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The Unique Value of Adoption

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Adoption can provide a child with the critical resource of a stable, loving family, which institutional and foster care fail to provide. Absent a stable family and the benefits of constant care and attention, children are at risk for severe physical, cognitive, and emotional deficits. Adoption can not only prevent these deficits of institutional care, but for those children who experience neglect and abuse prior to adoption, it is the best cure (IJzendoorn and Juffer, 2006). In general, adoption is a good thing for children in need of a family.

But adoption offers unique value *for parents*, too. Though adoption is often considered a second best or even last resort for parents in making their families, this view fails to recognize the special value of adoption in its own right. This topic is almost entirely ignored in the philosophical literature. Thus, I will explore here the unique value of adoption. I begin by noting that the selective focus on the value of adoption for *only* those people pursuing assisted reproductive technologies employs the hidden assumption that adoption is second best to procreation. I will focus on the value of adoption for *all* prospective parents.

My discussion is driven primarily by reflection upon non-relative adoptions, that is, adoption of children not previously a part of one's extended family. Non-relative adoptions contrast with intrafamilial adoptions, where a grandmother adopts a grandchild, for instance, or a brother adopts the child of his sister. More generally, adoption is an alternative to procreation—with a notable exception. For some same-sex couples who use artificial reproductive technologies to create a child, the partner who does not contribute a gamete to the process must adopt the child.[1] My focus will be on non-relative adoptions that are not also procreative in this way. That is, the arguments offered here are guided by my reflections on adoptions that involve already existing children who are not related to their adoptive parents.

[1] The adoption requirement varies by jurisdiction. For discussion of this important challenge to the adoption–procreation binary, see Julie Crawford (in this volume).

In adopting a child, one typically has the opportunity meet a specific need that all children have—the need for a family. Clearly, meeting this need is valuable for adopted children, but adopted parents may also place value in this fact and be motivated, in part, to adopt for this reason. In contrast, procreation does not share this important moral value, for a child not-created is not a child in need of anything at all. After exploring the philosophical issue, I assess the empirical complexities of this claim, which have proven controversial in adoption and children's advocacy circles. While adoption practices, generally speaking, can play a role in addressing the needs of children worldwide, individual prospective parents face the complex task of determining where they can best contribute their efforts in order to help children in genuine need of families, while not contributing to harms or exacerbating existing injustices.

Next, I argue that since most of the reasons in favour of procreation are self-referential—i.e. they locate the value of having a biological child in the child's connection to one's own body or genes—adoption is valuable for the very opposite reason. Adoption provides a morally noble opportunity to extend to a stranger benefits usually withheld for one's genetic kin. In adoption, one's relationship to one's child is defined solely through a history of love and care rather than through bodily connection. As such, adoption offers a unique possibility in which impartial concern for an other can be the starting point for a lifetime of love and care. I discuss this possibility against the objection that adoptions involving a "rescue" motivation are problematic. Along the way, I demonstrate how adoption challenges a strictly dichotomous understanding of impartial and partial reasons for action. In the final section, I reflect on the transformative power that adoption can have for parents' own conception of self and family.

My goal is to highlight the unique value of adoption, challenging the widespread assumption that it has second-best status to procreation. Indeed we'll see that adoption is oftentimes superior to procreation, providing a pure and exemplary model of what is most valuable about parenthood. However, making a superiority argument is not my primary aim here. I hope to show that adoption is a valuable option for all parents to consider and that it offers unique value of its own.

Focusing on Adoption's Value for All Prospective Parents

The majority of the sparse philosophical literature on adoption focuses on adoption as an option for infertile, subfertile, single, or homosexual people—a diverse group that I'll loosely refer to as *those who cannot easily procreate.* In this context, adoption is typically considered an alternative to using assisted reproductive technologies (ART). The narrow focus on adoption as valuable for those who cannot easily procreate expresses the widely held and largely undefended belief that adoption is a second-best alternative to biological procreation for having children. The underlying assumption is that

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only those who cannot biologically procreate without assistance would (or should) seriously consider adoption.[2] But, as I will show, many of the reasons for choosing adoption over ART apply *generally* to favour adoption over procreation. Adoption is a valuable option for all people who desire to parent children regardless of their fertility status.

One might think the narrow focus on the value of adoption for only those pursuing ART is justified because both ART and adoption require significant financial resources. This commonality makes adoption an obvious alternative to using ART. Consider, for instance, the argument that those who would use ART, in particular, have a *moral duty* to adopt children rather than spend resources on pursuing procreation (Petersen, 2002).[3] The argument relies upon the claim that resources spent on ART could be spent on adoption. Since only in adopting do these resources go to an existing child who needs them, some argue that people should adopt rather than pursue ART.[4]

This argument arises because the resources spent on ART are conspicuous. As such, the range of options—spend the money on ART or spend the money on adoption—is salient. Yet, anyone who chooses to become a parent has the *parental resource*—the money, time, emotional commitment, and care—to give to a child who needs it. *This* is the critical resource some existing children lack. One could put this resource towards a child of one's own creation or give it to an adopted child. That is, adoption is no less an alternative to easy procreation, though the option may be less salient. Granted, adoption may cost more than easy procreation, and these costs may trump a *duty* to adopt for many people; but I'm not defending a duty to adopt here. I'm arguing that adoption should be considered a valuable alternative to procreation more generally. It should not automatically be assumed to be second-best. For that reason, my discussion of the value of adoption applies to prospective parents generally, not simply to those facing the choice between adoption or ART.[5]

[2] This assumption is expressed in Smilansky (1995: 44), where he asserts that an argument for adoption instead of procreation (due to concerns about overpopulation) is not worth considering since there is no likelihood that it would be widely accepted. The view is further expressed in Hursthouse (1987: 309), where she states: "But it is, and would be, odd to want *to have a child* (i.e. be a parent) as an end in itself (i.e. not to secure the inheritance nor as a publicity stunt) without at all wanting *to have one's own child* (in the biological sense)."

[3] For evidence that this view is held by the public at large, see the comments sections of the following article/blogs, where the commenters frequently express variations on the opinion that the infertile should adopt rather than create children using ART. See Belkin (2009a and b) and Landau and Gumbrecht (2010).

[4] Cf. Rivera-López (2006), responding to Petersen (2002), rejects a targeted duty of *sub-fertile* parents to adopt children. He concludes that they are excused from this putative duty, given that the solitary focus on them is unfair. I do not share this conclusion; also consistent with fairness is a general expansion of the scope of a putative duty to adopt to include all prospective parents.

[5] I want to explicitly recognize that some same-sex couples may choose ART because they are, for all practical and legal purposes, prevented from pursuing adoption.

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Helping a Child in Need

One of the greatest values of adoption is that one can help a child in need of a family. This is obviously valuable to the child; but this fact can be valuable to and valued by adoptive parents. One may be motivated to adopt out of recognition of this fact, and one may deeply value this feature of adoption. There is both a philosophical and an empirical aspect to the claim that adoption helps a child in need of a family. I consider them in turn.

But first, let me say more about the concept of *need* employed here. I have in mind Joel Feinberg's (1973: 111) definition of need, where, "in a general sense to say that S needs X is to say simply that if he doesn't have X he will be harmed." This definition captures the important distinction between need and mere wants or desires. With unmet needs, a person comes to harm. Further, the need children have for a stable family is what I'll call a *critical need*. By this, I mean the fulfilment of that need is vital to the child's proper emotional and physical development.

All children *need* stable, loving families. Some however, have extant need, i.e. this need is currently unfulfilled or is in imminent danger of going unfulfilled. Many of the children with extant need have parents who are unable or unwilling to provide for them. In this way, they are *in need* of *new* families. Yet some children are orphans and have no existing families at all. Recognizing the difficulty of choosing an umbrella term for the children in question, I will speak of *children in need of families*. This is not to diminish the importance of the existing families of origin who may continue to play an important role in the children's lives. What these children need, even so, is a family that is able to raise them. Further, I indicate the specific need *for a family*, for these children may or may not otherwise be *needy*.

The opportunity to help a child in need of a family is a value unique to adoption; for in procreation one does not help a child in need of a family (or anything else). What one does is create a child, who is by her very nature vulnerable and needy in her dependence upon another to survive, *and then* she benefits the child with all the goods of parenthood. That is, one creates the need and then (hopefully) satisfies it. Only adoption helps an existing child with an unmet need.

Some will argue that in procreating you still *benefit* a child by bringing her into existence (Hare, 1975). Proponents of this unintuitive claim appeal to the more intuitively plausible possibility to *harm a person by bringing her into existence*. Many people think that creating a person who will endure terrible and incurable suffering harms that person. If this is possible, then for reasons of symmetry, we should at least grant the possibility that creating a child who will have a happy life benefits her. Further, the possibility to benefit a person by bringing her into existence can explain people's gratitude for their existence (Hare, 1975: 219). Many say the gift of life is the greatest benefit of all. Advocates of this view may argue that the benefit bestowed through procreation is similar to the benefit of adoption, undermining my claim that the adoption benefit is unique. They might say: *both* procreation and adoption provide *very important, large* benefits to a child.

Even if we grant that people can benefit others by bringing them into existence, this is no challenge to the claim that the adoption benefit is unique. For only in adopting do you meet an unmet need. That is, only in adopting do you alleviate an extant harm or prevent one from occurring. Should you choose not to procreate there is no child who is harmed for not coming to exist; there is no child at all. And this difference matters: for not existing at all is not bad for "the person" who does not exist. But an existing person lacking or losing what he critically needs—in this case, a stable, loving family—is bad for that person. Thus, only in adopting can you respond to or prevent a very bad situation for a person. The opportunity to critically improve an existing person's life is the unique benefit offered by adoption as opposed to whatever other kind of putative benefit one can confer by procreation.

Attempting to diminish my claim, one might argue that the putative benefit of existence is necessary for and prior to the possibility of helping a person in need. One needs the benefit of coming to exist in order to enjoy any other benefits at all. Thus, my opponent may argue, I cannot so easily talk about the benefit of adoption without giving equal attention to the benefit of procreation, for existence itself precedes all other kinds of benefit.

Coming into existence is necessary for us to receive the other goods of life. But this does not mean that it is more important than those benefits that are possible only after a person exists, i.e. those that make her life worth living. For consider, without these other benefits—e.g. the benefits of food, shelter, love, and family—the putative benefit of coming into existence is no benefit at all. We are born vulnerable, dependent, and needy; we need more than existence alone to have happy lives. Coming-to-exist could only be counted a benefit (if one at all) if one receives the other benefits that make one's life worth living. *Bare existence* of a person is not by itself a benefit. In fact, absent any other benefits, bare existence is sufficient to ensure that the child is *harmed* by coming to exist. Thus, the benefits subsequent to coming to exist are what ultimately matter when we claim that existence is beneficial for someone.

It is clear that the critical benefit provided in procreation is not solely the putative benefit bestowed in creating a child—it is that bestowed in *parenting a child* and ensuring that she has all the goods that make her life worth living. The unique value in adoption arises out of recognition that we can give this benefit to *an existing* person in need of that exact good. In contrast, procreation doesn't meet needs; it creates them.

The unique value of adoption is further supported by comparison with the value of child-bearing. Rosalind Hursthouse (1987: 309) argues that *bearing* children is intrinsically worthwhile. She claims that the value of having children is "inextricably bound up" with the belief that death is evil, life is a benefit, murder is wrong, and each life is uniquely valuable. Our reverence for child-bearing is a reflection of the larger thematic belief in the "sanctity of life"—or in more secular terms, the idea that human life is intrinsically valuable (Hursthouse, 1987: 309–10).

Creating and then bringing a child to term in one's body is an activity that requires substantial sacrifice on the part of the pregnant woman. To "do it well," as Hursthouse

(1987: 315) says, requires "courage, fortitude and endurance." Bearing children takes considerable virtue in order to achieve the important end of new human life. Hursthouse (1987: 315) states: "It is in this connection that one can see why it is tempting to regard bearing a child as analogous to sacrificing a fair amount of time and effort to saving someone's life." In both pregnancy and saving a life, a person takes on considerable burden as a virtuous response to the intrinsic value of human life. In this case, the relation between the labours of pregnancy and those of life-saving sacrifice is metaphorical. Though no life is saved in creating and bearing a child, a life is preserved by and entirely dependent upon the pregnant woman who undertakes her pregnancy with virtue. Bearing a child *is like* saving a life.

Hursthouse (1987: 315) continues:

> What is done, is, I claim, not just worthwhile and significant but *morally* worthwhile and significant, because of its connection with, on the one hand, the value or sanctity of life and, on the other, with what I have roughly categorized as "family life"—the field of our closest relationships with other people. For these two areas are the concern of morality if anything is.

The value in child-bearing is not found merely in its relation to the sanctity of life, but also in its aim of love and family. Hursthouse (1987: 315) explains: "In bearing the child, the woman makes it particularly and peculiarly *hers, part of her* life-cycle, *her* family. In so doing, she enriches her own life and that of those who form part of it."

I will not evaluate or reject Hursthouse's account of the value of child-bearing. Rather, I want to leverage it as an argument for the value of adoption. If there is value in an activity that both expresses regard for the sanctity of human life and the value of love and family—making a person one's *own*—then adoption is a paradigm such activity.

In many ways, adoption and maintaining pregnancy are morally similar. Both demonstrate deep regard for the sanctity of life. Adopting provides a benefit critical to a life going well. Maintaining a pregnancy ensures that the nascent life inside a woman's body will continue and flourish. In fact, parenting itself is one among this kind of activity, for in feeding, loving, and providing for our dependent children, we preserve their lives.

Yet, in many cases (not all, of course) the preserving of a life inside one's body during pregnancy is part of a greater decision to bring about that life in the first place. In such cases, it is more accurate to consider pregnancy as part of *creating a life*—making a life where previously there was none—rather than *saving a life—recognizing existing critical need and providing what is necessary to make that life go well.* There may be value in creating life, and this may be value that is tied to the greater theme of honouring the sanctity of human life. I'm not denying any of this. But the metaphor from pregnancy to saving lives is weakened.

In contrast, in adopting a child one is saving the life of an existing child. Though adoption is not always a *life or death matter*; it is a *critical* matter. It is about providing to a child a benefit that may make the difference between a life that goes well and one

with exceptional hardship, struggle, and suffering. People consider their lives *saved* when someone provides them with critically needed support, helps them find the right path in life, or ensures their life is lived to its potential. In adopting, one undertakes considerable sacrifice to critically improve a life, to save a life in this way.

Moreover, we know that adopted children are considered their parents *own children*; they are fully integrated into their parents' lives and families (Smith, 2005). If for Hursthouse, the deep value of pregnancy is through its connection to the saving of lives and the value of family, then adoption satisfies these criteria directly. Pregnancy, as a part of creation, satisfies the criteria only by the stretch of metaphor. This brings about an interesting inversion: adoption is the paradigm example of honouring the sanctity of life and the value of family. Adoption is not second-best. Morally speaking, it is the exemplar.

Let me now turn to the empirical criticisms of my claim that adoption helps a child in need of a family. In a popular exposé, E. J. Graff (2008: 59) proclaims that: "Westerners have been sold on the myth of a world orphan crisis." We are frequently told of the "millions upon millions" of orphaned children in the world by adoption agencies, who imply that by adopting a child we can do something to address this crisis. Graff counters this claim, noting that in fact there are waiting lists for adoption of healthy infants both in the United States and abroad. Prospective adoptive parents may be vying for the same limited pool of healthy infants. Thus, Graff's first criticism is that it is misleading to characterize adoption as helping children in need of families. The *adoptable* children—healthy infants, by Graff's definition—will be adopted one way or another, if not by you, then by one of the other many prospective adoptive parents.[6] Graff's second charge is more troublesome. Instead of a problem finding homes for children in need of families, there is a money-driven industry for finding children for adoptive homes (Graff, 2008).

We might attempt to address Graff's concerns by first agreeing on the number of *legally adoptable* children worldwide. But determination of an adoptability statistic is fraught with empirical complications. As a practical matter, an estimated 45 million births go undocumented each year in the developing world (Oreskovic and Maskew, 2008: 78). These children have no clear legal status, let alone any clear adoptability status. Also, many children institutionalized in orphanages have living biological parents, which can complicate or obscure their legal adoptability status. (Regardless, many of them have no *parents* in any practical or normative sense of the term: Bartholet, 2007: 95.)

Additionally, settling on an adoptability statistic is an inextricably value-laden determination. On one side, critics of international adoption worry that any adoptability statistic is inflated, since, they contend, it will count many children who would not be relinquished by their parents but for the "baby market" (Graff, 2008; Oreskovic

[6] See also Oreskovic and Maskew (2008, pp. 80-81).

and Maskew, 2008). On the other side, there are those who argue that the backlash against international adoption has rendered many children in need of adoption unavailable (Bartholet, 2007). Recently, the number of international adoptions, which consistently increased over the past several decades, has sharply dropped off (Carlson, 2010/11: 734). This is in part due to the closing of international adoption by some "sending" countries as a result of national pride and shaming;[7] it is partially due to national "subsidiarity," the view that local placement of children should take priority over international placement (Carlson, 2010/11: 735);[8] and it is partially due to the active campaigning of certain children's welfare groups that eye international adoption with suspicion due to the risks of child trafficking and exploitation of birth parents.[9]

Restrictions on adoptions for these reasons involve prior value judgements about adoption. There is the judgement, for instance, that preventing trafficking abuses should take precedence over placing children in adoptive families, i.e. that preventing active harms is morally more important than remedying harms through rescue. There is the view that children "belong" in their countries of origin, even if this means they will stay in subpar institutional or foster care. There is also the assumption by Graff and others that only healthy infants should count as *adoptable*, given the assumption that only they are desirable to prospective adopters.[10] The number of children available for adoption is directly impacted by prior value-laden opinions about adoption and adoptability.

If we are to assess the value of adoption by looking to the numbers of children who could be helped by widespread adoption practices, this number cannot already presuppose a judgement about the value of adoption. It may be true that there are waiting lists, but this is the artifact of adoption opposition from many sides. We cannot then cite this artifact of adoption opposition as an argument against the importance of adoption.

Though many will dispute the number of adoptable children, "the certainly true and important answer is that the number of children who would almost certainly benefit from adoption far exceeds the number of prospective adoptive parents" (Carlson, 2010/11: 735). An estimated 8 million children live in institutions (Secretary-General, 2006). Millions more children lack any form of stable parental care. If only a small

[7] e.g. South Korea restricted international adoptions after the 1988 Olympics in Seoul due to embarrassment about the perception that it was the world's leading "exporter" of children (Fisher, 2003: 344). Romania's complete ban on international adoption was connected to their bid for entry into the European Union (Carlson, 2010/11: 741). Most recently the Russian ban on American adoptions of Russian children was widely seen as a political response to the US passage of the Magnitsky Act (2012).

[8] Subsidiarity is endorsed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. Subsidiarity, though open to some interpretation, sees intercountry adoption as a last resort for orphans. The Hague Convention moves intercountry adoption up one rung in priority for those countries that have signed the convention (only half of "sending" countries).

[9] UNICEF is one such prominent organization.

[10] It is notable that special needs adoptions constitute more than one quarter of all unrelated adoptions in the United States. See Fisher (2003: 339). There are waiting lists for adoption of children with Down's syndrome and for other children who were once deemed unadoptable. See Bartholet (2000: 180).

fraction of these children were available for adoption, now or with foreseeable policy changes, this would plausibly exceed the number of annual adoptions—only 30,000 international adoptions occur each year (Bartholet, 2007: 167). In the US alone, there were 107,000 children who were legally adoptable in 2010 (US Dept. HHS, 2011). Roughly only half were adopted. Many more are in the foster care system, unavailable for adoption given current legal and institutional barriers that view adoption as a low priority, second to keeping biological families intact. The numbers clearly reveal that a very large number of children could *benefit from adoption*. To focus only on those who are clearly, legally adoptable is to ignore the millions who have fallen through the cracks in the system.

Graff's first criticism does not support abandoning adoption, rather it supports changing adoption institutions and practices so that more children are helped by adoption. Graff cites the prevalence of older aged children or children with special needs in the adoptability pool as a sober reminder to naïve, prospective adopters that it is not healthy infants who need rescuing. This fact is meant to quell the pro-adoption rhetoric. But this criticism takes such facts as inalterable features of our world. First, it overlooks the possibility of encouraging prospective parents to adopt older children or children with special needs and the possibility to provide institutional support to people who do so. Second, it ignores the potential for widespread adoption reform that would allow at least some of these children—whose older age and special needs can be aggravated by a sluggish and inadequate child welfare system—to find families at earlier ages, before some preventable cognitive deficits form (Carlson, 2010/11: 771). Instead of abandoning adoption as part of the solution, we need institutional reforms that will ensure more children in need of adoption are available for adoption.

But, in light of Graff's criticisms, what do we say to those people who are thinking of adopting now? First, the fact that a child has a good chance of being adopted by someone does not undermine the fact that, if you adopt that child, you will have met a critical need of that child. If you pull a drowning child out of a swimming pool, it is no less the case that you helped a child in need if there are also others willing to help out. Graff's concern about adoption demand does not undermine the main claim that adoption is valuable because it can help a child in need of a family. Yet we can characterize some children's need for a family as greater than others, if we take into account the alternatives readily available to them and their overall chance of being adopted. Cases involving children who are older or have special needs are the most urgent. Perhaps, the reasons to help a child and the corresponding value of adoption will be greater for those children who have the most urgent need. Prospective parents can count the degree of a child's need for a family as one factor among many in guiding their decision to become parents. But any case of meeting critical need has important value.

Second, the willingness of parents to adopt children is a power that could be leveraged in changing institutions and laws so as to make more children available for adoption. We cannot simply wait for these changes. Adoption will not be seen as a part

of the solution to children's needs if parents are not willing to adopt children at all. Convincing people of the value of adoption is in the service of this good.

This brings us to Graff's second concern about the role prospective adopters play in contributing to illicit "baby markets." There is a lively debate about the actual prevalence of illicit adoption practices and the appropriate response to them.[11] I cannot get into this debate here. But a genuine concern about illicit adoption practices is consistent with and endorsed by my position here: if a value of adoption is that it helps children in need of a family, clearly this value is not realized if any particular adoption is "helping" a child where no help was needed or if it is actively harming a child or her birth family. But I emphasize: concerns about unscrupulous adoption practices warrant closer scrutiny of those practices and vigilance by prospective adopters, not abandonment of the practices altogether. Prospective adopters have the responsibility to choose and support adoption practices that are ethical. Parents should not be naïve about the risks of exploitative adoption practices or baby-trafficking. Prospective adopters must take care in selecting the adoption agencies they will work with and scrutinizing the adoption practices in the country from which they will adopt.

Adoption critics raise important worries for prospective adopters to consider. This does not, however, undermine the possibility for adoption's unique value. Adoption can help a child in need of a family. As we've seen, this value is not a given and its value might be variable. We have a responsibility to promote adoption practices that reach the children in greatest need and that do not exacerbate existing injustices or create harms through illicit adoption practices.

Loving a Stranger as One's Own

Some of the reasons offered in favour of procreation as the best way to build a family can be leveraged in turn as reasons in favour of the unique value in adoption. People commonly appeal to the value in having children who share a biological relationship with the parents through the bodily connection a woman has with her child *in utero* and the genetic connection both parents share with their offspring.[12] A biological child is in some sense, they say, a part of each of them. The child shares with them a similar basis of genetic identity, and many think genes are predominantly what make us *who we are*. This is taken as a strong reason to favour procreation over adoption; for we should want our children to be connected to us in this specific way. Why this is so is typically left unexplained; perhaps it is self-evident for most people. Perhaps genetic similarity is intrinsically valuable. Some cite the putatively higher probability a genetically related child has of being physically and psychologically similar to her parents. The underlying assumption is that it is better that parents and children resemble each

[11] For a sample of this debate, see Oreskovic and Maskew (2008); Bartholet (2007); Carlson (2010/11).

[12] Works that raise some of the following themes or claims include: Velleman (2008); Kolodny (2010); Tooley (1999); Hursthouse (1987).

other in these ways. Others claim that we have a greater inclination to love and attach to children who are biologically and genetically connected to us.

I discuss these arguments in another paper, where I challenge the empirical and moral assumptions underlying the preference for biological children.[13] I won't repeat that discussion here.[14] Instead, I want to flip the argument on its end. If there is value in having genetically related children for the reasons offered above, then *for these same reasons*, adoption presents us with a unique and morally valuable prospect.[15] In adopting children, given that, putatively, none of these mentioned values are present, we have an opportunity to share one of the most intimate and loving human relationships with a stranger.[16] The adopted child is not attached to us by body or genetic identity; her existence is not the product of our actions or choices. We may not share the same personality traits, look, ethnicity, culture, or place of origin with this child. We may lack entirely a connection with this child other than that of common humanity. Yet, for all that, we may invite these children into our families.

For these reasons adoption is a practice of important and unique moral value. The parent–child relationship, typically and ideally conceived of (by some) as a relationship grounded in the similar genetic identities of each, is one of the most intimate personal connections humans can have. To willingly share this deeply intimate connection with a stranger is morally exemplary. It demonstrates the far range of possibility for human connection between strangers and the potential for intense, loving regard for an *other* in a context in which, typically, this very otherness is defined out of the relationship. Moreover, since adoption involves children—all of who by their nature are needy and dependent upon adults for their care—adoption exemplifies the uniquely human capacity for responding to vulnerability, wherever it may occur.

In adopting a child, one is not limited in one's expectations about the child's future possibilities due to a narrow focus on the genetic determinants of a child's talents and personality.[17] A parent can stand witness to his child's development into her own person, a person bound to him in love, not in body. Indeed, an adopted child becomes one's own by relation and history only; not because she is linked to one's biological identity or is the product of one's own creation, or a natural possession of sorts. She becomes one's own through a relationship that is fostered over time, through care and love.

Adoption reminds us that it is this relation of intimacy that should ground our use of possessive speech when speaking of personal relations, i.e. when we say that a person is one of "ours" or is "mine" (Smith, 2005; de Gaynesford, 2010: 87). People who are *mine*

[13] In "Preferring a Genetically-Related Child," unpublished manuscript.

[14] For some other works addressing and rebutting these concerns see: Haslanger (2009); Lotz (2008); Witt (2005).

[15] This general idea was suggested to me in conversation with Sally Haslanger. What follows is my own analysis.

[16] Again, not all adopted children are unrelated or strangers. My focus here is on unrelated adoptions.

[17] This is not to suggest that parents genetically related to their children are necessarily so bound.

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are not my property; rather that this person is *mine* means she stands in a special relationship with me that not all others share. Possessive speech is *relational* speech in two senses—as relating two people and as expressing personal closeness between them.[18] Understanding our use of relational speech in this way allows for a more expansive and inclusive application of "possessive" terminology and concepts. For instance, in the parent–child relationship, intimacy can be fostered in many ways: it may grow naturally from the bond a mother has to her child in pregnancy; but it may grow solely from a history of love, affection, and care (Kolodny, 2010). There is more than one way that a child can be one's own.

In sum, a unique value of adoption is in the transformation of a stranger to become a child of one's own, i.e. in choosing to love a child not previously connected to oneself through body or identity, but who will be one's child through a history of love and care. This value is independent of whether the child is in need of the relationship or whether the adoptive parents were motivated to adopt in part out of recognition of that need. One need not engage in moral reflection or deliberation to enact this possibility; it can be a natural and uncalculated reflex to extend compassion to a child in need of exactly that. The possibility for such generous and intimate love of an other is remarkable in itself.[19]

Yet, bringing the previous section to bear on this possibility, one *can* choose to enter into the parental relationship with a child out of recognition of that child's need for a family. One can let impartial, other-focused concern be the starting point for a lifetime of love and care for another person. In this case, adoption can have an other-focused starting point not shared by procreative parenthood.

I am not claiming that adoption is always or should always be a wholly other-focused act. For many people adopting a child fulfils a desire or need of theirs.[20] But I do want to draw the following distinction: arguments in favour or defence of procreation tend to emphasize the importance of the biological child's connection to oneself through genes or body. The value of procreation is located in the value of oneself. That is not to say it is primarily selfish or that procreative parenthood isn't also other-concerned, but the locus of value of this relationship is typically placed in self-referring terms. In contrast, those who adopt *can* locate the unique value of adoption in impartial concern for another. I can be motivated in part to make this child my child because she needs a family. I may also deeply desire to be a parent, but I may desire this for myself while being responsive to the moral reasons there are to share this relationship with a child who needs me. Adoptions that have some aspect of this other-concern I will call *altruistic adoptions.*

[18] The level of intimacy indicated by the use of possessive speech might vary with the type of relationship in question. My relation to my acquaintance differs in intensity and kind from my relationship to my sister.

[19] This is one value that all adoptions of children not genetically or biologically related to the parent share.

[20] I thank Carolyn McLeod for prompting me to clarify this point. For more on the special value of the parent–child relationship *to parents* (procreative and adoptive), see Brighouse and Swift (in this volume).

Some worry that adopting a child out of an impartial "rescue" motivation is an inappropriate starting point for the parent–child relationship, which is not fundamentally impartial. Elizabeth Bartholet (1993: 66), adoption scholar and adoptive parent, notes with regret that adoption agencies often frown upon prospective parents whose primary motivation for choosing adoption is to rescue a child.

Against this concern, it's worth noting that people have biological children for far more trivial reasons, and these are rarely subjected to scrutiny.[21] Suspicion of adoptive parents' motives may be yet one more symptom of the deeply entrenched assumption that adoption has second-place status. The motivations for adoption are held to greater scrutiny, since adoption is considered by some people to be deviant from the norm. For them, people who would choose adoption must explain themselves. Despite my obvious scepticism, I will take some time to make sense of this objection. In the process, I can better illuminate the transformation that occurs when an adopted child becomes one's own child.

First, people may worry that rescue is the wrong reason to become a parent. Parenting is far too demanding, and well-intentioned adopters wanting to "rescue" children should not be so naïve about the demands of this particular kind of rescue. But of course one who wants to adopt children should also want to be a parent. Someone will not have helped a child in need at all if she gives her a family in name only, i.e. if she fails to give the child love and care that only a person dedicated to being a parent in the fullest normative sense can provide. This is no objection to my claim: I'm talking about the value of adoption *for prospective parents*—for those who want to dedicate a significant portion of their resources and time to raising a child. We would criticize the prospective procreative parent who is naïve about the extensive demands of parenthood. But that some people are problematically naïve about the demands of parenthood in this case is no objection to procreative parenthood generally. Likewise with adoptive parents, though the rescue motivation could be inappropriate if it is the sole motivation for becoming a parent, it is not obviously problematic for those with a realistic understanding of, preparation for, and desire for the demands of parenthood.

Perhaps the worry is that adopters-as-rescuers may pose heavy burdens of gratitude on their children.[22] Parents who rescue children may see their relationship with their children in a fundamentally different way than procreative parents, in a way that makes their children feel unduly indebted to them. This could negatively impact adopted children.

But seeing rescue as a reason for adoption rather than procreation does not mean that the rescue relationship must come to characterize our parental relationship with

[21] I suspect that criticism of adopters who are motivated to rescue children in need is an instance of *do-gooder derogation*—a phenomenon where some in the majority (with regard to a choice), due to anticipation of moral reproach, take a derogatory attitude towards those in a minority who claim to base their choice on moral grounds (Minson and Monin, 2012).

[22] This concern was presented to me by Marianne Novy (2010).

our children. Adoptive families form parent–child relationships that fit the familiar mould of parent–child relationship, characterized by the same filial duties, no more, no less than biological families. Moreover, biological families are not immune from an analogous worry: we often hear of biological parents burdening their children with the claim that they should be grateful to them for their very existence. Whatever filial duties may be grounded in this sentiment, we find it appropriate to criticize parents if they take this demand too far. The fact that some biological parents act inappropriately in this regard does not count as a reason against having biological children. It counts as a reason against expecting from one's children servile gratitude. Thus, the same response in the case of adoption applies: we ought to parent with compassion and an appropriate sense of what sorts of burdens ought not to be placed on children.

Ultimately, I believe the rescue objection arises due to a misconception of the relationship between the impartial and partial perspectives and the reasons generated by each. One might think that a person motivated by impartial reasons to adopt has moralized the parent–child relationship in a way that will interfere with her forming an appropriate partial, special relationship with the child. A deeper explanation of this concern will both assuage the worry and better illustrate the idea that an adopted child becomes fully his parents' own child.

Philosophers are engaged in an ongoing debate about the tension in morality between the impartial and partial perspectives.[23] On one hand, morality is in its very nature about the impartial concern an agent should have for other people. Morality requires that I have regard for other people as equal subjects of moral concern. In considering what I morally ought to do, I deliberate from the impartial perspective, taking all people into account. Moral reasons speak against favouring myself and my inner circle of people.

On the other hand, some paradigm moral behaviour is partial in nature. Parents should love *their* children, giving them extra care and attention. The fact that a person is *my* friend is a reason for giving her special attention I do not give to others. That somebody is *mine* sometimes gives me reasons to be partial towards her (de Gaynesford, 2010: 88). This is true even though all people are equally valuable. Beyond this, many believe that morality leaves room for or even requires some partial attention to ourselves. We may be permitted or required to live a good life that includes cultivating our talents and interests and pursuing our goals. Favouring one's own perspective, on this view, plays a prominent, if not essential, role in moral reasoning.

Our conception of morality is fraught with tension between the impartial and partial perspectives, for they often come into conflict. The starkest picture is one without a possibility for balancing the two perspectives: impartial morality forbids partial perspective-taking; or conversely, the privileged partial perspective cannot be overridden in any case by impartial concern for others.

[23] For an excellent collection of essays on the topic, see Feltham and Cottingham (2010).

But impartial concern as the starting point for altruistic adoption need not stand in conflict with concerns arising out of one's partial, personal perspective. The following discussion not only defends adoption against this charge, it shows adoption to be a counter-example to such a simplistic picture. Adoption provides an example of the possibility for reasons of partiality to proceed from impartial grounds.

The reverse case—where genuine impartiality proceeds from partiality—is instructive. Maximilian de Gaynesford (2010: 93) argues that the same grounds for partiality can also justify impartiality. The fact that you are a parent to your children provides grounds for partial treatment of them. *Because you are their parent* you ought to and are permitted to favour them in a range of circumstances over, for instance, the neighbour's children. Yet the very same reason grounding this relationship of partiality grounds reasons for *impartial* treatment *between* your children. Our normative conception of parenthood includes that you be fair and equal in your treatment of *your* children. You should do so *because you are their parent.* Thus, as de Gaynesford puts it, impartiality can proceed from genuine partial grounds. This possibility is testament to the complexity of the moral landscape, which is rigidly simplified by a strict impartialist/partialist dichotomy. We should not assume that impartial treatment always has an impartial grounding.

Altruistic adoption reveals the opposite possibility: reasons of partiality can be generated from impartial grounds. Prospective parents may make their decision on how to become parents by starting from an impartial standpoint. Whether they procreate or adopt, the reasons they have to do so *for* the sake of their child-to-be *must* be impartial reasons. No special relationship between the parents and their potential child exists to ground reasons of partiality to the child. Choosing to become a parent is in fact a choice *to create a special relationship* with a child where the special relationship itself is the partial benefit in question. Thus, the decision to become a parent is not made from a standpoint of partiality *to* a particular child. The decision may still be (and usually is) partial *to oneself,* privileging one's own preferences and values in making the decision. But the point is that as it pertains to one's reasons *vis-à-vis* the child one will parent, this can be an impartial decision.

Adoption shows us that what may have started as impartially driven concern for a stranger can seamlessly become a concern for another that is integral to and driven by one's own partial perspective. A child becomes one's own child through fostering a relationship of love and concern across time. When a person adopts a child, the care she will give to her child as a parent becomes central to her own identity and conception of self. In parenting her child, she is not rescuing that child at every moment, she is caring for *her* child. She is partaking in the parent–child relationship of special concern. The transition between the impartial and partial perspectives within the life of the agent cannot be starkly drawn.

This insight is critical. One objection to impartialist morality is that it fails to give sufficient weight to an individual's own concerns and interests, putting them on a par with the interests, needs, and demands of all other people. As such, critics claim that

impartialist morality generates too many demands and sacrifices of an individual with regard to her own important projects. Some may think that altruistic adoption poses this problem—the impartial concern for another is incompatible with sufficient room for a person to privilege her own personal, partial sphere of action. I imagine the worry here is that a parent may come to resent the child that she "rescued."

But the objection to impartialist morality cannot be just about the *extent* or sheer burden of the demands of impartiality. For the demands generated from the partial perspective, such as those required in raising a child, being a good friend or family member, are extensive. Indeed, there is little else more demanding than parenthood itself. The crucial distinction must be that the demands of strangers are in *conflict with* one's space from which one pursues her important goals and projects. They are imposed upon one from outside, alien to one's important life projects. In contrast, answering the demands generated by one's special relationships in part *constitute* a person's goals and projects. But we've seen that the picture is more complex: a stranger can be integrated into one's own personal sphere of concern, becoming one's own child. Thus, this criticism of altruistic adoption grounded in an objection to impartialist morality simply does not apply. It only arises if one thinks impartiality can never give rise to partial relationships. Adoption proves this view to be false.

In short, impartially driven concern for another in altruistic adoption need not entail a parent–child relationship characterized by rescue of another person. A stranger child in need of a family can quickly become a child of one's own, generating reasons of partiality rather than impartiality.

Personal Transformation

I've focused on the way someone can integrate an *other* into her own personal, partial perspective; but her own perspective and self-conception can also be importantly altered. Further, this can be a valuable and unique transformation. Transracial adoptions are a compelling example of this possibility. John Raible (2008: 95) reports that non-adopted, white siblings of adopted, non-white children experience "more nuanced and sophisticated understandings of the dynamics of race in our society, and a deeper appreciation for struggles against racism, both in history and in the lives of their adopted siblings, and ultimately, in their own lives." In effect, they are *transracialized*—gaining intimate and extended, vicarious experience of navigating the challenges of a racial hierarchical society.

Raible's exploration of transracialized identity generalizes to the experiences of transracial adoptive parents. Sally Haslanger, in her own elaboration of the idea, suggests that for parents, this transformation is first engendered through the bodily closeness that they share with their child. She explains: "This empathetic extension of body awareness, this attentiveness to the minute signals of another's body, [the] taking on the needs and desires of another body as if your own, perhaps especially if the other's

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body is marked as different, alters your own body sense" (Haslanger, 2005: 279). As a vivid illustration of this internalization of one's child's body, Haslanger (2005: 279 n. 14) shares the experience of a white mother of two Korean-born adopted children who, on a trip to Korea, expresses joy in being somewhere where "everybody looks like us".

Haslanger labels this phenomenon as one of having a "mixed" racial identity. If we think of racial identity as a map "that functions in a multitude of ways to guide and direct exchanges with one's social and material realities," those with mixed racial identities navigate their world by reference to more than one map—namely, that of their own race and the race of their adopted child (Haslanger, 2005: 283). This mixed identity may manifest itself in many ways. It may foster not just sympathetic but *empathic* understanding of racial injustice. Mixed or transracialized identity can facilitate a person's ease with and preference for social and personal relationships with different-raced individuals. A person's sense of community may fundamentally change—she may be less at home in non-diverse settings. She may find that same-race friends cannot relate to her specific concerns, for the experiences of her different-raced child have altered her perspective. None of this amounts to the claim that a transracialized or mixed-race identity entails that one comes to have the *same* racial identity of the adopted child; but as Haslanger (2005: 285) explains: "my day-to-day life is filled with their physical being and social reality, and by extension, the reality of their extended families and their racial community.... their realities have in an important sense become mine."

Though transracial adoptions are the starkest example of this possibility for integrating another's identity into one's own, arguably, more general *transpersonal* transformations occur in adoptions of all kinds. Foremost, the adoption experience challenges a deeply entrenched cultural conception of the family as bio-genetically based. Adoptive families come to have revised notions of kinship relations as those fostered by shared histories of concern and care. This can happen without denying the significance of bio-genetic ties; in open adoptions, families may come to include an adopted child's birth family. The possibility for transpersonal transformation is yet another benefit of adoption and testament to the unique moral value of adoption; it allows us to transcend the constraints of our own accepted identities and integrate into them what was once outside or foreign to ourselves. In a way, adoption makes us bigger than our original selves; it expands us beyond our original kin and community.

Conclusion

There is unique value for prospective parents to be found in adoption. This value is not limited to only those who cannot easily procreate. Adoption is a valuable alternative to procreation for all prospective parents.

When we highlight what is uniquely valuable about adoption, taking it out from under the shadow of procreation, we can see it in a new light. Adoption offers special

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value to parents: it can help an existing child in need of a family, whereas procreation creates a child with needs. It is a paradigm expression of human regard for the sanctity of life and the value of family. Adoption's unique value is in sharing an intimate special relationship with a stranger, in the process making her one's own. The impartial moral concern for another can be integrated into one's own personal perspective and reasons for action. Adoption has transformative powers over our relation to others and our own conception of self. For these reasons, adoption could hardly be considered second best to biological procreation. In many ways, adoption is an exemplar for both the parent–child relationship and the human capacity for moral compassion.

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