# In Defense of Making Babies

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*Abstract*. It is a surprisingly controversial claim in procreation ethics that one excellent reason to have children is simply that children (like all people) are of great final value. But I argue here that that claim is right. Noting that it is sometimes difficult to see ahead of time why a child's final value is a good reason to have a child, I shore up my thesis by defending a principle of symmetry for practical reasoning: "One should φ iff, having φ-ed, one should have." I then defend my thesis against one major objection—that it is rationally illicit to appeal to the final value of the child when no such child exists—plus a few minor objections.

## I. Introduction

*1. Reasons to have children*

I have asked a few dozen friends and family members the question "Why have children?"—i.e., supposing you did want to have a child, why might you want that? Their answers typically fit into three groups: i) having certain experiences (e.g., "watching someone grow", or simply "joy"), ii) building a relationship ("starting a family", "having someone to love"), and iii) passing something on (e.g., knowledge or interests) to the child. Less often, people spoke of continuing a line or satisfying a divine mandate.

In a similar spirit, Pew Research asked people who do *not* have children about the "pros and cons" of having children. The only thing which a majority of them cited as a pro is that children might provide for you in your old age—(though only some thought that's something worth worrying about).[1] In the same survey, a significant minority did note that kids make it easier to maintain relationships with friends who also have kids. So perhaps that's another reason.

A separate Pew survey asked about children's contributions to a fulfilling life. (This one also targeted people *with* children, so one would have expected more pro-child answers.) The portion who said children are important for a fulfilling life came in at

[1] Rachel Minkin et al. (2024).

around 43%.[2] All told, children ranked a little below "having a lot of money" (49%), well below close friends (76%), and *far* below having an enjoyable job (84%)—but at least some people do think children are part of a fulfilling life.

What about social science proper? A broad literature review on "factors influencing couples' decisions to have children" outlines seven wide classes of factors, each with many members.[3] Within the "family dynamics" class are a few spins on some considerations already mentioned—e.g., desires for large families, continuation of a family line—and many new ones—e.g., compatibility of children with careers or hobbies.

In the philosophical literature, a few rationales for procreation emerge as favorites. Most emphasize the parent-child relationship, or parenting as a project: e.g., Harry Brighouse & Adam Swift, Susanne Gibson, Benjamin Lange, Erik Magnusson, Christine Overall, Nicholas Smyth, Rivka Weinberg, and others. David Wasserman emphasizes the benefits one will confer on the child. In addition to some of the above, Tim Meijers speaks of the benefits the child will confer on society. Anca Gheaus (i.a.) cites a general need to populate the world.[4] And so on. In general, to the extent that *the child* is the focus at all, *the* consideration—the one which dominates the conversation about whether we should have children—is whether the child will have a good life.

## 2. *Thesis*

One reason to have a child has not been mentioned yet. (Rather conspicuously, I would have thought.) Could I not want to have a child simply because that child will be a good, valuable, worthwhile thing—*the child*, nothing further?

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[2] Kim Parker & Rachel Minkin (2023). I'm presenting the "very / extremely important" category together with the neutral "somewhat important" by combining the percentage in the "very" group with half of that in the "somewhat" group. Here's the original breakdown (% saying "extremely" or "very"; "somewhat"; "not too" or "not at all" important):

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| having a job or career they enjoy: | 71 | 25 | 4 |
| having close friends: | 61 | 29 | 10 |
| having children: | 26 | 33 | 42 |
| having a lot of money: | 24 | 49 | 27 |
| being married: | 23 | 33 | 44 |

[3] Ranjbar et al. (2024), table 4. Many of the papers included are themselves meta-analyses.

[4] Brighouse & Swift (2006); Gibson (1995); Lange (2024); Magnusson (2025); Overall (2012); Weinberg (2015); Smyth (2020); Wasserman (2005), cf. Benatar & Wasserman (2015); Meijers (2020); Gheaus (2015) (cf. Spears & Geruso (2025) or Morland (2024), and cf. also initiatives like The Pragmatist Foundation project, Pornatalist.org).

For surveys of the field, including the major arguments and philosophers' endorsed reasons to procreate, see Tina Rulli (2016), §2, or Brake & Millum (2025), esp. §2.2; cf. also Matti Häyry (2004), p. 105, and Häyry (2024), pp. 51 – 52.

Many also mention other reasons in the courses of different projects (so that these are not necessarily meant to answer *our* question). E.g., Pallies (2023) mentions the children's approval; Metz (2011) (p. 249 – 250) notes the meaningfulness of the child's life; Savulescu & Kahane (2009) (among many others) make the quality of the child's life a criterion for selecting one child from a field of options; Douglas & Devolder (2013) add the goods of others to the same calculus; etc.

In all my private inquiries, and in all the systematic polling and empirical research I've seen, one simply does not find such appeals—to (the value of) the child, rather than to anything beyond her.[5] Granted that surveys are often coarse-grained, and "the child herself" is not a phrase people are used to; and social science focuses on "factors", which are not remotely the same as reasons for acting.[6] But—*et tu*, philosophy? None of the contemporary peer-reviewed philosophical work which I cite in this paper endorses the thought that (the final value of) the child herself could be a good reason to have a child—and only a few even mention it—with a couple of exceptions.[7]

David Spurrett appends "human life" to David Benatar's table of values and disvalues to be accounted for in procreating; and Saul Smilansky mentions the objective contributions the child would make to the total value of the world (directly or indirectly, the "by existing" angle being one of a dozen or so).[8] But neither of them develops (or even leans much on) the point. Elizabeth Brake offers a much fuller picture, hanging her argument on the value of the child's genetic *traits*.[9]

All three authors, though, treat the child's final value as a sort of count or quantity—*some human life*, or *such-and-such properties*—which could be manifest identically (and *are* exactly commensurable) in one child and in another.[10] I think it is a mistake to see the value at issue that way. If the goal were truly to add *some human life* (or *such-and-such traits*) to the world, you could promote the very same value, and much more efficiently, by, say, providing medical care for people who are already here. Why *have a child*, then? But I will not argue over that point. I will presuppose that the value at

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[5] At least, with the following qualification. No doubt some people are indeed looking for ways to express that children are valuable in themselves: "I want to love my child," "He gives meaning to my life," "I just wanted a child," "Life is a gift, and I wanted to give it to someone," "Parenthood is creation". After all, we love things which warrant love; what gives meaning to life is presumably meaningful; etc. Cf. fn. 12, on Pakaluk.

Still, the most popular reasons are *not* (even disguised) appeals to the child's value: the building of a family, the leaving of a legacy, the project of parenthood, etc. And it is also somewhat unfortunate that people prefer to speak of their feelings, experiences, and pleasures, rather than of their feelings' *objects*, of *what* they experience, or of pleasant *things*.

[6] In Ranjbar et al. (2024), one factor listed is "Spousal Attitudes Towards Fertility and their Inherent Interest in Children and Attaining a Parental Role". Studies under that heading investigate (i.a.) "personal factors", "family factors", "beliefs", "family orientation", "personal purposes and motivation"—Cf. Table 2—and that's as close as the review comes to mentioning (an appreciation of) (the value of) the child herself. Again, not that that's necessarily a problem for their purposes.

[7] Some other academic work does cite the possibility that one might have a child "for the child's own sake"—cf. fn. 4, esp. Wasserman—but that is ambiguous between an appeal to the child's final value and an appeal to benefiting the child. In any unambiguous cases I could find, what's meant is the latter.

[8] Spurrett (2011), p. 203 etc. (mentioned in Metz (2011), p. 249, and cf. Benatar (2006)); Smilansky (1995), cf. Smilansky (2012).

[9] Brake (2015).

[10] This is the m.o. in the wider discussion as well.

issue here is not strictly quantifiable, and non-commensurable between its bearers; if a given reader does not agree, no matter—my arguments in §§II-III, and perhaps even §IV, should work just as well for a less demanding picture of human value.[11]

Outside the journals, there are some fuller endorsements of the view I would like to defend. In a magazine article, Naomi Fisher (a philosopher) defends the same view I will. Gilbert Meilaender (a theologian) endorses something nearby in his review of Christine Overall's book. And, in *Hannah's Children*, Catherine Pakaluk (officially an economist) approvingly reports the words of several mothers who appeal in different ways to their children's final value (usually not in those words).[12] No doubt there are others—and more if we consider historical thinkers as well—but, at the end of the day, these voices are barely part of the contemporary philosophical conversation.

I find this surprising. A simple appeal to the final value of the child *seems* quite straightforward, certainly not obviously ridiculous. The child herself *literally is* the biological end of the act of procreation. Why, in the deliberation which contemporary academics impute to prospective parents, does she only show up instrumentally?

In any case, that is my target. I will argue that one good reason to have a child is simply the child—or (in terms more amenable to most philosophers) the fact that the child would be greatly and finally valuable. Consequently, if I say I hope to have a child someday, and if you say "What for?", it would be entirely sensible for me to insist that that question does not strictly have an answer.

"Final value" is the sort of value which properly features in the end position and not in the means position in (a single complete act of) practical reasoning. Pleasure for utilitarians and eudaimonia for Aristotelians are stock examples. Hence the "no further answer" corollary of my thesis. My focus here is on the role that a person's final value can play in practical reasoning (even before such a person exists)—so, for the sake of argument, I'll assume you agree that people do have final value, thus understood.[13]

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[11] Indeed, they're overkill. Though note that some arguments *against* a view like mine depend on the quantitative / commensurable picture—e.g., Overall (2014).

[12] Fisher (2025), Meilaender (2012) (cf. Overall (2012)), Pakaluk (2024). In Pakaluk, cf. esp. ch. 17, with Angela. Indeed, some of Pakaluk's interviewees seem to think in the way I will discuss in §II. That suggests that some non-philosophers *do* think this way—it just takes more than a survey to draw it out.

Meilaender's point, I admit, applies just as well to me as it does to Overall: he argues that we should not think of having a child as a mere *project*—in Overall's conception, a personal one, perhaps with collaborator(s). In his sense, I *am* thinking of having a child as a project: an Aristotelian *poesis*. (So, I think, is Fisher.) I do not agree that that point of view is straightforwardly illegitimate, though I do agree that we should *also* think of children as something we *receive*. But in any case, this difference, between creation and reception, does not affect my thesis. One can receive something just as well as make it because the thing itself is good.

[13] Though cf. §IV.2.

## II. Special Symmetry

*1. The special symmetry principle*

The primary way to see this value I'm talking about is to see *the child*—to get to know her, appreciating all the ways her worth manifests in her character and actions as she grows up. That obviously cannot be done before she exists. I suspect that is one reason why people do not often speak of a child's final goodness as a reason to have one, especially for the first time. It is an unintuitive thing to say when one does not yet apprehend this child whom one would find so valuable.

What we *can* do before having a child is notice that, if we did come to know and love the child we would have, we *would* appreciate her value in this way—not just as general human value, but even in all its particularity. In other words, we can know some things about that future situation, including that, as we will then see, the child's (particular) value will have been an excellent reason to have a child. And *that* we can act upon beforehand.[14]

Likewise, suppose there are dozens of small chests of 17th-century treasure buried all over Quail Island. And suppose I know that, were I to go looking for one of those chests, whatever I found would be some artifact brimming with unique history, archaic beauty, and meaning for our understanding of the past—in short, something very precious to me (which is just subjectivese for 'very precious'). I don't know *exactly* what I would find. What I know is that I would find something of great and particular final value. It seems reasonable for me to set out on the search, on the grounds that, in the end, the then-available details will justify the pursuit. Likewise, I suggest, for having children.

If that's right, then we have one valid way (among others) to reason from (the value of) the children one may have. More formulaically:

> *special symmetry*: One should have a child if, having done so, one's having had the child is what ought to have happened, and partly on grounds of (some fact about) some reason *r* such that (retrospectively) *r* is a good reason to have had a child.[15]

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[14] Smyth (2020) suggests that procreation ethics ought to address practical questions which actual people are actually asking. I hope I am doing that—indeed, hopefully in a more radical way than Smyth had in mind.

[15] "(Some fact about)" just in case your view is that the child herself or the child's value (neither one a fact) *is* the reason, and that that is unavailable to practical reason ahead of time (say, because it can only be available by acquaintance). In that case, I'm fine with saying that the prospective reason is a fact *about* that as-yet-indeterminate value.

Note that Special Symmetry is a case of a more general principle (with a bit about reasons added):

> *general symmetry*: One should φ if, having φ-ed, one's φ-ing should have happened.

And note that this, in turn, is just the analogue in practical reason of the famous "Reflection Principle" in speculative reason, due to Bas van Fraassen (1984), which we can reframe like this:

> *general reflection*: If one knows that, from some better epistemic position, one would see that *p* is to be accepted, then one should accept *p*.

Now, if Special Symmetry holds, then reasoning like the following is valid. Though I know hardly anything about the child I will have, I *can* be pretty sure that, once I've had a child, it will turn out to have been a good decision—among other things, because it gave me *her*. In other words, because of her value (which, at that later time, I will be able to see), having had a child was indeed what (in the context of my prior deliberative options) I should have done.[16]

*2. Clarifications of the special symmetry principle*

It is important to be very clear about how this reasoning is supposed to work. Special Symmetry is framed in terms of the act which, put prospectively, is *having a child*—i.e., the prospective question is "Should I have a child?" The retrospective question uses the definite article because the referent of 'child' is at that point determinate, and it would be odd to speak in a way that suggested otherwise at that real-life point in time. If you do procreate—if the thing you are deliberating about doing does in fact happen—then there is at least one child. So the determinacy, to that extent, is appropriate.

This claim, that the prospective and retrospective questions are about the same action, can be taken as stipulative. If you want to insist that there is no fully specified action to be apprehended in deliberation (as there is after you've acted), then fine: adjust the retrospective question to the appropriate level of generality.

The reason *r*, however, need not have any especially general form. It need not be, e.g., the value of "whatever child", or humanity conceived as some sort of abstract quantity. *r* is simply a reason why having a child was / is a good decision. This matters because, as I've said, I want my argument to go through even if the (relevant) value of the child you will have is not general or strictly quantifiable. So the reasoning I am suggesting need not construe the child's value in that way, even if one does not apprehend a particular child's unique value prospectively.

In all this, it is important that the *entire situation* is deliberative. It is not about φ occurring *as distinct from* one's φ-ing; nor is *r* a reason why it is good that φ happens, or a reason to endorse φ (or what it resulted in), *as distinct from* a reason to φ. The post-hoc question is an abstracted form of the very same question which, prospectively, is posed as live deliberation, assuming the same circumstances and set of options. Special Symmetry is about nothing other than that single practical question. And that question is *whether to have the child*—not whether it is *permissible* or *obligatory*, nor *good* or *right*, unless that is the same as the question whether to do it. Nor am I denying that sometimes

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If you accept this modified Reflection Principle and the analogy—or even if you accept that General Reflection gives us a one-step-removed *version* of General Symmetry, in epistemic rather than in directly practical terms—that's one good reason to accept Special Symmetry.

[16] We could instead have posited a principle like this: "If it is true that, if I procreate, there will be a child who will have great particular final value, then that is a good reason to procreate." That is simpler, perhaps even less problematic, and it makes an argument like mine go through. Yet I do not go for it because there is a subtle important difference between that and Special Symmetry, namely, that it treats *having some particular final value* as if *that* is the value the future child has. Which, even if that were coherent, would not be what I want. What I am trying to establish is a connection, albeit indirect, to a future unknown which *is* the child's actual particular final value. Because, after all, *that* is what matters.

procreating is the wrong decision. My thesis is about one important practical consideration.

I'll note three other points of clarification. First, the principle is objective. It's not about what you *will think* about the future child, but about what the correct evaluation of your action will be. What your future self will think is a helpful way to get a handle on the facts themselves, as long as we keep in mind that the facts themselves are what the principle is about. This is not about a projection into a future *mental state*—or, if it is, only heuristically.[17] Nor, even more subtly, is Special-Symmetry-style reasoning about what choice is correct solely on the basis of one's subjectively available reasons, for one's subjectively available reasons may differ between before and after. Think of Special-Symmetry-based reasoning as an attempt to account for what one's subjectively available reasons would be in a situation in which they were better aligned with the objective reasons.

Second, the principle does not say "One should have a child if and only if, having done so, one ought not magically reverse her conception (if it were possible)." Nor does it say "One should have a child if and only if, having had the child, one should have a child." In these cases, the prospective and retrospective questions are not the same. "Should I have had the child?" is how I choose to phrase the question whether to have a child when it's asked from a temporal standpoint after the event itself. That might mean it is asked in a sort of abstracted or simulated *post hoc* deliberation, but that does not mean it isn't the same question.

Finally, note that Special Symmetry is not my thesis. Its role is this: establishing its validity is one way (among others, and granting that people do have final value) to establish my thesis.[18]

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[17] Consequently, an objection from transformative experiences would not strictly be relevant. Note that L. A. Paul is always careful to speak of the inaccessibility of one's post-experience *subjective values* (Paul (2014), cf. esp. ch. 2, "Subjective Deliberation")—and for good reason, of course, because *those* are what the experience transforms. Special-Symmetry-style reasoning simply is not the kind of forward projection Paul has in mind.

[18] Other Q&A:

1) Would a reasons-against version of this principle also hold? I don't see why not.

2) Does Special Symmetry automatically validate huge risks that end well? No. Those might still have been things one ought not to have done, given the risks.

3) Similarly, does Special Symmetry validate evil actions that turn out well? No. Those, too, might have been things one ought not to have done, despite the good outcomes.

4) Isn't it impossible to benefit someone who does not exist, including by bringing her into existence? Maybe. The question gets complicated, but my argument *here* simply does not entail any such thing. Nor have I said anything about whether *not* procreating could harm the never-to-exist child, nor anything about the child's interests.

5) I've said I am not claiming that a person contributes to the total goodness of the world—am I *denying* it? No.

6) Can Special Symmetry bootstrap itself—e.g., if, post-procreation, I now have an obligation *to the child* to have created her? I think there are no such person-addressed *post hoc* obligations (or reasons generally). But if, conjoined with your views of reasons, Special Symmetry would allow such things, then simply add a condition making *r* a non-child-addressed reason.

*3. Brief objection*

If Special Symmetry holds, then it is in tension with a thought like David Velleman's: he says we can maintain that a procreative decision was the wrong one even though we endorse it in light of what came of it—as when a young girl decides to have a baby even though she is not ready, then comes to love the child. Here, he says, we can judge the same act differently if we do it from different perspectives under different descriptions: *having a child* was bad, given the circumstances, whereas *having this child* was good.[19]

If the two thoughts are truly supposed to be overall deliberative-style judgments about the single action which is to be, or was, performed, this seems to me like an outright contradiction. An appeal to different descriptions of the thing up for evaluation would only save us from contradiction if there were some corresponding distinction in the thing itself, making it *somehow* not one but two—otherwise, it is like holding up a yellow ball and saying "This ball is mine, but this yellow object is not mine."

It is *not* contradictory, of course, to maintain that an act shouldn't have happened even though you're glad for what came of it; nor that an act is bad in some way and good in another; nor that one was not subjectively justified in performing that action, though (without knowing it) one was *objectively* justified. Those are all coherent articulations of the phenomenon I think Velleman is picking up on—but they are also consistent with Special Symmetry.[20]

It is worth noting that Special-Symmetry-style reasoning *does* yield an epistemic transition like the one Velleman has in mind. Beforehand, the reason *r* which directly justifies one's choice—the child's particular value—is not determinately known. So, though that *reason* is determinate, the *description* which shows up in one's prospective deliberation—"the value of the child I would have"—is not.[21] But that does not imply a difference between correct overall evaluations of the action before and after.

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7) Does Special-Symmetry-style reasoning generalize, such that I have the same reason to have a child now as to have another later, then another, and so on? It emphatically does not. The question should have been whether my argument implies that one always has good reason to have a child. Yes, it does. (So do a lot of views—cf. fn. 4.) That does not imply anything about the total balance of reasons in any given case, nor that one must (or should) have as many children as possible.

[19] Velleman (2015), pp. 119 – 122 & fn. 50; cf. Parfit (1986), §122.

[20] It's also true that one cannot love someone in the fullest way without knowing her. But, first, that does not rule out loving her at all. Love can be general (cf. White (2025)). And second, this is not the sort of connection which Special Symmetry requires. I do not think one must (or can) procreate someone as an act of full-fledged non-general love for her—though maybe God can create someone in that way (cf. Pruss (2013), p. 400).

[21] This does not mean *r* is seen as an indeterminate reason prospectively. Also, the verbs in this sentence are tenseless.

## III. What Child?

*1. Transition to a metaphysical objection*

Most who object to this sort of "Special-Symmetry-style" reasoning do so on different grounds, having something to do with the weirdness of making any sort of reference to what does not exist. I have said that a child's value is a good reason to have a child. "Well," says the objector, "where is this child? If you cannot point out a child, then what exactly is the premise from which you are reasoning here?"

Some articulate a related thought in terms of benefits (or harms). The claim is that one cannot benefit a *given* person who does not exist (though one could aim to *benefit someone*). For example, Jeff McMahan says, "At the time of one's choice, there is no one who exists or will exist independently of that choice for whose sake one could be acting in causing him or her to exist. If one chooses to cause an individual to exist, that may be good for the individual who comes to exist, but it cannot be one's reason for acting, or one's intention in acting, to bestow that good on that individual."[22]

Now, I am not suggesting any appeal to a relative good, any benefit, including existence (even if it were sensible to think of existence that way). My thesis is about the final value of the child. And it's not obvious that McMahan's thought just straightforwardly translates: it feels quite intuitive that giving S some benefit presupposes that S is 'already there' in a way that creating S does not.

Also note that the objection (in our context) cannot *just* be that, before I've conceived a child, there is no existing child to serve as my end. There is clearly *some* sense in which taking something that doesn't exist yet as your end is totally unmysterious. Things are often our ends precisely *because* they don't exist (or haven't happened) yet: the meal you'll cook, the garden club you'll form, the song you'll request, even the pleasures you'll "cause" (if that is a thing people do). This is a fine way to practically reason. The question is only how to talk about it—and whether our account of it vindicates taking a child's final value as the reason to have a child.

*2. Alva's orchard*

Before we give a more targeted formulation of the objection, it will be useful to sift the ethics out of the metaphysics, both to focus our discussion and to help support the impression I would like to push, that children aren't special in this regard: Special-Symmetry-style reasoning applies to procreation just as it does in any other case. Here, then, is a case to refer to which is less morally loaded than that of procreation.

Alva is an orchardist. She has before her a collection of foraged apple seeds which she intends to plant. Because they are seeds and not grafts, Alva does not know what

[22] McMahan (2009), p. 152; cf., e.g., Weinberg (2015), 1.I.i & 1.II.i. See also Benatar & Wasserman (2015), p. 192 etc.: Wasserman is addressing McMahan, whose worry, as I say, is not quite the one which concerns us here, but it is worth noting Wasserman's response anyway. As I understand it, his response is effectively to shift from "the child" to "some child satisfying certain identifying criteria". He does not spell the thought out quite to the point that I can tell whether I agree with him or not. Occasionally, he does also say things like "someone, now unidentified or unidentifiable, who will become their child" (p. 197), which does strike me as a mistake. There is no person who will become their child.

sorts of apples she will get—whether they will be small, squat, dark, rosy, flecked, tart, sweet, crisp, or soft, or whether they will taste of wine, or roses, or limes, or whatever else. And that applies not just at the level of individual trees but also at the level of (pre-)cultivars. It is not even determinate which of the planted seeds will sprout.

Now suppose Alva reasons as follows. "I plant this seed," she says to herself (humoring a philosopher who asked her to talk this way), "and I shall care for this tree, in order to have the apples which will grow from it. No, I don't know much about those apples yet. But I do this because those apples will have some unique character which, whatever it turns out to be, will be interesting, perhaps even wonderful."

Again, there is a sense in which she "does not know what apples she is talking about", so to speak. There currently are not any such apples, nor does Alva know what they will be like, nor is she acquainted with them, or even with their causal precursors (for she does not know what seeds they'll have come from). She does not even know their number: perhaps, at its first harvest, one tree will yield seventy apples or so, but who knows?

Yet there *is* also a sense in which it is *the* apples, not just *some apples*, which are Alva's end. If someone were to come along at harvest several years later, absconding with all her apples in the night and leaving baskets of entirely different but equally good apples in their place—just as generally valuable for all their different particularities as Alva's were—it is not as though Alva would walk out into the crisp morning air, sip her coffee, and say, "Ah, yes, good. My end—the very same end which I set out to achieve—is realized, albeit not in the way I thought. For here are some apples which have a certain particular sort of value."[23]

Even in the original stages of her reasoning, in her first conception of her end, she seems to have some idea which connects her reasoning not just to *apples generally*, but to *the* apples which will grow from *the* trees which will grow from *the* seeds.[24] Indeed, perhaps that itself is the connection: that very sequence of actions, the planting and growing and harvesting of apple trees, beginning with the wilds from which Alva got these seeds. In any case, there is *some* such connection between Alva's plan and the apples it will yield.

Anyway, if I am right about Special-Symmetry-style reasoning, then it should also work for Alva. It should be sensible to characterize her deliberation as beginning with the particular but unknown value of whatever apples will result from her efforts, ending with the apples themselves, considered as finally valuable.[25]

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[23] Though perhaps she *could* say just that upon seeing the apples which her nephew cultivated and harvested in her stead (on account of her poor health forcing a short-term move to Georgia). In other words, what matters is not the apples' resulting from *her* efforts, though, of course, neither is her end realized if, rather than planting her seeds, she simply walks over to her nephew's orchard and asks for some of his apples.

[24] More obviously, neither is "some indeterminate apple" the *de dicto* object of her intentions. There is no such thing as an indeterminate apple, as any orchardist knows.

[25] If you dislike 'finally', no matter. The test is whether we can speak intelligibly of the apples' value. We can apply that test even if the apples are desirable for some further end.

*3. The objection*

The most direct and compelling objection I know of to reasoning like Alva's is given by Alex Pruss in *One Body*. He distinguishes between two classes of reasons to procreate—the value of the child, whom we can call "Sophie", and the further good things which Sophie makes possible—and then says:

> Now the value of *Sophie* herself could not have been a reason for procreating. For it was not known that *Sophie* would arise from procreation, and the value of an individual cannot be grasped in abstraction from that individual. The value of Sophie herself is not something in respect of which Sophie is fungible. Moreover, even talking of "the good of that individual, whoever he or she may be, who will result from our having sex" does not make sense until it is settled that this individual *will* exist, and that is precisely the question. To make decisions on the grounds of the value of the particular individual makes sense only once it has been decided that the individual will exist.[26]

Pruss reminds us what he means by "fungible": "...an individual x is fungible with respect to a good G providing that good G could have been equally well promoted by a different individual...." Then, just below, he completes the argument by giving his reasons for thinking that the goods which are pursued in procreation must *not* be goods with respect to which the child to be born would be fungible. In procreation, we are held to a higher standard when it comes to instrumentalizing others. This is true both of one's sexual partner and of potential children, except that, in the latter case, "The reasons for procreating someone are a kind of judgment on the value of the person's existence" as opposed to, say, a judgment on the value of the person's help or company or abilities.[27]

So, then, Pruss is arguing that the child to be born should not be valued merely instrumentally—for some further good apart from herself—and *cannot* rationally be valued finally, and that, therefore, the child cannot properly be your end in procreation at all.[28]

*4. The reply*

It is worth noting first that the uses Pruss seems to have in mind for phrases like "the particular individual" (from an agent's perspective) are referential, rather than attributive, in Keith Donellan's senses of those terms.[29] A referential use of a term would be as "the willow" is used in "The willow at the bend in the stream is very beautiful." Note that this sentence could be true even if the willow I'm thinking of is actually a little

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[26] Pruss (2013), p. 399.

[27] Pruss (2013), p. 400.

[28] Our concern, of course, is with his claims about final value, so we should note that he could mean "the good of that individual" to denote the good *for* the individual, i.e., *not* Sophie's final value but, e.g., her health. Fair enough—if that is what he means, he is right about that. If so, call this objection an extension of his thought, going somewhat beyond what he actually intended, focused strictly on the child's final value.

[29] Donnellan (1966).

ways downstream. An attributive use would be as "the winner" is used in "The winner of the cheesemaking contest shall inherit the estate."

The phrase 'the child', as it appears in my thesis, is attributive. It is *attributed* to the child I have, should I have one (or, in modified form, to children plurally). Perhaps the term could fail to apply if I do not end up having a child, but it could not fail to apply if I do. And what it then applies to is the child I then have. There is no possibility that the person the phrase picks out is a person of whom it is not true (as can happen in pure referential cases). And this is not a merely semantic point. The language corresponds to the structure I am envisioning for our prospective parent's intentions.[30]

Now, the claim I have been defending is the one Pruss is targeting in the latter part of that paragraph, where he says that "...the good of the individual, whoever he or she may be..." (taken as final value) is not a ground from which one can licitly practically reason till the individual's existence is "settled".

I think that claim is false, strictly as stated. It is not necessary that it be settled that a future thing will exist before decisions can be made on the basis of its value. There is a sense in which anything predicated of X presupposes X, but X may itself be a supposition. E.g., "The winner of the cheesemaking contest shall inherit the estate, provided we do end up going forward with the judging despite Wilton's horrible cassowary accident."

More broadly, the claim that one cannot infer decisions from a certain value when there is not, or it is not settled that there will be, any such value is either false or not a problem in the present case.

If the claim is that the value—say, that of Alva's apples—is not somehow *real*, or that it does not exist *presently*, then that is no objection to its featuring in deliberation. That sort of thing is just a routine part of planning ahead. And, in any case, reason is not grammatically temporal—i.e., it does not necessarily represent its objects *as* present (or *as* in time at all) like the senses do.

If instead the claim is that the value of Alva's apples cannot be posited even in the thin way which practical reasoning does require, that is true in a sense: the apples Alva will have cannot themselves appear *as such* (nor in all their particularity) in her reasoning. That does not mean that what *can* be posited in Alva's reasoning is not (let alone is something other than) the apples Alva will have. They can't be referred to; they *can* be denoted attributively. The whole point of Special Symmetry was to allow this sort of forward-projected simulation of the as-yet-indeterminate grounds for one's actions: some value *will* bear on your action (in all its particularity), and, though you are not acquainted with it yet, you can know *that* there is (or will be) such a thing, and you can make rational decisions on that basis. Nor does this require treating any of the possible outcomes as interchangeable.

In short, as far as the demands of practical reason are concerned, if it suffices that Alva's apples *will* exist, then it also suffices that they *would*.[31] The apples she could have

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[30] This is why what I am suggesting is not the sort of thing which, e.g., Narveson (1967) or Anscombe (1975) objects to.

[31] This applies also to McMahan's thought (at fn. 22), which, as far as I can tell, is also meant to require that the child's existence not depend on the choice.

years down the line do not exist yet. Nonetheless, if her plans do unfold, there *will be* such apples. And it will be those apples which, here in the prospective view, she intended to cultivate. There seems not to be a sense in which the apples' existence is "not settled" which makes it illegitimate to reason this way.

## IV. Children as Ends

*1. Back to ethics*

What if we *are* speaking of people rather than apples? Does that make a difference? Pruss also makes the following more properly ethical argument, suggesting that we are obligated to treat the future child in a certain genuinely particular way.

> We saw in section 4 of chapter 8 that in sexual cases we are bound by a higher standard in respect of using people than in most nonsexual cases. Likewise, in respect of procreation it seems we are bound by that higher standard. The reasons for procreating someone are a kind of judgment on the value of the person's existence rather than on the value of the person's presence, as in the case of the call to the helpdesk [for someone who can fix the WiFi].[32]

And he argues that procreating for the sake of goods with respect to which a child is fungible manifests an inappropriate judgment—it is like treating the child as an artifact. You might think this, too, poses a problem for my view.

Though the reasoning I suggest does not treat the child as fungible in Pruss's sense (cf. §III.3), as we've seen, it does in another sense: in just the way characteristic of attributive uses of descriptions, constrained by the structure of my (possible) intention to procreate. From the prospective view, "the child I would have" is a phrase which does not denote anyone referentially, but only attributively.[33] Is that a problem?

First, a note: my claim is *not* that the attributed description—"the child I would have"—is that under which the child is valued. I am not suggesting that anyone have a child because there will then be some child whose value will consist in her being the child one did in fact have. In that way, this is not like requesting WiFi help.

Second, a bit pithily: if (reasons for) procreation *did* amount to a judgment on the value of someone's existence, why not think the thing to do, then, would be to affirm that value by having the child?

Third, more to the broader point: why think the attributive reasoning I've suggested is problematic? It is difficult to see what about an attributive (vs. referential) grammar of thought in one's treatment of others is morally questionable, or even relevant, *as such*. Attributive thinking does not amount by itself to coercion, nor objectification, nor merely using someone—nor even treating anyone as interchangeable with someone else.[34] In any case, there is certainly no general ethical rule against

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[32] Pruss (2013), p. 400.

[33] That is *not* to say there are multiple individuals between whom it is indeterminate.

[34] Suppose I plan to hire the strongest candidate. Then i) I cannot then trade a stronger candidate for a weaker; ii) candidates may have different strengths, e.g., A may have a better bench and B a

attributive thinking, nor requiring referential thinking, in our treatment of others. And referential thinking by itself certainly does not amount to treating someone rightly.

This must be, as Pruss says, a 'higher standard'. But what would make *this*—the attributive vs. the referential, rather than any of the other candidates I just listed—what distinguishes a higher from a lower standard? It seems to me that, at most, it is perhaps *better* to account as much as possible for another's particularities, and to appreciate her for precisely who she is, in your actions toward her, all else equal. But surely that does not amount to a requirement in cases in which one simply *cannot* do so—especially if that's because there are not yet any such particularities, even any such person, to attend to. Indeed, that kind of appreciation is rarely possible even for already-existing people in more mundane circumstances.

Fourth, more summarily: I do not have the sense that attributive reasoning in one's treatment of others is objectionable in cases which are similar to that of procreation. Suppose I set out to adopt someone, not yet knowing whom, and the description constitutive of my intention is "the child most in need of a place of safety"; or suppose I set out to rescue someone from natural-disaster-type circumstances, and the description constitutive of my intention is "whoever is likeliest to die otherwise". These acts seem unproblematic—especially if it is simply not possible to know these others directly, nor genuinely to *refer* to them.[35]

*2. A final point*

I said at the beginning that I would assume people do have final value, as I defined it. "Assume" because one cannot cover *all* the bases. But I expect that, by now, some readers will worry that that assumption smuggled in too much, so I do want to briefly address that concern—at least enough to justify not making it a more central issue.

In the natalism debate generally (not necessarily in Pruss), one sometimes hears the vaguely Kantian thought that the value people have is, in Velleman's terms, dignity, not price.[36] Dignity (it's said) can only be *responded to*—never *promoted*. In that case, there is no valid practical inference by which dignity justifies bringing about what bears it.

I have personal reservations about the cogency of this vaguely Kantian thought, but set those aside. Either way, this is no objection to my thesis unless having dignity rules out *also* having final value (as I have used the term here).[37] And if people do have

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better deadlift, so that trading "up" still incurs loss; and iii) I might still be sensitive to who the candidate is as a person, just not via this very description.

[35] Cf. also Wasserman on other personal relationships: Benatar & Wasserman (2015), p. 203 etc.

[36] Velleman (2015).

[37] Indeed, as far as I know, nowhere in his essays on birth and death (Velleman 2015) does Velleman say people have no kind of value except dignity, though a few offhand comments do sometimes slip in that direction (e.g., p. 41, "According to Kant..."). His concern is just to show that dignity and "price" operate differently. He *does* say that dignity operates only when "it already exists" (p. 33), which would rather help my point. For then, *contra* Pruss, it would be impossible to violate a child's dignity *in procreating* (vs. acting upon an already existing child, acknowledging the possibility that an act is initiated before a child exists and later takes effect upon the then-existing child). I do not lean on that claim here because I do not agree.

some other great non-dignity final value, why shouldn't *that* justify procreation? Value does *generally* (*pro tanto*) speak in favor of bringing about what bears it.[38] (Presumably, even for Kantians like Velleman in every case except that of people.) Think of other cases in which I pursue or make something just because (some of) what I am aiming at is *that thing*, for its own sake: perhaps a sculpture, a song of gratitude, a marriage, a victory, or even a feeling. My claim is that a value of whatever sort operates *there* also bears on having a child. An objection to what I have said would have to be an objection to creation generally—which is typically not what's at issue in the dialogue I am engaging with, so that addressing it would take us too far afield right now.

*3. Conclusion*

My thesis has been that one good reason to have a child is (the final value of) the child. I have suggested that that simple rationale has received almost no attention in contemporary procreation ethics, and that the neglect is quite undeserved. I do not think there is any sound objection, and certainly no *indisputable* objection, to the sort of practical reasoning I suggest. Besides, something like it is unproblematic, and extremely commonplace. My argument so far has not relied on intuitions about cases. But, here at the end, I think a story would be a nice way to summarize the point.

Maja is a citizen of the new federated coalition of Northern-European states (Dutch acronym SCNE, formed in 2046 via the Bergen Accords). She has just given birth, and a government representative has notified her that the procedure will be as follows. First, the child will be raised at a government facility and never allowed any interaction with Maja. Second, the child will be sterilized at puberty. And third, next year's quota for lab-produced-and-incubated fetuses, to be raised at the same government facility, will be reduced by one. (I.e., the number of *ex hypothesi* "equivalent" children to be created next year is now one fewer.) That is SCNE policy. And, just for good measure, let's suppose atheism is true.

Now that every reason to have a child which we mentioned in §I.1 has been ruled out, I ask: has Maja *achieved nothing of value*? Has *nothing* good come of (or in) conceiving, carrying, and giving birth to this child?

Further, suppose Maja knew this would happen ahead of time. Again, I do not say she *should* have had a child, all things considered—but is it true that she had *no good reason* to do so?

It seems quite clear to me that the answer to these questions is 'no'. What came of Maja's decision was Filip—who, if you care to know, was a precious baby, and then a charming boy, and then a good man, quick to make a friend, patient in the face of stupidity, with eyes unceasingly alight with love for the soft music in all things—himself (post-Revolution) a cherished father, and grandfather, and great-grandfather.[39] Because of Maja's choice, there is Filip. *He* is a good thing. He matters.

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[38] James Lenman (2002) makes a point which may seem contrary to what I've said but is not. Cf. fn. 11.

[39] Not that "equally" valuable qualities and consequences couldn't have been attributed to whatever other child would otherwise have lived. This is not a contest.

Elizabeth Anscombe once answered this same question, "Why have children?", in characteristic style.[40] Though I have tried to say somewhat more than she did, I admit that I find in myself a certain sympathy with her answer—which was, more or less, to point out that the question is "weird" (indeed, unworthy of an answer), and that it takes being raised in a corrupt society to think otherwise. I haven't the will or the standing to be quite so abrasive myself. Still, I *have* tried to argue that we're missing something obvious here. Isn't the justification of the procreative act simply its plain biological *telos*—and doesn't it take a high-tech sort of confusion to think of anything else first? It's as if a young angel looked out in puzzlement upon the world God had just created, and said, "Why? Why would you make all this?" The question betrays that the angel isn't really looking. What it calls for is a turning of the head.[41]

[40] Anscombe (1989).

[41] Special thanks to Marshall Bierson for his substantial influence on this paper, and to Alex Pruss and [the anonymous reviewers], an audience at the 2026 CNU Virtues and Vices Conference, and the many who very patiently fielded my questions about why one would want to have a child.

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