that all moral norms are the same for all human beings. (2009, 98-99)

Perhaps we should view the notion of species as a defeasible heuristic for needs identification that will allow us to provide an account of the good for a variety of beings in a detailed way. But there is a larger issue here. To begin with species as a way of identifying needs and therefore goodness, rather than to begin with needs as a way of

58 Needs may also be categorized in ways that create groups smaller than species in helpful ways; for instance, we can imagine that human individuals with different personality types will need different things (e.g., introverts and extraverts) and that those different needs may rightly inform moral behaviour.

59 For example, in a footnote in Natural Goodness she states, “I have written here of species, but it might be better to use the words ‘life form’ as Michael Thompson does” (2001, 15).
identifying groups and therefore goodness for those groups, seems to put the cart before the horse.

In my view, Foot’s most concerning potential mistake is not exactly in her overly specified/narrowly biological approach, as she does seem to accept that needs vary with circumstances in non-negligible ways. There are, however, both empirical and theoretical problems with grounding natural goodness in species categories. First is the problem of unjustified exclusion. A problematic implication of Foot’s commitment to species-based needs as the ground for goodness and badness is that acting in a morally good way will be impossible for many people, entailing a highly exclusionary ethics. To equate the capacity for self-reflection with overly demanding standards of rationality and critical thought from moral agents seems unwarranted. Even individuals who are profoundly cognitively disabled may have what we could reasonably view as reflective capacities, but these are at times dismissed as merely (and regrettably) defective manifestations of reason that entail diminished needs-responsiveness. To be sure, these capacities’ exercise would be limited to a narrow set of situations— but could a severely disabled person not learn that she has the capacity to cause physical pain to another being, and with that self-knowledge, attempt to alter her future behaviour? Or, to put it in even less demanding terms, perhaps she would just feel different after acting in a way that visibly hurt someone, and then act differently toward that person. Even if she was unaware of the reason she was acting or feeling differently, this change could surely be described as the product of self-reflection in some sense. The human capacity for reflectiveness, it seems, has no logical constraints that would preclude a broadening of the term to include a vast array of abilities. This point is perhaps less an amendment to Foot’s view than a call for
an explicit recognition on the part of her supporters that we must be careful and clear in how we go about outlining the criteria of the defective will. Attending to needs must be accessible to a community of individuals with a broad spectrum of reasoning abilities.

Second, and more broadly, the sorts of needs that seem to be both most pressing and most desirably guiding of moral thinking and action are not divided along species lines. The natural fact of sentience, for instance, might ground a majority of our most basic moral behaviours. Again, the broad issue here is that what matters in terms of identifying grounds for goodness are not biological categories but biological traits. I make this distinction in part because I take issue with Foot’s claims regarding the constraints on flourishing as represented by requirements of a “natural life.” For Foot, “what is excellence, and what defect, is relative to the natural habitat of the species” (2001, 34). This means that, for instance, the deer in the zoo who cannot flee her enemies but remains secure given that she has no enemies from which to run remains defective; that is, a lack of disadvantage associated with the absence of some typically expressed trait does not correspond to a lack of defect. But it seems to me that despite the deer’s inability to flee being an instantiation of a disadvantage for her kind, to identify the deer herself as defective wrongly interprets the significance of the fleeing trait. Deer (just like other so-called prey animals) have a need to escape their enemies, not to flee. If and when a deer has no enemies from which to flee, her need to escape enemies is fulfilled, rendering her inability to flee a neutral property. If some being can do well in a given environment, it makes little sense to deem that being defective on the basis of her lack of some trait that was necessary for survival in another environment.
I am suggesting that for most forms of life there will be a range of options of sorts of lives within that form, through which the possibility of flourishing will vary with the available environments in which to live out those lives. The sorts of lives available that will be able to count as flourishing are more aptly identified on the basis of whether they allow the expression of certain traits rather than to what extent they conform to the “most natural” form of life for any member of a kind. There is reason to be wary of Foot’s claims that “animals cannot be said to be flourishing if they are not living anything like a natural life. Any animal is not benefited by being kept alive by artificial feeding and induced to breed by artificial means, because such a life would be too far from its life form. What fitted such an unnaturally fixed-up animal for survival, such as extreme docility, might not be goodness but perhaps defect in a thing of its kind” (2001, 93, fn 16). While she is right to suggest that alteration of some being of a kind that is singularly motivated by the purposes of another kind (e.g., breeding miniature teacup poodles for the amusement of rich humans), her emphasis on naturalness as a form of species typicality entails unjustified exclusion of a variety of beings from having identifiably flourishing lives.

Naturalism, beneficence, and benevolence

Before concluding, I would like to briefly explore the implications of accepting Footian ethical naturalism for the nature and significance of beneficence. Given that, for Foot, “virtues play a necessary part in the life of human beings as do stings in the life of bees” (2001, 35, citing Geach), exercising beneficence will be a condition of having a good will. As vulnerable and social animals, humans require others’ beneficial acts to
survive and flourish. Thus beneficence will be a moral demand under Foot’s account, but will be quite a different demand than the sort explored in the preceding chapters. Unlike in the consequentialist picture endorsed by PPB supporters, the notion of beneficence supplied by ethical naturalism is not maximizing.\textsuperscript{60} It will also not manifest as an unreflective response to need, which, as I will argue in the following chapter, is the view of beneficence implied by utilitarianism. Beneficence will instead be made sense of in terms of the way that bestowing benefit may express the benevolent will. And possession and expression of the benevolent will shall be appropriately shaped and informed by the way that humans live and engage with one another: “to determine what is goodness and what defect of character, disposition, and choice, we must consider what human good is and how human beings live: in other words, what kind of a living thing a human being is” (Foot 2001, 51). As interdependent beings who most frequently and effortlessly bestow benefit on close others, humans’ expression of the benevolent will shall not be, or not be uniquely, of an impersonal nature.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I set out to provide an analysis of Philippa Foot’s neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism and respond to some concerns regarding her account’s portrayal of the relationships among rationality, goodness, and forms of life. I aimed to show that while Foot can respond effectively to some concerns introduced by those committed to a neo-Humean account of practical reason, her naturalist picture could benefit from greater

\textsuperscript{60} Needs fulfillment does not seem to be the sort of thing that can be maximized in an individual, as needs are appropriately interpreted in threshold terms. Needs fulfillment across individuals is not something that can be maximized given the moral relevance of the agent’s needs to her decision-making and behaviours.
openness to the possibility of different sorts of lives counting as flourishing within natural kinds. I finished the chapter with a brief discussion of how the nature and significance of beneficence would be interpreted and applied in a Footian meta-ethical account. The following chapter will examine the normative ethical account to which, I will argue, there are strong theoretical and practical reasons to subscribe. Specifically, I will discuss and support a virtue-centred approach to ethical inquiry that is grounded in the naturalist picture of moral goodness I have examined herein.
Chapter 5

The nature and desirability of virtue: an analysis of a virtue-centred approach to ethics in human life

Introduction

In the preceding chapter I explained and defended a kind of ethical naturalism as a plausible and desirable meta-ethical position. I did so partly in order to lay the groundwork for my defense of a particular normative ethical theory, one that is virtue-centred. I will begin this chapter with an overview of some general features of a virtue-centred ethics and a brief examination of the notions of virtue and virtuousness that I will be using here. I will then examine some challenges faced by two rival normative ethical theories, consequentialism (in particular, utilitarianism), and Kantianism, to which a virtue-centred ethics is not susceptible. Finally, I will provide some reasons why I believe a virtue-centred ethics to be most plausible and helpful in terms of informing rational deliberation and, more broadly, mapping the ethical landscape. I am not aiming to present and defend a theory of virtue as a final alternative to utilitarianism and Kantianism. Rather, my concern is to show how appeal to a virtue-centred ethics facilitates the introduction of important considerations into ethical inquiry that would otherwise be ignored or undermined. It is in light of this extension of the sphere of legitimate and important moral considerations that I will defend the virtue-centred approach’s plausibility as a theoretical approach. There are, in short, several benefits of thinking in terms of virtue ethics, and because these benefits and the general pertinence of virtue
have been under-appreciated, I believe it productive to examine them. In Chapter 6, I will show how they are particularly useful in the context of reproduction.

Before proceeding, three considerations regarding the nature of this project as a whole are worth mentioning. First, my defense of a virtue-centred approach has motivated as well as been motivated by my favourable evaluation of the naturalistic meta-ethical position. That is, I believe that the virtue-centred approach has advantages of its own that do not spring directly from its basis in naturalism, and in this respect the approach should, in my view, be understood to hold a mutually reinforcing rather than unidirectional relationship with naturalism. I am therefore not advancing a straightforward top-down argument for what I will eventually present as my position on the ethics of childbearing, but rather an articulation of why these theoretical commitments to a form of ethical naturalism and a virtue-centred normative ethical theory are plausible and desirable insofar as they provide grounding for, as I will argue in the next chapter, a robust account of the morality of childbearing.

Second, my argument hinges on a particular way of going about moral theorizing in terms of adjudicating among competing theories and, more basically, deciding on the proper method of adjudication. I reject the idea that morality’s nature and significance can be determined in isolation from, and prior to, an examination of what we think is best for a moral theory to offer, in terms of explanatory and prescriptive power. Just as Foot negotiated a path to an objective and motivating ethics by rejecting the presupposed hierarchical relationship between reason and morality, claiming that reason must serve moral ends, I believe that understanding morality and identifying and developing a good moral theory involve meta-considerations that pertain to substantive concerns regarding
the theory itself. My arguments are based on the notion that moral theorizing is itself a normative activity; when we think about what will be best for a moral theory to say about things like the scope of morality and the ideal moral agent, we are developing standards to which a viable moral theory must conform.

This second consideration brings me to a third and final point regarding the second arm of my critical project, a critique of deontological ethics. In Chapter 3 I attempted to show that the rights-based approach to evaluating reproduction endorsed by Shiffrin is valuable but ultimately fails to be compelling. There, I was critiquing what I view as a strong example of a particular normative approach that is defended from a deontological framework. In this chapter, I am addressing issues that pertain to a distinct aspect of deontology; namely, the implications of some meta-ethical commitments of a paradigmatic deontological moral theory, Kantianism. When I stated in this chapter’s introduction that I will be critiquing Kantianism, I am referring specifically to Kant’s moral theory, and the particular target of my critique is his metaphysical picture, which grounds his deontological moral theory. For instance, taking responsibility for one's actions and becoming a self-identified moral agent are hindered by Kant's location of freedom (and thus, morality) in the noumenal realm. Despite the possibility of detaching Kant’s metaphysical picture from a deontological moral framework, a detachment that is arguably realized by neo-Kantians working in the liberal tradition, I believe that it is fair to argue for the advantages of a virtue-centred approach to morality and to the evaluation of reproduction in particular by critiquing this picture and its implications. I believe it is fair for two reasons. First, as I stated above, the legitimacy of a normative moral theory must hinge in part on the plausibility of its foundational meta-ethical commitments; that
is, to most accurately and productively evaluate a normative moral theory, one must take into consideration its general picture of reality and its account of the nature of moral concepts. In the preceding chapter I set out to provide reasons for subscribing to a neo-Aristotelian naturalist meta-ethical account. As I explained there, this account lends support to a plausible and desirable characterization of the moral realm and the moral agent’s place in it. In this chapter I will provide some reasons why I believe the Kantian account fails to support such a characterization. Because of this failure, Kantian moral theory has a count against it that a virtue-centred approach does not. This critique could simply invite contemporary Kantians to substitute a different metaphysics; the feasibility of such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this project. I merely wish to suggest that some aspects of Kant’s metaphysics render his or any moral theory grounded in his metaphysics problematic, and that they do so in a way that highlights some desirable features of virtue ethics.

Second, I do not intend these criticisms to supply reason for a generalized rejection of deontological approaches to morality. I understand that the scope of my criticisms is limited to the particular aspects of deontology on which I have chosen to focus. Moreover, I do not think such a generalized rejection either plausible or desirable. Rather, I wish merely to suggest that these aspects of deontology that I pick out manifest as weaknesses; and these weaknesses, I argue, are not suffered by the virtue-centred approach I defend. In sum, my focus on the implications of some of Kant’s meta-ethical commitments should not be viewed as a call for rejection of deontology that is based in arbitrarily selected features of some particular forms of deontological thinking. Rather, I wish to show how metaphysical commitments can mislead moral theory.
Virtue-Centred Ethics: Features and Commitments

I will discuss two features of a virtue-centred ethics that I take to be most crucial to supplying a cogent analysis of the morality of reproduction with a virtue-centred approach. These are the primacy of character in ethical evaluation and the regulatory role of practical reason.

Primacy of character

The first feature concerns the role and significance of character. One’s character is to be understood as a disposition to think (be reason-responsive), to feel (empathy), and to act (motivated by these right feelings and reasons). In a virtue-centred ethics character is regarded as the primary locus of goodness and badness, so that actions are evaluated by virtue of their expression of character traits. The primacy of character is contrasted with the primacy of outcomes or rule or principle-adherence in the context of ethical evaluation. Goodness and badness are sourced in individuals’ dispositions, so that, for instance, “For Jane to be generous, generosity has to be a feature of her—that is, a feature of Jane as a whole, and not just any old feature, but one that is persisting, reliable, and characteristic” (Annas 2011, 8). What matters ethically is the way that a person is disposed to act, feel, and choose, whereby this disposition has been intelligently cultivated and is reliably expressed. Being virtuous will mean being of virtuous character, and this will mean possessing and expressing identifiable character traits. Hursthouse explains that character traits involve much more than dispositions to act, even for certain reasons, as she illustrates with the example of honest individuals:

We expect a reliability in the actions that reflect their attitude to honesty, too. We expect them to disapprove of, to dislike, and to
deplore dishonesty, to approve of, like, and admire honesty….
We expect them to be distressed when those near and dear to
them are dishonest, to be unresentful of honest criticism, to be
surprised, shocked, angered (as appropriate) by flagrant acts of
dishonesty… to despise rather than to envy those who succeed
by dishonest means, to be unsurprised, pleased, or delighted (as
appropriate) when honesty triumphs. (1999, 11-12)

The evaluation of goodness or badness is therefore most accurately conducted
with the agent’s way of being across a range of situations and actions in mind. More
broadly speaking, virtue-centred ethics makes the claim that “action appraisal is
derivative from the appraisal of character…. [T]he claim is that the basic moral facts are
facts about the quality of character” (Watson 2003, 232). Some commentators believe in
the ultimate primacy of character, such as Michael Slote, according to whom “the moral
or ethical status of acts… [is] entirely derivative from independent and fundamental
aretaic… ethical characterizations of motives, character traits, or individuals” (2003,
203). The Aristotelian picture, in contrast, does not identify character as explanatorily
exhaustive of the goodness or badness of some action. For Aristotle, says Slote, actions’
“status as right or fine or noble is treated as in some measure independent of agent-
evaluations” (2003, 204), and this makes his view agent-focused rather than agent-based.
While I perceive the value in Slote’s self-ascribed radical stance,61 I am nonetheless
endorsing the more moderate and clearly neo-Aristotelian picture of the role of character,
which allows for some independent consideration of actions’ moral worth.

61 In fact, one of the purported concerns about Slote’s position that he discusses seems to be a
potential advantage. He suggests that objectors may argue that agent-basing erases the distinction
between doing the right thing and doing the right thing for the right reason (2003, 205). If all we
care about is motives, the objection goes, then the person who does what we wish to call right
(e.g., saving the drowning person because she wishes to continue her extortion of the victim) is
actually acting wrongly given that they have the wrong motives. But it seems perfectly sensible to
me to say that they have acted in a vicious way, while maintaining that the outcome was
preferable. I will expand on this idea in a later section of this chapter.
I will make two more brief observations about the significance of character, which I take to be important for evaluating the ethics of reproduction. The first is that while a trait must be stable and enduring to count as virtuous, it is possible to overestimate the required stability and generality of some trait’s expression for it to count as a virtue. This difficulty is picked up on by Robert Solomon, who argues that a “virtue must be somewhat general, but this generality need not entail that the virtue be impersonal, much less dispassionate, nor need it preclude exclusivity with regard to its object. The generality is of a different kind. A virtue must be manifested in many different sorts of actions and feelings” (2005, 87).

The second has to do with how character is formed. One is responsible for one’s character but does not have absolute control over it; the range of options for one to be a certain sort of person, to have a certain sort of disposition, is inevitably delimited by one’s circumstances and natural endowments. According to Annas, barriers to developing virtuousness are importantly external and contingent, so that “Most of these people [who grow up in conditions of extreme poverty or violence] fail to become virtuous because of the difficulties of their situation, not because they are not capable of it” (2011, 31). Moreover, any natural propensities to purportedly virtuous behaviour (displayed, for example, by the helpful individual with a naturally sunny disposition) are not true indicators of virtuousness. As Aristotle explains, “the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature. Rather, we are by nature able to acquire them” (1103a25).
Role and significance of practical reason

The second feature I discuss concerns the role and significance of practical reason in virtue-centred ethics. As I demonstrated in Chapter 3, Foot’s neo-Aristotelian naturalism, which grounds a virtue-centred account, presupposes a non-instrumentalist notion of practical reason. For Foot, being rational involves valuing and pursuing the good. In the virtuous individual, practical reason is manifest as a particular sort of reason-responsiveness. The virtuous person is practically wise in that she possesses “a sensitivity to the morally salient features of particular situations which goes beyond an ability to apply explicit rules” (Crisp 1998, 6). Generally speaking, neo-Aristotelianism holds goodness and rationality to be in a mutually supportive relationship, for, as Daniel Russell explains, “Aristotle insists that there is no moral virtue without *phronesis*, and no *phronesis* without moral virtue” (2009, 7). Moral goodness is therefore achievable only with a practical intelligence that partly consists in recognition of the goodness of the ends toward which one should aim, and partly in understanding how one may effectively pursue those ends. As Russell puts it, “reliability in hitting the targets of the virtues requires specificatory deliberation that is intelligent and flexible” (2009, 101).

This intelligence is actively exercised through the character as a whole. That is, practical reason in the virtue-centred approach is characterized holistically. The virtuous individual is one whose reasoning about what virtue requires develops and manifests in whatever context in which the individual finds herself: “[P]ractical intelligence develops over your character as a whole, in a holistic way. You can’t develop generosity in the absence of fairness and tact; you can develop a character trait, but it won’t be generosity, since it will fail to get things right in action” (Annas 2011, 86). Expressing virtue does
not involve, however, a threshold of reasoning that the agent either displays or fails to display: “It is not an all-or-nothing matter” (Hursthouse 1999, 156).

**Reason’s regulatory relationship with the emotions**

A virtue-centred ethics also involves a particular account of the relationship between reason and emotion; it takes as central the proper regulation of the emotions and their expression by practical reason. Emotions that are generally conducive to good actions are not good in themselves, but are necessary to the expression of virtue insofar as they are shaped by one’s faculty of practical reasoning. As Hursthouse explains of emotions such as love, “There is nothing about them, *qua* natural inclinations, which guarantees that they occur ‘in complete harmony with reason’, that is, that they occur when, and only when, they should” (1999, 102). It is, however, important not to overemphasize the deliberative aspect of virtuousness, in the sense that virtue may be truly expressed in an immediate way, as for instance when someone rushes to the aid of a threatened stranger. It is not that such an act is not consciously performed, but it is also not deliberated upon in the way that one would deliberate upon, for example, whether one ought to care for an ailing parent who has been abusive. Of course, the latter may also express a virtuous character; the point is that some forms of virtuous action may be less obviously mediated by practical reason. While deliberation may legitimately precede virtuous action, however, it may also precede doing that which *virtue requires*. The distinction between doing what virtue requires and acting virtuously will be filled out in a later section that focuses on the nature of virtuous action.
Moreover, as Robert Solomon has argued, sudden emotions may be involved in true expressions of virtue. In his argument for erotic love as a moral virtue, Solomon suggests that passions are not essentially transient or passive, and may indeed contribute to the development of virtuous character: “[W]hen an unusual emotion ‘bursts’ forth (falling in love, or finding oneself wholly absorbed in affection for a new baby), such emotions are not to be construed as a literal ‘burst’ but as a dramatic new constellation which, if it is to be counted as love at all, reconstitutes and redefines the life of the individual” (2005, 89). The significance of reason’s regulating relationship with the emotions concerns the virtuous person’s understanding of why she has acted the way she did, not reason’s complete control over her emotions’ behavioural manifestations. She recognizes her correct discernment of what was required in the given situation and can give reasons for her chosen course of action (Annas 2011, 30). In sum, because goodness of character is something that is achieved through intelligent practice, we can say of the virtuous agent both that she is engaged immediately by what is required of her, and that she has discerned what is required from her successfully because of the way her emotions and attitudes have been shaped by her overarching faculty of practical reason.

**Education and guidance**

The final point I will make about the significance of practical reason in a virtue-centred ethics concerns the way virtues come about. Virtuousness, as I hope to have made clear, is not an innate but a cultivated state of character. The sort of reasoned engagement with one’s circumstances that is displayed by the virtuous individual has been made possible through learning. As Annas explains, “Our natural practical traits need to be
formed and educated in an intelligent way for them to develop as virtues; a natural trait may just proceed blindly on where virtue would respond selectively and in a way open to novel information and contexts” (2011, 86). That some people seem naturally more inclined to behave virtuously or viciously is explained by what Aristotle refers to as the natural virtues (not true virtues), which may be possessed by children as well as adults. Such propensities for acting in a particular way or holding particular attitudes do not engage the faculty of practical reason in the way that would be required for their being true expressions of virtue.

The sort of learning that takes place in the trainee in virtue is best likened to that which takes place among learners of other skills, such as piano playing. Annas writes: “Because a virtue is a disposition it requires time, experience, and habituation to develop it, but the result is not routine but the kind of actively and intelligently engaged practical mastery that we find in practical experts such as pianists and athletes” (2011, 14). This interpretation of the rationally engaged and skilled nature of virtuousness is encapsulated in Hursthouse’s claim that *phronesis*, as practical wisdom, is a form of knowledge (1999, 190). To discern and explain what it would mean to express virtue in a given situation is a condition for virtuousness. It is through learning about virtue that we become virtuous: “The ability both to teach and to learn a skill… depends on the ability to convey an explanation by giving and receiving reasons. It thus requires some degree of articulacy” (Annas 2011, 19).
Virtue and becoming virtuous

This final point about the significance of practical reason in a virtue-centred ethics invites some further consideration of how virtue-centred ethics interprets the development of virtue. One learns to be virtuous through virtuous others and reflection on the virtues themselves. For Aristotle, virtue arises in the agent and from where she is in the world, but this process can and must go beyond that of cultural indoctrination. As Annas explains, one learns to be virtuous in a way that is mediated through family, culture, political context, etc. But because one learns virtue through not mere emulation but active aspiring, we may also transcend these contexts—we may go beyond our teachers through reflection on what the virtues demand (2011, 21-22). That is, “What the learner needs to do is not only to learn from the teacher or role model how to understand what she has to do and the way to do it, but to become able to acquire for herself the skill that the teacher has, rather than acquiring it as a matter of routine” (Annas 2011, 17). The ideal result is an individual who will discern and act on each opportunity to express virtuousness, in an intelligent but immediate way, like a skilled practitioner.

Because becoming virtuous demands rational and affectively engaged responsiveness to a variety of situations, virtue theorists such as Hursthouse take pains to demonstrate the implausibility of becoming good through simplistic rule-following. The central message Hursthouse and others wish to convey is that ethics cannot merely be a simple decision-making procedure that “any clever adolescent can apply,” and must allow for growth and progress that reflect progress of character. As Hursthouse explains,
unlike mathematical knowledge, cannot be acquired merely by attending lectures, and is not characteristically to be found in people too young to have much experience in life. (1999, 59)

While Hursthouse allows that there are exceptions to this rule, she and other virtue theorists wish to emphasize the developmental nature of virtuousness. Trainees in virtue require commitment and time in order to effectively cultivate a virtuous character. Annas proposes three criteria of learning virtue as skill: one must come to understand, one must develop skill for oneself, and one must strive to improve (2011, 17-18). Becoming virtuous therefore involves reflection on what virtue requires, development of one’s ability to express virtue for oneself (that is, in a self-directed manner), and commitment to continual improvement of one’s ability to express virtue.

**Virtuous action**

In this section I will explore the nature of virtuous action. As aforementioned, while I believe that it is possible to evaluate actions themselves, at its most basic level this evaluation concerns how actions may express the virtuous character. By explaining the criteria of virtuous action, the distinction between virtue and virtuousness should become clear: Apparent virtuousness reflects an understanding and action in conformity with what virtue requires and true virtuousness reflects the manifestation of virtue. I agree with Hursthouse’s claim that “though we may often find it difficult or impossible to apply the distinction between ‘doing what virtue requires’ and ‘acting virtuously’… it is a

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62 Hursthouse recounts a moving story of a deeply impressive youth to illustrate the possibility of exceptions. As she remembers, “an astonishing Pakistani boy called Iqbal Masih, sold to a carpet manufacturer at four, who, by the tender age of twelve, when he was shot, had already been campaigning for two years… with extraordinary determination and courage for the rights of children in Pakistan” (1999, 143). Such a precociously developed drive seems indicative of a youthful moral genius.
distinction that we think very important” (1987, 302). I will also draw a second
distinction that differentiates between the virtuous act and the act that is performed
virtuously.

As I have explained, becoming virtuous entails acting for the right reasons in a
particular way; that is, the virtuous individual is not just acting because she thinks it is
right to do so. She needs true commitment to the value of doing the virtuous act, and this
valuing goes “deep down… it governs and informs her whole life and conduct”
(Hursthouse 1999, 134-5).63 The truly virtuous action, as opposed to the only apparently
virtuous action, meets Aristotle’s three criteria. An action that simply accords with virtue
is not enough for it to be virtuous, for the action must be performed in the right state,
meaning that the agent “must know [that he is doing the virtuous actions]; second, he
must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and, third, he must also do
them from a firm and unchanging state” (1105a33-35, insertion from translator).

Knowing that one is performing a virtuous action will preclude actions performed, for
instance, in states of inebriation where one is not fully aware of one’s actions, from being
truly virtuous. The second criterion requires that the agent is choosing the action for
itself; in the context of reproduction, we could say that the woman who chooses to
become pregnant and bear a child so that she may dress her child up in amusing fashions
is precluded from having her action deemed virtuous.64 And finally, the woman who

63 Clearly, this requirement sets a very high standard for virtuous action, one which would
preclude many if not most people from attaining it with any regularity. But the demandingness of
a virtue approach is tempered by the distinction between ordinary and ideal virtue discussed by
Annas (2011, chapter 4) and explained in the following chapter.
64 The plausibility and desirability of choosing reproduction for itself are not at all self-evident. I
will explain why they are not later in this section. I will further discuss the complexities of the
criterion of intrinsic choice-worthiness and how this applies to reproduction in detail in the
chooses to bear a child for companionship on a whim, in a way that conflicts with her antisocial personality, is also precluded from having her action deemed virtuous. An action is therefore properly deemed virtuous rather than in accordance with virtue only when the acting agent is in the right state. This means, importantly, that a virtue-centred approach does have an account of what can be deemed right action in a way that appeals to the acting agent’s condition. An action is therefore right “iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically… do in the circumstances” (Hursthouse 1999, 28). The good act, I would argue, is simply the act that a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances, performed virtuously.  

**Choosing for itself: clarifying the second criterion**

This approach to distinguishing virtuous action and action merely in accord with virtue raises questions about what precisely meeting these three criteria would involve. In particular, it might be objected that the ideal of choosing an action for its own sake is both enigmatic and impractical. It is enigmatic because it is unclear how the virtue ethics proponent will ground the intrinsic choice-worthiness of actions, and how she will distinguish between actions that are rightly chosen for themselves and those that are not.

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following chapter. Here I will simply point out that Hursthouse endorses the idea of having a child as an end in itself, an aim that she contrasts with having a child for selfish reasons, such as to create an heir to an estate (1987, 306-306).

65 This distinction may render my view somewhat divergent from Aristotle’s, and closer to Slote’s. The former states: “[A]ctions are called just or temperate when they are the sort that a just or temperate person would do. But the just and temperate person is not the one who [merely] does these actions, but the one who also does them in the way in which just or temperate people do them” (1105b7-9, insertion by translator). I would rather say that actions may demonstrate conformity with justice when they are the sort that a just person would do, but are only just when performed by a just agent. There may be no disagreement here, but I point this out just to make clear the distinction I believe is important between (conformity to) virtue and virtuousness in action.
Indeed, it seems that in the case of some actions, it is a vice rather than a virtue to engage in the action for its own sake, a fact that may suggest that the whole criterion is suspect. For instance, the individual who pursues a successful career just for the sake of doing so is not more plausibly acting virtuously than the individual who does so in order to be in a better position to contribute to humanitarian projects. In the Catholic Church, to use another example, it is a vice to have sex for its own sake, but may be virtuous to have sex in order to procreate. It seems that the requirement of choosing actions for their own sake may not be a suitable test for identifying virtuous action, both because it is not clear what it means to choose an action for itself and because not all actions seem desirably chosen for themselves.

The practical issue raised by the second criterion is that with many actions, it is perfectly appropriate to commit an act partly for itself and partly for other reasons. Moreover, perhaps in most cases people do not, and perhaps cannot, choose an act merely for its own sake; most choices have a variety of motives, and it would be worrying if virtue theory required that we rigorously expunge all mixed motives.

There are, in sum, two central issues that demand resolution in order to provide a cogent neo-Aristotelian account of virtuous action and, more specifically, of what virtuous or vicious reproduction could look like: The first is what exactly it means to choose an action for its own sake in the virtue-centred approach, and the second is whether all or most actions (that may plausibly be categorized in terms of virtuousness or viciousness) can and should be chosen for their own sakes.

It turns out that the desirability of choosing an action for its own sake will depend on the nature of the act (specifically, its general relationship to human flourishing) as
well as the state of the agent. I propose that choosing an action for its own sake involves the *recognition of and response to the goodness or badness associated with the act*; to fulfill the second criterion, the agent must view the *nature* of the act in terms of its goodness or badness and respond accordingly. An act’s associated goodness is derived from a regular and deep positive relationship to human flourishing (primarily characterized in terms of needs-responsiveness). Choosing an act for its own sake means choosing an act for the sake of the goodness or badness associated with that act. A good or bad action is chosen for itself when it is the goodness or badness of the action that is responded to and acted upon; it is what engages the will. The potentially virtuous act is one that is reliably and deeply associated with a goodness that contributes to human flourishing, to which the agent responds in the right way, and vice versa for the potentially vicious act.

Some actions, like taking the long way home or painting one’s walls yellow, are not reliably associated with flourishing or its opposite. Choosing to paint one’s walls yellow as opposed to white is not helpfully explained in terms of virtuousness or viciousness; in this and similar cases, it would seem an absurd suggestion that one ought to choose the action for its own sake. Indeed, none of the three criteria of virtuous action are desirably met in these types of actions; for instance, it is not better that one chooses to paint one’s walls yellow because one has cultivated a stable preference for the colour yellow, as opposed to because one has experienced a flash of yellow appreciation. It is only the kind of action that reliably and significantly contributes to or hinders flourishing that will desirably meet any of Aristotle’s criteria. Actions that do not do so are not suitably deemed virtuous or vicious; they are neither potentially virtuous *nor* potentially
performed virtuously, and this is because they bear no significant and reliable relationship to flourishing.

On the other hand, actions that do bear such a relationship to flourishing are suitably deemed potentially virtuous or vicious. This claim may appear contentious in that it seems to suggest that acts may be evaluated independently from their performance by agents. But the claim is not that such actions are necessarily, absolutely, or independently categorized as virtuous or vicious; rather, it is that they may be characterized this way generally. To advance the former view would clearly conflict with some basic features of a virtue-centred ethics, namely the primacy of character and the role of practical reason. To illustrate and support this distinction, I invite the reader to consider what the virtue ethics proponent means when she claims that a great range of acts may be performed both virtuously and viciously. There are, in my view, virtuous ways to pursue all but the most abhorrent of activities, and vicious ways to pursue all but the most magnanimous of activities. The act of killing, for instance, may be performed virtuously; we can imagine a virtuous agent in some set of circumstances where she must kill and how she would go about doing so. The virtuous killer would be one who was caused great pain by the act, and whose committing the act was justified with reasons that were attentive to considerations of, for instance, justice and compassion. Nevertheless, we should rightly resist deeming the act of killing itself virtuous, even when so performed, because the virtuous agent here is not responding to the goodness associated with the act; she has not chosen killing in recognition of and response to its goodness, because killing is not the sort of act that is generally needs-responsive. She has not, to return to the second criterion, chosen the action for itself. But she has acted in a way that
is appropriately reason-responsive and affectively engaged; moreover, she has chosen the act with understanding and from a firm underlying character. She has acted virtuously *in spite of* the general badness of the act; the act of killing remains generally vicious, given its negative relationship with human flourishing.

Conversely, the act of risking one’s life to save another might be performed viciously, if, for instance, as in the case of the extortionist, an agent saves someone for entirely selfish reasons and with nefarious intent, and not at all with the victim’s well-being in mind. Here too the act has not been chosen for itself; there is a generally positive relationship between saving a person’s life and human flourishing, but we cannot interpret the agent’s will as directed toward that. Saving an individual’s life is a potentially virtuous act, which, in this case, is performed viciously.

Thus the virtuous act is distinguished from the act that is *performed* virtuously on the basis of whether the act can meet Aristotle’s second criterion, which requires that the action be chosen for itself. This distinction helps address the second criterion’s impracticality as well as its apparently enigmatic nature. The second criterion’s nature and plausibility is further clarified through appeal to how another act that is reliably associated with hindering flourishing can be chosen for itself and made vicious, or chosen for something else and made to merely accord with vice. Take, for example, the act of locking one’s young child up in a room alone for three hours (we will assume that such behaviour is clearly harmful). The individual who locks her child up because she is recognizing and responding to the badness in the action by striving toward it rather than retreating is (as long as her act meets the other two criteria as well) performing a vicious act. In contrast, the individual who locks her child up in a room because she wishes to
protect the child from witnessing her abuse at the hands of her partner is not acting for
the sake of the badness in the act of confinement. The confining action itself remains bad,
but it is not the act’s badness that drives her choice and engages her will. Note that for the
truly non-vicious nature of the act to hold, there must be no part of her choice that is
motivated to realize the badness associated with the act. And, similarly to the killing
example described above, it may be that the mother acts virtuously when she confines her
child, for instance if she does so because of sensitivity to her child’s general fearfulness
and her insight into her abuser’s intentions.

Now I will consider the significance of other motives in the pursuit of a
potentially virtuous or vicious act. In cases where an agent pursues a potentially vicious
act with a variety of motives, the weight of various considerations will play a role in
determining the *extent of her viciousness*. That is, the more other considerations that do
not concern the badness associated with the act motivate her choice, the less clear and
strong her viciousness will become. Her act, however, will not thereby come closer to
virtuousness. Rather, it will be more aptly characterized as incontinent rather than
vicious. The act remains bad but if the will is engaged with a variety of considerations
(e.g., in the case of confining one’s child, to get some sleep, to incite frustration in the
child, to pursue a hobby with peace and quiet, to increase one’s parental authority, etc.), it
becomes increasingly difficult to conceptualize the agent as expressing a vicious
character. In such cases, not much of a character is being expressed at all. The same
holds for virtuous actions. The action that is chosen primarily for its goodness will be

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66 Her decision will best be understood as incontinent because it consists in the failure of her
practical reason to guide and constrain her pursuit of her desires.
67 The problem of mixed motives and the importance of acting from a limited set of motivations
will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.
virtuous in a stronger sense than the action that is chosen primarily in light of some other considerations. In the latter case, the agent is more likely expressing continence than a virtuous character. It is only when the agent is not at all motivated by the goodness or badness associated with the generally virtuous or vicious act, but rather by some other contingent (usually atypical) features of the act, that she may be said to perform the act virtuously or viciously. We saw illustrations of this point in the virtuous killer and vicious savior cases. In this way, for example, the typically vicious act, to be performed virtuously, will have more stringent motive requirements.

Another observation helps resolve the impracticality concern, which is that purportedly selfish reasons for choosing an action are not necessarily distinct from reasons that are based in recognition of the act’s associated good. Recognizing the goodness for oneself that choosing an act may constitute is indeed a crucial part of being motivated correctly. As I have tried to show, the virtue-centred approach advances the justifiability and desirability of the individual’s consideration of her own well-being and flourishing requirements when choosing actions. Attention to a possible act’s contribution to one’s well-being is allowed and encouraged through two considerations that bear on some basic features of a virtue-centred ethics. The first is that one’s well-being is not defined in hedonistic terms; recognition of an act’s being good for you involves recognition of its contribution to your living a good life. The second concerns the primacy of character in a virtue-centred ethics. Choosing well means choosing in a way that reflects a well-formed character, and a well-formed character emerges only through sustained attention to one’s own needs and, to a significant extent, one’s individual preferences and goals. Choosing an action for its own sake is not equivalent to
the Kantian notion of acting from duty and only duty to merit praiseworthiness, which precludes consideration of any phenomenal aspect of the self during decision-making. This final consideration regarding the plausibility of granting some non-uniformity to the virtuous individual’s motives will have special significance in the case of reproduction.

In sum, an action that is choice-worthy in itself is one that the virtuous individual will tend to pursue, and actions that are chosen for themselves because of their badness are those that the vicious individual will tend to pursue. An example of the former would be volunteering at a homeless shelter, and an example of the latter would be harshly punishing a young child; these actions are respectively associated with goodness and badness in a way that reliably fosters or hinders flourishing. The next question is whether reproduction may be chosen for itself, and if so, whether it will be chosen for itself by the virtuous individual. As I will show in the following chapter, reproduction may be conceptualized as an act of relationship creation, where relationship creation is understood as something that is good for humans and contributes to flourishing, given humans’ interdependence. Given its reliably positive relationship with human flourishing, reproduction is a potentially virtuous act.

**Specifying the (human) nature of virtue**

I will conclude this section on the general features of a virtue-centred ethics with a brief examination of what defines and grounds virtuousness in humans. As explained in the preceding chapter, the virtue-centred approach places an emphasis on practical rationality as the distinguishing feature of humans that grounds the possibility of morality as well as its motivating character. Humans are distinct as a life form because of practical
rationality, a rational faculty that is intertwined with the appetitive. Aristotle claimed that the human function is activity in accordance with reason, and that human good is excellence in this pursuit. Virtues of character correspond to both the appetitive and rational parts of the Aristotelian soul; the appetitive part listens “to reason as a father” (1103a 4). This ability to be guided by reason is one way that virtue benefits its possessors, in the sense that virtue causes “its possessors to be in a good state and to perform their functions well” (1106a17-18).

The second aspect of virtue’s relationship to humanity concerns humans’ essentially interdependent nature. Humans, like other living things, are needy creatures, and it is partly because of this that humans require virtue to live well. As beings with complex emotions, thoughts, and social and political systems, we have needs that go beyond those of most other animals. Goodness will be a rational response to need, which is made possible through recognition of one’s own nature as a being with needs. Grasp of what it means to be a living being in this world, to be vulnerable to its necessities and indifference, is therefore that which both conditions the possibility of virtue’s cultivation and renders its cultivation objectively desirable. Most basically, being virtuous means being committed to a rational and appropriately affectively engaged response to needs, to the extent that one’s character, “all the way down,” is expressive of this responsiveness. The three dimensions of a virtue are action, emotion, and reasons. Thus, to possess a virtue will entail acting in the right way, with the right emotions, for the right reasons (and “for the right reasons” means in a way that requires an appropriately reason-responsive character). Virtues are those traits in which the corresponding disposition
responds well to need, and vices are those traits in which the corresponding trait responds badly to need.

Having provided an overview of the general features of a virtue-centred approach to ethics, as well as an examination of the nature of virtue and virtuousness and the nature and desirability of virtuousness given the human condition, I will now go on to examine some difficulties with two other rival ethical frameworks: Utilitarianism and Kantianism. These difficulties are serious because of the way they threaten the possibility for morality to find a plausible and desirable place in human life. As I will argue, a virtue-centred approach to ethics avoids these difficulties, and there is therefore strong reason to prioritize considerations of virtue in ethical inquiry.

**Criticisms of Utilitarianism and Kantianism**

I will now examine three important difficulties shared by utilitarianism and Kantianism. These difficulties reflect a problematic view of the significance of the moral agent, the genus and scope of moral goodness and badness, and the nature of the ideal moral agent.

**Alienation: integrity, agency, and the will**

Bernard Williams has led the charge in critiquing utilitarianism for what he and other critics view as its necessary commitment to radically undermining the weighty and unconditioned significance of an individual’s long-term projects and commitments. This criticism is often cast in terms of the alienation entailed by two utilitarian commitments: To the notion that each individual’s pain and pleasure count for one and one only, so that the individual cannot place her desires and aversions in any privileged place during moral
deliberation, and to the notion that since all that matters morally are outcomes, one cannot be justifiably concerned about what one in particular does or fails to do. Williams explains the issue as a problem of integrity, whereby the utilitarian agent’s decisions are legitimated only through the “satisfactions which he can affect from where he is” (1973, 115); his own decisions and projects are inevitably determined by the decisions and projects of others. Denying her the right to prioritize her own projects, utilitarianism forces the agent into an inescapable moral system that is radically self-undermining.

Another way of putting the worry, illustrated by MacIntyre in an interview with Voorhoeve, is that the agent is not allowed unconditional commitments under utilitarianism. It cannot be a morally acceptable choice to maintain a commitment in the face of threatened or actual bad consequences; the moral legitimacy of each instance of maintaining some commitment, such as providing care and refuge to one’s child, is conditioned on the utility of doing so (2009, 116). But it seems as if the value of such commitments is what makes morality worthwhile.

Kantianism has a similar susceptibility to the alienation problem, given its grounding metaphysics. The agent’s will, that which renders her actions hers, is, practically speaking, phenomenally absent. That is, the will is part of us only insofar as we, as rational agents, are part of the noumenal realm, and this realm is absolutely inaccessible to us as phenomenal beings. But we may act only in the phenomenal world, and acts of the will—the pure will, whose possession conditions our existence as moral agents—come from a part of us we can neither understand nor witness. As Jonathan Bennett surmises, “Freedom’s autonomy has been purchased at the price of its being rendered irrelevant to what actually happens. There seems to be no content left to the
notion of a *causality* of freedom” (201). So the possibility of accounting for our actions, in any way that appeals to our being in the empirical world, is denied. This loss of our actions’ recognizability as our own is accepted by Kant when he claims that “the real morality of actions (their merit and guilt), even that of our own conduct… remains entirely hidden from us” (B579). This issue arises as a result of the implications of Kant’s commitment to timeless agency. The noumenal or free agent is located outside time, so that one’s phenomenal manifestation has no identifiable relationship with the actions for which she may be deemed responsible. One may, for instance, be responsible for some act that took place before one was even born: “In regard to the intelligible character, of which the empirical one is only the sensible schema, no *before or after* applies, and every action, irrespective of the temporal relation in which it stands to other appearances, is the immediate effect of the intelligible character of pure reason” (B581). Individual agents seeking to understand how their freedom, and in turn moral responsibility, may manifest empirically, are left alienated, for “the noumenal nature of freedom… implies that there can be no empirical evidence as to when freedom is present and when it is not” (Bennett 201). While it has been objected, as Allen Wood has, that it would be asking too much of Kant to demonstrate agents’ responsibility for particular actions, given his project’s aim to show how it is *possible* to reconcile freedom with natural necessity (248), the critical point of alienation still stands. The plausibility and desirability of a moral theory must hinge in part on how the moral agent is able to understand and identify with her actions as her own, not merely in a formal sense but in a grounded practical sense.

A virtue-based ethics, on the other hand, requires and consistently involves an understanding of how we, as individual moral agents, are moving about in the world.
According to Alan Thomas, “virtue ethics is the only view that gives one a non-instrumental relation to one’s character” (Thomas 2009, 5). The moral self is something we can both perceive and value, rather than either a passive vessel determined entirely by circumstances, or an invisible will with whose empirical manifestation we may never engage. Moreover, the virtuous agent is one who may and must care about her character, and has good reason to do so given that all humans care about the sorts of lives they will lead. According to Christine McKinnon, “virtue-based theories prescribe that one lead a good human life. Exercising the requisite virtues is not a means of achieving an independently specifiable end. Rather, it is a way of flourishing, of being happy, of leading a fully human life” (1999, 68). The legitimacy of pursuing virtuousness as a way of life for oneself implies the impossibility of denying the moral import of integrity.

It may be objected that it makes little sense to hold integrity in high regard and encourage individuals to supply it as a moral reason for actions or omissions. Doing so could force praise of intuitively morally pedestrian or even repugnant behaviour. It is not, in other words, self-evident that there is intrinsic goodness in taking our desires, preferences, and projects seriously. As Hursthouse points out, dogged pursuit of or commitment to an end is not desirable in itself, for the end in question may be itself undesirable. The badness of the end to which one is committed nullifies the moral value of integrity: “If you go in for something insignificant or worthless then you count as ‘only pleasing yourself’ however much pain and effort and grit it calls for” (1987, 306). For instance, the deeply committed reality show contestant is surely not someone who should have her commitment to seeking an audience for her mundane activities praised, but if that commitment itself is valuable, it seems that a favourable moral reading is
impossible to deny. But, as Thomas explains, this way of viewing the proposed role of integrity is not fair to Williams’s view. Integrity, for Williams, is not a moral consideration for an agent, and not a reason for a course of action (2009, 7). The alienation critique can be held viable as long as we accept that a moral theory requires a place for personal commitments and projects, in the sense of not consistently and necessarily failing to regard their import in the moral life. The aspiring reality show star (or womanizer, or business tycoon, for instance) has problematic goals, but if her goals are deeply embedded in her character, they must be respected—not just because opportunities for moral development will be primarily available through her pursuit of these activities, but also because such activities contribute to her well-being. Absolute or systematic denial of the significance of any individual’s personal commitments hampers or precludes flourishing and moral development.

It may also be objected, however, that at least ancient formulations of virtue ethics share the burden of this alienation critique to some extent. In the Nichomachean Ethics, Aristotle argues that character development is voluntary and therefore we are responsible for the virtuous or vicious characters we create for ourselves. The extent of the voluntary nature of character is not to be underestimated: “Hence virtue is also up to us, and so also, in the same way, is vice. For when acting is up to us, so is not acting, and when no is up to us, so is yes. And so if acting, when it is fine, is up to us, not acting, when it is shameful, is also up to us” (1113b7-11). Character development is a constant concern, which we cannot reasonably abandon in pursuit of other perceived goods. The burden of morality’s demands thus weighs heavily on us for Aristotle as well—however, it is distinctively our burden to carry, as robust individual characters in wait. The same
cannot be said for the utilitarian agent, who bears the burden of moral demands as a mere instrument faced with the ceaseless task of facilitating utility creation.

Relatedly, the maximization requirement of utilitarianism also entails self-alienation by proscribing serious concern for the nature and development of one’s character, as the kind of commitment to self-reflection and self-development that such concern encourages is, at the very least, in tension with the utilitarian mandate to maximize the aggregate good. In any case where the pursuit of character improvement might conflict with the maximization of utility in some other way, the latter clearly wins out. Thus moral agents have no moral reason to take themselves seriously. But doing so is essential to living well and in an ethically righteous way, and rejecting this claim undermines the value of ethics itself. Frankfurt makes this point, albeit in a critical response to Aristotle’s notion of character development: “Becoming responsible for one’s character is not essentially a matter of producing that character but of taking responsibility for it” (2006, 7). The conception of the moral agent as a utility-producing vessel precludes the possibility of the sort of self-reflection and self-work that grounds what can be deemed legitimately ethical behaviour. I will consider this difficulty in more detail later in this chapter, in the context of the ideal agent problem.

**Unconditional commitments**

Another issue relating to the alienation problem is that the utility maximization requirement generates the impossibility of protecting unconditional commitments. Apart from disallowing unwavering commitment to some value one holds as foundational, utilitarianism denies the essential obligatoriness of anything. Considered as an issue of
the absolute contingency of any commitment distinct from maximizing utility, the
problem is that there can be no true prohibition of any action. Any kind of act, no matter
how intuitively wrong (for instance, violence towards the innocent), may be obligatory
under utilitarianism if that act is predicted to increase welfare. This implication of
utilitarianism is closely linked to the problem of integrity, in that it entails that the agent
may be required to act in ways she finds reprehensible, just in order to counteract the
more reprehensible actions of others. The implication is that “there is nothing so bad that
it cannot be done to prevent others from doing more things of the same kind” (Foot 2002,
94). For Foot, this unacceptable implication is necessarily tied to all consequentialist
moral frameworks. Appealing to a situation in which a would-be torturer and murderer
promises not to torture and kill x persons if a given agent will torture and kill y (<x)
persons, she writes: “[I]n terms of total outcomes... we have the choice between more
killings and torturings and less [sic], and a consequentialist will have to say that we are
justified in killing and torturing the one person, and indeed that we are morally obliged to
do it” (2002, 61). We are obliged to do so because under utilitarianism, there is no
priority of the self (or any individual or group, or any value to which the agent may
appeal, for that matter) in moral decision-making: all that matters is whether utility is
maximized.

The will’s relationship with moral goodness and badness

Utilitarianism also leaves the moral reasoner unable to account for what many
would wish to identify and describe as the moral badness and wrongness of certain acts
that result in utility maximization. For instance, when some individual with malicious
intent acts in a way that unpredictably results in significant harm aversion (imagine a would-be bomber whose bomb not only fails to go off, but also causes a mass evacuation of a large building that collapses on its own minutes later), few would resist condemning her act. Moral wrongness stems from the will rather than from the result of an action. Foot illustrates this problem through appeal to the aforementioned example of a blackmailer who saves the person she has been extorting from drowning, only because doing so will allow her to continue her extortion of that person (2001, 75). For the utilitarian, the blackmailer has presumably done the right thing, because the victim has been saved from the badness of death, which outweighs the badness of being a victim of extortion. Her action has created a better state of affairs, but it seems right to resist a favourable moral assessment of the action. To this interpretation it may be objected that we can surely continue to laud the specific saving act while condemning the act of extortion: While the utilitarian must agree that the resulting state of affairs is better since the extortion victim was saved from death, the extortionist remains accountable for the harm of her extortion. I contend that this reading of the situation is misguided because it fails to capture what moral assessment should capture; I will illustrate the nature of this problem shortly. Even if it were always better for me to be saved rather than allowed to die (though I strongly doubt it would be), the person who does the saving may still be morally condemnable for that very act of saving me.

Imagine, to use a more extreme example, that a person saves me just to torture me. In this case it seems obvious that there is wrongness not merely in the act of torture that will follow but in the first act of saving me, given both the act’s malicious intent and the harm that will follow from it. The utilitarian could reply that it is wrong to save me in
this case just because the badness of torture followed immediately by death is worse than just death in terms of utility; the act of saving’s good is cancelled out. But is there not still moral badness in the act of my being saved by my would-be torturer if, after she saves me, I am then rescued by the police and go on to live a decent life? I may be understandably glad that she saved me, given how things turned out, but this does not make her act morally laudable or even permissible. It is a happy accident that I turn out to survive, and only in that sense has a better state of affairs been realized. With the alternative approach advocated by Foot, moral analysis is neither limited to identifying conformity to the moral law nor burdened with the intimidatingly vast set of factors that may contribute to the utility created. Under her analysis, the blackmailer’s actions are judged as ethically bad because “an action is bad if it has badness from its kind, its end, or its contrariety to the agent’s beliefs about what is good or bad to do” (2001, 76). It is therefore the will’s responsiveness to need that ought to inform an action’s evaluation.

The point illustrated by this example is that there is no clearly acceptable way within utilitarianism to distinguish the two acts, of saving with intent to harm and saving with no malicious intent, which will maintain the first as morally bad and the second as morally good. The inability to make such a distinction highlights a deep problem with the utilitarian outlook, which is the problematic nature of its implied ontology of events.

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68 By making this claim, I am perhaps aligning myself with Slote’s agent-based perspective, which evaluates actions uniquely on the basis of the state of the acting agent. I favour this view in some cases. For instance, when Annas describes a fictional couple who decides to give their child up for adoption when it is discovered that she is dark-skinned (they are racist), Annas concludes that they have done the right thing (2011, 45). I disagree with her, and believe that although they did the best thing they could, given the circumstances, they did not act rightly.

69 It might be replied that appealing to a distinction between broadly and narrowly defined acts could resolve this concern. But as I explain, appealing to that distinction still does not help the utilitarian, as the saving act will end up not being plausibly understood as an act at all.
If the will is irrelevant to an act’s identification and evaluation, there is no way to evaluate events differently than acts. An action is differentiated from an event through the involvement of the will, and it is the state or quality of that will which helps generate an understanding of what that act is. My being saved is an event in the sense described by the utilitarian, neither laudable nor condemnable. Imagine that the would-be torturer, who is attempting to rescue me, gets a cramp and cannot swim out to me, but that as I am floundering, a closed canister floats by and takes me to safety. The only difference between these two occurrences to which the utilitarian can appeal is that the would-be torturer intended to save me. But the notion of intention here is too thin to help ground a distinction between the act of saving and the event of using the canister. The only way in which the torturer’s intention matters is that it is the direct cause of her swimming out to save me. But the fact of intention operating as a cause, while apparently making the action an act rather than just an event, does not reveal what we need to know about her will in order to make her act an evaluable act. And if a necessary condition for an act to be described as such is that it is evaluable, then the so-called agency she exercises is illusory, and she causes my being saved just in the same way as the canister.

Imagine a far more mundane situation, in which a person is eating an apple. Barring wildly implausible circumstances, the fact of her intending to eat the apple adds nothing to our explanation of the occurrence that might grant it normative significance. Intention itself does not permit a bestowal of agency that can be assessed for its goodness or badness. That is, if all we know is that she is eating the apple because she had the intention to do so, we acquire no foothold for any evaluation of what is happening. She could be attempting to consume vitamins, she could be attempting to bestow magical
powers on herself, or she could be hoping to discover a worm. There is nothing that can be said *about* the act. Her will remains completely opaque, and in that sense the instance of behaviour is equivalent to an event. Thus utilitarianism offers no satisfying distinction between acts and events.

**Ideal moral agents**

Both utilitarianism and Kantianism provide unsatisfactory accounts of ideal moral agents, because they do not capture the demanding and context-sensitive nature of striving to become good. To begin, the Kantian approach is, like utilitarianism, inadequately demanding of its agents’ reflective capacities, despite the approach’s apparently rigidly censorious nature. In fact, both utilitarianism and Kantian deontology presuppose that the moral realm requires agents to be only minimally reflective. Under utilitarianism, morality consists in consideration of a single variable in every potential action or omission: utility created or diminished. A wholly non-reflective but highly efficient utility-calculating and -effecting machine would be, in moral terms, equally good as or better than any saint not absolutely immune to weakness or temptation, and certainly better than a flawed but deeply reflective person wishing to devote herself completely to a life focused on decreasing suffering in the world. The implicit morally ideal person in utilitarianism is barely recognizable as a moral agent, and that ideal has problematic practical implications. For instance, in regard to procreation, utilitarianism

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70 It might be objected that while Kantian moral theory may be charged with impoverishment of considerations available to the moral agent, this does not render the agent minimally reflective. My response is simply that such a dearth of kinds of considerations *must* require less reflection, given that consideration of a variety of concerns (for example, how each person in the situation might be affected, how some act violates one’s commitments, etc.) is exactly what constitutes a more complex sort of reflection.
dictates that if one is to bear children at all, one should not attempt to bear that child who will experience the most utility but rather the child who will most effectively create utility.\footnote{This consistency requirement is picked up on by Jakob Elster, whose argument on the principle of procreative beneficence was discussed in the first chapter. Elster shows that potential reproducers have the obligation to adhere to the principle of general procreative beneficence in order to maximize well-being (2011).}

Regarding the weakness in Kantianism, we must recall that under Kant’s proposed framework, “ought” is a concept significant only to imperfectly rational beings. According to Kant, “If reason infallibly determines the will, then in the cases of such a being actions which are recognized to be objectively necessary are also subjectively necessary...” (412). It follows that “no imperatives hold for the divine will.... Imperatives are only formulas for expressing the relation of objective laws of willing in general to the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being, e.g., the human will” (414). Now, the human will is understood to be essentially imperfect as well as intrinsically valuable. And so the human aim for moral perfection is in fact an aim to be non-human,\footnote{This reading might seem to be unfair, given that Kant holds humans to be intrinsically valuable. But that which makes humans intrinsically valuable is that aspect of them which is, in the naturalistic sense, not human. It is the faculty of reason, endowed on us by the noumenal realm, which conditions the possibility for both freedom and morality. There is nothing human about the faculty of reason.} and to be detached from organic life itself. But it seems strange that the ideal moral agent—the creature with the divine will—is perfectly rational in such a way that the possibility of reflection, if considered as an act that involves the operation of reason on some other faculty, is in fact entirely removed.

Moreover, while Kantians clearly believe that we ought to care about our wills, there is in fact only a narrow set of circumstances in which our moral attention—our
will’s engagement—is mandated under Kantianism. Situations in which a particular way
of imposing one’s will is demanded are present only at times where the universalization
of one’s maxim creates a contradiction, either in conception or in the will itself. In both
these cases, submission to the moral law is made possible through that part of the agent
that is non-empirical. Unlike in neo-Aristotelianism, where the agent’s passions and
biological needs are necessarily intermingled with reason in her moral life, such that her
goodness is that which allows her to move about best in empirical reality, the ambitious
Kantian agent will find herself unrecognizable as an empirical self. If the ideal moral
agent is essentially unreflective (albeit perfectly rational), it is clearly the case that
qualities such as attentiveness and responsiveness in moral agents generally will only be
deemed valuable in some extremely minimal and narrow sense.

The general problem I am presenting thus concerns the ideal agents that are
implied by utilitarian and Kantian moral theories. I have claimed that there is no clear
reason why we should not think that the best way of going about adjudicating between
moral theories is to begin with some notion of what we think is important for a moral
theory to have. Thinking about what kind of agent is ideal in light of a particular theory is
essential to that theory’s assessment, because recognizing the desirability of the ideal
moral agent is required for morality to matter to us. That is, there is good reason to call
into question any moral theory whose implied ideal moral agent is either not admirable,
not achievable (in principle or practice), or both. I am not claiming that moral self-
 improvement must be an overriding concern in a viable moral theory, but rather making
the weaker point that moral self-improvement cannot be deemed an unreasonable goal. In
the preceding critical section, I showed that utilitarianism and Kantianism endorse
dubious ideal moral agents. If this claim is true, then moral self-improvement seems to become a questionable, if not straightforwardly irrational, pursuit under these theories. Yet it seems truly contradictory to claim that there may be no good reason to pursue such development. As Rosalind Hursthouse explains, “Our characteristic way of going on, which distinguishes us from all the other species of animals, is a rational way. A ‘rational way’ is any way that we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do” (1999, 222). As I have tried to show, the virtue-centred approach emphasizes the striving and aspirational nature of the self.

**Conclusion: capturing what matters**

I believe that a focus on the virtues and on virtuousness helps ground an approach to ethical evaluation and decision-making that successfully captures and responds to what matters in human life. I have tried to show that a virtue-centred approach, informed by and grounded in a form of ethical naturalism, has a highly valuable place in human life and honours what humans care about.

I wish to note, however, that in arguing that a virtue-centred approach to ethics is superior to the utilitarian and consequentialist approaches, I am far from claiming that these theories are valueless. Utilitarian sympathies are easily identified, for instance, in the revisions of naturalism that I suggested earlier. The desirability of sentience as that feature which grounds the scope of eligibility for moral consideration seems obvious to me, in the sense that it correctly unites a broad spectrum of beings to whom moral status should be ascribed. While utilitarianism is not required to take the moral import of sentience seriously, some utilitarian scholars (e.g., Peter Singer) have been extremely
effective in their efforts to showcase the significance of the badness of pain with regards to human moral responsibility. And Kantianism rightly endorses a place for inviolability in the moral system, which helps guard against blind faith in those we perceive to be virtuous. But given the deep problems with both of these theories, and the relative invulnerability of virtue-centred ethics to some of their most damaging criticisms, greater commitment to understanding, developing, and applying a virtue-based ethics is warranted.

A morality that is capable of extending its reach into all relevant aspects of human activity through what is distinctive of humanity is only made possible with an emphasis on agents’ reflective activities—or to be more precise, agents’ attentiveness and responsiveness. Behaviours and dispositions showcasing attentiveness and responsiveness are essentially reflective, for they require critical examination of both the self as agent and the world in which and the people with which the agent interacts. These are the skills and dispositions that the virtue ethicist takes as her bread and butter. Moral goodness is therefore located in the responsiveness of the will to a non-static set of features of any given situation. As Foot explains, “what matters morally is not only how someone acts... but also how his will is disposed even when this cannot affect the course of events” (2002, 91-92). One cannot be adequately morally attentive if the bottom line (of, for instance, utility maximization) is the only thing that matters. Rather, the will’s

73 By this I mean that the alternative framework must be able to provide guidance on a suitably expansive number and diversity of questions and situations. This is not to say that it must allow moral considerations to override all others in a diversity of situations or require the systematic yielding of non-moral norms to moral norms in decision-making. What is at stake is the capacity for a framework to reach into any aspect of human life if it is so needed, because most if not all aspects of human life may at some point or in some capacity demand consideration from a moral point of view.
responsiveness to an array of contextual features is what allows us to act morally. To act in a morally good way is to reliably identify and respond appropriately to others’ needs and recognize what is demanded of oneself. To act in a morally bad way consists in the opposite, such that in acting one’s will is either insensitive to and ignorant of what is demanded of the agent, or is sensitive to what is demanded and inclines to do otherwise.

In sum, questions we confront on a regular basis, to which we wish our moral frameworks could respond, are not clearly approachable in a non-superficial manner with utilitarianism or Kantianism. I close with a brief glimpse at Murdoch’s insight into the nature of our search for answers:

Should a retarded [sic] child be kept home or sent to an institution? Should an elderly relation who is a trouble-maker be cared for or asked to go away? Should an unhappy marriage be continued for the sake of the children? Should I leave my family in order to do political work? Should I neglect them in order to practise my art? The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really looking. (1997, 109)

Murdoch’s claim illuminates the importance of reflection in responding to moral questions; really looking is something that is largely beyond the purview of utilitarians and Kantians. Striving toward virtuousness, on the other hand, will encourage exactly the sort of engagement with the world and with oneself that will enable responses to these questions and help one live well. It is therefore the ideal of virtuousness that I believe will most appropriately guide an ethical assessment of reproduction.
Chapter 6

Virtuous reproduction: a preliminary analysis and defense

Introduction

My central aim in this chapter is to provide a virtue-centred evaluation of reproduction. This will involve an explanation of how the notions of virtue and vice can effectively guide a moral assessment of reproduction. I will begin the evaluation by revisiting the reasons that a virtue-centred approach is best, in particular regard to the debate concerning reproduction. The concepts of virtue and vice, I argue, provide an objective, reason-giving, and instructive path to understanding the morality of reproduction. To ensure that the scope of my argument is clear, I must note that I am referring to reproduction of a particular sort in this project, and that my characterization of reproduction will entail a significant narrowing of my argument’s application. I will be detailing the limits on what I take to be reproduction of the relevant sort throughout the chapter, but I wish to indicate from the outset that I will be considering only the set of cases where reproduction is voluntary, desired, and pursued with intent to bear and raise the resulting child or children.

I will then show how the moral assessment of reproduction is accomplished through consideration of how the virtuous individual or trainee in virtue who is interested in pursuing reproduction would make the choice to reproduce or refrain from doing so. My application of a virtue-centred ethics to reproduction consists of two parts: First, I will consider how virtuousness and viciousness in their holistic, descriptive senses may be appealed to in the evaluation of reproduction. Second, I will show how what I take to
be two central virtues, courage and benevolence, may be honoured or violated in reproduction. Application of these virtues is informed by a naturalistic meta-ethical perspective that supports a particular notion of the role of virtue in contributing to human flourishing. But before I turn to these tasks, I will consider a series of concerns that may be presented as wholesale objections to the project itself.

**Preliminary justifications and caveats**

In the preceding chapters, I have explained why other normative ethical frameworks have been largely unhelpful in assessing the morality of reproduction, and why I believe a virtue-centred approach to ethical inquiry is desirable. As I have attempted to make clear, however, my project is not concerned with advancing and defending virtue ethics as an alternative theoretical framework that replaces others. Rather, I hope to have shown that a virtue-centred ethical approach avoids some theoretical difficulties to which Kantian and utilitarian approaches are vulnerable and also has independent advantages. Here I will show how thinking in terms of the virtues contributes helpfully to the ethical evaluation of reproduction. But I first need to say more about why I think it justified to pursue this sort of assessment at all. The notion that the choice to reproduce and the act of reproduction may themselves be subjected to moral assessment is both contentious and distinct from the notion that particular ways of reproducing are open to moral evaluation. The latter issue has been widely discussed in the bioethical literature; for instance, the use of prenatal genetic testing, preimplantation genetic diagnosis, selective abortion, and new reproductive technologies has been widely debated, as have the issues of sterilizing cognitively disabled women, forcing
contraception on drug-addicted women, and mandating selective abortion of fetuses exhibiting traits that will be severely disabling.

The question of whether one may reproduce, on the other hand, has displayed clear boundaries, engaging only with issues related to what sorts of children some potential reproducer may have. Much scarcer is debate surrounding the prior question of the morality of reproducing at all, and how potential reproducers ought to consider whether they should pursue reproduction; this want of commentary is in no small way due to the deep-seated cultural assumption of the prima facie permissibility and desirability of reproduction. Few scholars have turned their attention to the morality of reproduction itself, perhaps choosing instead to accept the view that reasons for reproduction are immune to criticism, thereby implicitly endorsing the pronatalist cultural status quo that not bearing children is equally if not more suspect than bearing children. I agree, however, with the claim of one of these few critical scholars that “the choice to have children calls for more careful justification and reasoning than the choice not to have children simply because in the former case a new and vulnerable being is brought into existence whose future may be at risk” (Overall 2012, 3). Indeed, as I hope to have established in the preceding chapters, reproduction is clearly ethically significant because of the non-required and significant harm that it entails for the child who will be born, other particular individuals, and the population, as well as for all other sentient creatures and the environment. The decision to reproduce must, therefore, be answerable to moral assessment and calls for justification. I will now consider some areas of concern regarding this shift of the “burden of justification” (ibid).
Feminist concerns

First, I must respond to potential feminist criticisms regarding my project’s arguably contentious assumptions. Feminist thinkers could charge the project with inherent anti-feminism on the basis that the purported non-sexist nature of such a project would inevitably be grounded in a false assumption of equality in regards to the labour, vulnerability, and responsibility respectively borne by men and women in reproductive behaviour and decision-making. In a context where women, for biological, social, and political reasons, have fewer and higher-stakes choices in regard to reproduction, the project could be deemed unjust. Women’s reproductive autonomy is already challenged and constrained in many ways; embarking on a critical analysis of reproduction itself may imply that imposing much greater constraints on women’s choices and behaviour would be acceptable. A commitment to taking this concern seriously and a desire to avoid the quagmire of a debate that surrounds post-conception reproductive decision-making motivate me to limit the scope of my assessment to pre-conception decision-making and behaviour. I also limit my scope to those situations in which that pre-conception decision is made with the assumption that if one conceives, one wishes and aims to raise the child. Thus involuntary conception is beyond the purview of my analysis and critique.

Even with these limitations, however, it might be replied that I am not really avoiding the underlying issues plaguing any attempt at morally assessing something so “personal” as reproduction. Perhaps, it may be argued, consideration of reproduction’s morality is an instance of the wrongheaded encroachment of the moral on every aspect of human life in a way that does not take into proper account humans’ basic nature as socially, politically, and culturally located beings. There are two criticisms here: first, that
reproduction may not be the sort of issue that is appropriate for moral evaluation, given that the moral does not and should not encroach on every aspect of human life, and second, that because reproductive decisions are modified by social conditions, the virtuousness of one’s decision to reproduce may inevitably and problematically turn out to depend on factors such as disability, race, sex, and class of the potential reproducers.

To the first criticism, I only wish to respond that the personal nature of the decision of whether to reproduce does not grant the decision immunity from moral assessment. I will simply repeat that given that the decision to reproduce always entails causing non-required and significant harm, it cannot be plausibly excluded from moral consideration. In response to the second criticism, to which I am far more sympathetic, I point out three features of my analysis that may help address if not resolve the worry: First, that what I wish to present here is an all-other-things-being-equal argument. In this way, my substantive ethical argument is less important than the presentation of what I take to be a desirable form and method of moral assessment in regards to reproduction. I wish to show how application of the virtues can help potential reproducers think about the moral nature of the reproductive act in their case. Second, given the nature of virtue ethics as fundamentally situational, it cannot turn out to be the case that there will be one answer to the question “is it virtuous to reproduce”? Virtuousness of character is contextually informed and expressed, and I need not and should not suggest that through an application of virtue ethics each individual will or should come to make the same choice. Third, the account of virtuousness with which I will be working is sensitive to the
deep influence of circumstance on the extent of an individual’s ability to express virtue, and allows for truly virtuous action that is not ideal action.\(^\text{74}\)

**Reproduction as basic right?**

I should also provide reasons that I do not take pursuing reproduction to be a basic moral right, because if it were, evaluating the choice to reproduce through a thick moral lens might appear essentially misguided.\(^\text{75}\) In keeping with the aforementioned constraints of my argument, this discussion of a potential right to reproduce is limited to pre-conception decision-making. The relevant question is whether there is a right to pursue reproduction, but I will be referring to the “right to reproduce” for the sake of simplicity.

Addressing the question of whether there is a right not to reproduce will assist in the response to its inverse. There are several plausible ways to show that refraining from reproduction must be a basic right. According to Laura Purdy, for instance, it is permissible to prevent the birth of possible individuals: “It is not wrong because there seems to be no reason to believe that possible individuals are either deprived or injured if they do not exist” (2004, 148). The possibility of deprivation is conditioned on having experiences (being a subject) and the possibility of injury via prevented existence is

\(^{74}\) The basic response here is that while circumstances may (and indeed, almost always will) hamper one’s ability to cultivate and express virtue, we may and should remain committed to the equal capacity of individuals to become virtuous (Annas 2011, 31).

\(^{75}\) Clearly, having a right does not mean that in all circumstances it will be morally acceptable to exercise that right (nor does not having a right to something mean that one is never morally owed that thing). But surely it would be problematic to claim that one has a right to do x if x is generally condemnable. Given the strong foothold of antinatalism that was established in chapter three, it seems reasonable to worry that identifying a right to reproduce could call into question the project of morally evaluating reproduction itself.
conditioned on a being’s having a right to exist. Because nonexistents have neither experiences nor the right to exist, we cannot reject a right not to reproduce.\(^{76}\)

It seems to me that both of Purdy’s claims must be right, and I will only make two small points to add to their justification. First, the term “prevented” is misleading, in that it suggests that all nonexistents would otherwise have come into existence but are prevented from doing so by potential reproducers. This is clearly absurd. Second, the notion that a nonexistent can be harmed or have a right violated if not brought into existence has absurd implications. Laura Shanner recognizes that it would be undesirable to accept that a nonexistent might be harmed by not being brought into existence by referring to what this commitment would imply for unwanted pregnancies: there would, for instance, be no way to justify contraception, or to condemn men who father many children for whom they do not intend to care (2004, 252). Shanner overlooks, however, the far more basic and damning implication of taking the opposite view, which is that there is always moral reason to bring individuals into existence, and that by failing to do so, one is causing serious harm, or at least failing to create benefit where possible. This problematic implication is not exactly the same issue that would commit us to the Repugnant Conclusion, but it has similar entailments. That is, it would not entail commitment to the idea that a larger population of individuals with lives (just) worth living is better than any smaller population of individuals with (much) better lives. But it

\(^{76}\) If possible individuals had a right to exist, anyone failing to attempt to bring such individuals into existence would be guilty of a rights-violation. This is an absurd conclusion in itself, but particularly in regard to what it would imply for women, given that women do the labour of gestating and bearing children.
would entail acceptance of a moral loss associated with every failure to bring about new existences. Thus reproductive rights must include, at least, the right not to reproduce.\footnote{It is important to note that while I have been invoking reproductive rights commentators Purdy and Shanner to forward this argument, their platforms are in fact quite distinct; Purdy and Shanner are motivated by concerns for, respectively, the potential wrongness of bringing a severely disabled child into existence, and whether there is a right to assisted reproduction. Moreover, neither Purdy nor Shanner takes herself to be considering the right to reproduce tout court.}

Is there a basic right to reproduce? Understanding reproduction as a basic right will depend on two things: what we take rights to be protecting (what is the function of rights), and how we take rights to be determined—that is, on what basis rights are assigned.\footnote{Obviously, a thorough account of the nature and function of rights is beyond the scope of this project. But I hope this limitation does not preclude provision of some observations regarding what a plausible right to reproduce might look like.} Some have postulated a right to reproduce on the basis of autonomy \cite[e.g.,][]{Robertson2004}. Ruth Chadwick suggests that autonomy-based arguments for reproduction may hinge on either the right to bodily autonomy or the right to self-determination \cite[230-231]{Robertson2004}. Protection of bodily autonomy protects us from trespasses on or in our bodies and allows us to do what we wish with our bodies (with various and important restrictions). Chadwick suggests that the right to have children cannot be grounded in the right to bodily autonomy given that doing so would necessitate failure to properly regard the resulting child’s distinct value. She explains, “A right to have children based on the potential parent’s bodily autonomy neglects this other locus of moral rights [of the potential child, as a distinct being] insofar as it treats the child as a mere appendage” \cite[231]{Robertson2004}. This claim might seem dangerous for any supporter of the permissibility of abortion, but I have limited my consideration to pre-conception decision-making. Also, the right to reproduce seems best characterized as a positive right,
because reproduction consistently demands the assistance of others (in most cases, just a handful of health care professionals, but in others, an array of medical practitioners and/or other assistants are required). Conversely, the right to bodily autonomy, while including the right to do with one’s body what one wishes, does not apply in situations where the right may be used to cause harm (as Chadwick surmises, I cannot swing my arm this way and that if it will make contact with some individual’s face). Bodily autonomy is most crucially a negative right, one that disallows unwanted infringement on one’s body’s boundaries. In sum, the right to bodily autonomy cannot form the basis of a right to reproduce, at least in the particular area that we have sectioned off, which includes only pre-conception decision-making and behaviour.

Chadwick also rejects the right to self-determination as a viable basis for a right to reproduce. She argues that, in general, we may have relational rights that are based in the right to develop one’s own self-conception; individuals have relational rights to pursue consensual associations with others, such as friendship. After considering the possibility that having a child might be a relational right, to create a relationship with some individual, she rejects it on grounds that bearing a child, unlike, for instance, getting married, is not legitimately tied to the fulfillment of one’s self-conception. She writes, “since one can have a relational right based on self-determination only if all parties to the relation consent, and no one consents to be introduced into the world by someone else, it follows there is no relational right to be a parent” (2004, 231). A decision to pursue pregnancy would necessarily involve exercising a right through a non-consenting party. That is, the woman’s decision to become pregnant and subsequently bear a child is imposed upon the child; the child cannot will her existence. The child cannot choose to
develop this relation, which would be required to ground her parents’ relational right to reproduce.

I agree with Chadwick’s conclusion that a relational right to reproduce cannot be justified, in light of the impossibility of obtaining the child’s consent to enter into the parenting relationship. As I will explain in more detail later, however, the fact that one does not have a relational right to bring a child into existence does not mean that the intentional introduction of a new existence to form a relationship has no moral import, nor that it therefore is wrong to bring a child into existence. The impossibility of obtaining consent from the possible individual who will be brought into existence is ethically relevant because of the harms of existence. But as I hope to make clear in a later section, many risky (yet desirable) relationships are created without consent; creating a child with whom one plans to have a relationship may be analogized with these situations to show that the formation of a relationship may rightly guide the virtuous individual in her deliberations and actions.

It may also be suggested that the desire to reproduce, or the interest in reproducing, is a viable candidate for grounding a right to reproduce and for staving off the choice’s subjection to ethical evaluation. While it may seem unreasonable to ground rights in general on desires (rather than on needs), the desire to reproduce may be deemed special insofar as it is deeply and widely entrenched, both biologically and socially. We may wish to protect the possibility of fulfilling such desires with rights, particularly if we think of reproduction as being a basic human interest and therefore as something that must be rights-protected. The question is whether it would be deeply counter to human interests to deny a right to reproduce, or to deny the goodness of pursuing reproduction.
Shanner, quoting from Plato, considers the moral import of the naturalness of the desire to procreate: “mankind is by nature a companion of eternity, and is linked to it, forever. Mankind is immortal because it always leaves later generations behind to preserve its unity and identity for all of time: it gets its share of immortality by means of procreation. It is never a holy thing to deny oneself this prize…” (quoted in Shanner, 2004, 238). So the question is perhaps whether in putting reproduction to the moral test, we are asking too much of humans, who we would think must be, for mercy’s sake, allowed to consider their reproductive urges immune to moral judgment, and indeed absolutely protected.

There are two ways I can respond to this objection, and each of these will be more fully spelled out later. First, we can show that the content of the desire to reproduce might be fulfilled through distinct activities and life plans (Chadwick 2004, 235; Purdy 2004, 150). Those features of the desire to have children that might be thought to ground a right to do so are also those that do not require reproduction. For instance, the desire to engage in a parenting relationship, to assist in children’s development, or to create a family, are all plausibly fulfilled through avenues other than reproduction. These are desires that correspond to basic human needs, such as those for affection and trust, which are met within caring relationships. The desire to continue one’s genetic line or to achieve a sense of immortality, on the other hand, cannot ground a right—despite Plato’s claim otherwise. 79 Second, and more broadly, we may deny the moral import of such desires in the same way we would deny the moral import of a desire to cause harm to some individual for one’s own benefit. We needn’t endorse strict antinatalism to agree that

79 It seems clear to me that individuals have no need to continue their genetic line or to experience a sense of immortality in order to live well, though I accept that many believe that they do. If it is true that they do not, the desire for such ends cannot ground a moral right.
pursuing that which one desires at the cost of causing serious harm would be a morally bad thing to do. Given these considerations, I do not believe that characterizing reproduction as a basic moral right can be used to deny the legitimacy of an ethical evaluation of reproduction. To conclude, I have argued that there is a right to not reproduce. I have characterized the right to pursue reproduction as a positive right, and argued that such a right is not defensible.

Anti-naturalist?

I offer one final consideration regarding the legitimacy of morally evaluating reproductive decision. Given the naturalistic grounding of the virtue-centred approach I wish to endorse, it may be suggested that I must consider whether there is an innate drive to have children, such that it would be absurd to subject the act to moral assessment. I agree with Overall’s contention that it would be a mistake to fail to recognize the moral significance of the decision to reproduce. Against the notion of viewing reproduction as “a mere expression of biological destiny,” she explains that such a perspective removes us from “seeing having children as something that women do, [and causes us to] continue to see it as something that simply happens to women or as something that is merely ‘natural’” (5). I both agree with Overall and wish to claim that that pejorative sense of naturalness (i.e., the sense that dismisses the act as passive and inevitable) sometimes projected onto childbearing is misguided. Despite her commitment to naturalism, Foot rejects the idea that the choice not to reproduce is defective—although she does, to her view’s disadvantage, suggest that the lack of capacity to reproduce is defective (2001, 42). According to Foot, “[t]he bearing and rearing of children is not an ultimate good in
human life, because other elements of good such as the demands of work to be done may give a man or woman reason to renounce family life” (2001, 42). Thus the naturalist’s account of the good life does not require reproduction or even family creation. Moreover, recall the Footian notion of deriving moral norms from natural needs; if reproduction is not a need, worry about subjecting it to moral evaluation within a naturalist framework should dissolve. It might be suggested that reproduction is a group-based need—after all, if no one reproduces, the group will cease to exist. But the fact that the group’s continuing existence hinges on the pursuit of reproduction does not make the group’s existence itself a need. Unlike, for instance, co-operation, reproduction is not a practice that is required to make the lives of group members go well rather than badly; a failure to reproduce will entail an absence of lives rather than bad lives. My response to the concern that subjecting reproduction to moral assessment is anti-naturalist will not be fleshed out until the application section of this chapter; here I will only reassert my commitment to the plausibility of deriving norms of goodness from natural facts, and suggest that such a commitment does not presuppose conceptualizing reproduction as a passive and unreflective behaviour that merely happens.

**Virtue-centred assessment of reproduction**

A virtue-centred approach to reproductive decision-making will be action-guiding for a diversity of individuals while maintaining clear and objective standards. If it is a viable project to assess reproduction at all, we are best equipped to do so with a virtue-centred approach. I have already examined some reasons that a virtue-centred ethics is theoretically plausible and able to make sense of what may be considered a good human
life (e.g., that it includes and mandates moral self-work). Identifying what is morally good and bad about particular actions or attitudes, I have argued, is more difficult with utilitarianism and Kantianism.

**Why virtue?**

Now I wish to explain why I take virtue-based ethics to be the preferred lens for moral assessment *in this case*. Recall that for Foot, thinking in terms of virtue and vice is what helps us see ethics as legitimately objective and action-guiding. In deciding whether to participate in a war, for instance, rather than considering the permissibility of doing so on the basis of utility calculations or conformity to the law, which seem to be inaccessible in practical instances, we ought to think about whether it is, for instance, *courageous* in that case to storm the enemy in war, as opposed to rash. The virtuous agent considers the potential courageousness of her act because doing so will help her act in a rational and appropriately affectively engaged way to her circumstances, and more specifically, to the needs of those around her. The underlying naturalist position advocated by Foot shows that being vicious is a bad way to be, because it fails to respond to need. Being virtuous is a good way to be, because it responds to need, of both ourselves and others (often, but not necessarily, effectively). The virtuous disposition is in this way neither selfish nor selfless (Solomon 2005, 93).

We ought, in the same way, to think about how particular virtues apply when deciding whether to pursue reproduction. Thinking in terms of the virtues provides the deliberator with the necessary resources to identify, explain, and identify *with* the goodness or badness of her potential action. That is, the agent is able to make her
decision on the basis of how she has good reason to believe that exercising some virtue will express character she wishes to have. As Christine McKinnon explains, “Virtuous dispositions are chosen and acquired because of the part they play in developing the kind of character that the agent wants to have, in helping him become the kind of person he wants to be, and in living the kind of life he wants to live” (1999, 66). Inviting consideration of the courageousness or benevolence of some action therefore not only allows but mandates the agent’s attention to herself and what sort of character she wishes to express through her behaviour. Thinking in terms of the virtues is not merely helpful and desirable in terms of its action-guiding character but also in terms of the view of human life that it endorses, and this facet of virtue-based thinking is particularly advantageous in the case of reproduction. The goodness or badness of introducing new life into the world, because it entails a special kind of relationship between the created individual and the reproducers, is best approached with attention to the sort of life that is aimed for by the potential reproducers. As an approach that is undergirded by naturalism, virtue-centred ethics appropriately locates the relevant questions a potential reproducer must ask herself in facts about how she may and should live her life as a human being.

**Cultivation versus expression of virtue**

There are (at least) two different ways of attributing virtue to the performance of an act: Virtue can be expressed and it can be cultivated. According to Aristotle, virtue is cultivated, or developed, through habituation, which involves habitual striving for the mean. The more one strives to reach the mean, by, for instance, trying to stand firm against frightening situations, the more capable one becomes of doing so, to the point
where one expresses true courage (1104b). As indicated in the preceding chapter, for an action to be truly virtuous it must meet three criteria: The agent must have understanding of his action, he must voluntarily choose his action and choose it for its own sake, and must make the choice from a firm underlying character (1105a). Thus instances of cultivating virtue are often not instances of expressing virtue. It is worth considering whether reproduction can present an opportunity to cultivate virtue. If so, in what way does concern for developing virtue provide a reason to pursue reproduction? I contend that it cannot, because other ways of parenting, and barring this possibility, other ways of cultivating similar virtues (e.g., patience, by volunteering at a daycare), may be equally effective in assisting virtue’s cultivation. Deeming reproduction an opportunity for virtue cultivation would, moreover, have strange implications. As aforementioned, virtue is developed through habituation, and it seems right to identify those setting out to reproduce repeatedly, as a form of habituation, as implausible lovers of virtue. Moreover, trainees in virtue must be wary of seeking out interactions with others for the primary purpose of cultivating virtue, as this would be exploitative.

But even though it is implausible to attribute virtuousness to reproduction on the basis of the cultivation of virtue, the possibility of expressing virtue through reproduction remains. That is, reproduction, to use Hursthouse’s language, is open to being characterized as something the virtuous individual might “go in for.” As I explained in the preceding chapter, actions that may be characterized as potentially virtuous or vicious—that is, as actions that virtuous or vicious individuals tend to go in for—are actions that may be chosen for themselves. They may be chosen for themselves in the sense that the agent’s will engages with the act’s associated goodness or badness. Only
acts that reliably foster or hinder flourishing are potentially virtuous or vicious, in that the agent may choose such acts for their associated goodness or badness. I now turn to arguing for the claim that reproduction is reliably associated with the good of fostering human flourishing through relationship-creation, may therefore be plausibly and desirably chosen for itself, and is a potentially virtuous act.

**Choosing reproduction for itself**

To begin, I will assume that there is nothing problematic in saying that both the virtuous and the vicious performance of reproduction are conceptually possible. This claim aligns with my suggestion in the preceding chapter that some actions are potentially virtuous or vicious and that potentially virtuous actions may be performed virtuously or viciously, and vice versa. If we understand reproduction to mean simply, “creating a new human being,” there are both virtuous and vicious ways to partake in this activity, but the creation of new life itself does not seem to be plausibly or desirably chosen for itself. How then might we go about conceptualizing the reproductive act as something that could be chosen for itself? If the act being chosen is associated with goodness, I have argued, the act may be motivated by recognition of this goodness in such a way that renders the action virtuous. We might say that the goodness associated with reproduction is children. This is precisely what Hursthouse suggests: “Children feature as ‘goods’ in our conceptual scheme… like health, knowledge, pleasure and virtue” (1987, 309). If choosing reproduction means choosing children, and children are ‘goods’ (more precisely, are intrinsically valuable), then choosing reproduction for its own sake might be plausible. But of course, the derivation of reproduction’s goodness
from the goodness of children must be justified. The fact of children being intrinsically
desirable does not immediately lend credence to the intrinsic desirability of reproduction,
and if a deep connection between the two cannot be forged, then we have not yet
established the possibility of choosing reproduction for itself.

Hursthouse argues for the connection this way: “[S]ince for a woman bearing a
child is in part constitutive of having a child, and since having one’s own child is
intrinsically worthwhile, bearing a child is intrinsically worthwhile” (1987, 312). In other
words, obtaining a child is something that can be chosen for itself, and obtaining a child
is an action that is deeply intertwined with reproduction. The nature of my project makes
it impossible to be uncritical of the extent of this connection between reproduction and
having children. And clearly, there is no necessary link between the two; they are
separable. But what Hursthouse shows (albeit not entirely explicitly) is that the nature of
the act of choosing children is such that its meaning is necessarily bound up with the act
of choosing reproduction. Hursthouse’s point highlights the importance of social and
cultural context in determining the accepted nature of what it means to have children. In
one sense, her claim is clearly false, since adoption, for instance, is a counter-example.
But she does capture the deep-rooted cultural attitude that true parenthood is achieved
only through reproduction.80

For Hursthouse, our beliefs about reproduction are “inextricably bound up with a
second set of thoughts, thoughts about the value of love, of family life…. In connection
with these thoughts, children do not feature as goods insofar as they are new human

80 A quote from a discouraged new mother who was prohibited from indicating herself as
biological parent (rather than non-biological) on her baby’s registration forms provides a clear
instance of this attitude at work: “I don’t want to be a second-class parent” (Hurley 2013).
beings, extra human lives, but as progeny or offspring, as my or our children” (1987, 311). She is claiming that when we consider choosing to reproduce, we are in fact considering whether it would be good to have a child, with having a child defined as having a child of one’s own. I believe it helpful to summarize her argument this way: a) Children are intrinsically valuable; b) having a child is intrinsically worthwhile; c) having a child (through reproduction) does not mean bringing a new life into existence—rather, it means having a child of one’s own (creating a relationship); d) creating relationships is generally conducive to human flourishing; e) therefore, one may choose to pursue reproduction for itself, rendering reproduction a virtuous act.

Because she argues that it is good to have a child, and something one can choose for its own sake, Hursthouse may conclude that reproduction may be chosen for itself, and that it is a potentially virtuous act. We may choose reproduction for its own sake if and when we hold a proper conceptualisation of how it represents the having of a child. Hursthouse’s analysis gets us part of the way in regard to establishing the potential virtuousness of reproduction (reproduction as being plausibly and desirably chosen for itself). Her important insight is that given the way humans are and the way we think about having children, it is misguided to suppose that it is plausible to detach having children from reproduction. It seems to me, however, that the task of establishing the value of having a child of one’s own, as opposed to obtaining a child in some other way, remains incompletely fulfilled. While it is clearly the case that people do interpret the action of having children in terms of reproduction, the more basic aspiration underlying the aim to have children is family-making (understood as a particular kind of relationship-creation). Accepting Hursthouse’s argument may therefore be in tension with
my claims about how non-reproductive methods of having children allow access to the (true) goods that are generally associated with reproduction. But as I hope to show, the particular qualities of the relationship between parents and biological children help distinguish and legitimize the choice to create a family by reproducing. To do this I will appeal to a view of childbearing similar to that advanced by Overall, which identifies relationship creation as the goal of reproduction as well as Annas’ distinction between ideal and ordinary virtue expression. I contend that the choice to pursue reproduction is conducted through a particular scheme of meaning-attribution that characterizes the reproductive act as the creation of a relationship with a particular other or others.

I hope to have established that if creating a relationship is choice-worthy in itself, reproduction may be chosen for itself. I now turn to elucidating the distinction between ordinary and ideal virtue, which will help determine whether reproduction may desirably be chosen for itself. I will then examine the nature of virtuous reproduction.

**Ordinary and ideal virtue**

There are two different sorts of virtue expression. The distinction between being virtuous and becoming virtuous, discussed in an earlier section on cultivating versus expressing virtue, is not what concerns me here. Now I will suggest that it is plausible to distinguish between two sorts of true virtue: the ordinary and the ideal, with the former constituting a set of virtue manifestations at different levels or stages of development. The latter is a universal and not practically unrealizable standard, but dependent on a similarly ideal society for its expression. Proceeding with my analysis through appeal to Annas’ (2011, chapter 4) elucidation of the distinction will allow for a more contextually
informed mode of assessment of reproduction’s virtuousness. In particular, appeals to ordinary virtue will make room for consideration of situational factors; such factors, that is, could be said to hamper the expression of ideal virtue but contribute meaningfully to the expression of ordinary virtue.

Various constraints, including those arising as a result of one’s society, culture, and individual flaws, regularly prevent what Annas refers to as ideal virtue. She explains:

“If we are realistic we realize that the dispositions from which we act are always flawed in a number of ways, both by individual failures and by the way the virtues have been taught and learned in an imperfect society. But again there is no confusion in saying that ordinary people are kind or brave, as long as we are aware of the stage of development we are talking about, and the ways in which the imperfections and injustices of society can compromise even the most idealistic individual. (Annas 2011, 65)

As I will show, reproduction may be virtuous without being ideally so; the choice to pursue reproduction must be understood in the context of our deeply pronatalist culture, which endorses the inherent desirability of childbearing and, conversely, suspicion toward those who do not pursue reproduction.

Because this distinction between ordinary and ideal virtue expression relates to the demandingness of a virtue-centred approach to ethics, I will consider whether the motivation to reproduce in order to have one’s own child is virtuous, and whether, if it is, that motivation must be the unique or primary one. As indicated in the preceding chapter, the potentially virtuous act is rendered actually virtuous through the agent’s will’s engagement with the goodness associated with the act. For instance, the agent striving to reduce pain because of the goodness associated with doing so will render the act virtuous in a way that the agent who reduces pain for a variety of reasons, including the power that
she estimates to hold over the victim as a result, is not. But it may be true that in many cases, individuals are motivated by diverse considerations. In particular, under normal circumstances, it may be argued, individuals seek to reproduce for a variety of reasons, some of which are not for reproduction itself. And surely it would not be wrong, for instance, for a woman to choose to pursue reproduction because she desires an increased intimacy with her partner, because she wishes to solidify ties with her peer group that is reproducing, and because she believes that doing so will make her less lonely.  

While I am sympathetic to this point, I argue that we must not grant significant legitimacy or moral relevance to mixed motives. To have a vast variety of motives when choosing actions would disallow any kind of character development or moral development. Becoming a fully formed character requires being motivated by the right things. Certainly it is the case that both human nature and circumstance prohibit regular expression of pure, singularly motivated virtuous action. But this does not mean it is not something we ought to strive for, nor that virtue is implausibly expressed in a reliable way. Clearly, people can be and are motivated by some considerations more than others, and tend to value acting for particular reasons, and a limited set of reasons. Being consistently faced with a laundry list of reasons for each other’s choices and behaviour would mean that we would not be able to understand or explain ourselves to one another. Such obstacles to understanding would clearly be detrimental; mutual intelligibility is valued and valuable, given our nature as social and interdependent beings. I do not believe that this claim is incompatible with the suggestion that people are and may

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81 These reasons to pursue reproduction (which I would suspect are not uncommon) are, notably, neither absolutely selfless nor selfish, and indeed all of them may be characterized in terms that imply attention to the goodness associated with the reproductive act. 
justifiably be multiply motivated much of the time. And the claim is not that one should
always aim for single-minded motivation. For instance, one may pursue reproduction
because she wishes to enter a parenting relationship with a child, because she wishes to
create a family with her partner, and because she wishes to experience the rewarding
feeling of witnessing and contributing to a child’s development. The individual is
multiply motivated in such a way that her will is primarily engaged with the act’s
associated goodness, and she understands and is able to communicate her primary
reasons for acting.\textsuperscript{82}

Beyond the facilitation of intelligibility that is denied with a great diversity of
motivations, consistently vastly varied motives would diminish if not preclude the
character development that grants humans a sense of identity that is required for agency.
Character is developed partly through regularized reason-responsiveness, and this is what
allows agents to maintain a sense of identity when faced with novel situations. Thus
surely it is neither true nor desirable that people act from a mere collection of motives, so
that no particular motive has greater weight or priority. Humans do and must be able to
count on taking certain considerations (rather than others) seriously when they are
choosing how to act. And when it comes to acts that are strongly associated with some
goodness or badness, we care especially about our and others’ reasons for pursuing or
avoiding such actions. Thus while we may understandably wish to grant that it is not
wrong for individuals to choose to pursue reproduction for a variety of reasons, the
virtuousness that may be expressed in reproduction is rightly confined to cases where the

\textsuperscript{82} This point echoes Annas’ articulacy requirement for virtue, which is the “ability to convey why
what is done is done” (2011, 20).
agent’s will is primarily if not uniquely engaged with the goodness associated with reproduction.

**Reproduction and virtuousness**

I will now provide a holistic appraisal of how the virtuous character in general will approach reproductive decision-making. This part of the evaluation will involve thinking about those qualities that define the virtuous character: attentiveness, reason responsiveness, and affective engagement. Under consideration, then, is the phenomenology of virtuousness in the case of reproduction. What are the ways in which agents can be deemed appropriately reason-responsive and affectively engaged so as to be held virtuous?

As explained in the preceding chapter, the three dimensions of virtue—action, emotion, and choice—are mutually informative and strongly related, but may be distinguished in terms of their characteristic operational manifestations. Illustrating possible manifestations will be best accomplished through examples; I will therefore provide a (fictional) description of two individuals who respectively express vice and virtue in reproduction, just in terms of these broad and relatively abstract dimensions that will manifest in different ways depending on the virtue being discussed.

*Potential reproducer 1: Beatrice*

Beatrice has the desire to pursue reproduction in order to bear and raise a child. She takes herself to be reasonably knowledgeable about what reproduction involves and entails. She assumes that a number of facts to which she has been attentive are relevant to her decision. For instance, a friend of hers currently has a five-year-old son who has been
diagnosed with leukemia, which has caused a great deal of distress, pain, and hardship both for him and for her friend. She has also read in trusted publications about her region’s public school system’s inequity and educational inadequacy, as well as the increasingly widespread phenomena of playground bullying and its deep psychological repercussions. Being socially and politically engaged has also afforded her the opportunity to gain a sense of how many children are orphaned and not having even their basic needs met.

Conversely, she notices that her other friend, currently pregnant, is faced with unique and rewarding challenges, and she is aware of the joyfulness of other genetically-related families she spends time with. She sees that her nephew, the biological son of her sister, has now, at the age of twenty-two, become a competent, confident, kind, and active citizen, whose idiosyncrasies and responses to humour exude a charming combination of those of his parents. When Beatrice considers reproduction, she feels both excitement and distress. She is keen on experiencing the joy of the families she spends time with, and seeing an individual whom she brought into existence and raised do well both for himself and for the world. But these positive feelings are immediate and not deep. Beatrice’s character is such that she is more emotionally responsive to the plight of those already existing children in need, and to the deep sorrow and regret she would feel if the child she introduced into the world were to be subject to profound harm. Her feelings, that is, have been regulated by her practical reason so that her emotional response is guided by considerations of need. And her decision to refrain from reproducing is motivated by her commitment to the values of justice, kindness, and courage. She believes she is doing the right thing because she has responded in a rational way to the right considerations.
Potential reproducer 2: Benjamin

Benjamin has the desire to pursue reproduction in order to bear and raise a child. He has some basic knowledge of what reproduction involves and entails, but is not at all clear on the dangers or the burden of gestating to birth. He has heard that when a woman has a child with some man, that man will both feel and be more attractive to other women. Benjamin believes that having a genetically-related child will allow him to mold that child into someone just like him, so that he may relive his old glory days as president of his high school’s AV club. He also notices, however, that his parents and his sister hope very much that he will have a child, and they have in fact offered to help with the child’s socialization and education. They seem to generally care about children and about raising them to be happy and good citizens.

Benjamin holds a grudge against his parents and sister, and wishes to avoid engaging in activities that would make them happy. Despite the fact that his committed female partner wishes very much to have children of her own, he refuses to consider it for the aforementioned reason. He is vigilant in his use of protection so that he can avoid impregnating his partner and ensure avoidance of his parents’ and sister’s satisfaction. When tempted to change his mind, he considers all the work involved in raising a child, and how his partner may lose her attractiveness after becoming pregnant.

Benjamin’s decision has been guided by reasons that are either insensitive or contrary to needs-responsiveness. His affective engagement in the situation is not appropriately regulated by reason, in the sense that he feels the wrong things (e.g., pain at making his family happy, fear of responsibility) and allows these feelings to guide his decision. In addition to holding false beliefs, Benjamin has identified and responded to
reasons in a way that fails to address needs, thereby demonstrating defect. In general, Benjamin acts viciously by failing to demonstrate a disposition in his decision-making that strives for and facilitates the flourishing of himself and others.

These examples are intended to show how the same decision can be reached by both the virtuous and the vicious individual, and provide some detail on the phenomenology of their decision-making. Depending on how the individual makes her choice—specifically, how she feels and is guided by her emotions in a reason-regulated way—she may behave virtuously or viciously.

**Two virtues of character in reproduction**

The second part of my evaluation consists in an assessment of the relationship between particular virtues and reproduction. I will consider specifically what the potential virtuous reproducer must be responsive and attentive to and engaged with by examining two virtues that are both central and particularly amenable to being applied to reproduction: courage and benevolence. These virtues meet the criteria outlined in Rachels’ definition of a virtue as “a trait of character, manifest in habitual action, that is good for a person to have” (2010, 2). My analysis will be incomplete to the extent that more virtues must be considered to adequately assess the morality of reproduction; my aim is not to provide a comprehensive application of virtue theory to reproduction. But

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83 Legitimate concerns may be raised that considering the expression of individual virtues fails to conform to a unified picture of the virtues, and may imply endorsement of the sort of traits that would generally be seen as bad to have in isolation (for instance, courage in the Nazi soldier). I believe that taking these concerns seriously is not incompatible with following Aristotle in continuing to say something about what it means to have and express individual virtues. Moreover, as Foot says, it is often helpful to consider whether some act is, for instance, courageous. Part of the action-guiding value of a virtue-centred approach is that it allows us to think about our actions in these thick, diverse, and particular terms.
beginning with appeal to these virtues is a reasonable starting point, particularly given the absence of previous commentary on the link between virtue and reproduction. I also justify my selection of virtues on the basis that both of these clearly meet the requirement of being states of character that humans need. I will provide a brief exposition of each virtue in those terms; that is, in terms of the necessary role they play in human life. I wish to note that because I have endorsed a characterization of reproduction as a relationship-creating act, and because one of my project’s central concerns is to revise the role of beneficence in reproduction, I will spend significantly more time on my analysis and defense of benevolence in reproduction. But I begin with courage, in order to demonstrate the expression of a virtue that is independent of this project’s more specific commitment to understanding beneficence and its relevance to childbearing.

**Courage**

The Aristotelian virtue of courage is suitably defined in triadic terms as a mean between two opposite extremes, so that the courageous individual expresses the mean between two vices, rashness and cowardice (1115b-1116a). Aristotle succinctly characterizes courage in his statement that “whoever stands firm against the right things and fears the right things, for the right end, in the right way, at the right time, and is correspondingly confident, is the brave person; for the brave person’s actions and feelings accord with what something is worth, and follow what reason prescribes” (1115b). The virtue of courage is manifest in attitudes and actions that are appropriately responsive to danger; one is courageous if one’s response to danger involves fear and judgment in the right ways. Aristotle writes: “[S]tanding firm against what is painful
makes us call people brave; that is why bravery is both painful and justly praised, since it is harder to stand firm against something painful than to refrain from something pleasant” (1117a). But we must not overestimate how painful this standing firm is, for according to Aristotle, a clear sign of cowardice is the sort of despair that an individual overly sensitive to pain and loss will feel, and in this way, “The brave person is unperturbed, as far as a human being can be” (1115b). As with each case of individual possession of the virtues, the courageous individual has the right emotional responses to dangerous, burdensome, or fearful situations because those emotional responses are properly regulated by reason. The individual who experiences paralyzing fear of responsibility for the care of another person, for instance, will likely be failing to conform to the mean, for her fearfulness is grounded in a failure to recognize the importance and value of such behaviour. As with other virtues such as temperance, there is an asymmetry between the badness of the two extremes, in that it can be preferable to be rash than to be a coward. This asymmetry seems clearly plausible in light of the status of courage as a meta-virtue; that is, courage is good to have in itself but also because its expression is the condition for all other virtues’ expression. Moreover, courage may be rightly viewed as the primary condition for living well, given human mortality. As T.H. Irwin writes, “Bravery… is concerned with fears and confidence, but more specifically with fear of death, not simply because it is difficult not to be moved by the fear of death, but also because love of one’s own life is natural” (2005, 71).

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84 This asymmetry of difficulty probably does not always tip in the way Aristotle believed it does. For those of us who find it just as challenging (if not more so) to refrain from pleasant things as to face painful things, there is reason to focus more on developing temperance.
In light of this characterization of courage, may we say that reproduction may be courageous? Considering the question from the woman’s point of view, if she will gestate the fetus, it seems entirely plausible to call reproduction courageous in at least some cases. While the health and psychological risks of pregnancy have undoubtedly diminished radically with the development of modern medical techniques, improved hygiene and nutrition, more attentive pregnancy and neonatal care, and the increasing accessibility of a wide range of literature pertaining to health and well-being during pregnancy, pregnancy and childbirth continue to carry unavoidable and significant health risks. For instance, all women who become pregnant risk developing pregestational diabetes or preeclampsia, and experiencing miscarriage (NIH 2012). And in terms of childbirth, maternal mortality rates, while diminished, remain significant in a number of countries. Thus, for a woman, choosing to conceive and gestate a child involves facing significant dangers against which she stands fast. This conclusion resonates with Hursthouse’s claim that “[m]ost pregnancies and labours call for courage, fortitude, and endurance…” (1987, 300).

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85 The maternal mortality rate in Canada, for instance, went from 501.8 maternal deaths per 100,000 births between 1921 and 1925 to 3.6 deaths between 1986 and 1990 (Bélanger 2000).
86 This is not to say that medical advances and the medicalization of pregnancy have provided unmitigated benefits to pregnant women. Indeed, pregnancy’s medicalization is a rightful source of worry for women and for scholars working in biomedical ethics. Broadly, pregnancy as well as childbirth are described as medicalized because “they are increasingly processes that—in fact and as a social ideal—are managed and overseen by medical professionals, typically involve a high degree of technological medical intervention and contact with clinics and hospitals, and are assessed by medical experts who are the authorities on their progress” (Kukla and Wayne 2011). Such interventions frequently include invasive procedures, such as amniocentesis, which are risky.
87 For instance, mortality rates remain very high in countries rife with political conflict such as Afghanistan (currently 1575 maternal deaths occur for every 100,000 births) (Rogers 2010). A higher mortality risk associated with giving birth may or may not render the decision to reproduce in that context more courageous, depending on how the decision was made.
In light of the nature of pregnancy and birth, however, it seems justifiable to expand courage beyond this feature of being appropriately responsive to danger and fear. So far I have worked directly from Aristotle’s definition of courage. While this characterization is a helpful starting point for understanding how courage manifests as a contemporary virtue, I believe that being courageous is crucially associated with a range of attitudes and actions that extend beyond standing firm against danger, risk, and fear.

While many contemporary scholars discuss the relevance of context to identifying what it means to stand fast against danger, and make distinctions between pedestrian and heroic notions of courage (e.g., McKinnon 1999, 166; Pury and Starkey 2010, 85; Scarre 2010, 3), the propensity to take on burdens and to be a caregiver is neglected as a possible and important manifestation of courage. I thus take issue with the fact that “it has commonly been accepted that courage involves the mastery of fear…” (Scarre 2010, 5), and agree with Irwin’s claim that “we ought not to infer from Aristotle’s account that facing danger is the only principal exercise of bravery” (2005, 72).

I am not suggesting that a preference not to take on the responsibility of creating and raising a child indicates cowardice. Indeed, on a charitable reading, those who hesitate to reproduce because they worry about how they will manage the immense responsibility associated with it display prudence, self-knowledge, compassion, and temperance-grounding restraint. The point here is that reproduction is immediately and

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88 A notable exception is Hursthouse’s proclamation that the burden associated with pregnancy and childbirth may be on par with going into battle, as for instance when she approvingly quotes Euripides’ Medea who states that “I would rather stand three times in the battle line… than give birth once” (1987, 300). But what I am interested in here is how the peculiar phenomenology of pregnancy and childbirth lends itself to a more nuanced conceptualization of courage.

89 The issue may also be put in terms of a failure to recognize different sorts of danger; that is, there is a tendency not to count as dangerous situations that are different from paradigmatically dangerous situations such as front-line battle in war.
deeply demanding for the woman, as Sara Ruddick explains: “Children ‘demand’ their lives be preserved and their growth fostered…. Because a care-taking mother typically bears her own children, preservation begins when conception is recognized and accepted” (1999, 111). Indeed, the caretaking is an all-encompassing project that must be pursued in tandem with the woman’s performance of other tasks and while she continues to meet her regular responsibilities. Pregnancy is associated with a wide range of rapid changes to the body, to the extent that “It may well seem as if no part of her body has remained unchanged, as even her organs are dramatically rearranged” (Mullin 2005, 39). Further, pursuing reproduction requires openness to responding to the future child’s demands, and this reflects a willingness to become responsible for a future being. The weight of this responsibility is serious, as the mother is held responsible for whatever goes wrong in the growth and development process, and “must shape natural growth in such a way that her child becomes the sort of adult that she can appreciate and others can accept” (1999, 111). The notion that responsibility begins well before the birth of the child is borne out in empirical literature, which indicates pregnant women’s widespread experience of “prenatal attachment,” which is “theoretically… viewed as being underpinned by mental representations of the self as caregiver” (Laxton-Kane and Slade 2002, 253, 263). Though the experience of prenatal attachment cannot itself ground a genuine responsibility, it fosters an attitude of responsibility because it involves a perceived bond between oneself, as a caregiver, and one’s child, as a dependent.

Pursuing reproduction may also reflect an active and accepting engagement with the unknowability inherent in human life; not in the sense of being simply resigned to life’s unpredictability but in the sense of participating most fully in a life that demands
epistemic humility. As Mullin explains, “Beyond these… fears and concerns about her own health and that of the fetus, every pregnant woman who plans to raise the child she carries also needs to come to terms with her welcoming of a creature who is already radically transforming her body, her social interactions, and her habits, who will always radically transform her life, and about whom she knows virtually nothing” (2005, 43).

The woman who gestates and bears a child may, through the pregnancy experience, separate herself from the realm of fantasy, which “works in the service of inauthenticity” (Ruddick 1999, 117). She does so by welcoming an experience that will involve a relinquishing of bodily control in order to create a new and loved member of humanity. As one empirical study demonstrates, women who experience pregnancy view themselves, in part, as being vulnerable to a host of uncontrollable bodily changes that disrupt the cultural notion of the self-governed body:

These respondents [for whom perceived loss of control was negatively characterized] described feeling that what they wanted or thought became irrelevant (Helen); a sense of being taken over (Grainne and Selina); dismay at how far their bodies expanded (Belinda, Olivia and Marian); being unable to carry out normal daily activities (Olivia, Sam and Belinda); and illness and discomfort (Olivia, Grainne, Belinda and Sam). Recalling Bordo, it is as if they resented their pregnancies for plunging them back into the female body natural (Warren and Brewis 2004, 228).

Thus, there is a willingness to participate in a different and challenging expression of embodiment on the part of women who pursue reproduction. There is a sort of mandated humility and acute risk-awareness for the future mother, given what she has taken on as a naturalized identity—that is, an identity that is insusceptible to typically pervasive forms of social control. This naturalized identity may expose her to more risk because it is less agential by virtue of its location in the uncontrolled. The gestating
woman, then, is courageous in her willingness to take on the uncertainties of human life in an intimate and embodied way. By participating in this natural process she is responding in a courageous way to the inherent riskiness of human life. This reading aligns with Lear’s contention that “…courage is the capacity for living well with the risks that inevitably attend human existence” (2006, 121, quoted in Scarre 2010, 75).

**Benevolence**

The other virtue that I wish to consider that is potentially expressed through reproduction is less straightforwardly applied than courage. Benevolence is neither an Aristotelian virtue nor a virtue that lends itself clearly to the issue of reproduction. I take the former characteristic to be relatively unworrisome, for the simple reason that benevolence (or something akin to it—for instance, kindness or generosity) is generally accepted as belonging in the standard canon of virtues. According to Jennifer Welchman, “Benevolence is a disposition to devote one’s resources or one’s efforts to others” (2005, 151).

The latter characteristic is evident in reproduction because reproduction is unique in involving the creation of a previously non-existing being. If benevolence is defined as a trait that involves the bestowal of benefit, the idea that reproduction could express benevolence appears puzzling, if not absurd. To whom may one’s act of benefit be directed through reproduction? If we wish to insist, as I believe we should, that an act that brings an individual into existence must be evaluated on the grounds of whether and how *that* individual has been benefited, the notion of expressing benevolence through the act
of reproduction may seem misguided. While we may reasonably appeal to two other candidates for benefit receipt, the self and other deliberators, the most challenging and important possibility for benefit receipt is the individual who will be created. And the idea that one may be benefited by being brought into existence is contentious (e.g., see Parfit 1984, Harman 2004, Benatar 2006). This contentiousness is a worry even when reproduction is characterized as relationship creation, because of the special manner and implications of this sort of relationship creation. Moreover, even if there is some possibility of being benefited by being brought into existence, bestowing benefit in this way may not be construed as expressive of a benevolent character. Expressing benevolence is not equivalent to bestowing benefit. I believe that there are two issues here, and will take each in turn to show how reproduction can express a benevolent character in the sense of bestowing benefit on another individual.

**Benefiting through bringing into existence**

The first issue is metaphysical: It is not clear how an individual is benefited by being brought into existence, because a condition of benefit-bestowal is that there is some identifiable benefit-recipient. If we wish to avoid the unpalatable implication of emphasizing the moral import of population benefit or reproducer benefit, we are left with the unconceived who may receive benefit by being brought into existence, and it may seem straightforwardly absurd that anyone may be benefited in this way. For Parfit, however, it is reasonable to suggest that if one’s life is worth living, then one’s life is

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90 I am in agreement with Overall that reasons for having children should stand up to three moral tests: concern for women’s and children’s well-being, respect for women’s autonomy, and, most importantly here, refusal to use child or mother as mere means (2012, 93).
better than nothing; and if one’s life is better than nothing, then one has benefited by being brought into existence (1984, 487). The (well-recognized) problem with this view is that it seems wrong to suggest that one is better off because one exists; the two-state view of assessing harm and benefit suggests that benefit implies a positive change in one’s state. Clearly, a non-existent does not have a state to which existence can be compared favourably or otherwise, so it may seem obvious that one cannot be benefited by being brought into existence. To address this difficulty I will appeal to Parfit’s own solution to the problem as well as a distinction between different sorts of potential beings provided by Elizabeth Harman.

Parfit’s view is that “Causing someone to exist is a special case because the alternative would not have been worse for this person. We may admit that, for this reason, causing someone to exist cannot be better for this person. But it may be good for this person” (1984, 489). He continues “we are not claiming that starting to exist can be either good or bad for people when it does not happen. Our claim is about starting to exist when it happens” (ibid). To help justify this claim, consider that of potential beings, there are both possible future beings and actual future beings. I am borrowing terms from Harman’s defense of abortion of early fetuses to make this distinction. Her Actual Future principle states that “an early fetus’s actual future determines whether it has moral status” (1999, 311). If the fetus will become actual, then the fetus has some moral status; if it will not, it does not. In her article, she sets out to show how a very liberal view on early abortion is supported through this way of assessing the fetus’ moral status. While I am not interested here in the moral status of fetuses, I believe that this Actual Future principle, and the Mother’s Intention principle also outlined by Harman (which claims
that an early fetus has status if and when the gestating woman plans to carry it to term),
assist in this discussion of whether one can be benefited by being brought into existence.
When an individual sets out to conceive a child with some other person or persons, she
intends the creation of a particular child or children. I believe that the very fact of her
anticipation of the child, whether her attempt to reproduce is successful or not, creates a
set of conditions whereby she may be doing some individual good. And, if and when she
is successful, and the child she has created will have a life worth living, she may be said
to have done the child good.

With every act of reproduction that is successful, some particular individual will
come into existence. I have already set constraints on my argument’s scope so that under
consideration are only those cases where the pursuit of reproduction is aimed at creating
and raising a child if and when reproduction is successful. So the benevolent will may be
construed as directed to some particular (here, future actual or intended), if not
identifiable, person. And when the will that is aimed at creating a new individual fails,
this does not imply harm or a lack of benefit. As Parfit explains, “When we claim that it
was good for someone that he was caused to exist, we do not imply that, if he had not
been caused to exist, this would have been bad for him. And our claims apply only to
people who are or would be actual” (1984, 489). So when it happens that someone comes
to exist, it can be good for that person. It is not that not starting to exist can be good or
bad for anyone. Parfit justifies this claim through appeal to the following scenario:
Imagine a case where an individual who has just come into existence almost dies but has
her life saved. It seems plausible to suggest that it was good for her to have her life saved.
If this is true, claims Parfit, it would be strange to deny the possibility that it could be
good for someone to come into existence (ibid). Harmon’s aforementioned principle, the Mother’s Intention Principle, lends force to this argument. Individuals who are pursuing reproduction aim for a life to be created, and they aim to create a particular life (e.g., my son). It does not seem a stretch to say that the potential parents are aiming to do good for the person that they hope will come into being as the result of their reproductive efforts.

Thus, while it may have seemed as if what is being done through reproduction is creating conditions for benefit rather than bestowing benefit itself, if it is true that existence can be good (just) for the individual who does come into existence, we need not worry that the alternative to existing is to be insusceptible to benefit or harm. We can imagine that, for the virtuous individual or trainee in virtue who wishes to ask, “Would this act of reproduction express benevolence?” the bestowal of being could count as a benefit in the sense that we could be doing good for some individual.

Even if the bestowal of benefit may be rightly said to take place in reproduction, however, this does not mean it will be benevolent to pursue reproduction. The reason for this non-entailment, unsurprisingly, has to do with the peculiar nature of bestowing benefit through bestowing existence. Even if one is bestowing benefit through reproduction, it is necessarily a tenuous and complex sort of benefit. Shiffrin’s account of the asymmetry of harm and benefit, which correctly rejects a shared scale model of harm and benefit, helps illustrate this tenuousness and complexity. I will not rehearse the argument here, but rather simply remind the reader of Shiffrin’s distinction between the morality of bestowing pure benefit and that of removing harm, when in each case the creation of harm is also at stake. According to Shiffrin, one may justifiably—and indeed laudably—impose harm when there is a clear risk of greater harm (1999, 126). One is not
similarly justified in imposing harm when there is no risk of greater harm, but only the possibility of pure benefit bestowal. I take the greater moral weight of imposing harm to be intuitive and plausible, and accepting this asymmetry will result in our calling into question the justifiability of reproduction. The difficulty, then, of establishing the potential benevolence of reproduction will only be resolved through response to this issue, which I pursue in the part of this chapter that defends benevolent reproduction.

The second issue regarding the possibility of benefiting through bringing into existence is epistemological and moral, and can only be fruitfully explored through appeal to a clear account of what benevolence, as a human virtue, means. I will begin by establishing the difference between beneficence and benevolence; it is only the latter that I take to be a character trait, and therefore a plausible candidate for a virtue. This distinction is pertinent to the second issue because bestowing benefit is only benevolent under the right epistemic conditions (e.g., when one has good reason to believe that the benefit will be helpful and can be bestowed at a low cost), and is only morally desirable when doing so does not threaten the pursuit of other important benefit-bestowal opportunities, and is done with the right attitude and for the right reasons.

Most broadly, benevolence may be distinguished from beneficence through its relationship to the will and to consequences. It is the presence or absence of the benevolent will that helps determine the virtuousness of an action. Benevolence is more fitting than beneficence in the virtue-centred framework that I have advanced, which requires that quality of the will help assess the goodness or badness of the act. Beneficence, on the other hand, is a term most accurately appealed to in a consequentialist framework, as it consists in the act of benefiting; in its most basic and
technical sense, beneficence is a feature of some action that bestows benefit. Benevolence involves striving to express a benevolent character, which may manifest in a variety of ways. Indeed, displays of benevolence may be quite at odds with displays of beneficence; the benevolent individual may see that benevolence demands refraining from bestowing benefit, or may fail to benefit, and still be expressing the virtue of benevolence. Consider, for instance, the beneficial effects that having children may have on society, in terms of creating future workers and tax payers; this is not the sort of possible benefit that will motivate the benevolent character. One reason is that aiming for this benefit would imply treating the future child as an instrument of well-being for others. In sum, benevolence rightly replaces beneficence in a virtue-centred ethics as the latter is a results-focused action description whereas the former is a character-focused description that concerns the individual’s quality of will. The particular virtue under consideration here is the benevolent response to need, which is a specification of the account of virtue introduced earlier. I am therefore proposing a revised role for the principle of beneficence in reproduction (revised from the principle of procreative beneficence discussed in the first and second chapters). The proper role for beneficence in guiding childbearing (as well as more generally) is as a mode of expression of the benevolent character.

Benevolent reproduction: characterization and defense

I wish to clarify the method of moral evaluation of reproduction I advance. To this end, I outline a set of considerations to which the virtuous potential reproducer would be attentive. We can say that a benevolent nature will bestow benefit in the following ways:
1) At the right times: when benefit can be bestowed with no or few risks to the beneficiary, when bestowing benefit would not be unjust, and when bestowing benefit will not be unacceptably burdensome to oneself;

2) To the right people: when benefit will be meaningful and important to the recipient, and the recipient will be in a position to accept benefit;

3) In the right amounts/right distribution: benefit is not going to overwhelm the recipient, or alienate her, and the benefit is not provided in quantity that will threaten other acts of benefiting;

4) While feeling the right things; and

5) Choosing for the right reasons

These criteria are meant to reflect broadly accepted conditions of virtuous action. Doing all or some of these things wrongly can indicate lack of virtue or even the presence of vice.

With this characterization of benevolence in operation, there arises a moral question as to whether one could legitimately be said to express benevolence through an act that is so risky to the created individual. After all, great struggle and difficulty seem to touch all but the very best of human lives, and given that any child who comes into existence will be at risk for profound suffering, which we cannot predict, the pursuit of reproduction by a trainee in virtue could appear to be a rookie mistake. I will suggest that reproduction may be, despite these difficulties, something that the virtuous individual or trainee in virtue may pursue, and will make my argument through appeal to three considerations. The first two are facets of reproduction itself, and the third concerns the contextual features of reproduction.
With the criteria outlined above, the problems associated with attributing benevolence to reproductive decisions are perhaps immediately apparent. Even if one is benefiting the created individual through the act of reproduction, one is still doing so at high costs, and one is creating needs. The possibility for benevolent reproduction is thus called into question. As Annas points out, “To get it right in giving, how to give, when and to whom, not to mention how much, you have to have an interest in the welfare of others beyond their role as your beneficiaries; otherwise you risk your giving becoming selfish…” (2011, 84, emphasis added). Keeping in mind Shiffrin’s identification of the comparatively low moral value of bestowing pure benefit, it seems as though the truly benevolent character must not bestow the sort of risky benefit that requires simultaneous harm. To bestow benefit through reproduction may be an instance of selfish giving and therefore not benevolent. The potential reproducer may resemble, then, the unsavoury character who seeks to create needs in order to feel wanted or to exert a sort of control over another. The virtuous individual, on the other hand, would eschew performance of a purportedly beneficent act that is unhelpful and self-serving. It might be, then, that the benevolent disposition inevitably benefits only currently existing others. Potential reproducers may take the attitude that they are creating good conditions for beneficence, but we could say that adoption can serve this purpose just as well or better.

I argue, however, that it must be true that the aspiring virtuous individual may both create conditions for bestowing benefit and express benevolence through reproduction. I will use two examples to illustrate this point. Each of these examples involves an instance of relationship creation that may be analogized with reproduction. First, some individual might create an organization devoted to improving the quality of
life for homeless individuals in her area, and second, she might cultivate a friendship with some individual she sees to be struggling with life’s burdens. Even if neither the creation of the organization nor the creation of the friendship is beneficial in itself, and she falls short of expressing benevolence because she is not adequately attentive to the relevant circumstances, she has undoubtedly created good (that is, virtue-supported) conditions for benefiting others.

It could be objected that both the organization and the friendship are formed because of pre-existing needs, unlike in the case of reproduction, which involves needs-creation. But it is possible to go deeper than this reading in order to justify the analogy between the two scenarios and reproduction, and to show how in each case the relationship-creating act may express benevolence. Two observations motivate a deeper reading. First, a wide range of human needs emerge relationally. Second, humans need relationships in terms of both needing a sense of belongingness within a community, and needing close relationships with particular others. Needs creation through relationship creation, then, is potentially virtuous; both the expression of virtue and the flourishing of human life require the pursuit of needs creation. That is, human life happens to go best when individuals are willing to create paths to flourishing, and creating these paths will involve creating inherently risky conditions for virtue’s cultivation and expression. In the cases above and in reproduction, the agent is creating a relationship which may be good for the other member or members of the relationship. And aiming to do what is good for others must be what benevolence is all about.

The plausibility of this characterization of benevolence is supported by the nature of goodness explained in an objection by Overall to Benatar’s claim that it is good to
have an absence of harm (which is equivalent to non-existence). She writes: “A mere absence or avoidance is neither good nor bad unless it is bad for someone” (2012, 105). If no one avoids bad by not existing, we cannot say that non-existence is good, because there is no individual for whom it is good. Whoever is brought into existence, on the other hand, as discussed earlier, may benefit from existence. In light of the possible goodness for an individual that existence may enable, I propose that one may strive to express benevolence through creating relationships as the condition for benefit bestowal. The plausibility of this idea hinges on there being a variety of human needs that emerge only within relationships that are themselves the fulfillment of a human need.

Whether we allow this conceptual space for the possibility of the creation, by a benevolent individual, of conditions for benefit bestowal, there remain a number of empirical facts that speak against the idea that reproduction is a benevolent means to create conditions for bestowing benefit. Whether one is bestowing benefit directly or creating conditions for its bestowal, attentiveness and sensitivity to the world, and to what it means to be in this world, will surely direct the virtuous individual toward the pervasive and pressing needs of currently existing individuals. The greater urgency of attending to existing individuals’ needs is relevant to the pursuit of parenthood through reproduction in two ways. First, potential reproducers who wonder if they may reproduce benevolently may appeal to reasons that involve facilitating the flourishing of another being, fulfilling her needs in a way that contributes to her living well and helping others to live well. But these laudable reasons would just as easily inform and encourage the act of adoption. By adopting a child, one creates conditions for bestowal of benefit, as well as benefiting through the act itself, by taking into one’s care an already-existing child in
need of that care to survive and flourish. In this way, one is bestowing benefit on the right people and in the right distribution.

Besides bestowing benefit only at high cost and high risk, one’s potential benefiting through reproduction will hinder the expression of benevolence in other areas. And benevolence might be best or most clearly expressed in situations that involve currently existing others, whose most basic needs, such as for shelter and security, are not being met. For instance, imagine that one has the capacity to benefit a multitude of strangers, in a way that is consistent with one’s valuing of providing members of oppressed classes with opportunities for flourishing. This is precisely the sort of project pursued by Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, who aims to spearhead the creation of low-income housing in Lowick. Such a focus on grand, broadly effective projects may be the ideal way to bestow benefit, in the sense of being the most benevolent response to human need. It may also preclude the devotion of time and resources to having and raising a child. Dorothea’s character arguably expresses an ideal benevolence when she asks, “What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other”? (Eliot 1994,1308). Pursuit of this ideal through reproduction, even if the choice-worthiness of reproduction itself is allowed, may appear misguided.

So the benevolent individual might completely reject the possibility of reproduction, because bestowing benefit will best be done by helping others in profound need. Surely, in other words, the virtuous person can, at least in most cases, do better than devoting herself to such highly localized and demanding sources of need that do not yet exist. On the account of virtuousness that I am advancing, which interprets virtue as the rational and appropriately affectively engaged response to need, then, it seems that
reproduction could be off the table for the virtuous individual, and more specifically, that it would not be benevolent to reproduce. There are, however, three considerations that will create space for the virtuous individual or trainee in virtue to pursue reproduction, which I will take in turn. Each of these considerations is grounded in a particular view of what reproduction involves.

I claimed earlier that reproduction is rightly characterized as the creation of a relationship, and that this relationship bears ethically relevant features. Choosing to reproduce, within my argument’s constraints, means choosing to parent, and according to Overall, “Parenting is a relationship, not a set of actions directed at an object. The lifetime of parent-child interactions is, I believe, key to understanding what is good about procreation…. what matters is the process of procreation and parenting, that is, the relationship between parent and offspring. In this relationship lies the best reason to have a child” (2012, 212, emphasis added). My earlier claims regarding the possibility of bestowing benefit through reproduction given its (needed) relationship-producing nature demonstrate agreement with her view. I also agree with Overall that in order to ethically evaluate reproduction, we must examine “the meanings people attribute to reproduction and to children and…the significance of procreation for the kinds of beings that we are” (2012, 210).

If the meanings that people attribute to reproduction matter to its morality, and if the relationship-creating nature of reproduction permits its status as potentially benefit-bestowing, three points in favour of the possibility of benevolent reproduction follow. First, because reproduction involves the experience of pregnancy, and pregnancy is a desirable relationship (typically) accessible only through reproduction, it is possible to
express a benevolent character through pregnancy. Second, pursuing parenthood through reproduction involves creating a genetic relationship, which involves a special kind of intimacy and is also (typically) only accessible through reproduction, so it is possible to express a benevolent character in aiming to have a biological child. The third point concerns the general tendency of humans to bestow benefit in and through close relationships. While bestowing benefit may be more effectively pursued in an impersonal manner, humans develop and express a benevolent character through their interactions with close others. Choosing to pursue reproduction may be a manifestation of benevolence even if it is not an ideal method of benefit-bestowal.

**Bodily connectedness and interdependence**

Because interdependence is manifest in important ways in relationships, benevolence can be desirably and easily expressed through these relationships. Humans need love and support in particular from those whom they consider to be intimates—friends, family, and romantic partners. Pregnancy, in the context of voluntary conception aimed at creating a child one will raise, may be conceptualised as the beginning of the relationship, and indeed, despite its brevity, an important part of it. It is an essentially intimate connection, which may be valued both in itself and as an integral means to the parent-child relationship that will come to be. The woman who chooses to reproduce may be motivated by the desire to begin her parenting relationship during pregnancy, because she will be contributing to the child’s growth and development.

I suggest that if we allow for the ethical relevance of bodily experience and bodily connection in terms of relationship-making, the bodily attachment between woman and
fetus is a legitimate ground for expression of the benevolent character. The woman has created conditions for benefit in a way that manifests virtue. Presenting the nature of pregnancy as a relationship defined by “corporeal gifting,” Myra Hird claims that “This process (life) is the first gift and the first debt any living organism encounters” (2007, 14). This gifting may be both beneficial and harmful, and is at base unpredictable, given the interdependent and mutually constituting nature of humanity: “[W]e are not autonomous individuals who subsequently interact: we interact, gifting things calculable and incalculable, and this ongoing process creates our individuality, to be recreated with every encounter” (ibid). If it is accepted that pregnancy is not merely a passive process whereby the pregnant woman is host to the developing organism inside her, but rather an active process (Hird 2007, 7), such giving may be said to demonstrate the benevolent will. Thus the active process in which the pregnant woman is engaged is the formation of a relationship wherein she both benefits the developing child and creates conditions for future benefit-bestowal in a robust and engaged way.

**Genetic connectedness and intimacy**

The second consideration that I believe may correctly be included in the virtuous individual’s choice of whether to reproduce is the genetic relatedness of her child. It generally seems desirable to deny the potential moral import of genetics in regard to whether a child is worthy of being brought into existence. That is, both the genetic relationship of the child to the parents and the particular genetic traits of the child seem

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91 The insignificance of this genetic relatedness is denied by Hursthouse, who in fact *presumes* that those who wish for a child must be wishing for their own child. Of individuals who would pursue adoption she writes “it is, and would be, odd, to want *to have a child* (i.e. be a parent) as
morally insignificant. The reason is that assigning significance to the genetic relatedness of one’s child is incompatible with commitment to the desirable notion that one can and should love one’s child no matter which genetic traits she happens to express (including in those cases where there is no sharing of genetic traits). I believe, however, that a genetic relationship carries social meaning, which may be appropriately normative. Parents perceive, rightly or not, genetic similarities in their children that may (ideally implicitly) contribute favourably to the relationship’s beneficial qualities for the child. The fact that little Suzy has your eyes and your partner’s laugh, or your partner’s propensity for doing puzzles, or burning easily, or aversion to opera, represents opportunities for connections that, if rightly attended to, in turn present excellent opportunities for bestowing benefit. A father’s recognition and response to his daughter’s literary preferences, which are grounded in his view of what he has passed on genetically to her, for instance, may be a manifestation of his benevolent disposition. A more basic example that could be indicative of genetic connectedness (as opposed to environmental parental influence) could be the ease of responding helpfully to one’s child’s mood disorder.

I hope it is obvious that my claim is not that benefit-bestowing qualities and capacities of the parenting relationship hinge on genetic relatedness. Rather, it is that the genetic connection between parent and child that is achievable (currently) only through reproduction is one of many possible dimensions of this type of parenting relationship (in an end in itself (i.e. not to secure the inheritance nor as a publicity stunt) without at all wanting to have one’s own child (in the biological sense)” (1987, 309). Whether it is odd or not (though I strongly doubt that it is), Hursthouse never argues for the moral superiority of having a biological child over adopting a child. This lack of argument diminishes the strength of her conclusion that bearing children is a morally significant and intrinsically worthwhile activity. 

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the sense that it is *itself* a relationship), which may desirably create conditions for benefit bestowal that the benevolent character might pursue.

*Relevance of the human context: benefiting through relationships*

The final consideration that is available to the virtuous individual questioning whether she will pursue reproduction is the relevance of social context to the ways benevolence may be expressed. Virtue, as showed in the preceding chapter, is learned in embedded contexts, which inform and shape the development and manifestation of virtuousness (Annas 2011, 21). While the reflectiveness of humans frees us from having our characters determined by such variables as the culture and family in which we were raised, the available range of the expression of virtue is necessarily limited by the contexts in which we become and act as agents. This limitation is relevant to the virtuousness of creating a relationship through reproduction. Recall that the aim to create a parenting relationship can be achieved through avenues other than reproduction. By choosing to adopt, for instance, the aspiring parent will be able to bestow benefit in a manner less complicated than she would through reproduction. As discussed earlier, choosing adoption will involve attending to pre-existing needs, which makes the choice to reproduce a lesser candidate for benevolent action. Moreover, choosing to adopt instead of reproduce avoids the non-required and significant harm that will inevitably burden the created individual.

But consider, again, how George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* illuminates the nature and implications of the relevance of social context. At the end of the novel, Eliot’s narrator considers how an outsider might view Dorothea, who has given up what she was initially
committed to, permanent widowhood—and the grand plans she had for reforming the housing system in Lowick—to marry a man with whom she is in love and to have children. Suggesting that the outsider may be critical of Dorothea, by judging her to display inconsistency in her commitments, the narrator concludes, “Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it” (1491-92). The purported compromise of Dorothea’s benevolent disposition was, we can conclude, inevitable, so that her virtuous character could not have remained pristine. Yet though her imperfect social circumstances may leave her unable to express ideal virtue, she undoubtedly expresses a high level of ordinary virtue.

It might be suggested, however, that reading any moral significance into the force of her circumstances implies mere resignation to the moral poverty of our time, which disallows true expression of benevolence. Recall, too, that virtue must involve a striving for that which is better, so that even when one fails to exemplify virtue given one’s circumstances, it is still a failure, and still may be viewed as vicious. Christine Swanton’s assertion that “virtue, at high levels, is constituted by a solid core of incorruptible integrity, honesty, and so forth: a core of virtue not readily undermined by corrosive social forces and institutions” (2005, 192) perhaps ought to be heeded. But if we understand the social context of the feasible expression of virtue to be that of humanity itself, then for those who wish to create these conditions of benefit, benevolence must not
in principle require denial of the (legitimate) influence of our context. The worry discussed above regarding Dorothea’s purported fall from grace may be based in implicit endorsement of a particular notion of benevolence: impersonal benevolence. Impersonal benevolence is of the sort endorsed by utilitarians, and, in virtue-ethics terms, consists in an unbiased and generally benevolent will toward all individuals in need. However, given our social nature, the will to benefit others within relationships is more likely to arise than a drive to express impersonal benevolence, and it is seriously and unjustifiably demanding to be critical of such preferred modes of benefit-bestowal. Such a criticism, moreover, would be in tension with the neo-Aristotelian picture grounding this analysis: “For the Aristotelian, human nature provides a kind of barrier which rational thinking has to respect, since otherwise it will be frustrated. Impersonal benevolence brings this out in a vivid way. Human nature constrains rationality—our ability to choose different ways of life, to transform what we do and what we are—in two ways” (Annas 2005, 17). These constraints suggest that it is unrealistic to require that benevolent individuals be singularly devoted to impersonally benevolent acts, and that an emphasis on impersonal benevolence would not allow for the living of a good life as humans, in that it would preclude human flourishing (2005, 17-18).

The problematic nature of unwavering commitment to impersonal benevolence and its implications for the flourishing of the virtuous individual is demonstrated in a conversation between Dorothea and Will Ladislaw. Will is angered by Dorothea’s failure to find enjoyment in the rich display of art around her when she is at a gallery in Rome. She complains that it is accessible only to an elite few, and so makes the world no better, and is deeply saddening. He shoots back:
I call that the fanaticism of sympathy.... You might say the same of landscape, of poetry, of all refinement. If you carried it out you ought to be miserable in your own goodness, and turn evil that you might have no advantage over others. The best piety is to enjoy—when you can. You are doing the most then to save the earth’s character as an agreeable planet. And enjoyment radiates. It is of no use to try and take care of all the world; that is being taken care of when you feel delight—in art or in anything else. Would you turn all the youth of the world into a tragic chorus, wailing and moralizing over misery? I suspect that you have some false belief in the virtues of misery, and want to make your life a martyrdom (Eliot, 394-395).

Obviously I do not wish to interpret Will as advocating a sort of enlightened hedonism, to which the virtuous individual could surely not reasonably subscribe despite the importance of living well and with pleasures. Rather, I believe his indignant response is meant to demonstrate the need for acceptance of the world in which we become who we are in order to practice virtue in a way that truly contributes to the world’s good. And it is the less grandiose acts and the particular, less obvious individual devotions that create a liveable world. As Eliot’s narrator muses, “[T]he growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (1492). Thus I take Will’s statement to imply that benevolence must be able to involve modesty of aims, in order for the virtuous character’s manifestation to be something other than mere self-sacrifice. And in addition to the inadequacy of virtue as martyrdom, expressing benevolence within relationships may be defended through appeal to the value of expressing love to one’s intimates. This point is made by Robert Solomon in his argument for erotic love as a virtue. Solomon suggests that the so-called “overvaluation” of the beloved is not a count against that passion’s virtuousness: “Love is not just ‘seeing clearly’ but seeing erotically (to be trivial about it), and this has to do
with not only desire but with the particularities of the beloved as experienced by the lover” (2005, 92).

Perhaps it is not, or not merely, the moral impoverishment or far from ideal nature of our society that can help us see the virtue in reproduction. If it were, as reproducers we would be no better than, to use Annas’ example, the Romans who displayed compassion to their slaves (2011, 46). But Will Ladislaw reminds (or warns) us, as both ancient and contemporary scholars in virtue ethics have done, that the expression of virtuous character depends on the possibility for its joyfulness in response to a desired experience. The virtuous agent’s personal contentment must have a place in her expression of the virtues; indeed, Foot claims that “it seems important to recognize as virtues of the will (as volitional excellences) a readiness to accept good things for oneself…” (2001, 79). Thus, the rational response to need may be affectively engaged in a way that does not systematically prioritize the pursuit of grand and self-sacrificing acts. As Christine McKinnon explains, “We admire a wide range of persons and kinds of lives, but they are the kinds of lives that we take to be within the realm of possibility for most of the rest of humankind too. It is not superhuman lives we admire, but human ones…. Good, meaningful lives come in a wide variety of forms, are lived under an enormous variety of situations, and have to respond to many different kinds of pressures” (1999, 166). The virtue of benevolence may be appropriately and desirably focused on bestowing benefit in the context of intimate relationships and in a way that is responsive to social context. Despite the complexities of bestowing benefit through reproduction, therefore, a benevolent character may be expressed in the pursuit of reproduction.
Conclusion

We have reason to believe that what initially seemed to be the compromised expression of virtue in reproduction might be indicative of true, if not ideal, virtue. I have tried to show that two virtues of character, courage and benevolence, may be attributable to reproduction, so that the virtuous individual may express virtue through reproduction. I take the most important point of this chapter to be that a virtue-centred approach to the ethics of reproduction provides an effectively grounded and helpful method of evaluation.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

I began the body of this dissertation with a review of critiques of the principle of procreative beneficence (PPB) in Chapter 2. While the many worrying practical implications of the principle seem sufficient to reject it, I was fundamentally concerned with the problematic conceptual resources and normative foundations from which it operates. PPB advocates rely on a dubious conception of harm to justify an obligation to have the best possible child when reproducing. They also depend on an implausible account of the nature and normative significance of genetic information. I meant to accomplish three things through my analysis and response to the critical literature surrounding the PPB.

First, I argued that if it were true that there is an obligation to have the best possible child, then in each case of potential reproduction, it would be morally preferable to have no child. The reason is that, given basic facts about human reproduction and the maximizing requirement of the principle, the best possible child will always remain potential; the choice to make any particular child actual will always involve choosing what could be the less than optimal child. If the moral goal of potential reproducers is to maximize any offspring’s advantages, it will always be best to choose to try to have another, better child, rather than to have an actual child. The reason is that there will be no reason to believe, in any case of possible reproduction, that there is not a better child who could be selected for instead.

The antinatalist implications of the PPB present a prima facie reason to reject it. But second, whether or not antinatalism is resisted, the PPB’s maximizing requirement is
problematic. I argued in the third chapter that an obligation to select the best possible child is grounded by the doctrine of impersonal harm, which is a resolution strategy for the Non-Identity Problem (NIP). I agreed with Shiffrin that the strategy that employs a doctrine of impersonal harm fails to take into account the moral difference between preventing harm and bestowing pure benefit; while the former justifies causing harm, the latter cannot. Potential reproducers are not obliged, and indeed not immediately permitted, to be maximizing in their selection of offspring. Rather, since bestowing a pure benefit such as the benefit of existence is performed only on the condition of also causing serious harms, potential reproducers should instead consider their abilities to address and compensate for the harms of existence. Their doing so, however, does not render them insusceptible to moral condemnation, given the high costs inevitably associated with reproduction that are not justifiable through a corresponding bestowal of pure benefit. Thus with the PPB and Shiffrin’s account, respectively, the NIP is resolved by invoking the concept of impersonal harm, and an asymmetrical model of harm and benefit. My third claim was that while the latter strategy is superior, it too is antinatalist. Moreover, under this rights-based account, the morality of reproduction can be determined merely through assessment of the reproducer’s willingness to accept liability for the harm that will be caused through bestowing existence. Shiffrin’s account provides no space for condemnation of decisions to reproduce that include the ability and willingness to share in the new life’s burdens, nor for potential moral goodness expressed through reproduction.

These claims laid the groundwork for my appeal to and defense of a neo-Aristotelian virtue-centred ethics, grounded in naturalism, in Chapter 4. My
dissatisfaction with the normative foundations of the approaches discussed above to resolving the NIP encouraged me to examine an alternative meta-ethical ground for morally assessing reproduction. I argued that the general role of beneficence that is defended by some commentators in the reproductive ethics debate can be criticized most effectively through appeal to Footian ethical naturalism. Subscription to a naturalist meta-ethical stance similar to Foot’s is both sound and desirable. Despite some potentially lingering questions regarding the analogous nature of general biological and moral norms, I defended Foot against concerns introduced by commentators such as McDowell regarding the potential detachment between rationality and morality and broader issues pertaining to the notion of group-based needs. I also took the potential problems with grounding morality in group-based needs seriously, and expressed concerns about Foot’s method of categorizing and bestowing normative significance on needs. I suggested that an approach that begins from needs based in particular traits (for example, the need of sentient beings to avoid pain) is preferable to Foot’s approach, which begins with a biological category (species) that identifies needs, and determines moral norms from there.

I argued that the ethical naturalist picture is, moreover, desirable because its grounding of moral norms in empirical facts about the world and about humans in particular encourages a productive approach to the nature of human obligations and the sphere of morality. Ethical naturalism provides a foundation for a normative ethical framework that most accurately and helpfully captures the goodness and badness that beings with the appropriate traits (e.g., empathy and rationality) will wish to pursue and avoid. This normative ethical framework, a virtue-centred ethics, interprets moral
goodness as needs-responsiveness, guided by emotions and regulated by reason in the appropriate ways.

In Chapter 5 I supported a virtue-centred approach to ethical inquiry, by highlighting the desirability of some of the central features of that approach, specifically its focus on character and its account of the role of practical reason in morality. I presented the ideal of virtuousness as something that is, partly because of the ideal’s grounding in ethical naturalism, the preferable guiding standard for decision-making and for evaluating the goodness and badness of states and actions. Unlike utilitarianism or Kantianism, I argued, a virtue-centred ethics accommodates both the moral legitimacy of personal commitments and the demandingness of striving for the good, and also provides an appealing account of how moral goodness develops and is manifested. Virtue-centred ethics makes space for a moral agent who best contributes to flourishing in a context of interdependent living.

In Chapter 6 I set out to accomplish two goals: To justify the project of morally assessing reproduction itself, and to supply a virtue-centred model for assessing reproduction and guiding potential reproducers. I showed that while a number of legitimate concerns may be raised about the possibility for a just and practical moral evaluation of reproduction, many can be resolved through identifying and rejecting deeply embedded pronatalist assumptions. I then set out to demonstrate the possibility of virtuous reproduction. I began by providing an account of the nature and significance of reproduction that is informed both by my conclusion in Chapter 4 regarding the relationship between different types of acts and virtue, and by accounts of reproduction supplied by Hursthouse and Overall. On a holistic level of virtue-centred assessment, my
question was whether reproduction could be pursued in a way that is appropriately affectively engaged and reason-responsive, such that the will is primarily directed toward the good associated with reproduction. I concluded that it could. I then examined the possibility for expressing two individual virtues in reproduction, courage and benevolence. I argued that a courageous and benevolent character may be expressed through pursuing reproduction. The nature of reproduction as a relationship-creating act helps ground a picture of the virtuous individual expressing these virtues, in an ordinary if not ideal way.

I began this project with a sense that I might be able to contribute to the field of reproductive ethics through a revisionary account of the concept of beneficence and its normative significance in the context of reproduction. But the scope of the project soon grew much larger. The potential goodness of bestowing benefit and the badness of causing harm in reproduction, I decided early on, can be captured only in an account of morality that is character-focused and sensitive to the “wrenching complexity of moral phenomena” (Slote 2003, 223). The troubling implications of prior approaches to the morality of reproduction, particularly strong antinatalism, gave me pause. I wondered if it was possible that all acts of reproduction could be morally wrong, and if not, what could be morally good about them. And so I believed it worthwhile to ask, when it comes to potential children, is to love them to leave them be (nonexistent)? The answer could only come, for me, by thinking in terms of virtue. I concluded that one can express love for her potential children through bringing them into existence, but that this expression of love is best interpreted as a manifestation of a courageous and benevolent character, whose goodness is constrained and compromised by the world in which we must live.
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