

Proactivity, Partiality, and Procreation

Cheong Hong Wai

(penultimate draft, forthcoming in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research)

Introduction

Parental partiality is commonly perceived as being a perfectly morally justifiable practice. We often think it morally appropriate, perhaps obligatory even, to deliver a level of care and concern to our children that far exceeds what we standardly do for others. This is a stance that is widely held among philosophical theorists concerning partiality.

Less commonly noted, however, is the form of partiality that a prospective parent might bear toward their (yet-to-be-conceived) future child¹. Prospective parents can, after all, elect to act in ways that will make the child that they will conceive in the future better off. Indeed, there are many ways that prospective parents can engage in such ‘pre-parental partiality’. They can, for example, choose to set aside money for their future child, or avoid vices (like smoking) that might have a negative influence on their future child.

Now the practice of pre-parental partiality is also generally considered to be morally justifiable. Recently, however, this commonsense intuition has been cast into doubt. Detractors like Douglas (2019) and Podgorski (2021) have each sought, in their own respective ways, to undermine the moral justifiability of pre-parental partiality. The practice of pre-parental partiality, it seems, has fallen on hard times.

¹ Among those who discuss the moral justification of acting pre-parentally partially are Lewandowski (2018) and Lillehammer (2009).

And so, I seek to provide repose for those who remain committed to the justifiability of pre-parental partiality. In this paper, I illuminate a plausible approach that promises to rescue the moral justifiability of pre-parental partiality from the concerns raised by both Podgorski and Douglas. And as it turns out, my approach will have some surprising implications about exactly which forms of parental partiality are justified. The structure of the paper is as follows:

In Sect. 1.1, 1.2, and 2, I introduce both Podgorski's and Douglas's arguments against the moral justifiability of pre-parental partiality. Then in Sect. 3, I introduce my approach toward justifying pre-parental partiality – the Proactivity Strategy – which sees our reasons (as prospective parents) for pre-parental partiality as deriving from the partiality obligations that our future selves (as parents) possess. Next, I provide several candidate accounts of what those parental obligations of partiality could be in Sect. 4, and discuss how they can be integrated with the Proactivity Strategy to yield different accounts of what our pre-parental obligations of partiality could be in Sect. 5. Finally, in Sect. 6, I discuss one surprising implication of the Proactivity Strategy, and what that implies for each of the views presented in Sect. 5.

1.1 'No-Benefits' Argument

First, let us consider Podgorski's (2021) argument against the moral justification of pre-parental partiality, which we may reconstruct as follows:

'No-Benefits' Argument

P1. Prospective parents cannot act in ways to make their future children (that they procreate) better off. ²

² Those who defend partiality along procreative lines (or its variations) include Gheaus (2012), Ferracioli (2018), Olsaretti (2017), and Rakowski (1991), among others.

P2. If prospective parents cannot act in ways to make their future children (that they procreate) better off, then they have no moral reasons to engage in pre-parental partiality.

C. Therefore, prospective parents have no moral reasons to engage in pre-parental partiality.

Let us walk through each premise in turn. Podgorski takes P2 to be self-explanatory. And it is not hard to see why – plausibly, if the entire point behind pre-parental partiality is to ensure that one’s future children are better off in some shape or form, then should it not follow that pre-parental partiality loses its moral justification in the event where it fails to live up to its purpose.

This leaves P1. Podgorski starts with the following observation:

Identity-Affecting: Almost all of our actions now will stand to influence the identities of our future children³.

Now *Identity-Affecting* enjoys much currency among contemporary philosophers⁴. Plausibly, most of what we do now will sufficiently alter the circumstances of our future child’s conception (i.e. earlier/later time of conception, different sperm and egg fusing, etc.) to guarantee that a different individual ends up being conceived.

But if *Identity-Affecting* is true, then almost all of our engagements in pre-parental partiality will stand to affect the identities of our future children. Consider:

Procreation

³ Some philosophers might note the very tiny off-chance that the same sperm and egg could still fuse regardless of the action that is pursued, and that the moral significance of this possibility should not be understated. See Roberts (2007) for an example on this.

⁴ This claim, while intuitive, is not completely uncontroversial. For an example, see Wolf (2009).

A couple, A&B, is currently deciding whether or not to save up money for their future child's education. If the money is saved, then A&B will be less hesitant to start engaging in procreative acts, and this eventually leads to the conception of a child five months later; a child we shall name Better Ben. In contrast, A&B will be much more hesitant to start engaging in procreative acts if the money is not saved, and this leads to the conception of a different child two years later; a child we shall name Decent Dan.

In *Procreation*, we note that there is no way in which A&B could have acted to make their future child better off than they would otherwise have been. After all, neither Better Ben nor Decent Dan could have been made to benefit by either action. Choosing to save the money here, for instance, would not have benefited Decent Dan at all, since he would not have come into existence if that were the case. Likewise with Better Ben – he would also not have existed at all had A&B chosen instead not to save the money.

Thus Podgorski generalizes: Examples like *Procreation* serve to establish P1 of his argument. And given the relatively uncontroversial nature of P2, Podgorski concludes that prospective parents simply have no moral reasons to engage in pre-parental partiality.

1.2 On the De Dicto Strategy

There is, however, a potential complication here. As Hare (2007) points out, there are actually two distinct ways in which A&B's future child can be said to have been made better off by their decision:

In the first sense, A&B's act makes their future child better off iff the particular individual that is the future child leads a better life if the act is performed than if it is not. Call this the *de re* sense.

In the second sense, A&B's act makes their future child better off iff the act leads to a better off particular individual occupying the role of being A&B's future child than if the act was not performed. Call this the *de dicto* sense.

And as Hare argues, pre-parental partiality engagements do stand to make our children better off in the *de dicto* sense. A&B can, for instance, make their future child better off *de dicto* by choosing to save the money; for a better-off particular individual (Better Ben) does end up occupying the role of being A&B's future child (as opposed to Decent Dan) had A&B chosen to save the money. P1 of Podgorski's argument can therefore be resisted if one takes our parental obligations of partiality as obligations to make our children better off in the *de dicto* sense.

So does this insight of Hare serve to undermine Podgorski's argument? I think not. Podgorski, in any case, considers in his article multiple ways in which a proponent of Hare's *de dicto* strategy can cash out their view, and argues that none of them succeed in light of all the counterintuitive implications they face. And I am inclined to agree with Podgorski on this. Consider, for instance, the following *de dicto* view:

De Dicto Betterness: If A's future child is made better off *de dicto* by the doing of X instead of Y, then A possesses a reason of special concern against doing Y.

The view is straightforward enough. Pre-parental partiality acts are morally justified, the view goes, precisely because the performance of such acts makes one's future children better off in a *de dicto* sense. As covered earlier, saving the money does make A&B's future child better off in the *de dicto* sense – for it is Better Ben and not Decent Dan who ends up being A&B's future child in this case, and Better Ben is a better off individual than Decent Dan. Therefore, *De Dicto Betterness* endorses that A&B is morally justified in saving money for their future child's education.

However, views like *De Dicto Betterness* face a significant flaw: they lend themselves to a deeply unintuitive picture of the moral landscape. Take, for example, the many other relationships besides procreation that are commonly held to generate similar reasons of special concern (e.g. friendship, romantic relationship, parent-adoptee relationship, etc). If our reasons of special concern work the way the *de dicto* view(s) suggests, then seemingly, we do possess reasons of special concern to make our friends, romantic partners, and adoptive children better off in the *de dicto* sense.

But this implies the following absurdity – that we possess reasons of special concern to get happy and well-off people to occupy the roles of being “my friend”, “my romantic partner” and “my adopted child”. This cannot be right – we do not consider someone a good boyfriend just because he has managed to find a happy woman to date. Plausibly, special concern does not give us reasons to be “picky” by selecting better off individuals to occupy roles in our special relationships. And views like *De Dicto Betterness* fail to capture this aspect of our special relationships.

The following example illustrates this:

Adoption⁵

C&D are currently faced with the choice of either adopting Ellie (a somewhat gloomy individual) or Fay (a bright and happy individual) from the orphanage to be their child. The following table displays what both Ellie’s and Fay’s welfare levels would be given C&D’s choice:

	<i>Adopt Ellie</i>	<i>Adopt Fay</i>
<i>Ellie</i>	7	5

⁵ This example here is structurally similar to the one Podgorski (2023) considers.

<i>Fay</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>12</i>
------------	-----------	-----------

In *Adoption*, the way of making C&D's future child better off *de dicto* is to have C&D adopt Fay instead of Ellie. Consequently, *De Dicto Betterness* entails that C&D do possess reasons of special concern to replace Ellie with Fay. But this cannot be right. Notice that Ellie's adoption makes both Fay and her better off than before, whereas Fay's adoption makes things worse for them both. Surely, our reasons of special concern cannot be advocating for the option here that only harms and that benefits none⁶!

Examples like *Adoption* suggest that special concern gives us no reasons to be picky about the identities of the occupants of our special relationships. We can call this the *Pickiness Objection* against the *de dicto* strategy⁷. In a later section, I will argue that certain kinds of pickiness are justified, and therefore that the general lesson Podgorski draws is misguided. But it is hard not to appreciate its intuitive force here. Surely, C&D possess no reasons of special concern to pick Fay over Ellie. The kind of pickiness endorsed by *De Dicto Betterness*, at least, is unjustified.

De Dicto Betterness, therefore, offers no moral justification for pre-parental partiality. And Podgorski argues that a similar fate befalls all the other extant *de dicto* views as well⁸. All these lead Podgorski to reject the *de dicto* strategy as a viable approach to the moral justification of pre-parental partiality.

⁶ Indeed, this explains – according to Podgorski (2023) – why Haramia's (2014) response towards cases like *Adoption* (i.e. that our *de dicto* reasons of special concern just aren't strong enough to make it obligatory for C&D to adopt Fay) strike us as deeply unsatisfying.

⁷ For more on the *Pickiness Objection*, see Podgorski (2023).

⁸ Podgorski also considers various ways in which one might strengthen *De Dicto Betterness*, and argues that even the most plausible of these fail at capturing the essence of living up to the ideal of our special relationships. See Podgorski (2023) for an in-depth exposition of the failings of the various *de dicto* views.

2 ‘No-Relationships’ Argument

The problems for pre-parental partiality extend even further. Even if we could act now to make our future children better off *de re* (something Podgorski denies), a significant hurdle still remains in the path towards a moral justification of pre-parental partiality. For as it stands, prospective parents might not even stand in the “right” kinds of relationships with their future children, and therefore might not even possess any reasons of special concern of partiality to begin with⁹¹⁰.

Indeed, Douglas (2019) endorses exactly this line of response against the moral justifiability of pre-parental partiality (as I reconstruct):

‘No-Relationships’ Argument

P1) Prospective parents do not stand in partiality-justifying relationships to their future children.

P2) If P1, then parents have no moral reason to engage in pre-parental partiality.

C) So, parents have no moral reason to engage in pre-parental partiality.

Now Douglas considers P2 to be self-explanatory. And once again, it is not hard to see why. It does make intuitive sense, after all, that our partiality obligations ground themselves in the existence of the relevant special relationships.

This leaves Douglas with the task of justifying P1. According to him, these “right” kinds of relationships have to be relationships that are independently plausibly capable of generating reasons (of special concern) for partiality. To that effect, he identifies three candidate relationships that could plausibly fit the bill: these being procreative, contractual, and loving

⁹ See Jeske (1998), Kolodny (2003), and Scheffler (1997) for examples of accounts that seek to justify partiality on the basis of our personal relationships.

¹⁰ See Kolodny (2010b) for a deeper dive on why certain relationships, but not others, justify partiality.

relationships. And none of them, Douglas contends, typically hold between a prospective parent and his/her future children, thereby casting into doubt the basis of our pre-parental obligations of partiality.

Take contractual relationships, for starters. As Douglas diagnoses, contractual commitments of partiality (implicit or explicit) are most plausibly formed at the time of adoption (in adoptive cases) or at the time of voluntary conception (in procreative cases). Prospective parents therefore have no contractual obligations of partiality toward their future children, as there exists no such contractual relationship between them and their future children before the points of adoption/voluntary conception.

Next, consider loving relationships. According to Douglas, prospective parents also typically do not stand in loving relationships with their future children. As he conceives, loving someone plausibly requires some sort of attachment to a particular individual. But prospective parents oftentimes do not come to form said attachment toward their future child as an individual¹¹. For instance, Douglas considers:

*Fertility Clinic*¹²

Suppose that Arama and Bram are due to undergo a fertility treatment in which one of Arama's eggs will be fertilized by one of Bram's sperm in vitro. You phone Bram just as he is about to leave for the fertility clinic to give the sperm sample. As a result, he gives the sample 15 minutes later than would otherwise have been the case, with the result that Arama's egg is fertilized by a different sperm.

¹¹ Note that Douglas's (2019) argument here appears to be primarily directed toward procreative cases. And this aligns with the focus of this paper, which aims to defend pre-parental partiality in exactly these kinds of cases. One might, however, doubt if the argument also applies in adoptive cases, given that it is plausible that prospective parents can form attachments with their future adoptive children pre-adoption.

¹² Taken from Douglas (2019).

Now in *Fertility Clinic*, you have (very plausibly) altered the identity of Arama's and Bram's future child as your phone call had resulted in a different sperm fusing with Arama's egg than would have otherwise occurred. And yet, as Douglas is quick to note, Arama and Bram likely would not feel any sense of loss whatsoever as a result of your action. Indeed, as far as they are concerned, the post-phone call child serves as a perfect replacement for the pre-phone call child. And Douglas generalizes – most of us would respond similarly to Arama and Bram when placed in their shoes. Therefore, Douglas takes this to be indicative of us typically not forming any attachment to our future children.

Moreover, Douglas also contends that it is nearly (if not outright) impossible for prospective parents to foster an attachment to their future children as particular individuals, even if they had wanted to. This is because it is highly unlikely that a prospective parent can gather enough information to even figure out which particular individual will end up becoming their future child. As a result, the likelihood of having prospective parents stand in loving relationships with their future children is further diminished. In this picture, only a rare few – those who can accurately identify and also foster an attachment with the particular individual that is to become their future child – would have any reasons of special concern at all to engage in pre-parental partiality.

Note, thus, the inadequacies of either a contractual, or a loving, relationship-based justification of pre-parental partiality. And as for procreative relationships, the response is even more obvious: prospective parents certainly do not stand in procreative relationships with their future children, as the process of procreation has not even begun. Therefore, in the absence of any other candidate relationship that can account for these partiality obligations, one might doubt if it remains possible to vindicate pre-parental partiality from the start.

3 On Proactivity

I contend, however, that there is a more promising approach available; an approach that leaves room for pre-parental partiality despite granting P1 of both the '*No-Benefits*' and '*No-Relationship*' arguments. In what follows, I shall spell out what I take to be the most natural grounds on which pre-parental partiality can obtain its moral justification. It begins with the following principle:

Proactivity Principle¹³: We do possess special reasons of a derivative nature *now* to ensure that we fulfil any *future* obligations we may come to possess¹⁴.

The *Proactivity Principle*, I contend, is highly intuitive. There are many scenarios where, intuitively, we seem to possess an obligation to ensure that our future obligations get fulfilled.

Suppose, for instance, that I know that I will promise to help you with your research article tomorrow once we meet. In this scenario, it does seem wrong of me to act in ways that would prevent my future compliance with the contract (that is only formed once I have promised to help with the article on the next day). For example, it does seem wrong for me to make another promise to my wife to meet her for the entirety of the next day. Plausibly then, we seem to already possess some kinds of special reasons even before the formation of the contract – reasons that are derivative of our future reasons to comply with the contract, once formed¹⁵.

Having established the plausibility of the *Proactivity Principle*, my strategy caps off by identifying our current reasons of special concern towards the fulfilment of our future

¹³ This takes inspiration from Douglas's (2019) discussion on derivative reasons – and is more or less my attempt at giving a more principled version of the view that he considers. See also Frick's (2019) notion of what he calls 'standard-regarding reasons', which hews very closely to my view here on proactivity.

¹⁴ I will be focusing on our *objective* reasons of special concern here – that is, those reasons which are grounded in the way the world is, and that hold independently of what the agent's knowledge of the world is like. But of course, what the Proactivity Principle says here can easily be adapted (e.g. by factoring in the agent's ignorance and uncertainty about what the world is like) to provide an account of our *subjective* reasons of special concern.

¹⁵ The existence of these derivative reasons need not depend on whether or not we possess the intention to form the contract at a later time. It may be enough that the contract will in fact be, or likely will be, formed.

obligations (or our current *proactivity* reasons, as I shall refer to them henceforth) as the grounds of which pre-parental partiality obtains its moral justification. Let me explain.

The idea here is simple. To specify, it is our *future* obligations towards our (then) existing children that form the basis of our *current* proactivity reasons to ensure that these future obligations get fulfilled. And pre-parental partiality is justified only insofar as it complies with our proactivity reasons – i.e. the reasons of special concern we possess now to ensure that we fulfil our future obligations to be partial to our (then) existing children.

Observe thus how the *Proactivity Principle* bypasses the concerns raised by Podgorski and Douglas. Insofar as our future parental obligations of partiality are justified, the principle endorses that we also possess an obligation now to prepare our future selves to fulfil these future obligations. Therefore, *contra* Podgorski and Douglas, being able to better one's future child *de re* is not required to justify pre-parental partiality, nor is it required for one to already stand in a special, partiality-justifying relationship with one's future child.

4 On Parental Partiality

There are, however, multiple views concerning the form that our parental obligations of partiality can take. And the scope of pre-parental partiality that the *Proactivity Principle* justifies varies in accordance with one's preferred view on what their parental obligations of partiality amount to. I will briefly survey some natural options and consider their implications with *Proactivity*. Some of these views, I believe, are significantly more plausible than others, but we do not have space here to fully adjudicate between them. For instance, one could have the following view:

Threshold View: We possess reasons of special concern to guarantee that our children have a certain level of well-being.

At first glance, the *Threshold View* seems plausible enough. Recall *Procreation*. Now one might plausibly interpret A&B's failings towards Decent Dan as arising from their inability to provide Decent Dan with a sufficient level of education. Lines of reasoning like these pair well with what the *Threshold View* says about the nature of our parental obligations of partiality.

A closer look, however, uncovers several flaws. For starters, the *Threshold View* says nothing about how we should be prioritizing the well-being of our children over others. This licenses a form of parenting that intuitively runs counter to the ideal of parental partiality:

Anti-Partial

The couple E&F are currently the parents of their child, Mediocre Mike. And E&F do take care to ensure that Mediocre Mike's well-being levels are above the threshold. But Mediocre Mike has a friend, Lucky Lucy. And E&F take even greater pains to ensure that Lucky Lucy's well-being levels are even further above the threshold than Mediocre Mike's.

Now E&F's parenting in *Anti-Partial* strikes us as being, in some sense, defective. Clearly, E&F do possess the resources available to afford their child – Mediocre Mike – a greater level of well-being than what he currently has. Instead, E&F had opted to channel more of their resources to the betterment of Lucky Lucy – an individual who is otherwise not related to them in any significant way. And this, I contend, runs counter to our commonsense notions of parental partiality. Anti-preferential treatments of one's own children certainly do not constitute parental partiality engagements.

Do note, however, that E&F's parental obligations of partiality would have been fulfilled under the *Threshold View*. For it is still the case that E&F has provided a sufficient level of well-being for their child. As long as Mediocre Mike's well-being level is determined to be above the threshold (which it is in this case), E&F will be judged to not have violated their

parental obligations of partiality. Therefore, cases like *Anti-Partial* prove problematic for the *Threshold View*'s take on what our parental obligations of partiality look like.

But there is more. As it stands, the *Threshold View* can also be too demanding at times. Consider the following scenario:

Effortful Parents

The couple G&H are currently the parents of their child, Loved Luna. Now G&H are poor, and have very little in the way of resources available at their disposal. However, they do make the utmost effort to ensure that their child – Loved Luna – receives as much well-being as possible. Despite all their efforts though, Loved Luna's well-being levels never manages to clear the threshold.

Now in *Effortful Parents*, G&H's parenting strikes us as being laudable in some sense. Despite not succeeding in getting their child's well-being level past the threshold, G&H's parenting nevertheless seems to align well with what ideal partial parenting would look like. After all, G&H have dedicated so much of their available resources to the betterment of their child, Loved Luna. And surely, the amount of effort put into bettering one's child also matters for the fulfilment of one's parental obligations of partiality. It would certainly be a mistake to simply dismiss G&H's treatment of Loved Luna as being anything but partial.

Notice, however, that this is exactly what the *Threshold View* would say about G&H's parenting. It is a fact, after all, that G&H had never managed to improve Loved Luna's well-being level beyond the threshold, and this is sufficient grounds for G&H to be judged to have failed their parental obligations of partiality under the *Threshold View*. Therefore, cases like *Effortful Parents* also prove problematic for the *Threshold View*'s take on what our parental obligations of partiality look like.

Given the inadequacies of the *Threshold View*, we now turn our attention in search of an alternative view that better captures our intuitions. And fortunately, there is already a view that does exactly that. Consider:

Maximize View: We possess reasons of special concern to provide them as high a well-being level as we can, given our available resources.

Now one might, at first glance, be tempted to take the *Maximize View* as being even more implausible than the *Threshold View*. After all, this view seemingly implies that we are obligated to use all of our available resources for the betterment of our child, and that any failure to do so results in a violation of our parental obligations of partiality. We would, in all practicality, never even come close to fulfilling our parental obligations of partiality if that were the case.

That said, reaching such a conclusion is overly hasty. It makes sense, after all, to take our parental obligations of partiality as being of the *pro tanto* sort. This perspective recognizes that while we have certain duties to prioritize our children's well-being, these obligations are not absolute and must be balanced against other moral considerations. Indeed, the *Maximize View* appears much more compelling once we move beyond the potential complications arising from conflicting moral considerations. It seems far more plausible, in the absence of any such conflicts, that we should strive to make our child as well-off as we possibly can.

Furthermore, the *Maximize View* avoids some of the weaknesses inherent in the *Threshold View*. In *Anti-Partial*, it is clear that E&F are not devoting as many resources as they possibly could to better their child, Mediocre Mike. Therefore, E&F will not be judged to have fulfilled their parental obligations of partiality under the *Maximize View*.

And what of cases like *Effortful Parents*? In the *Maximize View*, what matters is not that a certain, threshold, level of well-being is being afforded to the children by their parents, but

rather if the parents have given to their children as high a well-being level as they possibly could. And in *Effortful Parents*, we note that G&H have given their child as high a well-being level as possible. As a result, under the *Maximize View*, G&H would be judged to have fulfilled their parental obligations of partiality. And this sits well with our intuitive judgments about the case. To summarize: the *Maximize View* aligns well with the intuition that our parental obligations of partiality involve giving one's children special priority over others, while also emphasizing the duty to make every effort to maximize our children's well-being.

That said, I believe the *Maximize View* ultimately still falls short of providing a fully satisfying account of our parental obligations of partiality. Indeed, it risks delivering verdicts that strike us as highly counterintuitive in certain circumstances. For instance, consider the following case:

Mimicry

The couple I&J are currently the parents of their child, Fooled Finn. Now I&J do take great care in making sure that Fooled Finn receives as much well-being as possible, given the resources that they have available. Unbeknownst to Fooled Finn, however, I&J's actions are neither driven by love nor arising from a sense of duty as parents. Instead, their efforts to ensure Fooled Finn's well-being are entirely motivated by selfish reasons (i.e. they believe that in pretending to care for Fooled Finn, they would go to Heaven in the afterlife). In reality, they harbour deep resentment toward Fooled Finn and secretly wish him harm.

Now I suspect that most of us would reject the idea that I&J have fulfilled their parental obligations of partiality. And the problem here, I contend, lies in their motivations. I&J are not genuinely concerned with Fooled Finn's well-being for his own sake; instead, they are primarily concerned with securing their tickets to Heaven by pretending to care for their child.

This lack of genuine concern seemingly disqualifies I&J's actions from counting towards the fulfilment of their parental obligations of partiality.

But here we encounter a problem. As it stands, the *Maximize View* struggles to account for our intuitions in cases like *Mimicry*. Despite their perverse motivations, I&J still does manage to make Fooled Finn as well-off as they possibly can. As a result, I&J would still be seen to have fulfilled their parental obligations of partiality under the *Maximize View*. Cases like *Mimicry* therefore pose problems for the *Maximize View*'s take on what our parental obligations of partiality look like.

The lesson I think we should draw is that the correct view of parental partiality obligations must take into account the *motivations* that form the basis of our parental partiality engagements. Indeed, I suspect that only the motivations would eventually matter for the purposes of determining whether one has fulfilled their parental obligations of partiality or not. Take, for example, the following case:

Locked-In Parents

The couple K&L are currently the parents of their child, Clocked Cleo, whom they love dearly. If they could, they would undoubtedly do everything in their power to maximize Clocked Cleo's well-being. Tragically, however, K&L both acquired Locked-In Syndrome shortly before Clocked Cleo's birth, leaving them completely incapacitated. Their condition is extremely severe; to the point that they even require external assistance for basic functions such as breathing and blinking. As a consequence, they are completely unable to contribute towards their son's well-being levels in any way at all.

As the case depicts, K&L are unable to do anything at all to improve the well-being of their child. And yet, I suspect that many of us would be inclined to maintain that K&L are still fulfilling their parental obligations of partiality. We note, after all, K&L's love for their child,

and how they would do anything in their power to enhance their child's well-being if they could. If this is right, it is the underlying motivations behind our parental partiality engagements that determine whether we have fulfilled our parental obligations of partiality.

This leads us to my own preferred view of our parental obligations of partiality:

Motivations View¹⁶: We possess reasons of special concern to be appropriately motivated towards our children.

The *Motivations View* only requires that we possess the appropriate motivations. And while I do not claim to provide an exhaustive list of all eligible motivations, certain key examples – such as love or respect for one's parental role – do constitute clear-cut examples of motivations that would be deemed appropriate.

The same cannot be said for I&J's motivations in *Mimicry* though. Do note, after all, that I&J's primary motivation in maximizing Fooled Finn's well-being in *Mimicry* is merely to secure their tickets to Heaven, and that they do not act out of love, or respect, or indeed any other motivation that might be plausibly seen as issuing from one's reasons of special concern. It is clear, therefore, that I&J's motivation for improving their child's well-being is inappropriate here. And the *Motivations View* captures this intuition - it would not endorse I&J as having fulfilled their parental obligations of partiality.

Because the *Motivations View* focuses exclusively on the possession of the appropriate motivations on the part of the parents, and does not (unlike the previous two views) associate our pre-parental obligations of partiality with the deliverance of any well-being outcomes at all, it is able to capture the judgment that K&L are not failing their obligations in *Locked-In*.

¹⁶ Douglas (2019) shares a similar view, suggesting that we may possess reasons of special concern to prioritize the interests and well-being of our children, relative to others, in our decision-making processes. However, unlike my approach, Douglas does not emphasize the importance of our underlying motivations. This makes his view susceptible to the challenges posed by *Mimicry*-like cases.

Since K&L do possess the appropriate motivations (they have all the attitudes, like love, we expect from parents, and would prioritize their children's welfare in their decision-making), the *Motivations View* will endorse K&L as having fulfilled their parental obligations of partiality. The fact that K&L were never able to bring about any improvements in their child's well-being is irrelevant in this case.

Now one might worry that I am being too quick here in moving from the relevance of I&J's motivations to their assessment as parents to the conclusion that these motivations constitute the content of their parental partiality obligations themselves¹⁷. Motivations, after all, do seem to matter for other sorts of determinations. Take moral parenthood, for instance. An individual is said to be the moral parent of a particular child if they possess the moral right to parent said child. And plausibly, motivations do seem to play a crucial role in the determination of one's moral parenthood status – as Ferracioli (2023) argues, being sufficiently and appropriately motivated by considerations like that of love and respect for one's parental role is an essential factor (among others) for one's qualification as a moral parent.

But if that were the case, then a potential complication arises: How can we be sure now that the *Motivations View* is correct; that our motivations do actually constitute the content of our parental partiality obligations? After all, one can go the other way and argue that the *Motivations View* is mistaken; that the role of our motivations lies not in the determination of our parental partiality obligations, but rather in the determination of our moral parenthood status (a la Ferracioli). And there is even some *prima facie* plausibility to this: when we look at cases like *Mimicry*, it makes intuitive sense to us that I&J most definitely do not qualify to be the moral parents of Fooled Finn, and that this is explained in large part by the perverse motivations behind I&J's treatment of Finn.

¹⁷ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

Nevertheless, I am inclined to think that the role of motivations in determining moral parenthood is entirely compatible with the correctness of the *Motivations View*. And here's why. Consider: Even when one qualifies as a moral parent by possessing (among other things) the appropriate motivations, one would still seem to possess an ongoing parental obligation of partiality to maintain these same appropriate motivations toward their children post-moral parenthood. I suspect that this would strike many of us as intuitive. After all, it makes sense for moral parents – the very bearers of the moral right to parent their particular children – to be obligated to sustain the very motivations that partly qualified them for this role in the first place. If so, this indicates that motivations matter not only for the determination of one's moral parenthood status, but also figures into the content of our parental obligations of partiality themselves – as the *Motivation View* claims.

My view, therefore, is that the *Motivations View* delivers the most plausible account of our parental partiality obligations among the views considered thus far. But I recognize that the brief assessment we have made here is not decisive and that a full evaluation of these competing views and their alternatives is beyond the scope of this paper. Perhaps the reader does not share the intuition that the parents in *Locked-In* fully satisfy their obligations, or that the parents in *Mimicry* fall short of them. Or perhaps the reader thinks that the apparent role of motivations in good parenting can be captured in other ways, for example as qualifications on moral parenthood, or as conditions for praiseworthiness or blameworthiness. Moreover, it is possible to have a *hybrid* view of the obligations of partiality – one which requires parents both to have appropriate motivations and to ensure their children actually meet a threshold, or get as much of the well-being available to them as possible. But we do not need to take a stand on exactly which view is correct – on any of them, some form of pre-parental partiality is justified.

5 On Pre-Parental Partiality

Armed with a deeper understanding of what our parental obligations of partiality could be, we are now ready to deliver a Proactivity-based moral justification of pre-parental partiality. In what follows, I will discuss how each of the views considered (namely, the *Threshold*, *Maximize*, and *Motivations* Views) pair with the *Proactivity Principle* to yield differing accounts of what our pre-parental obligations of partiality amount to.

So without further ado, let us discuss these views in order. First, we consider the view that results from pairing the *Proactivity Principle* with the *Threshold View*:

Pro-Threshold View

- (i) Our parental obligations of partiality are to guarantee that our children possesses a certain level of well-being.
- (ii) Our pre-parental obligations of partiality are to prepare ourselves in ways to ensure that our future selves (as parents) fulfil their parental obligations of partiality in (i).

As the *Pro-Threshold View* goes, we are (as prospective parents) to prepare ourselves to ensure that our future selves (as parents) *can* (*ability-wise*), and *do* (*action-wise*), deliver unto their children a well-being level that meets the threshold.

Take, for instance, the act of saving money for one's future child. Very plausibly, such an act is likely to help improve the well-being of one's future child. And this implies that the act is likely to contribute towards helping one's future-self deliver the threshold level of well-being to their (then) existing child. Acts like these therefore serve as paradigmatic examples of the kinds of pre-parental partiality engagements that the *Pro-Threshold View* justifies.

Next, we move to consider the view that results from pairing the *Proactivity Principle* with the *Maximize View*:

Pro-Maximize View

- (i) Our parental obligations of partiality are to afford our children as high a well-being level as we possibly can, given the available resources.
- (ii) Our pre-parental obligations of partiality are to prepare ourselves in ways to ensure that our future selves (as parents) fulfil their parental obligations of partiality in (i).

According to the *Pro-Maximize View*, we are (as prospective parents) to prepare ourselves to ensure that our future selves (as parents) *can*, and *do*, deliver unto their children the highest level of well-being as they possibly could, given their available resources.

This leads to a difference in the scope of justifiable pre-parental partiality engagements under the *Pro-Maximize View*. Unlike the *Pro-Threshold View*, the *Pro-Maximize View* will not straightforwardly recommend actions like setting money aside. Setting money aside affects how much one's future self can do for one's child, but it does not help them do as much as they can. On the *Pro-Maximize View*, if I set no money aside, my future self has no problems satisfying their obligation, as long as they are doing the best they can with those limited resources. Ensuring my future self has *more* resources simply raises the bar for what my future self is required to accomplish.

By contrast, consider the act of reading up on the dos and don'ts of child-rearing. Engaging in such an act now plausibly helps our future selves to be more knowledgeable on parenting-related matters, which then helps them be more efficient when it comes to the utilization of the available resources for the betterment of their (then) children. It is therefore acts like these that would constitute as justifiable pre-parental partiality engagements by the *Pro-Maximize View*.

And finally, we move to consider the view that I am partial towards – the one that results from pairing the *Proactivity Principle* with the *Motivations View*:

Pro-Motivations View

- (i) Our parental obligations of partiality are to be appropriately motivated to afford our child as high a well-being level as we can, given the available resources.
- (ii) Our pre-parental obligations of partiality are to prepare ourselves in ways to ensure that our future selves (as parents) fulfil their parental obligations of partiality in (i).

As the *Pro-Motivations View* goes, we are (as prospective parents) to prepare ourselves in ways to ensure that our future selves (as parents) possess the appropriate motivations towards their children.

And once again, the scope of justifiable pre-parental partiality engagements differs. Unlike the aforementioned *Proactivity* views, actions like setting money aside or acquiring knowledge on the dos and don'ts of parenting will not be straightforwardly recommended by the *Pro-Motivations View*. After all, what the *Pro-Motivations View* is looking out for is whether an action helps one's future-self acquire the necessary motivations toward their child. And plausibly, these actions do not help (nor hinder) one's future self in this regard.

By contrast, consider the act of cultivating a loving and caring disposition via engagement in meditative practices. This act, insofar as it is effective, does help by making our future selves develop a loving and caring disposition towards their children. And plausibly, this additional love and propensity to care do contribute toward having our future selves be appropriately motivated to afford their child as high a well-being level as they can, given the available resources. Acts like these therefore serve as paradigmatic examples of the kinds of pre-parental partiality engagements that are justified under the *Pro-Motivations View*.

I have presented, thus, three different views on what our pre-parental obligations of partiality amount to, each corresponding to a different view on what form our parental obligations of partiality take. While I am personally sympathetic towards the *Motivations View*,

the *Proactivity* strategy is compatible with any account of our parental obligations of partiality that we have discussed thus far. Readers who remain drawn to other views of our parental obligations of partiality (be it the *Threshold View*, the *Maximize View*, or perhaps some other view altogether) can similarly invoke the *Proactivity Principle* to arrive at their respective views on our pre-parental partiality obligations. The *Proactivity Principle*, coupled with a view on our parental obligations of partiality, is all it takes to secure a moral justification for pre-parental partiality.

6 On “Picky”-Parenting

Keeping these *Proactivity* views of our pre-parental obligations of partiality in mind, let us now turn to revisit Podgorski’s *Pickiness Objection*. The worry was that on a justification of pre-parental partiality like Hare’s, we have reasons of special concern to be picky about the identity of the occupants of our special relationships in a way which seems inappropriate. Although our account of pre-parental partiality is very different, it is worth revisiting this worry, because the *Proactivity* strategy also justifies a form of pickiness. However, as I’ll try and argue, this kind of pickiness is not objectionable in the same way.

According to the *Proactivity Principle*, for any obligations we may acquire in the future, we possess a corresponding obligation to prepare now to help our future selves fulfil those obligations. And sometimes, being ‘picky’ about the identities of the occupants of our special relationships is exactly what helps our future selves fulfil their newly acquired obligations of special concern. Therefore, insofar as it helps one’s future-self fulfil their obligations of special concern (whatever these obligations might be), the relevant *Proactivity* view is going to deliver that we do indeed possess reasons of special concern now to pick the identities of the occupants of our special relationships.

As we have already seen (in Sect. 1.2), some ways of being picky seem to strike us as deeply unintuitive. Special concern doesn't seem to tell us to pick along the lines of well-being – i.e. it is not a hallmark of a good parent that they adopt the happiest child in the orphanage. And it seems similarly absurd when generalized to other kinds of special relationships – it is not a hallmark of a good spouse that they have successfully matched themselves with a happier partner. It is for reasons like this that Podgorski dismisses Hare's *de dicto* strategy for justifying pre-parental partiality. Does the *Proactivity* strategy also always commit us to being picky in a similarly objectionable way?

I think the answer is no. In particular, suppose the *Pro-Motivations View* is correct (as I think it is). According to that view, our pre-parental obligations of partiality consist of preparing our future selves to possess the appropriate motivations (i.e. love, respect for one's role as a parent, etc.) to maximize their child's well-being, given the resources available to them. Therefore, we note that the *Pro-Motivations View* would only endorse ways of being picky that do help prepare our future selves in the required way.

But as it occurs, being picky in the way that the *Pro-Motivations View* endorses does strike us as highly intuitive! It is, after all, intuitive that we do possess reasons of special concern to pick those that we do already love, or foreseeably would come to love, to be the occupants of our special relationships. Indeed, this seems to hold true of many of our special relationships; it does make sense, for instance, for good boyfriends to be picky by choosing their girlfriend to be someone that they foreseeably would come to love the most. Views like *Pro-Motivations* therefore avoid the counterintuitive implications that the aforementioned *de dicto* views face¹⁸. It should be noted, however, that for those who do not endorse the *Pro-*

¹⁸ Notably, on Ferracioli's (2023) view on moral parent qualification in Sect 4, I would also expect a similar kind of pickiness to be justified w.r.t. motivations, but for a somewhat different reason. On the *Motivations View* picture, the idea is to pick a child that you can love because that helps you live up to your future obligations. On the *Ferracioli-type* picture, the idea would be to pick a child that you can love because only that way can you really come to be the moral parent of said child.

Motivations View (or at least, some hybrid versions of it), the *Pickiness Objection* may present additional challenges that would need to be addressed through alternative means. For example, on the *Threshold View*, the *Proactivity* strategy justifies being picky about having a child that you will be able to put above the threshold. This might sound plausible, but it runs into worries similar to those faced by Hare's *de dicto* view. In the *Adoption* case discussed earlier in Sect 1.2, for example, if the relevant threshold is at 10 units, then the *Pro-Threshold View* would give the objectionable recommendation of adopting Fay over Ellie.

Conclusion

The *Proactivity Strategy*, as I've argued, is our best shot at providing a moral justification of pre-parental partiality. And our pre-parental obligations of partiality are, under this picture, to prepare ourselves now so that our future selves can fulfil their (then) parental obligations of partiality. A tight connection between our pre-parental and parental obligations of partiality is thus established. The scope of morally justifiable pre-parental partiality, then, depends on what the right view of our parental obligations of partiality is.

This leaves us to consider what the correct account of our parental obligations of partiality is. And on that front, I remain partial to the *Motivations View* – not only does it accommodate our intuitions in problematic cases like that of *Mimicry* and *Locked-In*, but its *Proactivity* counterpart (i.e. the *Pro-Motivations View*) also licenses the most intuitive ways of being picky about the participants in our future relationships.

But my goal here has never been to argue for which *Proactivity* view is best. My goal has merely been to show that the *Proactivity Strategy* can be relied upon to yield, when paired with some view of our parental-partiality obligations, a moral justification of certain pre-parental partiality engagements. Fans of either the *Threshold View*, *Maximize View* (or some other view

altogether) are therefore free to invoke the *Proactivity Principle* to arrive at their preferred, *Proactivity*-based justification of pre-parental partiality.

Acknowledgments

I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to everyone at the Department of Philosophy at the National University of Singapore for all their unwavering support and guidance. In particular, I would like to thank Abelard Podgorski, Lavinia Picollo, Isaac Wilhelm, Daniel Waxman, Tang Weng Hong, members of the Philosophy Graduate Seminar (Freddie Wu, Hia Ren, Ho Peng Han, Intanon ‘Troph’ Somboontanasarn), together with Chia Zhi Heng, Eugene Ho, Ewan, Liu Jia Chen, Ryan Tan, Shaun Wee, and SQ for helpful insights, comments and feedback on earlier versions of the paper. Finally, I would also like to thank an anonymous reviewer from PPR for their helpful comments and feedback which has only served to improve the paper greatly.

References

- Douglas, T. (2019). Parental partiality and future children. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v15i1.351>
- Ferracioli, L. (2018). Procreative-parenting, Love’s reasons and the demands of morality. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 68(270), 77–97. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqx022>
- Ferracioli, L. (2023). “The Right to Parent and Moral Commitment” in *Parenting and the Goods of Childhood* (pp. 29 – 52). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frick, J. (2020). Conditional reasons and the procreation asymmetry. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 34(1), 53–87. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpe.12139>

- Gheaus, A. (2011). The right to parent one's biological baby*. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 20(4), 432–455. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2011.00402.x>
- Haramia, C. (2013). Our responsibility to the non-existent. *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 29(1), 249–256. <https://doi.org/10.5840/swphilreview201329126>
- Hare, C. (2007). Voices from Another world: Must we respect the interests of people who do not, and will never, exist? *Ethics*, 117(3), 498–523. <https://doi.org/10.1086/512172>
- Jeske, D. (1998). Families, friends, and special obligations. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 28(4), 527–555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1998.10715984>
- Kolodny, N. (2003). Love as valuing a relationship. *The Philosophical Review*, 112(2), 135–189. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-112-2-135>
- Kolodny, N. (2010). Which relationships justify partiality? the case of parents and children. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 38(1), 37–75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2009.01173.x>
- Lewandowski, W. (2018). “Parents, Special Obligations and Reproductive Genetics.” In M. Soniewicka (Eds.), *The Ethics of Reproductive Genetics: Between Utility, Principles, and Virtues* (pp. 67–80). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Lillehammer, H. (2009). “Reproduction, Partiality and the Non-Identity Problem.” In M. Roberts & D. Wasserman (Eds.), *Harming Future Persons* (pp. 231–248). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Olsaretti, S. (2017). “Liberal Equality and the Moral Status of Parent-Child Relationships.” In D. Sobel, P. Vallentyne & S. Wall (Eds.), *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy*, vol. 3 (pp. 58–83). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Podgorski, A. (2021). Partiality, identity, and Procreation. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 49(1), 51–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12182>

Rakowski, E. (1991). *Equal justice*. Clarendon Press.

Roberts, M. (2007). The non-identity fallacy: Harm, probability and another look at Parfit's depletion example. *Utilitas*, 19(3), 267–311. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0953820807002609>

Scheffler, S. (1997). Relationships and responsibilities. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 26(3), 189–209. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.1997.tb00053.x>

Wolf, C. (2009). “Do Future Persons Presently Have Alternate Possible Identities?” In M. Roberts & D. Wasserman (Eds.), *Harming Future Persons* (pp. 93–114). Dordrecht: Springer.