

Childhood Bads, Parenting Goods, and the Right to Procreate

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Abstract:

Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, together with many other philosophers, think that adults' interests in raising a child can give them a moral right to parent when they will be adequate parents. We consider whether the same interest could give such adults a moral right to procreate, as a means of acquiring a child to raise. We argue that the interest in parenting cannot support a right to procreate, because the features of childhood that make parenting uniquely valuable for adults are bad for children. Adults may have a right to procreate, but they do not have that right due to their interest in a parent-child relationship.

Keywords: family values, procreative ethics, parental interests, parental rights, relationship goods, value of childhood, bads of childhood

1. Introduction

In *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships*, Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift argue that many people have a profound interest in parenting, rooted in the value of the relationship that parents can enjoy with their children. These people's lives would be stripped of unique and important goods if they didn't raise a child. Brighouse and Swift rely on this parental interest to argue that adults who would be adequate parents have a moral right to raise a child, so as to satisfy their relationship-based interests.¹

Brighouse and Swift don't directly address the ethics of procreation; their concern is the ethics of relationships between parents and existing children, whether biological or adopted.² But it's common to believe that procreating is one permissible way—perhaps even the default way—to satisfy the interest in being a parent that Brighouse and Swift's argument draws upon.³ This is, after all, the way the vast majority of people become parents. It's also impossible for everyone with a strong interest in the parent-child relationship to satisfy their interest without some people making children. Every child who is parented, including adopted children, must be procreated. Even if everyone who procreated but preferred not to parent the resulting children gave those children up to adults with a strong interest in parenting, the demand would likely outstrip the supply. Moreover, the adoption process, at least as it exists in most affluent modern societies, imposes a host of challenges on would-be parents; the process is often expensive, intrusive, and slow.⁴ So the unique and powerful interest in parenting that *Family Values* relies on in its case for the right to parent appears, at first glance, to give many adults strong reasons to procreate.⁵

A further thought would move from the claim that adults have strong reasons to procreate in order to parent, to the claim that their interests in parenting are strong enough to establish a moral right to procreate, provided they would do a good enough job of meeting their children's

interests. The interest in procreation might ground a corresponding right—at least when procreating is the only way for competent would-be parents to acquire a child without taking on more costs than they can be expected to in order to satisfy their interest in the parent-child relationship.⁶ We call this attempt to derive an entitlement to procreate from an entitlement to parent the ‘parental relationship justification’ of the right to procreate. Again, Brighouse and Swift don’t themselves endorse this argument; they have no official position on the ethics of procreation. But the parental relationship justification of the right to procreate is an interesting and initially plausible extension of their view.

Despite the seeming plausibility of the parental relationship justification, we argue that there is a morally fraught side to adults’ interests in parenting, which often goes unacknowledged. This derives from the necessary link between children’s subjection to some significantly bad features of childhood, and adults’ profound interests in parental relationships with children. The unique relationship goods of parenting outlined by Brighouse and Swift involve helping children to cope with, and eventually overcome, bad-making features of childhood. If children didn’t experience these bad features, then parents wouldn’t enjoy the unique goods of being a parent.

This dependence of adults’ interests in parenting upon children’s subjection to the bads of childhood undermines the parental relationship justification of the right to procreate. It does so by undercutting (or perhaps severely attenuating the strength of) the reasons that an adult’s relational interest in parenting would otherwise give her to procreate as a means to satisfying that interest. In other words, the interest in the parent-child relationship that would ordinarily speak strongly in favor of the right to procreate fails to do so, because the interest’s satisfaction directly requires that children be non-consensually subjected to some very bad states.⁷ Since the parental

relationship justification of the right to procreate depends on the claim that adults have strong reason to procreate, this result undermines that case.

A few clarifications are needed before moving on. First, the rights to parent and procreate mentioned in the parental relationship justification are moral rights, not legal rights; our focus here is on the interpersonal morality of procreation rather than the law and public policy issues surrounding procreation.⁸

Second, the rights we consider are weighty moral liberties to parent and procreate, paired with entitlements against interference with certain aspects of one's parenting and procreation. So the right to procreate would explain why a person could permissibly procreate, even when her doing so imposed high costs on others.⁹ To illustrate, consider that procreating and raising a child results in a massive production of greenhouse gas (likely more significant than any other projects the average person undertakes).¹⁰ Many people believe that the imposition of such costs renders ordinary actions impermissible. However, a right to procreate would explain the commonsense verdict that adults are permitted to procreate despite these consequences, without requiring us to accept that they have rights to impose comparable forms of pollution in service of less significant pursuits. It would also explain why others wrong a would-be procreator if they try to interfere with her procreation.

A final point concerns the paper's target. We consider one explanation of how adults' interests could support a moral right to procreate: Brighthouse and Swift's relationship goods account. There are many other ways to defend the right to procreate. For example, procreation might be a way of adding value to the world by creating new persons, honoring religious commandments, or maintaining the existence of a family line or ethnic group. Our argument says

nothing about these, or other, justifications, so a right to procreate may well be justified on grounds not examined here.¹¹

Our focus on the parental relationship justification may seem narrow, but we think it's worthy of detailed consideration for several reasons. First, it resonates with a common attitude that intentional procreators take toward the decision to create a child. Many parents cite their interest in a special relationship with a child as the reason they decided to procreate. Since the success or failure of the parental relationship justification has implications for the moral evaluation of this decision, it's worthy of sustained consideration. Second, the parental relationship justification is philosophically significant, in light of the prominence and plausibility of Brighouse and Swift's work on parenting. While they don't take a position on the view, it's a natural extension of their work. Moreover, ideas resembling the parental relationship justification figure in several recent discussions of procreation.¹² Finally, we think the parental relationship justification is more promising than many alternate explanations of the right to procreate, including some of those mentioned above. So its failure has significant implications for the prospect of a successful defense of the moral right to procreate.

The remainder of this article proceeds in three parts. Section two discusses the relationship-based interest in being a parent. Section three links this interest to the fact that children experience seriously bad features of childhood. Section four argues that the parental interest doesn't lend strong support to the right to procreate, because the satisfaction of parents' interests depend on and are inextricably tied to their children being subjected to bad states.

2. Good for Parents

Brighthouse and Swift believe that ‘many, perhaps most, adults need to be involved in an intimate relationship of a particular kind [with a child they parent] in order to have a fully flourishing life’ (2014, p. 88). They regard this relationship as contributing uniquely to adults’ well-being, such that, for adults who have a profound interest in parenting, other relationships couldn’t substitute for the flourishing produced by being a parent.

Brighthouse and Swift link the goods of parenting to four special features of the parent-child relationship (2014, pp. 88-91). First, the relationship involves unequal standing between participants: children are especially vulnerable to their caretakers, don’t choose to enter the family, and generally lack the power to exit it. Second, children are often unable to look after themselves, so parents must sometimes coerce and manipulate their children for their own good. Third, children lack a determinate conception of their own good, such that parents must play a role in shaping what children take to be valuable in life. Fourth, children are primed to spontaneously and unconditionally trust and love their parents.¹³

These features of the parent-child relationship jointly explain why parenting requires a special form of care. Parents have a high-stakes responsibility: shepherding their children through the transition from childhood into self-governance. Their engagement in that role is a source of satisfaction, and it offers some unique opportunities for personal development. More importantly, these features allow parents to enjoy special forms of intimacy and affection with their children, which can be one of the most fulfilling aspects of adults’ lives. If parent-child relationships didn’t have the four features mentioned above, the mode of care involved would be different, and less significant, at least with respect to the well-being of adults (Brighthouse and Swift, 2014, p. 91). Changing these features might deprive parenting of some of its special

challenges or joys, such that the interest would not be so weighty, and many adults' flourishing wouldn't be so significantly reduced by being denied the opportunity to parent. A change in the parent-child relationship would also blur the lines between parenting and other forms of relationship—transforming it into a relationship akin to friendship or other fiduciary relationships, which people could enjoy without having children.

For the remainder of the paper we assume that Brighouse and Swift's view correctly identifies the interest many adults have in parenting. But what we say about their view generalizes to many other plausible accounts of the interest adults have in parenting. For example, although their views differ in interesting and important ways, Colin Macleod (2010) and Christine Overall (2012) present accounts that share many of the salient features of Brighouse and Swift's account. For our purposes, what's important about all these explanations is that they link the special value of the parent-child relationship for parents to the fact that children are unique beings who need to be cared for and controlled in light of the specific incapacities and challenges they face. We strongly suspect (though we don't consider alternative accounts here) that any attempt to explain the special value of the parent-child relationship will fail to account for its uniqueness or profound importance to adults if it doesn't essentially involve children's asymmetric dependence, vulnerability, and need for parental care and control. Such attempts would fail to show that parenting was non-fungible, thus failing to explain how the interest in the parent-child relationship could support a right to parent or procreate when other relationships are available that satisfy the same interests.

In the next section, we show that it's bad for children to be subject to the incapacities and challenges that establish the special value of parent-child relationships. This puts pressure on the idea that adults' interests in this relationship could underwrite a right to procreate.

3. Bad for Children

Childhood imposes some bad conditions on children. We focus on four bads of childhood: impaired capacity for practical reasoning, need for extensive parental control, profound and asymmetric vulnerability, and lack of an established practical identity. These features are essential to explaining the unique character of the parent-child relationship, and thus the special interest that many adults have in being part of that relationship. But the presence of each of these conditions is significantly bad for children, in the sense that they are significant impediments to children's well-being.¹⁴

We aren't claiming that the bads of childhood make childhood an overall bad condition for children (as Hannan (2016) does). Nor do we claim that procreation harms or wrongs children, in light of the fact that it exposes them to the bads of childhood. The bads of childhood are features that are regrettable, but, for all we say here, there may be goods of childhood that outweigh the bads, making childhood an overall desirable condition. Children may be able to enjoy certain unique goods that adults cannot (Brighouse and Swift (2014, p. 65) think that sexual innocence is one such good). Alternately, children may have a special propensity to enjoy goods that adults also enjoy, such as special access to the goods of imaginative play (Gheaus 2015; Macleod 2015). Our arguments here are compatible with those claims, and with the further claim that the good aspects of being a child are sufficiently weighty to make childhood on the whole good for children. We only claim that some aspects of being a child are significantly bad. These, we go on to show, are the very aspects that generate the unique relationship goods adults can enjoy from parenting.

Impaired Practical Reasoning

When human agents have aims they want to accomplish, they often set themselves to reasoning about how to accomplish them. Agents also reason about how their aims fit together, with an eye to assuring consistency and coherence in their ends and their plans to achieve those ends. Children are agents that are characteristically bad at this kind of reasoning. They have purposes, but they're not good at determining what means to take to accomplish these purposes. Nor are they good at ensuring that their aims and plans are consistent or coherent.

This inability is partly a result of children's immature capacities for practical reasoning. For example, children are systematically worse than adults at reasoning about what to do when decisions involve probability estimation, as when a decision involves the assessment of risk. The inability also results from children lacking information. They simply haven't been in the world long enough to assemble a body of reliable information, which is necessary to reason effectively. Finally, for the most part, children aren't as good as adults at delaying gratification or managing their emotions. This also prevents them from effectively reasoning and acting in pursuit of their goals.

Children's lack of information and impaired practical reasoning can also lead them to make objectively bad decisions with some frequency. As Brighthouse and Swift point out, 'young children explore the world in a way that is largely uninformed about the dangers it presents ...they will consume poisons, walk into busy roads, fall through windows, drown in swimming pools, burn themselves on hot ovens, even if they are warned not to' (2014, p. 63).

These shortcomings suffice to explain why children's impaired practical reasoning is bad for them: it prevents them from getting and doing the things they want (even when these are reasonable things to want), and it leads them to engage in activities that are dangerous.

Moreover, children's inability to achieve their ends often leads them to experience considerable frustration and sometimes even anguish, thereby detracting from their well-being.

A more controversial claim concerns whether there's something non-instrumentally bad about being a person—a creature fairly close in its practical capacities to normally-functioning adults—that is quite bad at setting ends for herself and determining means to her ends. We're inclined to believe that it's inherently bad for persons to aim for foolish or worthless things, that many of children's aims are for such things, and that this is explained (at least in large part) by their reasoning incapacities. If those thoughts can be successfully made out, then children's impaired practical reasoning could be shown to be bad in its own right, as well as instrumentally bad insofar as it affected children's ability to satisfy their own preferences and desires.

Need for Extensive Parental Control

Children are subject to legitimate parental authority (which can often be permissibly backed by coercion) in many aspects of their lives. For example, when a child only wants to eat unhealthy foods, her parents may, and sometimes must, require her to develop a taste for healthier foods. Good parents' control of children is often morally unimpeachable. But the fact that children need to be subjected to this control is a regrettable feature of their lives. As with impaired practical reasoning, part of the badness of this need for subjection is a result of children's experience of parental control. Having their actions controlled is often very difficult for children. Some children can find being controlled reassuring, at times. We think the bad experiences are likely to exceed the good, for most children, but we're also more confident than in the case of impaired practical reasoning that this need for control is regrettable apart from the way children experience it.

It's intrinsically bad for a person to be subject to extensive control across a variety of aspects of her life, and parents' control of children is such a kind of extensive control.¹⁵ Systematic subjection to the will of another makes life worse for a being capable of guiding its conduct (even imperfectly) according to judgments about how it ought to act. This result isn't altered by the fact that a considerable degree of subjection is ultimately in children's best interests.

Profound and Asymmetric Vulnerability

Children are primed to incautiously form attachments: they tend to latch on lovingly to the adults they depend upon (and in some cases to other adults), even when these adults aren't worthy of their love. Children are physically vulnerable to adults as well, since they're smaller and weaker than most adults. Most of the bads of childhood listed above also render them vulnerable to the abuse or neglect of adults (and other children), as well as to non-agential dangers in the world and dangers that result from their own bad decision-making.

Vulnerability is present in, and likely necessary for, a host of valuable relationships, so it may seem strange to regard its presence as a bad. This is especially true in vulnerability-inducing relationships that are consensually entered into on the basis of trust—relationships like engagement in a shared economic venture or romantic partnership, for instance. Children's vulnerability, however, has a number of features that make it unlike the vulnerability present among business or romantic partners, and more like forms of vulnerability that we ordinarily find troubling.

Children's vulnerability to parents is asymmetric. A parent can easily harm her child, but children are generally unable to harm their parents in the same way, or to the same degree, (even

if children can have the ability to do hurtful things that prove devastating for their parents). The stakes of children's vulnerability are very high. The harms involved can be grave; children's mental and physical well-being—even their lives—are at stake.¹⁶ Moreover, children aren't normally able to exit their familial relationships to seek out parents who will do a better job of caring for them. If they're to get what they need from adults, most of it will generally have to come from their parents. Social arrangements that make non-parents responsible for a larger share of childcare can mitigate the risks imposed by this vulnerability, exposing children to more styles of caregiving, and ensuring that multiple parties have an eye on the threats to which children are exposed (Gheaus 2011, pp. 502-505). Conscientious caregivers, parental and otherwise, can also help to protect children from harm. But it's important not to overstate the extent of the protection that adults can offer children. Profound and asymmetric vulnerability is inescapable for children.

When vulnerability eventuates in harm, that vulnerability is clearly bad for children. Children's awareness of their vulnerability can also be a source of distress in their lives, making it a cause of experiential disvalue. But children's profound and asymmetric vulnerability may not seem bad for them in cases where it does not eventuate in harm and they are unaware of it, especially when children are free from harm because conscientious adults protected them. But we think vulnerability is seriously bad, even when it doesn't eventuate in significant harm and children are unaware of it.

One way to appreciate the badness is to recognize that persons have an interest in a modally robust freedom from harm, in addition to their interests in avoiding actual harm. That is to say, they have an interest in being protected from harm in a host of relevantly similar possible scenarios. In everyday contexts, we often discuss this kind of interest as an interest in safety:

exposure to significant danger is bad, even in cases where that danger doesn't eventuate. This explains why it's bad for airline passengers to fly on planes that haven't been serviced properly, even if none of the planes actually fails to operate, and the passengers are unaware of the danger. The lack of maintenance exposes the passengers to danger: had things gone slightly differently (had a vital component been marginally less durable, as it might well have been) the plane would have gone down. Children's vulnerability exposes them to a similar kind of danger, even when parents do all we can expect of them to do to guard children against harm. Had things gone differently for those children (had they wandered away in a different direction, for instance) they would have faced significant harm. And we believe their lives are worse in virtue of that danger.

In short, vulnerability that doesn't eventuate in actual harm is nonetheless bad for children because it makes children's protection against harm modally insecure. Good parenting can reduce the insecurity, but there will be a wide array of dangerous scenarios, even under the most safety-promoting rearing. Moreover, there are also compromises that good parents must make between safety for their children and other important goals, such as children's development of their independence. Recall that children's vulnerability is also bad for them to the extent that knowledge of their vulnerability distresses them, and when their vulnerability results in harm.

Lack of an Established Practical Identity

We take impaired practical reasoning, need for parental control, and profound asymmetric vulnerability, to be fairly non-controversial instances of states to which it is bad for a person to be subjected. We now turn to a more controversial candidate for a bad state that is constitutive of childhood: the lack of an established practical identity. There's a sense in which children—especially younger children—often lack an authoritative prospective on what they want. Facts

about ‘where they stand’ as agents aren’t fully established, since they haven’t developed a stable identity, characterized by various plans and commitments, from which to make decisions about what kinds of projects they want to pursue in the world.

So while a child will commonly want something, this aim is often less robustly her own than it is when she takes it up as an adult. As an adult, she embarks on a project against an established background of other plans and commitments, whereas her aim as a child springs up against a sparser background. As a result, the aim is less fully hers—there’s less to say about why she identifies with it. It’s also characteristically less stable, since it can be changed without necessarily altering many of her other aims and commitments.¹⁷

Why think lacking a practical identity is a problem? One explanation is that it prevents children from valuing things deeply in the way adults can. This is bad for children because it that deprives their lives of a core source of meaning.

Children often experience this absence as a problem as well, especially as they mature. They recognize that they need to make their life-choices in a way that is coherent and authentic. Without making choices like that, their lives don’t go well. Awareness of this fact is one of the core difficulties of later childhood. But childhood involves lacking the capacities necessary to make the choices children are called to make.

Children’s lack of practical identity is less obviously bad for them than the features of childhood discussed above because there seems to be a valuable side to the unsettledness of children’s practical identities. Settled plans and projects can be encumbrances as well as sources of value. There are possibilities opened up by the shallowness of children’s commitments: they can imagine themselves more readily in wildly incompatible life projects, for instance, in a way that becomes difficult for adults. This kind of imaginative activity *is* valuable, inasmuch as,

besides being enjoyable for children, it helps children to see how things look for others, and to recognize potentially attractive possibilities for themselves. We might also think that children are especially able to engage in valuable forms of experimentation and play that aren't available to agents with more established identities. This claim can be made more plausible when accompanied by the observation that we characteristically progress from childhood, with a lack of an established practical identity, toward the more established identities characteristic of adulthood. Perhaps a complete life that includes both experiences is better than a life that includes only one, and, if this is right, then the claim that lack of an established practical identity is bad for children is less plausible.

Readers can decide for themselves whether this fourth purported bad of childhood is overall bad for children. We include it because we think it's worthy of consideration, but don't insist on its badness for children, as we do with the previous three.

On the Charge that We Treat Children as Little Adults

Thus far, we have argued that childhood is significantly bad (at least in some respects) for children, since it involves impaired practical reasoning, the need for extensive parental control, profound and asymmetric vulnerability, and (perhaps) the lack of an established practical identity. One common response to our claims about the bads of childhood is to say that, while they would be bad for adults, they aren't bad for children. Our picture of childhood, the objection goes, is like the depiction of children found in medieval- and renaissance-era paintings, where children are depicted as tiny adults. Critics claim that this isn't what children are like; children are different kinds of creatures from adults, with different interests, such that some things that are bad for adults are not bad for children, and vice versa (Tomlin 2015).

This important objection depends on the fact that what it is for a child's life to go better differs significantly from what it is for an adult's life to go better. In particular, various kinds of agential interference (internal and external) are bad for self-governing adults because such adults have the abilities to govern their own lives, but they aren't bad for children, since they characteristically lack that ability.

We agree that rendering self-governing adults incapable—even temporarily—of governing their lives is worse than creating children who are temporarily incapable of self-governance. For instance, many adults (unlike children) have autonomously formed preferences that their self-governance continue into the future, coupled with complicated plans they have built their lives around. This makes it especially terrible for them when they lose this capacity for self-governance, or are denied its exercise.

However, we think that having a will—fully formed or otherwise—makes the conditions discussed above bad for children. Children guide their action in light of their assessment of what reasons they have to act. We believe that the conditions enumerated above are very bad ones to be in for creatures that possess a capacity for reasoning practically, however underdeveloped.

Children's experience of these aspects of childhood supports the claim that the conditions discussed above are bad for them. Our claim that these states are bad for children is not made true simply in virtue of children's experience, but their experiences provide good evidence for the objective badness of the states under consideration. It's possible to be in a bad state, without recognizing as much, and without feeling badly about that state. But when people experience a state as bad, that gives us a strong indication that it actually is bad. And—perhaps with the exception of the lack of an established practical identity—children very regularly experience these states as bad for them. They express their sadness and frustration about their subjection to

parental control and their inability to accomplish their purposes on a regular basis. And, especially when their vulnerability is made vivid to them (as when they are harmed or fear that they may be), children often respond with fear or despair. We take these responses to be good evidence for the claim that the bads of childhood are actually bad for children.

The fact that children often experience the states under consideration as bads also plays a role in explaining their badness. After all, frustration, unhappiness, and other negative emotional responses engendered by the bads are conditions which, when regularly experienced, make a life objectively worse than it would otherwise be.

Note also that as children mature they get more and more like adults in terms of their self-governance capacities. Yet there are still intermediate stages where many of the bads of childhood obtain with respect to a child that is part-way to adulthood. If you think the bads would be bad for adults, then there is considerable pressure to regard them as bad for at least some children—namely those who are older, and closer to self-governance, than very young children.

For these reasons we believe that the features of childhood discussed above are bad for children. This can be a difficult conclusion to accept, in part, because it frames adults' relationship to children in a way that appears more problematic than we would often like to acknowledge. It's important to recognize that the bads of childhood are a product of the characteristic features of childhood, not of failed parenting. While different modes of social organization and different choices by parents and third parties affect how bad these states are for children, any feasible mode of procreation and rearing will leave children subjected to impaired practical reasoning, extensive parental control, profound and asymmetric vulnerability, and the lack of an established practical identity.

We have argued that being a child involves occupying a state partly constituted by some seriously bad states. We now consider the how that fact bears on the parental relationship justification of the right to procreate.

4. Parental Interests and the Right to Procreate

Parents have a weighty interest in raising children because they're able to enjoy a uniquely valuable kind of relationship with their children. The uniqueness and value of this relationship depend, as Brighthouse and Swift have argued, on the fact that children require a special form of care and control. Notice that children require this care and control precisely because they suffer from the bads of childhood. So parents' enjoyment of a special relationship with children is inextricably bound up with children's subjection to the bads of childhood. A child who wasn't an impaired practical reasoner, lacking an established practical identity, needing extensive control, and subject to asymmetrical vulnerability, wouldn't be someone with whom parents could possibly enjoy the special kind of relationship that Brighthouse and Swift identify as a major element of many people's flourishing.

This essential dependence of adults' relationship interests on the bads of childhood means that those interests don't speak in favor of a right to procreate, as they would otherwise do. More generally: the benefits enjoyed by care-givers cannot figure in an explanation of why we ought to create scenarios in which someone is in need of their care.

This is obvious in some cases. Suppose that a person would genuinely flourish by nursing a close friend back to health as a result of the intimacy that such care would foster. This in no way speaks in favor of creating a situation in which her friend is ill and in need of care. Similarly, if a person would benefit from helping a romantic partner through a difficult time, this

doesn't provide her with good reason to engineer difficulties for her partner. While each caregiver's significant interest in special relationships would ordinarily give strong reason to create a situation in which they enjoy those relationships, this reason is undercut by the fact that the interest essentially requires putting the recipients of care in seriously bad states.

It is less obvious that the benefits to parents cannot figure in the explanation of why they should procreate, because the alternative to subjecting a child to the bads of childhood is that child's non-existence. The relevant contrasts in the other cases aren't like this. Instead, they are scenarios in which a person's friend exists but isn't sick, or a person's partner is around but isn't faced with difficulties.

It's natural to be skeptical of the claim that the bads of childhood undermine the case for the right to procreate for a related reason: children gain access to a host of goods in virtue of existing, and there isn't any way (given the nature of human development and reproduction) for us to create persons without their experiencing the bads of childhood. As a result, procreation can seem to be a way of benefiting children.¹⁸ Even if procreation does benefit the created person, this doesn't vindicate the parental interest justification against our argument. While the child's benefitting may speak in favor of procreation, this wouldn't mean that the would-be parent's relational interest in raising the child speaks in favor of a right to procreate. That interest isn't based on benefiting the child (or at least not solely so); it's an interest in being in a relationship with a creature that's afflicted by the bads of childhood. And a carer's interest of that sort doesn't explain why the carer has a right to bring about the situation in which the delivery of care is possible.

For a further illustration, consider a case that is closer to procreation than those discussed above. Dr. Frankenstein is a lonely scientist living on an island with no other persons.

Frankenstein devises a method for creating an artificial life-form, Monstra, from inanimate objects. The limits of Frankenstein's scientific powers mean Monstra will inevitably suffer from some serious problems. She'll experience considerable pain and some difficulty getting around. As a result, she'll require considerable care from her maker. On bad days, she'll need Frankenstein to help with her chores and comfort her when the pain gets especially difficult. But if Frankenstein looks after her, Monstra's pain and hardship will gradually decrease, such that she can expect to have typical human abilities after a decade of difficulty. Frankenstein recognizes all this before creating Monstra.

Now consider two different sorts of interests Frankenstein might have in creating Monstra. The first is an interest in friendship. Frankenstein is lonely, and has a strong interest in enjoying an intimate relationship with another being. This interest could be fully satisfied even if Monstra weren't exposed to the bad states she is necessarily afflicted with.

A second possible interest would be in a special form of intimacy that comes from caring for an asymmetrically vulnerable dependent, which Frankenstein would enjoy as a result of creating Monstra and helping her deal with her challenges. This interest fits with a deep commitment to helping Monstra—Frankenstein looks forward to providing that help, and he knows that, with a little luck, Monstra's life will ultimately be a good one, which matters significantly to him. But the bads that Monstra will face play a different role in this interest than they do in the interest in overcoming loneliness. This second interest, unlike the first, wouldn't be satisfied if Frankenstein improved his alchemy and avoided subjecting Monstra to significant difficulties.

Whether Frankenstein has a right to create Monstra will depend on a host of considerations: the appropriateness of creating artificial life, or beings that experience certain

levels of pain, for instance. But one consideration that it seems clearly inappropriate to consider in the mix is Frankenstein's interest in caring for someone afflicted by the difficulties Monstra faces, or in being in a special relationship that requires such care. The reason-giving force of that interest is undercut by the fact that its satisfaction requires subjecting Monstra to significant pain and non-consensual dependency. By contrast, the more general relationship interest he has in friendship, which isn't reliant on Monstra's suffering, may well be a relevant consideration. In short, only some relationship interests look relevant to determining whether we have a right to create someone to share a relationship with us.

The kind of parental interest that Brighthouse and Swift discuss, and which is also endorsed by some others who present a relationship-based justification of the right to parent, cannot support a right to procreate. This is because these interests are directly reliant on the bads that children face, in the way that Frankenstein's objectionable interest in caregiving was. The parental interest is an interest in a relationship that *necessarily* involves one party being subjected to the bads of childhood. That subjection isn't a mere side effect, as it was when Frankenstein created Monstra to secure a friend. Since the normative force of the caregiver's interest seems to be undercut in the previous cases, we believe the same should be true of this case.

Most people who want to parent have an interest in parenting children from infancy and young childhood. They have an interest in parenting someone who is a poor practical reasoner, who lacks an established practical identify, who needs extensive control, and who is significantly more vulnerable than they are. If you told would-be parents that you could take away these aspects, many would no longer have an interest in parenting, because they could not derive the same special goods from raising such children. The more children come to resemble adults, the

less unique our relationships with them become, and the less able they are to contribute specially to our flourishing. Brighouse and Swift (2014, p. 91) acknowledge this in stating that, ‘other intimate relationships, where those are consensual on both sides and in which the parties are symmetrically situated, are not adequate substitutes.’ They correctly insist that part of what explains the special character of the parent’s relation to a child is ‘her degree of vulnerability to one’s judgments [and] her involuntary dependence’ (2014, p. 93). This necessary and direct connection between the parental goods and the bads suffered by children is what undercuts the normative force of adults’ interests in procreating in order to parent. Since the parental relationship justification of the right to procreate claims that the normative force of those interests grounds a right to procreate, this undercutting renders the justification unsuccessful.

Our argument depends on the idea that the benefits enjoyed by a caregiver can’t figure in an explanation of why the caregiver is entitled to create scenarios in which someone is in need of their care. What would explain that claim? We aren’t committed to a particular explanation here, but we find the following line attractive. Asymmetric caring relations between persons can be morally problematic. As persons, all parties involved in these relationships have equal moral status. But relationships where one party depends upon the care of the other, without being able to reciprocate with comparable care of his or her own, can seem at odds with the idea of a relationship between equals. To be sure, these relationships needn’t be inegalitarian. They can be compatible with the equality of the parties involved when both parties enter into them by choice, against a background of alternate options. But when an asymmetric caring relationship is imposed without the meaningful consent of both parties, it tends to forcefully threaten the status of the dependent party. One way to overcome this threat is to show how the relationship could be justified to the dependent based on his or her interests alone. If, instead, the creation of the

relationship is justified by appeal to the caregiver's interest in a special relationship with the recipient of care, it can seem that the recipient is being treated a means to the caregiver's satisfaction. And this type of treatment is ordinarily incompatible with respecting the dependent's equal status as a person.

This brings us to an interesting potential implication of our argument. The failure of the parental relationship justification may not only mean that parents' interests in a relationship with children fail to ground a right to procreate. It may also indicate that parents who decide to procreate primarily in order to secure the goods of the parent-child relationship behave in a way that reveals a defect of character or motivation. This could be true even if there were other grounds supporting a right to procreate (and hence rendering permissible these parents' procreation). In procreating with the main aim of enjoying the goods of parenting, these people create a situation where someone is exposed to the bads of childhood *so that* they can deliver the care and enjoy the benefits of doing so. This seems to display an objectionable indifference (or unawareness of) the relationship between their own parental interests and the regrettable circumstances of childhood. Since we believe many adults do procreate primarily in order to benefit from parenting, and since the idea of their doing so doesn't initially seem intuitively objectionable to many of us, we find this result interesting and troubling.

One further thought, which we lack the space to explore here, is that adults might have strong reason to adopt in order to satisfy their interest in the parent-child relationship. Adoptive parents' care tends to existing needs. They don't cause a child to suffer from the bads of childhood in the same way that procreative parents do, so adoption escapes the concerns raised in this paper.

5. Conclusion

We've argued that the relational interest in parenting doesn't speak in favor of a right to procreate. Nothing about this suggests that procreation is morally impermissible—many activities that we don't have a *right* to engage in are sometimes *permissible* to engage in. Our argument is also compatible with the conclusion that there is a right to procreate supported on grounds other than parents' interests in the kind of special relationship identified by Brighthouse and Swift. But we take ourselves to have shown that the parental relationship justification fails to support a right to procreate. The goods of parenting depend on the bads of childhood in a way that undercuts the reasons that parents' interests would otherwise give for procreating. Despite initial appearances, parental interests of the kind laid out by Brighthouse and Swift are not a promising basis for a right to procreate.

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¹ Brighouse and Swift give a dual interest argument for the right to parent, which draws heavily on the interests of children as well as parents. The interests of children explain why only adequate parents have a right to parent on their view. Moreover, Brighouse and Swift set the bar for adequacy quite high in recognition of children’s interests. But parents’ interests also play a crucial role in establishing the right to parent on their account. One of their aims is to explain why adequate parents would be wronged if their custody of their children was terminated to better satisfy the interests of those children. They claim that the interests of adequate parents are weighty enough to justify retaining custody of their children even when others would do a better job of meeting those children’s interests. We focus on the interests of parents here, but what we say is consistent with their complete dual interest view, and its concern for children’s interests.

² In at least two points in *Family Values*, Brighouse and Swift do entertain a connection between procreation and parenting. They say that ‘adults who judge themselves unable to love their children may still have reason to procreate—if there are others who want to be parents, who possess and wish to exercise their capacity to love but are not themselves able to procreate’ (2014, p. 21). In discussing Christine Overall’s work they state that her ‘focus is on procreation, rather than parenting, though of course, in the standard case, people’s reasons for wanting to do the former are so that they can get to do the later’ (2014, 194). These passages suggest they believe parental interests give reasons for procreation, but they don’t explicitly endorse this view.

³ Brighouse and Swift now distinguish (appropriately in our view) between the right *to* parent and the rights *of* parents; while the rights of parents are justified by children’s interests alone, the right to parent is grounded partially on the interests that adults have in occupying this fiduciary role (2014, 54). Our focus here is on adults’ interests in the right to parent, and whether these interests also support a right to procreate.

⁴ The cost excludes many people from adopting, and people are sometimes also excluded because they are single, unmarried, or in same-gender relationships. It’s difficult to adopt infants, but many parents’ flourishing is linked to raising children from a young age. Moreover, some of the children available to adopt face special challenges, like disabilities or histories of trauma. These challenges may interfere with some would-be parents’ flourishing. Many of these challenges are the result of unjust discriminatory features of adoption policies and bionormative cultural views, which we reject. All sorts of people can be good parents, and parental interests can be satisfied by sharing a relationship with biological and adopted children. Nevertheless, even if adoption is an equally valuable or superior form of acquiring a child to raise, one still needs to answer the important question about whether the parental interest in the parent-child relationship can underwrite a right to procreate.

⁵ Throughout the piece we discuss the rights and interests of ‘adults,’ ‘parents,’ and ‘would-be parents’. Unless context indicates otherwise, each locution refers to those adults who have an interest in being parents, and whose right to procreate a child is at issue.

⁶ There are complicated issues concerning the move from interests to rights, which we don’t take up here. We simply follow Brighouse and Swift in thinking that there’s a plausible move connecting fundamental and widespread interests in parenting to the right to parent (2014, 53). They argue that adults’ interests in parenting are weighty enough to give them a right to raise a child, provided doing so doesn’t impose unacceptable burdens on others. The primary concern is that adults adequately protect their children’s interests. If their claim is plausible, we think the analogous claim about adequate would-be parents’ rights to procreate a child in order to raise her warrants investigation.

⁷ For the suggestion that reasons can be undercut by their interaction with moral considerations see (McDowell, 1979; Raz 1975, 35-48). For the remainder of this article, we won’t distinguish between the claim that the reasons in question are undercut (deprived of all normative force), and the claim that they are significantly attenuated (retaining some force but deprived of most of their strength). Readers unsympathetic to the undercutting and attenuation of reasons can recast our arguments as claims about the reason to procreate being outweighed by a stronger countervailing reason, without the reason to procreate being deprived of its normative force. On this revision of our view, we would deny that the parental relationship justification succeeds because the interests it highlights come into conflict with weighty moral considerations limiting how one can permissibly benefit from subjecting others to bad states.

⁸ There are strong reasons against government interference in people’s sexual and procreative lives. However, this doesn’t establish that there’s a moral right to procreate, only that government should stay out of at least some aspects of the procreative realm.

⁹ At any rate, it could do so up to a certain point. Like Brighouse and Swift (2014, 56), we’re concerned with defeasible rights, which can be overridden when there are sufficiently strong countervailing reasons (as when other rights are at stake).

¹⁰ On procreative ethics and environmental costs, see: MacIver (2015), Young (2001).

¹¹ Moreover, even if there is no moral right to procreate, many instances of procreation might still be permissible. Adults don’t have a moral right to operate large trucks. As a result, it can be morally impermissible for them to do so if their operation will impose costs on others (e.g. risk of injury or property damage) that aren’t paired with significant benefits. But it can also be perfectly permissible for some people to operate trucks when doing so isn’t too costly for others and when the associated benefits are significant (as when trained drivers transport valuable items). The view we argue for here is that a particular justification of the moral right to procreate fails; even if there’s no alternate argument for the right to procreate, this doesn’t mean that procreation would always be impermissible, only that agents’ procreation wouldn’t be protected by a moral right.

¹² Gheaus (2016) cites Brighouse and Swift’s account of parental interests and the right to parent, and argues that it entails a right to procreate for adequate parents, when procreation is the necessary or best means to acquire a child to raise. Overall (2012) and Weinberg (2016) both argue that parental interests similar to those discussed by Brighouse and Swift provide the strongest reason for procreating. In an unpublished manuscript, Ferracioli (2016) articulates a parental interest justification that differs significantly from Brighouse and Swift’s account of

parental interests. Her account may avoid our challenge as a result (though we believe it has other problems that we can't take up here).

¹³ Children vary quite dramatically in their capacities, owing to natural lotteries, environmental factors, and which developmental stage of childhood they occupy. Despite these differences, developmentally typical children of all ages are constituted so as to allow these special features of the parent-child relationship to manifest to some degree. This paper follows Brighouse and Swift in defining children as 'people, who, because of their age, have yet to develop the capacities that characterize normal adulthood' (2014, p. 58).

¹⁴ We avoid discussion of how well-being should be understood in this paper, since we think the bads of childhood we discuss will be regarded as bad by many theories of well-being. While some views may not accept all of our explanations of why the states under consideration here are bad for children, we expect they will still accept enough of our claims to agree that (most of) the states are seriously bad for children to inhabit. That is enough for our purposes.

¹⁵ It is also, arguably, a form of domination, a fact which might compound the badness of parents' control of children. For a discussion of the claim that children are subject to the arbitrary will of parents, see Tomlin (2015).

¹⁶ 'An adult with supervisory power over a child has the power of life or death; and this is not, at least when the child is young, reciprocated. Less spectacularly, they have the power to make the child's life miserable or enjoyable (with limits, at least at the enjoyable end)' (Brighouse and Swift, 2014, p. 89).

¹⁷ For further discussion see Schapiro (1999).

¹⁸ There are concerns about whether this mode of thinking is coherent. For discussion, and a defense of the claim that creation can benefit, see Parfit (1986, pp. 487-490).

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