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Antinatalism and Moral Particularism

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Abstract

I believe most acts of human procreation are immoral, and I believe this despite also believing in the truth of moral particularism. In this paper I explain why. I argue that procreative acts possess numerous features that, in other contexts, seem typically to operate with negative moral valences. Other things being equal this gives us reason to believe they will operate negatively in the context of procreative acts as well. However, most people's intuitions represent procreative acts to be morally permissible in most circumstances. Given moral particularism, this would normally be good evidence that procreative acts are indeed morally permissible and that the features that operate negatively elsewhere, simply do not do so in the context of procreative acts in particular. But I argue that we have no good reason to think our intuitions about the ethics of human procreation are accurate. Our most reliable source of insight into the ethics human procreative acts are not our intuitions those acts themselves, but our intuitions about the typical moral valences of the features such acts possess. If that is correct, then acts of human procreation are most likely wrong.

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Introduction

I am a *moral particularist* and an *antinatalist*. That is, I believe in the inherent variability of moral valences, and I believe that, exceptional circumstances aside, acts of human procreation are most likely wrong.

At first glance this seems like an odd combination of views. Most acts of human procreation appear to be morally permissible to most people. Other things being equal, this is excellent evidence that this is precisely what they are. Even if I can locate in them many features that in other contexts seem typically to operate as wrong-makers—and this is exactly what I will be doing in what follows—the fact that procreative acts themselves appear morally permissible suggests that those features are not operating as wrong-makers in the context of procreative acts in particular. So, of all plausible views about the nature of ethics, moral particularism seems especially inhospitable to antinatalism.

However, I shall argue that such appearances are deceptive. The widespread intuition that, in the main, procreative acts are morally permissible, lacks any real probative force. By contrast, there is no similar reason to believe the same thing about the intuitions that find many of the features of procreative acts to be wrong-makers. As this is now our most reliable source of insight into the ethics of human procreation, I conclude that it is most likely immoral.

Moral Particularism

I call myself a *normative particularist* because I am at present convinced that any consideration that generates a positive normative reason—which I, in line with most others, would characterize as a *favoring* of doing or believing something—in one context can just as easily generate a negative normative reason—a *disfavoring*—in another, and no favoring or disfavoring at all in others. That is, to put it in the terminology that some prefer, a consideration that has a positive normative valence in one context can have a negative normative valence in another, and no normative valence whatsoever in others. By itself this does not entail normative particularism, because it is consistent with this thesis that there may be a rigid pattern to how any particular feature's normative valence behaves, such that one could, in principle, formulate rules that describe it.¹ But, and for me this is essential to being a normative particularist, I believe there is no necessity to any pattern there may be. That is, there is both no necessity to there being a pattern—so

¹ Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge, “What Does Holism Have to Do with Moral Particularism?” *Ratio* 18, no. 1 (2005): 93–103.

though there may be a pattern, there does not have to be—but even if there is a pattern, it does not have to be rigid across time and space. Normative patterns, if patterns there be, are always contingent, not necessary. So, even if consideration *P* seems to have a negative normative valence in every situation we can conceive of, this does not entail that it *must* do so, and will always and everywhere continue to do so.²

For clarity, consider an analogy. Put aside the favoring relations constitutive of moral and other normative reasons and consider instead the favoring relations constituted by *my* (or *your*) attitudes toward things. There is normally going to be a loose-ish pattern to them, though one shot through with exceptions. For example, in the main I like chili because, in most cases, adding chili to a dish leads me to like it more. But it is not as if I *have* to like a dish more just because chili has been added to it. There are some dishes to which adding chili has the reverse effect—its presence makes me like the dish less, or not at all. And there is an amount of chili which, if added to almost any dish, will make me dislike it. Nevertheless, there remains a pattern of sorts to when I like and do not like chili and, as such, it seems true to characterize me as someone who likes chili, because typically I do. There is no necessity to any of my tastes—they can and have changed—and I am not being inconsistent if I like chili in one dish and not in another, or if I like chili one day and not the next. So I am a particularist regarding my own favorings and disfavorings. Yet this doesn't stop me, or anyone else, from being able to make informed judgments about what I might like—it doesn't stop anyone from making statistical generalizations, or inferring that I will most likely enjoy dish *p* because I enjoyed dish *q*, and dish *q* seemed relevantly analogous to *p*.

I think everything I have said about my favorings is also true of the favorings constitutive of normative reasons, and thus of moral reasons.³ We are primarily aware of normative reasons through a faculty of rational intuition—we call it “our reason” or “intuition”—and the job of work of our theories is, I think, to characterize the clearest and most widely corroborated deliverances of our reason, other things being equal. As a moral particularist, moral reasoning about difficult and unclear cases—cases where rational

² There's room for disagreement over exactly how one qualifies as a moral particularist, and I am simply describing what I mean by the term. The central contemporary figure in the debate over moral particularism is Jonathan Dancy. See Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993). The term was first coined, however, by R. M. Hare. See Richard Mervyn Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 18. For a survey of recent developments, see Jennifer Flynn, “Recent Work: Moral Particularism,” *Analysis* 70, no. 1 (2010): 140–48.

³ This is not to suggest that the favorings constitutive of normative reasons are among our own attitudes. I have provided an analysis of normative reasons elsewhere: Gerald K. Harrison, *Normative Reasons and Theism* (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

intuitions conflict, or are unclear or untrustworthy—is akin to the kind of reasoning a good chef might engage in when trying to devise an original menu for someone whose tastes he/she has a fairly good grasp of. The chef will have to make informed judgments about what to concoct, based on their understanding of the client's attitudes toward other dishes. The chef will no doubt try and build a mental picture of the client's taste personality and use this as an imaginative simulation against which to test proposed dishes and flavor combinations. But no matter how careful the reasoning, the proof of the pudding is going to remain in the eating.

Likewise then, though I am a normative particularist—and so, by extension, a moral particularist—this does not mean I deny that there is any kind of pattern whatever to the normative aspect to reality, nor does it mean I deny that we can make statistical generalizations based on how some feature or features have behaved in other contexts. Just as the fact I typically like a savory dish more when chili has been added to it gives me default but defeasible reason to believe I will like dish *p* more if some chili is added to it, so too the fact that typically consideration *X* has, intuitively, operated as a wrong-maker in those actions in which it has featured gives us some default but defeasible reason to believe that it will operate as a wrong-maker in some other action in which it is featuring. But if it appears, intuitively, not to be doing so, then, other things being equal, that is good evidence that it is not doing so in this particular context.

Typical Wrong-Makers

In this section I will describe numerous features possessed by (typical) procreative acts, and will draw attention to the fact that in other contexts these features seem, at least in the main, to operate with negative moral valences.⁴ That does not, of course, entail that they operate with negative moral valences in the context of procreative acts—not given the truth of moral particularism, anyway. Nevertheless, the fact they *typically* operate with a negative moral valence makes it reasonable to suppose that they will operate this way elsewhere as well, other things being equal. Again, and to stress, other things may not be equal in the case of procreative acts. But whether this is the case will be the matter addressed in the subsequent section and not this one. The point of this section is simply to highlight that a) procreative acts standardly possess all of these features and b) these features typically operate as moral negatives.

⁴ Julia Tanner and I have drawn attention to these elsewhere, albeit much more sketchily. See Gerald K. Harrison and Julia Tanner, “None,” *Philosophers' Magazine* 75 (2016): 72–77.

Consent

No one gives their prior consent to be born. To procreate is therefore inevitably to subject someone to a life. And to subject someone to a life is, fairly obviously, to have subjected them to something very significant. To procreate is therefore to subject someone to something of great significance.

In other contexts, the fact an act will significantly affect another person without their prior consent typically operates as a powerful wrong-making feature of such deeds. For example, if someone has not consented to have sex with you—a significant activity—then, other things being equal, that generates a powerful moral reason not to have sex with that person.

It should also be noted that even when an act is likely to benefit the affected party, an absence of prior consent still seems, in the main, to operate negatively. For instance, if you hack into my bank account and start gambling with my money, then even if you make me a fortune, the fact you did not have my prior consent to do so seems to be an ethical negative. And this seems to remain the case even where consent is not possible, and even when the act seems overall justified. For example, imagine an unconscious patient needs an arm removed if they are not to die of septicemia. Due to their unconsciousness, they cannot consent. Strange circumstances aside, it is no doubt morally justifiable to remove the arm because of the great harm that would befall the person otherwise. Nevertheless, the absence of prior consent still seems to operate negatively in this context, for it is regrettable that consent was not possible and it would have been better had it been given. It is just that in this case the positive moral valence possessed by the fact removing the arm will prevent the person from dying outweighed the negative moral valence of the fact they did not consent to it.

Of course, it is “in principle” possible to consent to have one’s arm removed in a way that it is not even in principle possible to consent to be created. But affecting another significantly without their prior consent seems to operate negatively even in cases where consent is more robustly impossible. For instance, if I want someone to work for me *against their will*, then clearly the very nature of what I want prevents me from getting anyone to consent to it. Yet this doesn’t mean it is ethically okay for me to make someone work for me *against their will*. Other things being equal, it would be wrong to make someone work for me against their will, and wrong in no small part because it would involve significantly affecting someone without their prior consent. The fact it was impossible to get their prior consent does not seem to alter this.

It would seem, then, that the fact an act will significantly affect another without their prior consent is a fact that can reasonably be expected to operate with a negative moral valence in an act that features it, other things being equal. As has already been noted, procreative acts possess this feature. Yes, it is not possible to give one's prior consent to be created, but we have already seen that in other contexts this does not seem to alter the negativity of this feature's moral valence. And yes, maybe procreative acts are ones that are likely to benefit most of those they affect. But we have also seen that in other contexts this does not seem to alter the negativity of this feature's moral valence either. In summary, then, procreative acts subject someone to a life—which is a very significant thing to do to someone—and they do so without the prior consent of the affected party. In other contexts to subject someone to something significant—even when consent is not possible, and even when it is likely to be overall beneficial to them—seems to operate with a negative moral valence. And thus if other things are equal, we have reason to believe it operates with a negative moral valence in the context of procreative acts as well.⁵

Harm

Living a life is a job of work, and a considerable one at that. Granted, the odds are that most parts of the job will be enjoyed by most of those who have been made to do them (though there is absolutely no guarantee of this). But by no means is all of the work pleasant. Indeed, large parts of the job are extremely painful, demeaning, undignified, and frightening.

For instance, it begins badly. We emerge naked and screaming from the nether regions of another person. A less dignified way of beginning one's career here is hard to imagine. And then we find ourselves ignorant, uncultured, and unsophisticated. We cannot feed or clothe ourselves for a considerable period of time, and will be dependent on the goodwill of others for our survival for many years. To stand any real chance of thriving in the rest of our lives, we will need to be forced to endure years of careful, dedicated schooling by a host of experts. And for many of us our ignorance and dependency will return once more at the other end of life, as our bodies start degenerating. And whether our bodies go to wrack and ruin or not, nearly all of us will live in fear of this happening.

⁵ A more detailed antinatalist case that focuses on the importance of consent is that presented by Seana Shiffrin. See Seana Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm," *Legal Theory* 5, no. 2 (1999): 117–48.

There is also the indignity of not knowing what our lives are about, if anything, and yet being addicted to living them. Most of us would do virtually anything—including the most degrading of things—to stay alive. This, it seems to me, is an indignity and therefore a harm. Life is a gift, it is said. But it is a gift in the way that injecting someone with heroin and then providing them with a lifetime’s supply of the drug is a gift.

Furthermore, and as anyone who has lived here for any period of time knows only too well, this world is an extremely dangerous place. It contains large numbers of murderers, rapists, and thieves and even greater numbers of lower-level mean-spirited, ungenerous, unkind people. It also contains almost every conceivable disease and disaster. They happen all the time and they befall people largely arbitrarily, at least from the perspective of justice. And as such it is practically impossible to avoid these harms.

And anyone who lives here will, it seems, eventually die. So they will become invested in a life, and then they will lose it. And they will become invested in other people, and then they will lose them.

I do not wish to catalog any further the harms that we all know lie in wait for anyone living a life. The point here is that there are many of them and that, other things being equal, the fact that an act will subject another person to many harms is a fact about an act that, typically, operates with a negative moral valence. The fact that stepping on your toe will cause you the harm of pain provides me with a moral reason not to step on your toe. Likewise, then, the fact that procreative acts will subject another to a catalog of harms of the kind mentioned above, and others besides, is a fact that—other things being equal—can be expected to generate moral reason not to perform the act in question.

Of course, life also contains many benefits. We fall in love with people it is good for us to fall in love with, we enjoy ourselves a lot of the time (if we are lucky), and we witness much beautiful scenery and often perform good deeds and exhibit fine character traits. And if an act promotes these sorts of benefits, then that is a fact about it that, typically anyway, operates with a positive moral valence.

But importantly there seems to be an asymmetry between benefits and harms here. Consider: if I know that, were I to have a child, the child’s life would be one characterized by intense suffering, then—other things being equal—that fact seems to generate a powerful moral reason not to have a child. That is, it operates as a wrong-

maker, and, other things being equal, it would be wrong for me to create that child. But by contrast, if I know that, were I to have a child, the child's life would be characterized by intense joy, then—other things being equal—that does not seem to generate a positive obligation to have the child.

There are different diagnoses one might offer of this quandary. The most influential has been offered by David Benatar, who draws the moral that absent benefits are not bad unless there is someone for whom they constitute a deprivation, whereas—by contrast—absent harms are good even though there may be no one for whom they are a benefit.⁶ But for my purposes here it is enough that we merely note that though procreative acts create benefits to those whom they create, in this particular context—that is, in the context of acts that create the person that they affect, as opposed to acts that affect an already existing person—this fact does not seem to operate as a right-maker. That is, the benefits contained in a potential life do not seem to generate moral reason to create the life in question. By contrast, the harms contained in a potential life do seem to generate moral reasons not to create the life.

Harm to Other Species and the Environment

If an act carries a high risk of causing significant harm to the creatures of other species and their environments, then this feature will typically operate with a negative moral valence. For example, wantonly chopping down a tree that contains many nesting birds and other wildlife seems wrong, and wrong in no small part because of the harm it will cause to the creatures living in the tree. So, if an act will cause significant harm to other creatures and their environments, then this typically generates a moral reason not to perform the act in question.

I think it is also fairly uncontroversial that acts of human procreation possess this feature. The average human will typically act in ways that will bring about the deaths of many animals every year, often for no better reason than because the human in question likes the taste of their dead bodies, and/or wearing bits of them. So creating a new human life will almost certainly cause the deaths of many hundreds of other animals over its entire course. Furthermore it is clear that humans have an ongoing practice of colonizing territory being used by other creatures with scant regard for their welfare. Thus procreative acts, by bringing into existence humans who will

⁶ For a good discussion of Benatar's arguments, see the entire edition of the *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (2012), edited by Thaddeus Metz. It includes various papers that support and argue against Benatar's view, as well as a reply from Benatar.

almost certainly do significant harm to other creatures and their environments, possess a feature that, in other contexts, has a negative moral valence.

Imagine, for instance, that humans procreated in the manner of Glomerata wasps. That is, imagine we have to inject human larvae into, say, live calves (Glomerata wasps inject their larvae into living caterpillars). The human larvae then live inside their living host, slowly eating their way out, a process that eventually kills the calf. Well, would a halfway decent person procreate if *that* is what it took? I think not. The calf's welfare matters, and if creating a new human life required that a calf be eaten alive from the inside out, then that fact can be expected to generate a powerful moral reason not to procreate. There does not seem to be a relevant difference between the calf case and regular cases of human procreation, for we all know well enough that human procreative acts will in fact cause considerable suffering and death to other creatures (including, of course, many calves). And so, other things being equal, it seems reasonable to assume that this fact operates with a powerful negative moral valence in the context of human procreative acts.

Loving Relationships

When we are created we imprint on the first people we have any extended contact with—normally our parents of course—and we will typically fall unconditionally in love with them. Likewise, those who create new lives almost invariably imprint on those they have created, and tend to fall unconditionally in love with them too. Most, I think it is fair to say, see these unconditional loving relationships as wonderful, positively features of procreative activities. Indeed, it is plausible that many procreate precisely in order to realize these supposed goods. The love that parents have for their offspring, and that their offspring have for them, is seen as among the chief prizes of life.

However, it is interesting to note that these loving relationships are not, at base, the product of predominantly reason-responsive processes. Far from it, they are, we might say, *biological* rather than *rational*. That is, they are not the result of, nor are they particularly responsive to, free choices and assessments. We imprint on *whom-ever* we first encounter for a sustained period, regardless of their character, and likewise where our parents are concerned. Whatever child they had created—that is, whatever its character and personality—they would have imprinted on it. And most are well aware of this; as already noted, many have children precisely because they wish to love and be loved in this way. The automatic and unconditional nature of it all is part of its appeal.

But this is ethically very significant, I think, because in other contexts loving relationships that have arisen in this way seem far from ideal. Indeed, such relationships seem more akin to addictions or sicknesses. And those who intentionally seek to create them seem thereby to be doing something wrong. The love they create seems to present an obstacle to true flourishing rather than to be a constituent of it. It may not be an insurmountable obstacle, because that which we have loved blindly we can come to love with open eyes. But it is an obstacle nevertheless. And intentionally trying to create one of these nonrational, obstacle-to-flourishing loving relationships—even as a means to acquiring a rational one—seems to be a fact with a negative moral valence. Indeed, quite a powerful negative moral valence if my intuitions are anything to go by.

For instance, Jack wants very much to be loved. He pines after his neighbour, Jane. But he believes that if he were to approach her in the normal way he would say such ridiculous things that it would ruin any prospect of a relationship between them. However, he has recently read about Stockholm syndrome and so knows that kidnap victims have a heightened tendency to fall in love with their kidnapers, regardless of who their kidnapers may be. So, knowing this, he decides to kidnap Jane and hold her in his basement for a while, gambling that under these circumstances Stockholm syndrome will set in and she'll fall in love with him. The plan succeeds and she does fall in love with him. He unchains her and they live happily ever after.

That is not a charming love story, is it? Of course, part of the problem is the fact Jack acted wrongly—seriously wrongly—in kidnapping Jane. But what should not be overlooked is that compounding this wrong is the fact that Jack has manipulated Jane into falling in love with him. That Jack wanted Jane to love him via inducing Stockholm syndrome is not a fact about Jack's act that makes it better, but seems if anything to make it worse. Similarly, the fact that Jane did indeed fall in love with him does not make the situation better either, but makes her even more of a victim of Jack's wrongdoing than she might otherwise have been. For now she has not only been kidnapped, but also infected with a strong affection for her kidnapper.

Note too that even if Jane subsequently comes to love Jack in a more rational way—that is, she imprints on him, but over time comes to love him in virtue of certain qualities he has, and then becomes reason responsive in respect of these qualities such that were he radically to change she would cease to love him—the relationship's origins still remain a bad part of the love story and taint it. And certainly, Jack's act still seems wrong (and seems wrong even if Jack anticipated that Jane would eventually come to love him in a more rational, reason-responsive way).

Another example: John, like Jack, wants to be loved. But rather than Stockholm syndrome, he has been reading about the phenomenon of *transference* in which a therapy patient will often unconsciously transfer strong emotions about significant others to the therapist. Inspired by this, he undertakes to become a therapist in order to exploit this tendency among patients. That is, he sees in the phenomenon of transference not a problem to be managed and tackled, but an opportunity to be exploited for his own emotional ends. He hopes that, through transference, he will become the object of another's loving affection. As with Jack, his plan works well and a patient, Joan, falls in love with him via the transference process.

Again, this is an unsettling love story, not a wholesome one. Intuitively John behaved badly and Joan is John's victim. Her feelings for him were not hard won through a suitably reason-responsive process of reflection and assessment, but were the product of nonrational processes that John knew about and cynically exploited. And John's act of becoming a therapist in order to exploit transference processes seems reprehensible. There are good reasons to become a therapist, and bad reasons to become a therapist, and John's reasons seem squarely to be in the bad camp. And they seem to belong in this camp precisely because they involve becoming a therapist in order to generate a *bad* kind of love from another. And in what does the badness of this love reside, apart from in the fact that it is a love that is not the product of suitably reason-responsive processes?

At the risk of laboring the point, consider as well what Christians typically say about God and the existence of evil in the world. For their explanations invariably mention two things: love and free will. They will often admit that God could, in principle, have created us such that we would automatically and inevitably love him. However, they point out, correctly surely, that such a love would not be of a valuable kind, and would not be of a sort that a good person would seek to be the object of. After all, were God to do such a thing, he would be no better than Jack or John, and the consequent love his creatures would feel for him would be of the unhealthy sort that Jane and Joan have been made to feel for Jack and John.

Christians then typically go on to emphasise that love of the kind worth giving and receiving, and so love of the kind a good god would want to be the object of, must be given freely. Yet, the account continues, even God could not have created free agents and at the same time determined that they would fall in love with him in the valuable way. All God could do is create the circumstances in which such love becomes a possibility. And what that requires is for God to relinquish control over his creations—which is in part what creates the possibility of evil—and to create a distance between himself and them. As Hick says,

Within such a situation there is the possibility of the human being coming freely to know and love one's Maker. Indeed, if the end state which God is seeking to bring about is one in which finite persons have come in their own freedom to know and love God, this requires creating them initially in a state which is not that of their already knowing and loving God. For it is logically impossible to create beings already in a state of having come into that state by their own free choices.⁷

Now regardless of what we think of the credibility of this as an explanation of the world's evils, my point is that it appeals to core intuitions of the very kind I have been appealing to above.⁸ For it emphasizes the idea that loving relationships of the valuable kind, and of the kind that good people are wont to try and cultivate—are a product of free decisions and assessments. By contrast, loving relationships that are not so produced are ones that good people seem to go out of their way *not* to cultivate.

Now obviously a great deal more could and, ideally, should be said about the suitably reason-responsive processes that are at the heart of good loving relationships. But it is clearly beyond the scope of this essay to do that. Happily, for my purposes it is sufficient to note that loving relationships that are the product of processes that are not at all, or barely, reason responsive seem—in the main, anyway—to be relationships that it is wrong to cultivate intentionally. That was the kind of love that Jack and John sought to cultivate, and it is the kind that Christians believe a good god would *not* seek to cultivate. So if it is a fact about an act that it will create such relationships, then that is likely to be a fact that will operate with a negative moral valence. And if such an act is performed with the intention of creating such relationships, then that fact about the act is also likely to have a negative moral valence.

⁷ John Hick, "Soul-Making Theodicy," in *Philosophy of Religion Selected Readings*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 306.

⁸ In fact, antinatalist views generate a novel perspective on the problem of evil for the traditional conception of God. For if antinatalism is true and other things are equal, then no perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient being would create new life. Thus, if antinatalism is true, we are not the creation of such a god. But if God exists, then by definition we are the creations of such a god (God is typically defined as the creator of everything apart from himself). Therefore it would seem that God does not exist if antinatalism is true. I should perhaps also say that, speaking personally, it does not seem to me to be any good or noble thing to create creatures and make them walk in the valley of the shadow of death so that they might come freely to love you. And relatedly, if you find yourself walking in the valley of the shadow of death, then it does not seem any good or noble thing for you to do to make some innocent children follow you (even if they come freely to love you).

Yet it is loving relationships of this un-reason responsive kind that parents have with their offspring and offspring with their parents, at least initially. For it seems undeniable that the newly created imprint on those whom they first encounter for any period of time, and undeniable that most parents imprint on their offspring. Indeed, it is hard to think of a *less* reason-responsive love than this sort. Furthermore, it seems likely that many procreative acts are performed partly in order to create loving relationships of this kind. That is, many seem to want to be the object of these kinds of automatic, unconditional loving affections, and procreate knowing that their offspring will almost certainly love them in precisely this way. So once more we have procreative acts possessing features that, in other contexts, seem to operate with a powerful negative moral valence. And so, if other things are equal, then it is reasonable to suppose that this is how they will operate in this context as well.

Prejudices

It seems morally bad to prioritize the interests of another if one is doing so for no better reason than that they are a member of the same sex or race as oneself. And such racist and sexist dispositions seem bad not just due to the detrimental consequences that may result for the relevant sex or race. These compound the badness of such dispositions. But even if a person is never going to get the opportunity to exercise their racist or sexist disposition, it still seems bad in and of itself just to be in possession of it. We—persons, that is—are morally valuable *irrespective* of our sexes or races, not *because* of them. Thus, we are owed respect and goodwill from each other irrespective of what race or sex we belong to.

If there were a recreational drug that had as a side effect that it would most likely instill or accentuate racist and sexist dispositions, then that would—typically, anyway—generate a moral reason *not* to take that drug.⁹ And it seems clear that it would do this even if most people regularly take the drug in question, and enjoy taking it, and are brazen and proud of their subsequent racist and sexist attitudes.

Bearing all this in mind, there seems no fundamental difference between prioritizing the interests of others due to their being members of the same sex or race and prioritizing the interests of others due to their being members of the same genetic family. For exactly the same points apply, surely. No less than a person's sex or race, a person's genetic family is irrelevant to the moral value of that person. We are owed respect and goodwill from others irrespective of the genetic family to which we be-

⁹ Julia Tanner and I make this point in Harrison and Tanner, "None," 75–76.

long, rather than because of it. Indeed, it is easy enough to imagine someone who has no genetic family whatsoever—a magical agent who just pops into existence from nowhere—and intuitively it seems clear that this person is owed the same respect and goodwill as any other. So the familyist—the person who prioritizes the interests of family members simply because they are family members—seems to exhibit the same vice as the racist and the sexist. In all of these cases we have people prioritizing the interests of one person over another on the basis of some feature that is irrelevant to the moral importance of that person.

It is important to stress, however, that I am not for a moment denying that there can often be moral reasons to be partial to some people over others, even when there is no difference in the inherent moral value of the people involved. For instance, intuitively I owe special obligations to my partner and my friends and my parents and my siblings. If my partner needs a kidney and mine are a match, then I think I almost certainly have an obligation to donate one to her. Yet if a stranger needed a kidney and mine were a match, then—if my intuitions are to be trusted, anyway—I am not similarly obligated to make the sacrifice. Clearly there is no difference in moral value between my partner and the stranger. It is just that I stand in a relationship to my partner that I do not stand in to the stranger, and this seems to make all the difference in this case. The same is true of my friends and my parents and my siblings. I am in relationships with them all, and these relationships affect my obligations toward them, even though they have no bearing on their inherent moral value.

Soran Reader has said something very helpful here:

The main criterion which distinguishes relationships from mere relations, is that a relationship involves an actual connection between agent and patient, a real “something between” them which links them together. This “something between” can be thought of as a kind of contact or presence of the relata to each other. Where there is “nothing between,” there is no relationship.¹⁰

She continues,

Although my concept of relationship is broad, several kinds of relation fall outside it. First, the relation of sharing a property falls short of having a relationship. I agree with Samuel Scheffler when he points out that relations consisting of shared superficial properties are not relationships, for example having a surname with the same number of letters. But I think we can go

¹⁰ Soran Reader, “Distance, Relationship, and Moral Obligation,” *Monist* 86, no. 3 (2003): 370–71.

further. Having shared properties, *simpliciter*, is not a relationship, whether the properties are superficial, non-superficial or even essential. For example, having had a heart transplant is a non-superficial contingent property two people might share. But it is not a relationship, because it involves no actual connection, nothing between the persons which links them together.¹¹

That sounds quite right to me. I have moral reason to donate a kidney to my partner because I stand in a relationship to her that I do not stand in to the stranger. Importantly, however, merely having things in common with another person—such as being the same race, or the same sex, or being members of the same family—does not constitute a relationship of the kind that seems to generate special obligations. I do not, for instance, owe any special obligations to a clone of my partner—I am not obliged to give her a kidney if she needs one—despite her being a member of the same family, sex, and race as my actual partner. For being the same family, sex, and race as another person is merely to have things in common with them, and that is not yet to be in a relationship with a person. So, I have special moral obligations to my parents and siblings not because we share genetic material in common, but because of the relationship we have come to stand in to each other.

If all this is correct, then there would seem to be no fundamental difference between racist, sexist, and familyist dispositions. And that means that, if other things are equal, we can reasonably infer from the moral negativity of racist and sexist attitudes the moral negativity of familyist attitudes. And, as such, we can then reasonably conclude that if it is a fact about an act that it is will most likely either instill or accentuate a familyist disposition, then this is a fact that will most likely operate with a negative moral valence. That is, other things being equal, it is reasonable to suppose that we have moral reason not to perform acts that will likely instill or accentuate familyist dispositions.

This clearly is a fact about most procreative acts. For if one procreates, chances are that one will either find that a familyist attitude becomes instilled or that one's existing familyist dispositions are accentuated. Indeed, in my experience many parents—indeed, many people—are quite brazen about their familyist attitudes, and think nothing of proudly declaring that blood is blood and that family comes first.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 374.

Intuitive Natalism

Above I have described numerous features that, typically, seem to operate with negative moral valences. And I have noted that most procreative acts possess them all. Therefore other things being equal, it seems reasonable to suppose that they will operate with negative moral valences in the context of procreative acts. That is the default.

However, other things appear far from equal. For acts of human procreation are not ones about which most have no clear moral intuitions. Far from it: virtually everyone seems to get the impression such acts are morally permissible (even praiseworthy). Indeed, the intuition that most human procreative acts are morally permissible seems as clear and distinct and widely corroborated as the intuitions about the moral negativity of the features in the contexts described above. So isn't there something perverse in allowing, as I have been inviting us to do, our intuitions about the moral valences of the features in cases other than procreative ones determine our judgments about the procreative ones? After all, if moral particularism is true, then we know already that no moral valences are fixed and as such it is entirely possible that a feature that operates negatively in most other cases simply doesn't operate that way in the context of procreative acts. So, isn't the sensible thing to do here to take both sets of intuitions at face value and conclude that human procreation is an exceptional case? After all, our best evidence that we have an exception on our hands is that the considerations in question are not appearing to make the act in which they are featuring wrong. And isn't that precisely what—by my own lights—appears to be the case where most procreative acts are concerned? Yes, procreative acts are acts that significantly affect another without their prior consent, and they harm the welfare of other species, and they instill what, in other contexts, seem to be prejudicial attitudes, and generate what, in other contexts, would seem to be unhealthy kinds of unconditional devotion. But perhaps in the context of procreative acts specifically these features do not operate as wrong-makers, for after all, they do not appear to be doing so.

I take this objection seriously and accept entirely that if a consideration appears to most people not to be operating as a wrong-maker in a particular context, then—other things being equal—that really is excellent evidence that it is not operating as a wrong-maker in that particular context. But once again, other things are *not* equal, or so I would claim. For though clear and widely corroborated moral intuitions are *typically* good evidence in support of what they represent to be the case, that is not always and everywhere true. Sometimes there are considerations that discredit the

probative force that clear and widely corroborated moral intuitions would otherwise have. And this, I shall argue, is precisely the case in respect of the widespread intuition that procreative acts are morally permissible. They do appear to be morally permissible, but in this case appearances count for nothing. If I am right about this, then when it comes to the ethics of procreative acts, our most reliable source of insight into their morality will be the typical moral valences of their features.

Defeating the Intuitions

Imagine I have the intuition that Xing—an act that has several features that normally operate as wrong-makers in other contexts—is morally permissible. It is not that Xing appears to have additional features that seem to be operating as right-makers and whose positive moral valence is countervailing the negative moral valence of its wrong-makers. No, it seems that Xing is just plain morally permissible—there seems nothing wrong about it; that is, nothing about it seems to be operating with a negative moral valence. Other things being equal, this is good evidence that Xing is morally permissible and that the features that elsewhere operate as wrong-makers are simply not doing so in this context.

But now imagine that I subsequently find out that I have just come from visiting a hypnotist who is notorious for implanting in those who visit him the posthypnotic suggestion that Xing is entirely morally permissible, and that he implants this in people regardless of the actual moral permissibility of Xing. Well, now I have a *defeater* for my intuition that Xing is morally permissible.¹² That is, this information about how I have most likely acquired the intuition *discredits* it. If I have acquired the intuition via posthypnotic suggestion, then it provides me with no more reason to think Xing is permissible than it does to think it is impermissible. That is, it counts for nothing in terms of evidence.

That, I contend, is exactly how things are where the morality of procreative acts is concerned. For the widely shared intuition that procreative acts are morally permissible seems most likely to have been implanted by blind evolutionary processes alone, and this, no less than implantation by a hypnotist, undermines their credibility as evidence. Consider first that our intuitions about the morality of our actions have a significant impact on how we behave. If an activity appears wrong, then we typically do not do it (the precise nature of the link between our motivations and our moral judgments, and between our motivations and our actions, are matters of controversy, but that there is a

¹² John Pollock and Joseph Cruz, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986), 38.

connection is not). In turn, how we behave significantly affects our reproductive success. For example, those of our ancestors who got the intuition that reproduction is immoral would, in the main, have tried hard not to do it. Now it seems very credible that those of our ancestors who tried hard not to reproduce would have been significantly less reproductively successful than those who did the opposite. And thus the disposition to get the intuition that reproducing is morally wrong is one that is unlikely to be favored by a process of evolution by natural selection. By contrast, the intuition that procreation is morally permissible—indeed, good and wholesome—is likely to be favored by such processes, because those of our ancestors who got that intuition would have actively tried to procreate, and actively trying to procreate is, strange circumstances aside, likely to be a reproductively successful strategy. Hence, quelle surprise, virtually everyone gets the intuition that procreation is morally permissible and good and praiseworthy. Getting it “helped our ancestors make more babies,” as Richard Joyce might say.¹³ If that is the whole story about why we get such an intuition, then it seems to me that it discredits it. For there is no reason to think that the truth or otherwise of such an intuition had anything to do with why most reason-responsive agents have come to be prey to it. As Huemer explains,

The fact that evolutionary pressures explain our having some cognitive or perceptual faculty does not *in general* undermine trust in that faculty. Evolution explains why we have eyes and ears, why we have the capacity for reasoning about the physical world, and why we have the capacity to learn languages. In none of these cases does an evolutionary account of the origin of our faculty undermine trust in that faculty: no one argues that our vision, reasoning, or language apprehension is unreliable because it is a product of natural selection. So why should ethics be any different? The answer is that in the case of nonmoral faculties, there is a reason why accuracy should be selected for. Accurate nonevaluative beliefs are usually useful for attaining one’s goals; therefore, if a conscious organism is generally well adapted, so that its desires are generally in line with what would promote its own reproductive fitness, then, as a rule, more accurate factual beliefs will increase its fitness. For instance, if one wants to avoid predators, then correct beliefs about where predators are located will benefit one.¹⁴

Being fairly reliably hooked up to the physical aspect of reality, if physical aspect there be, can be expected to confer a considerable reproductive advantage. It enabled our an-

¹³ Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁴ Michael Huemer, “Revisionary Intuitionism,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 25, no. 1 (2008): 376–77.

cestors to survive long enough to reproduce, and enhanced their ability to find someone with whom to mate. Hence why most of us today find ourselves reliably hooked up to it. Thus, an evolutionary account of the development of our sensible faculties does not, in the main, give us reason to doubt their reliability, at least not when it comes to informing us about the location, size, and shape of things. But by contrast, the normative aspect to reality is not where potential mates reside, and it has no sharp edges and long drops. As such there is no special reason to think there would be selective pressure in the direction of accurate normative intuitions, other things being equal. Again, back to Huemer:

If an organism has generally accurate non evaluative beliefs, it cannot be assumed that, in general, its also having objectively correct values will increase its reproductive fitness. Rather, an organism's reproductive fitness would seem to be best promoted by its having values skewed in a certain direction: by the organism's taking its own reproductive success, to be good, whether or not those things are objectively good. The crucial asymmetry is that non evaluative beliefs typically function to help us select the correct means of achieving our goals, whereas evaluative beliefs typically influence what goals we seek. Natural selection could be expected to favour individuals whose goals are in line with the "goals" of evolution, and who take the correct means of achieving their goals.¹⁵

Of course, ahead of investigation there is no special reason to think the normative aspect to reality won't consist of objective favorings of behavior likely to increase reproductive fitness. But by the same token, there seems no special reason to think it *would* contain such objective favorings either. The point, rather, is that those agents who got the impression procreation was permissible and good and praiseworthy would be the ones favored by a process of natural selection, regardless of the actual content of the normative aspect to reality. So, irrespective of the accuracy of the intuition that procreation is permissible, those who got it would be selected for. The clear and widely felt intuition that human procreative acts are morally permissible seems to me, then, to be one we have good reason to think has no real probative force. It seems highly likely that we have it due to the operation of selective pressures alone. Just as the hypnotist's indifference toward ethical truth discredits the intuition that Xing is morally permissible, so too the indifference of natural selection toward the ethics of procreation discredits our moral intuition that procreation is morally permissible. Again, this is not to say that procreation is therefore wrong. It is just to note that the intuition that it is permissible does not count for anything, and thus to gain insight into its ethics we need to look elsewhere.

¹⁵ Ibid., 377.

But what of the intuitions I appealed to when drawing attention to the typically negative moral valences of the features I identified above—can they be similarly undercut? Perhaps, but I do not think so.¹⁶ For instance, the intuition that it is important not to make significant impositions on another without their prior consent hardly seems like one that selective pressures alone would favor one having, other things being equal. For as I have already argued, rational reflection upon it will lead one to conclude that procreating is something we have moral reason *not* to do, for procreative acts themselves make significant impositions on those they bring into this realm, and they do so without the prior consent of those parties. So, absent the intuition that procreation is permissible, having this intuition will lead one to the conclusion that procreation is positively impermissible, which on the face of it seems about as far from an adaptive intuition as one can get.

The intuition that the harms contained in a life generate a moral reason not to create it, whereas the benefits contained in a life generate no moral reason to create it is, once more, not one we would expect to be favored by natural selection. For again, other things being equal, having it will lead one to conclude that we have moral reason *not* to procreate.

Similarly, the intuition that in determining what we should do we should weigh alongside the interests of our own species the interests of other species, regardless of their usefulness to the flourishing of our own, is again hardly one that we might reasonably expect a processes of natural selection to favor us having. For reason-responsive humans who do get such intuitions, and who are relatively observant of our impact on the world are likely to draw the conclusion that, for the sake of the interests of other species, we ought not to procreate.

Likewise for those intuitions that imply there is something ethically problematic in wanting to be loved automatically and unconditionally, and in wanting to have one's own little tribe of acolytes. Having such intuitions means that, other things being equal, one will not see the possession of such desires as good, and one will not see in the fact

¹⁶ Needless to say, there are some who think evolutionary debunking accounts can be given of all ethical intuitions (or at least, they will be debunking if some kind of objective ethics is assumed). See Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006): 117–48; and Joyce, *Evolution of Morality*. I, like most others, do not think this is true. It seems self-defeating as any case for anything must appeal to some normative intuitions, as I argue in Harrison, *Normative Reasons and Theism*, 96–100. And if some normative reasons have to be admitted to exist, then it is hard to see why the reality of moral reasons should be denied. I clearly believe *targeted* debunking arguments are possible, such as the one I am making here. But I do not believe debunking arguments can be given for all moral reasons, only a subset.

that by procreating one can satisfy such ethically problematic desires any kind of reason to do so. Again, that does not seem to be a reproductively successful conclusion to draw. And finally, the intuition that we have no special reason to prefer someone just because they share genetic material in common with us—indeed, that we have reason to view such a disposition as positively bad—is again hardly one we would expect natural selection to favor. Quite the opposite: we would expect biological processes to favor agents who got the impression that they *do* have reason to prioritize those with whom they share genetic material. And of course, we—many of us—*do* get those intuitions too. The point is just that the latter can now be seen to have no credibility precisely because selective pressures seem most likely to be responsible for why we have them. That does not seem to be true of the former intuitions, to their credit.

So all of the intuitions I have appealed to seem, from the perspective of reproductive fitness, perverse. For whether taken singly or together they imply that procreative acts are positively immoral, at least in the main. As such I think we have no reason to doubt their accuracy. By contrast, the fact that most of us have the intuition that human procreation is morally permissible—and that as such it represents a case where the above considerations seem to cease to operate as wrong-makers—looks suspiciously like an intuition that selective pressures would favor. And thus the best explanation of why we get that intuition about human procreation is not that it is accurate, but that it enabled our ancestors to breed more successfully.

Conclusion

I have noted the typically negative moral valence of a number of features. And I have noted that procreative acts typically possess all of them.

However, human procreation seems to most to be permissible and even good and praiseworthy. If moral particularism is true, and if other things are equal, then this would be evidence that procreative acts are an exception and all of these features cease to operate negatively in such a context.

I argued that other things are far from equal. The intuition that human procreation is permissible is an intuition that seems best explained by the operation of blind evolutionary processes alone. And this, I argued, discredits it because there seems no good reason to think such processes will favor normative truth in this area. By contrast, the intuitions about the wrong-making tendencies of the features I drew attention to are all intuitions that would not enhance an agent's reproductive fitness. For they are intuitions that, taken at face value, would lead one to conclude that human procreation is immoral (at least in

the main). Thus it seems reasonable to think these intuitions are accurate, other things being equal.

If the intuition that human procreation is morally permissible lacks probative force, then our most reliable source of insight into the ethics of human procreation will be our intuitions about the typical moral valences of its features. Again: the features I described typically operate with negative moral valences. All of them are possessed by procreative acts, and so we now have good reason to suppose that they operate negatively here as well. And if that is true, then it seems most likely that procreative acts are overall wrong, especially if they do not possess features that we have good reason to suppose operate with countervailing positive moral valences (a possibility space has not allowed me to consider here, but that I am skeptical about). For they significantly affect another without that person's prior consent; they create harms both to the person and to others species that we have moral reason not to create; they create loving relationships of an intuitively bad kind; and they instill or accentuate apparently bad attitudes. In this way, then, I arrive at the conclusion that typical acts of human procreation are most likely wrong, and wrong consistent with the truth of moral particularism.

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