ABSTRACT
Advances in reproductive technologies – in particular in genetic screening and selection – have occasioned renewed interest in the moral justifiability of the reasons that motivate the decision to have a child. The capacity to select for desired blood and tissue compatibilities has led to the much discussed ‘saviour sibling’ cases in which parents seek to ‘have one child to save another’. Heightened interest in procreative reasons is to be welcomed, since it prompts a more general philosophical interrogation of the grounds for moral appraisal of reasons-to-parent, and of the extent to which such reasons are relevant to the moral assessment of procreation itself. I start by rejecting the idea that we can use a distinction between ‘other-regarding’ and ‘future-child-regarding’ reasons as a basis on which to distinguish good from bad procreative reasons. I then offer and evaluate three potential grounds for elucidating and establishing a relationship between procreative motivation and the rightness/wrongness of procreative conduct: the predictiveness, the verdictiveness, and the expressiveness of procreative reasons.

I. INTRODUCTION
The view that it is important that we have children ‘for the right kinds of reasons’ is at least a widely shared intuition, if not virtually axiomatic. As Seana Shiffrin notes, ‘a dim eye is cast on procreation done haphazardly’.1 David Wasserman urges us to think of morality in the sphere of procreative conduct as ‘forbidding us to do certain things – things as momentous as bringing a child into the world – unless we do them for appropriate reasons.’2 Wasserman’s view exemplifies what I will call the procreative reasons-relevance thesis – the thesis that why we procreate matters for the morality of our procreative conduct – and a clearer statement of the reasons-relevance thesis in the philosophical literature on procreation would be hard to find.3

In this paper I offer three suggestions as to why a reasons-relevance thesis might be thought plausible. The question that concerns me is precisely how, or in virtue of what, procreative reasons contribute to procreative

rightness. I do not aim to give a thorough account of which kinds of procreative reasons are right and which wrong, but rather to make suggestions about how we might think about rightness/wrongness in relation to procreative motivation. Each suggested explanation will be considered with reference to so-called ‘saviour sibling’ cases in particular. The focus on the saviour sibling phenomenon reflects the fact that recent scrutiny of procreative motivation has nowhere been more intense than in these cases, in which prospective parents seek permission from fertilization licensing authorities to use IVF combined with PGD and tissue type matching to select an embryo whose tissue – usually cord blood or bone marrow – will be suitable for life-saving donation to an existing seriously ill child.

I start, however, by challenging one common approach to thinking about the morality of procreative reasons, before looking at possible support for a procreative reasons-relevance thesis.

II. A PRELIMINARY NON-STARTER: PROCREATIVE REASONS-RELEVANCE AND REFERENCE

Precisely what it is that makes procreative reasons of the right or wrong kind is not easily explained, despite the fact that we can relatively straightforwardly summon up examples that intuitively fit such moral descriptions. Accordingly, commonly frowned-upon reasons for having children include: ‘to save our marriage’, ‘to look after me when I am old’ or ‘to have a second chance at fulfilling my dream of becoming a professional tennis player’. Marginally less opprobrious are reasons such as: ‘to give my life purpose and meaning’, ‘to gain social acceptance’, or ‘to keep me young’. More readily endorsed procreative reasons include: ‘to give my other child(ren) a sibling’, ‘to balance our family’, ‘to inherit the family business’, or ‘to experience the joys and challenges of parenthood’, to name just a few. Of course, some people (perhaps many) have children for no reason at all. That is, they do it accidentally, or they do it without much introspection and critical reflection, following social expectations and doing simply ‘what one does’ at a certain point in one’s life. Such cases, however, do not fall within the scope of this discussion, since they obviously lack one of the relata necessary for an enquiry into the relationship between procreative reasons and procreative conduct.

It is common – in philosophical and everyday discussions that simply assume the relevance of procreative reasons – to focus on the way in which procreative reasons refer as part of explaining the rightness or wrongness of particular kinds of reasons. To see this, consider the saviour sibling phenomenon that has been the subject of considerable moral suspicion on these grounds. David Wasserman’s discussion of these kinds of cases is particularly illuminating. Wasserman claims that:

[the principle that condemns [the saviour child’s] creation is not based on the extent of sacrifice involved or threatened, but rather on the degree to which his creation is subservient to the needs of another, and on the absence of his own good as part of the reason for his creation.]

Wasserman describes a child conceived to save a sibling as having been ‘initially cast in a less symmetrical, more servile role’. He notes an asymmetry in that ‘the good that one child represents for the other is not reciprocal; the saviour sibling is good for the saved sibling in a way, and to an extent, that the saved is not for the saviour. The ideal situation, we can infer, is one in which there is a symmetry of goods – of need or benefit bestowal – between the relevant persons, in this case the children. Symmetry considerations thus provide grounds for saying at least that no person ought to be brought into existence solely for the purpose of fulfilling another’s needs or interests or bestowing benefits upon them. Procreation for such purposes establishes asymmetry ab initio, and that is a bad thing.

Accordingly, at the heart of this account of the moral flaw in unacceptable procreative reasons is the asymmetrical figuring of one individual’s interests or needs in the reason or motive for another individual’s creation. Procreative reasons are deemed morally unacceptable for being largely or exclusively ‘other-referring’ – for being based upon, derived from, or characterized exclusively by reference to the good, interests or needs of someone other than the being brought into existence. The positive account that emerges is that for procreative reasons to count as morally acceptable they must refer to some good or interests of a child to be created. This does not entail that other-referring reasons may not figure at all amongst procreative motivations. Such reasons, however, must play at most an auxiliary role in the decision to parent, or must be balanced by child-referring reasons.

Yet to speak of what is for the good of a child, in the context of considering reasons to bring that child into existence, is to stray into troublesome philosophical

5 Ibid.
terrain concerning what can be claimed about the value or disvalue of being brought into existence – namely the debates arising from the ‘non-identity’ problem made famous by Derek Parfit and taken up by David Heyd and others.6 What we might term the ‘value attribution’ problem concerns the question of whether being brought into existence can ever count as a benefit or harm for a possible future person. Adopting a distinctly person-affecting view of value, Heyd offers a fairly convincing denial of such a possibility, on the grounds that there is no one who can be said to be harmed or benefited by being brought into existence or, for that matter, consigned to perpetual non-existence.7 According to Heyd, it is logically problematic to think that one could benefit ‘someone’ by bringing them into existence, because it is logically problematic to think that one could be worse off in a ‘world’ in which one does not exist than in a world in which one does.8 Of course, there is an objective, impersonal or third-person sense in which a world that includes your existence may be a better world than a world that does not, a sense captured by Jeff McMahan’s ‘impersonal comparative principle’ or ‘ICP’.9 But in no sense – impersonal or person-affecting – are either of those possible worlds better or worse for you. For this reason, Heyd argues, ‘genesis choices can and should be guided exclusively by reference to the interests, welfare, ideals, rights and duties of those making the choices, the generators, the creators, or the procreators.’10 David Benatar agrees that it does not make sense to think of coming into existence as itself a benefit for the person brought into existence, though he thinks, contra Heyd, that a person’s coming into existence can (and indeed should) count as a harm for that person (but I will not deal with that argument here).11

For the person who comes to exist, then, being brought into existence can itself only be regarded as value-neutral, and in no sense can one be benefited by one’s own coming-into-existence.12 In Parfit’s and Heyd’s terms, the person-affecting value of procreation can attach only to the procreators, not to the procreated. Coming into existence is of course a precondition for the attainment of things of value; but preconditions for value do not transitively accrue the value of those things for which they are the precondition, or at least not automatically. In this case, where the precondition for value attainment is existence itself, we encounter special and insurmountable barriers to value transitivity and attribution.

The implications of the debate concerning the value or disvalue of being brought into existence for the debate concerning the morality of procreative reasons are acknowledged by Benatar when he says ‘. . . whereas it seems strange to give as a reason for having a child that the child one has will thereby be benefited, sometimes we do avoid bringing a child into existence because of the potential child’s interests.’13 The saviour sibling position considered earlier held that right reasons for having children refer to the good or sake of the future child. However, the value neutrality of being brought into existence would, it seems, preclude that kind of reference, on the grounds that there is nobody for whom their own creation could be a good, or for the sake of whom their own creation could occur, or to whom the value of coming into existence could be ascribed. Hence, if we are to take seriously the non-identity and value attribution problems it seems inescapable that our reasons for having children will fall into the category of being exclusively other-referring. It seems inescapable, therefore, that our reasons for having children will fail to be of the ‘right’ kind.

Wasserman and others note this problem, an attempted solution to which is to say, as Wasserman does, that ‘. . . even if we cannot create a child for his own good, we must create him for reasons that include or, as he puts it in a later paper, concern his own good.’14 Precisely what is intended by this is not entirely clear but, on one reading, it remains vulnerable to the value-attribution problem: that it is impossible to speak of any procreative reasons – reasons to justify the very bringing of children into existence – even as ‘including’ or ‘concerning’ the good for those children whose existence we seek to bring about. The child’s own good cannot count in any way as a reason in favour of bringing it into

7 The view is not without its detractors. See for example N. Holtug, J Ethics 2001; S. A. Wrigley, Genetic Selection and Modal Harms. Monist 2006: 89.
8 Heyd, op. cit, note 6.
11 D. Benatar. Why it is better never to come into existence. Am Philos Q 1997: 34.
12 Parfit himself agrees that this is a reasonable position to take, though he regards either conclusion – that causing to exist can benefit and that it cannot be said to benefit – as defensible. See Parfit, op. cit, note 6.
13 Benatar, op. cit. note 10, p. 346.
14 Wasserman, op. cit. note 4, p. 24 (my italics). See also Wasserman, op. cit. note 3.
existence (though, importantly, it can count as a reason in favour of making certain welfare-promoting provisions for its future).

Perhaps we should be more charitable towards Wasserman’s view, interpreting his claim that ‘morally justified procreation must involve acting on a vision of the future that includes the good of the child’ in a more common-sense way that avoids troubling value-attibutions and non-identity problems. Perhaps the requirement is simply that whatever their content, procreative reasons must be compatible with a reasonable account of what is in any child’s interest, or at least not incompatible with them; and perhaps this is what Wasserman in fact intended. Accordingly, we might regard ‘inheritance of the family fortune’ as compatible with the good for any child, even if we can’t thereby count it as a reason for bringing the child into existence.

Notice, however, that such a reading amounts to a shift away from the requirement that procreative reasons be child-referring, to considerations of the future welfare of any children brought into existence. The value-attribution problem arises exclusively for attempts to justify the bringing into existence of a child by referring to the good for that child; the problem does not arise any and every time we consider making welfare provisions for expected future persons. So while the good for a child cannot serve as a justification for bringing a child into existence, and therefore cannot serve as a procreative reason, the good for a child can and should serve as a consideration in taking on the parental role, whatever our necessarily other-referring procreative reasons for deciding to do so.

To return to the saviour sibling case, we must acknowledge that our reason for creating the saviour child refers, inter alia, to the good of the already-existing child, and not in any sense to the good of the saviour child itself. What we may then do – and Wasserman would surely oblige us to do it – is consider the expected compatibility between realizing the good for an existing child, and meeting the welfare needs of a future saviour sibling, once he or she exists. We can ask, that is, about whether we are, all things considered, in a position to provide a decent life for a second child, encompassing in our consideration the plans we have for that child’s life, plans which include their role as a potential life-saving donor for their sibling. We ought not to be concerned about the other-referring nature of our procreative reason – all procreative reasons are other-referring – but rather with the question of whether there exist grounds to expect that a saviour child, once in existence, will be vulnerable to harm, including as a result of having been brought into existence as a saviour sibling. Furthermore, as Aulisio, May and Block suggest, the permissibility of tissue donation in any particular saviour sibling case will necessarily depend upon satisfaction of a ‘best interest of the donor’ standard at the time of the proposed donation, just as it does in cases of minors and living-related donation. As I have indicated, however, considerations of child welfare shift our attention away from issues concerning the reference of procreative reasons, and suggest instead a distinct account of the basis of procreative reasons-relevance.

III. EXPLANATORY CANDIDATE 1: PROCREATIVE REASONS-RELEVANCE AND PREDICTIVENESS

Let us turn, then, to the reasons-relevance thesis – the thesis that why we procreate matters for the morality of our procreative conduct. A plausible and intuitively strong candidate for explaining the relevance of procreative reasons is that they are predictive of parenting capacity and therefore, indirectly, of welfare outcomes for future children. Implicit in this line of enquiry is the idea that were we somehow to know that we are incapable of providing decent parenting to a child, then it would be morally wrong for us to decide to have a child.16 Here we focus squarely on parenting capacity, and thereby avoid the problems associated with talk of the interests of not yet existing children and related ontological and existential comparisons. There is a tendency to assume that would-be parents’ procreative reasons augur something about the quality of parenting that they are likely, ceteris paribus, to provide for a future child. Although the connection is defeasible, an autonomous agent’s intentional action is guided by, and ideally consistent with, what she takes to be her reasons for acting. Thus, to the extent that agent continence of this kind obtains, it might seem reasonable to expect the content of procreative reasons to be to some extent predictive of the quality of parenting, and derivatively of the quality of life or welfare of the future child. In terms of procreative rightness, acceptable procreative reasons would be those other-referring reasons that augur a parenting capacity that is at least compatible with and not contrary to, the good of any child who comes into existence (setting aside

16 Emphasis on the predictive aspect of procreative reasons brings greater focus on questions concerning parental capacity than many have been prepared to grant (with notable exceptions such as H. La Follette in Licensing Parents. *Philos Public Aff* 1980; 9).
for our purposes here all questions about whether ‘maximally good’ or ‘sufficiently good’ parenting is required.) If it can be established that procreative reasons are predictive of parenting capacity, then procreative reasons turn out to be highly morally relevant and significant indeed, since the welfare of future children is widely deemed a paramount consideration, not least in the sphere of technologically assisted reproduction.\textsuperscript{17}

Perhaps it is the predictiveness of procreative reasons, then, that explains their moral relevance?

From the limited empirical evidence that is available, however, it would seem that we are not entitled to infer very much at all from procreative motivations to parenting capacity. Research into unplanned pregnancy in the United States yields no evidence of disproportionate representation of unplanned children – those conceived for no reason at all – among neglected and abused children.\textsuperscript{18}

Rather, risk factors for child abuse and neglect lie in a combination of conditions such as parental mental ill health, domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, socioeconomic deprivation, and caregiver changes.\textsuperscript{19} Of course, pointing to such risk factors does not indicate anything about the motivations with which people in these kinds of conditions decide to have children. What empirical evidence of this kind does highlight, however, is that the material and social conditions in which people

17 Thus child welfare requirements are recognized in statute law such as Section 13 (5) of the Human Fertilization and Embryology Act 1990: ‘A woman shall not be provided with treatment services unless account has been taken of the welfare of any child who may be born as a result of the treatment (including the need of that child for a father), and of any other child who may be affected by the birth.’ The HFEA’s guidelines for interpreting the section specify that potential technology providers consider such factors as the ability of parents to ‘provide a stable and supportive environment for any child produced as a result of the treatment’, ‘their ages and likely future ability to look after or provide for a child’s needs’, and ‘the effect of a new baby or babies upon any existing child of the family’. See C. Gavaghan. Use of preimplanation genetic diagnosis to produce tissue donors: an irreconcilable dichotomy? Human Fertil (Camb) 2003; 1: 23–25 (see especially notes 46–48).

18 As reported in M.P. Auliso et al., op. cit. note 14. Their research was based on that reported in S.K. Henshaw. Unintended Pregnancy in the United States. Fam Plann Perspect 1998; 30. Henshaw reports that approximately 25% of children in the USA are unplanned (with half of the approximately 50% of unplanned pregnancies having resulted in abortion), Auliso et al. claim that there is no evidence suggesting a correlation between neglect or abuse and children who are conceived for reasons that can be regarded as ‘less than optimal’; but they offer no evidence in support of that claim.

19 Similarly Celia Doyle’s research on emotional abuse found ‘there [are] no significant differences in culture, ethnic group, religion and class or a [family] member with a physical or learning disability’; and concludes ‘[t]here appears to be no type of child who is more vulnerable to emotional abuse in terms of age, gender, ordinal position in family and health or disability . . . ’ C. Doyle. Emotional Abuse of Children: Issues for Intervention. Child Abuse Review 1997; 6: 330–342: 335.

parent play a very significant role in determining parenting capacity, and a much clearer role than that which procreative motives might reasonably be assumed to play.

Consider also a further point about what we might think of as the ‘transition’ effect of becoming a parent to a new child (whether a first or subsequent child), a point which I think suggests that reliable empirical evidence of a connection between procreative reasons and parenting capacity is likely to remain elusive. We can probably all agree that of the significant transitional events one might experience in one’s life, the experience of the intended birth of a sought-after child is one of considerable and far-reaching impact.\textsuperscript{20} I believe (though I cannot argue for it fully here) that we can reasonably expect a person’s emotions, desires and motivations to be sufficiently disrupted in the transition to new parenthood, seriously to challenge inferences from pre-procreative motivations to parenting capacity. I will not be so bold as to say that we can reasonably expect all parents to come to love each child they have, nor to care for them well. But I do think that a moment’s reflection on the emotional impact – positive and negative – of the birth of a new child ought to caution us against any assumption that particular kinds of procreative reasons will reliably and necessarily predict for poor child outcomes via predicting for poor parenting capacity.

In relation to saviour sibling cases, the first point to note is that these are still so few in number as to be statistically undetectable in large-scale research on

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general risk factors for abusive and neglectful treatment by a parent. Setting aside risk of abuse and neglect, however, we might consider instead the concern that those who conceive a child to save an existing child’s life will not love the saviour sibling child for her own sake or in her own right. Here some potentially relevant evidence can be gleaned from cases of inter-sibling bone marrow or cord blood donation. It would of course be wrong to assume that these donor children were conceived in order to be donors, and for this reason the evidence is not reliably exported to the pre-implantation tissue typing cases. Yet the HFEA saw fit to refer to this research in their 2004 Report on Preimplantation Tissue Typing, stating that they found ‘. . . no evidence, that was transferable or relevant to the issue of preimplantation tissue typing, that adverse psychological effects would result from the procedure’.21 They reported, moreover, that expert consultation consistently reflected the view that while bone marrow donation tends to intensify family relationships, it does not alter those relationships for the worse.22 The HFEA concluded, accordingly, that ‘there [is] no evidence that being conceived in this manner is injurious to the psychological welfare of the child’.23 Leaving aside the question of whether donation necessarily injurious to the psychological welfare of the child, the HFEA encouraged.24 Yet the HFEA saw fit to refer to this research in their 2004 Report on Preimplantation Tissue Typing, stating that they found ‘. . . no evidence, that was transferable or relevant to the issue of preimplantation tissue typing, that adverse psychological effects would result from the procedure’.21 They reported, moreover, that expert consultation consistently reflected the view that while bone marrow donation tends to intensify family relationships, it does not alter those relationships for the worse.22 The HFEA concluded, accordingly, that ‘there [is] no evidence that being conceived in this manner is injurious to the psychological welfare of the child’.23 Leaving aside the question of whether donation necessarily injurious to the psychological welfare of the child, the HFEA encouraged.24 Yet the HFEA saw fit to refer to this research in their 2004 Report on Preimplantation Tissue Typing, stating that they found ‘. . . no evidence, that was transferable or relevant to the issue of preimplantation tissue typing, that adverse psychological effects would result from the procedure’.21 They reported, moreover, that expert consultation consistently reflected the view that while bone marrow donation tends to intensify family relationships, it does not alter those relationships for the worse.22 The HFEA concluded, accordingly, that ‘there [is] no evidence that being conceived in this manner is injurious to the psychological welfare of the child’.23 Leaving aside the question of whether donation necessarily injurious to the psychological welfare of the child, the HFEA encouraged.24 Yet the HFEA saw fit to refer to this research in their 2004 Report on Preimplantation Tissue Typing, stating that they found ‘. . . no evidence, that was transferable or relevant to the issue of preimplantation tissue typing, that adverse psychological effects would result from the procedure’.21 They reported, moreover, that expert consultation consistently reflected the view that while bone marrow donation tends to intensify family relationships, it does not alter those relationships for the worse.22 The HFEA concluded, accordingly, that ‘there [is] no evidence that being conceived in this manner is injurious to the psychological welfare of the child’.23 Leaving aside the question of whether donation necessarily injurious to the psychological welfare of the child, the HFEA encouraged.24 Yet the HFEA saw fit to refer to this research in their 2004 Report on Preimplantation Tissue Typing, stating that they found ‘. . . no evidence, that was transferable or relevant to the issue of preimplantation tissue typing, that adverse psychological effects would result from the procedure'.

A second argument for the procreative reasons-relevance thesis might claim that procreative reasons are morally relevant because they are ‘verdictive’.24 By ‘verdictive’ I have in mind the idea that reasons can, to some extent, reveal and reflect the moral character of the reason-holder, supplying information that permits the making of a judgement or verdict about that person’s moral goodness or virtue. It is true that oftentimes our judgements about a person’s virtue and character concern their actions rather than their reasons. And it is certainly a common intuition that good people are, inter alia, people who do good things. But, as we can understand Kant to have insisted, a person’s reasons and motivations may reveal a great deal more about their moral worth and character than do their actions.25 And it is sometimes the case that a person’s action only becomes intelligible by reference to their motives or reasons for performing the action. Even if we do not endorse wholesale Kant’s exclusive focus on the will, most of us are inclined to accept the more moderate position that an agent’s reasons and motivations – to the extent that these are known – are at least relevant, if not integral, to an assessment of their moral character and virtue. Perhaps it is in respect of their verdictive power, then, that procreative reasons are relevant to a moral assessment of procreative conduct? Whatever its merit, on its own this proposed account falls short of establishing procreative reasons-relevance. There may be some sense in which our interest in procreative reasons is an interest in whether a would-be parent possesses, or is likely to develop, the kinds of virtues we deem important for parenting. In Hurthouse’s virtue-ethical terms, a virtuous parent would be one who


22 Indeed some claim that donation can, in some cases, be in the best interests of prospective donors themselves, due to the development of close familial bonds, and a possible heightened sense of their own value and significance within the family. See for example M. P. Aulisio et al., op. cit. note 14.

23 HFEA, op. cit. note 19, pp. 5–6. The Authority did recommend that follow-up studies of children and families should be strongly encouraged.
possesses character traits conducive to a child’s flourishing and the right kind of attitude towards procreation (taking into account certain familiar biological and other facts – in particular those concerning reproduction, children, parenthood, and family relationships). Examples of such character traits might include patience, kindness, supportiveness, and reliability. Indeed, it may be that a focus on parental virtue is preferable to an exclusive focus on children’s rights and their correlative parental obligations as shaping the landscape and determining the parameters of the moral domain that is the parent-child relationship.

Yet, notwithstanding the salience of a virtue focus for thinking about morally ideal parenting, I don’t think it is some assumed verdictiveness of procreative reasons that ultimately accounts for the plausibility of the reasons-relevance thesis. To the extent that we are interested in what procreative reasons reveal about a would-be parent’s moral character or virtue, I think our interest is in what character or virtue suggests about the capacity to provide for the welfare of a future child (especially given an understanding of virtues as enduring and stable dispositions to behave in certain kinds of ways). If I am right about this, our interest in the verdictiveness of procreative reasons is ultimately an interest in the predictiveness of those reasons, specifically in what parental virtue predicts about parenting capacity. This suggests that of the two explanations considered so far, the predictiveness of procreative reasons is the stronger candidate for grounding a procreative reasons-relevance thesis, notwithstanding the challenges it faces.

V. PROCREATIVE REASONS-RELEVANCE AND EXPRESSIVENESS

The final possible basis for the reasons-relevance thesis is more tentatively offered, and in offering it I shall quickly proceed to modifying it. Familiar from bioethics debates on genetic screening and embryo selection in particular, the so-called ‘expressivist’ objections raise concerns about the possible negative judgements and attitudes conveyed by certain reproductive practices and goals. The attitudes and judgements in question are ones that, according to one formulation, ‘. . . themselves constitute a profound injustice’ to certain groups of vulnerable people, typically people with disabilities. The expressivist objection has predominantly been raised in relation to the moral quality of procreative actions and decisions, rather than of procreative reasons. However I see no conceptual barrier – though there are some pragmatic ones – to assessing procreative reasons in the light of what they express, since these reasons are in principle knowable, either communicatively or through their realization in procreative conduct. In the saviour sibling case, then, the suggestion would be that part of the moral relevance and significance of the motivation to have a saviour child consists in the meaning or message that such a procreative motivation conveys, to others within one’s family and society and, perhaps most importantly, to the saviour child herself. Such concerns about the conveying of negative judgements are intended as fully independent from concerns about parenting capacity and, hence, can legitimately be raised even in the absence of evidence or claim of any such incapacity.

Importantly, to acknowledge the expressiveness of procreative reasons is not to claim that any meaning that might be conveyed by a procreative reason must necessarily be intended by the would-be procreators. Contrary to the standard way in which the expressivist objection is interpreted in bioethics debates, those concerned about the ‘message’ or meaning that reproductive motives and practices convey need not be committed to a strict intentional account, endorsed by some philosophers of language, that treats meaning as determined by what an expressor intends to convey. I am not convinced that it is a narrowly intentional notion of meaning that bioethics objectors presuppose when they urge us to consider the meanings conveyed by our procreative decisions and practices, or for that matter reasons. A tendency to conceive of the expressivist objection in narrow intentional terms has led some bioethicists to reject it on the grounds that it requires that the negative or prejudiced judgements

allegedly expressed by a decision or practice must actually exist amongst the beliefs, and structure the motivations, of those making the decisions or engaging in the practices. Accordingly, Buchanan et al. have said:

[A] decision expresses (or presupposes) a particular judgment . . . if and only if either, as a matter of psychological fact, one could only be motivated to make this decision if [one] ascribed to the judgement . . . or one cannot rationally make the decision without believing what the judgment affirms.  

This leads them to conclude that ‘. . . as a general form of argument, the expressivist objection is invalid.’ The problem is that this assessment seems to miss the spirit and purpose of the expressivist objection. Deployed as an argument against practices like disability screening, the intended purpose is not to uncover morally objectionable beliefs or judgements among the mental states of those engaged in selection decisions or practices. It is rather to draw attention to the ways in which certain decisions, practices or motivations might be interpreted by others, including those whose existence results from them, and quite irrespective of the intentions of those whose decisions, practices or motivations they are. In saviour sibling cases, the expressivist concern is that even if the prospective parents do not in fact judge the value of the saviour sibling to be instrumental and to consist solely in the saving of another child’s life, nevertheless there is a reasonable and foreseeable chance of the saviour sibling interpreting the reason for their own creation as conveying just such an evaluation.

An alternative – and more plausible – strategy is to understand the expressivist objection as encompassing a concern about the meaning that a procreative decision, practice or reason evokes. The sense in which evocation can be distinguished from expression is suggested in discussions of Frege’s work on meaning and tone, in relation to which Anthony O’Hear and Michael Dummett argue that ‘...in evocation what counts is what is actually brought about in an audience rather than what the speaker intends.’ As O’Hear puts it, ‘...because it is the actual response evoked in hearers that is relevant, the evocational use of language depends in a unique way upon the dispositions of hearers.’ More radically, Quine and Davidson are regarded as holding the view that a person’s spoken meaning is a matter of what it would be reasonable for others to interpret them as meaning based on their observable behaviour. And of course feminist critiques within the philosophy of language have sought to correct the alleged individualism of theories of meaning that focus narrowly on speaker intention, arguing that such theories either exclude or fail to incorporate sufficiently the social elements of meaning.

Importantly, loosening the connection between meaning and intention does not entail a full-blown subjectivity or indeterminacy about meaning, such that any response in a hearer or audience is to be regarded as constitutive of the meaning of the utterance or action. O’Hear notes Dan Sperber’s suggestion that we can block the slide to subjectivism or indeterminacy about meaning by seeing that within communities, the existence of shared cultural symbols – such as beliefs, rituals, and historical narratives – means that the evoked responses of individuals will be directed or channelled in particular and determinate directions. Although he is at pains to emphasize that evocation is never totally determinate, Sperber makes the point that:

The more numerous are the beliefs, rituals, etc., which are taken into account, the more the evocational field is determinate, the more restricted is the range of possible evocations, and the more the members of a single culture are led to similar evocations... cultural symbolism focuses the attention of members of single society in the same directions, determines parallel evocational fields that are structured in the same way ...

What Buchanan et al. overlook, therefore, is that procreative reasons and practices can be evocative of morally problematic attitudes and judgements even in the absence of such attitudes and judgements being possessed or intended by would-be procreators. In reflecting on procreative reasons, then, we should be prepared to ask ourselves about the ways in which those reasons and motives are likely to be understood by others, including the children we bring into existence. It is quite compatible with having one child to save another that we in fact value the saviour child for its own sake – Buchanan et al. are right about that. But it is also compatible with our valuing of a saviour child for its own sake, that our reason for

31 Ibid.
bringing it into existence evokes a quite different understanding on the part of others, including the child. For example, the practice of having one child to save another may be interpreted by other members of the moral community as endorsement of the view—now widely considered morally offensive—that it is acceptable to regard some persons exclusively as means to ends, and more specifically, as instruments for the welfare-promotion of others. For their part, the saviour sibling child may interpret their own coming-into-existence as conditional in a sense and to an extent not generally endorsed within our society—namely as entirely conditional upon their possession of particular attributes or a capacity to fulfill predetermined and designated roles and expectations. Had they not possessed these attributes and this potential, after all, they would not have been selected to come into existence. This may lead to feelings of subordination and inferiority, quite irrespective of the accuracy of the interpretation of parental motives and attitudes.36

To what extent are we responsible for accommodating the possible interpretations of others in our procreative decisions? My modest suggestion is that we are responsible for doing so only to the extent that we have given thought to the possible interpretation of our procreative aspirations and have put ourselves ‘on task’ to assuage the concerns and actively counter the possible misinterpretations of our procreative reasons, for those most at risk of being negatively affected by such misinterpretations—not least of all the resulting children themselves.

VI. CONCLUSION

I have suggested and considered three possible approaches to explaining the contribution of procreative reasons to the rightness or wrongness of procreative conduct. Do they support an endorsement of Wasserman’s view that morality forbids us from bringing a child into the world unless we do so for the right kinds of reasons? In my view, the foundations for such a strong reasons-relevance thesis have not been secured. At best we have grounds for a moderate reasons-relevance view, one that regards procreative reasons as fit subjects for private moral scrutiny, without granting them the determinative role suggested by the strong reasons-relevance position. Such a view also stops short of entailing any of the more dramatic implications often issuing from bioethics arguments. These include legal prohibition, intensified governmental regulation, or other curtailments of procreative liberty. Jonathon Glover acknowledges that it may be ‘hard to accept that society should set no limits to the genetic choices parents can make for their children.’37 While I have not here defended such an extensive permissiveness, my arguments do caution against the imposition of procreative limits where there exist insufficient justificatory grounds for them. To echo Wasserman’s conclusion, the very difficulty of the question of what counts as an acceptable reason for having a child ‘. . . weighs against any attempt to condition the state’s provision of reproductive assistance on parental reasons or motives.’38 As we have seen, the very difficulty of the question of whether and how procreative reasons contribute to the rightness of procreative conduct reveals an explanatory schism between our ordinary everyday assumptions and the philosophical grounds available in support of them.

Nevertheless, the grounds considered here offer at least a starting point for the critical moral reflection about procreation that is properly a part of a so-called ‘examined life’. Such a life is one in which we are both conscious of and, ideally, able to endorse the significant reasons and motivations that we act upon.

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36 Though of course, and as noted in relation to sibling organ donation at note 22, it is also possible that saviour children may regard themselves as having a uniquely valuable place in the family in virtue of their saviour role.


38 Wasserman. op. cit. note 4, p. 21.