II. THE GIFT OF LIFE

> They will arrange for the suckling of the children by bringing their mothers to the nursery when their breasts are still full, taking every precaution to see that no mother recognizes her child.
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> —Plato, *Republic* V.ii.460e

> Nor is there any way of preventing brothers and children and fathers and mothers from sometimes recognizing one another; for children are born like their parents, and they will necessarily be finding indications of their relationship to one another.
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> —Aristotle, *Politics* II.iii.1262a

Many people are grateful to their parents for giving them a gift consisting in life itself. Life itself is an odd sort of gift, since there is no one around antecedently to serve as its intended recipient.[1] Life is at best a benefit that prospective parents toss into the void in the hope that someone will turn out to have snagged it, to his own surprise as much as anyone's. But once parents have performed this random act of kindness, they may be thought to have no further obligation to the future beneficiary, for whom they have already done more than anyone will ever again be able to do.

Of course, babies are needy creatures, and their biological parents generally bear the burden of seeing to it that their needs are met. This allocation of childcare duties may be no more than a social convenience, however, taking advantage of the biological fact that at least one of the parents is bound to be on the scene when the needy creature makes its appearance. Maybe alternative childcare arrangements would be just as good, if only they could be institutionalized, as Plato famously imagined. If proximity to the birth is all that biological parents have going for them as caregivers, Plato's scheme for community nurseries may be worth considering.

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1. As Matthew Hanser pointed out, no one can act with the intention of bringing a particular person into existence ("Harming Future People," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 19 [1990]: 47–70, at p. 61).

Aristotle criticized this scheme as unrealistic. Children who are not seen as the sons and daughters of anyone in particular will not be properly cared for, he thought; and in any case, people will seek out their own parents, children, and siblings, despite all efforts to keep them apart. As Aristotle realized, human beings have a natural tendency to find and associate with their biological relatives.

Today we can explain this tendency in evolutionary terms, since it enables each human organism to promote the propagation of his genotype and to benefit from the like tendency of his relatives. But the aims of natural selection need not be ours. If the human tendency to congregate in biological families is a vestige of natural selection, then it may be like the capacity for murderous jealousy, for example—a natural tendency that human society has no reason to accommodate. Certainly, the human affinity for consanguines is implicated in such regrettable human phenomena as racism and xenophobia. Maybe it should be killed in the cradle, as Plato suggested.

Still, that's not what modern-day readers of *The Republic* think; they think that Plato's scheme for child rearing is inhumane. Why do they think so? What would be wrong with permanently separating parents and children at birth?

I think that associating with relatives is more than a biological imperative; it's a personal need, imposed on persons like us by our predicament as human beings. Because I believe that biological ties have value, I also believe that there are good reasons for assigning the duties of childrearing to biological parents in the first instance. Indeed, I believe that the act of procreation generates parental obligations that cannot be contracted out to others, except when doing so is in the best interests of the child.[2]

These obligations arise because being begotten is not, as many believe, the original birthday present. As Seana Shiffrin has argued in a brilliant paper on claims of "wrongful life," being brought into existence is at best a mixed blessing, and those who confer it are not entitled to walk away congratulating themselves on a job well done.[3]

2. For a different defense of the same position, see Rivka Weinberg, "The Moral Complexity of Sperm Donation" (forthcoming in *Bioethics*).

3. Seana Valentine Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm," *Legal Theory* 5 (1999): 117–48. Brad Inwood has directed me to Seneca's *De Beneficiis*, Book 3, Sections 29–38. For example: "[I]t is a pretty trivial benefit for a father and

Shiffrin argues that bringing someone into existence is a morally equivocal act, because it entails imposing harms on the person as well as bestowing benefits. Shiffrin argues further that a fundamental asymmetry between harms and benefits prevents the harm imposed by procreation from being justified by the benefit bestowed. And Shiffrin attempts to explain the asymmetry by proposing a philosophical account of harm, although she does not develop it fully.[4]

Now, although I agree with Shiffrin that bringing someone into existence is a morally equivocal act, I do not think that it can be equivocal because of conferring a mixture of harms and benefits. For as I explained in Part I, I believe that a person can be neither harmed nor benefited by being brought into existence. I will therefore devote the first half of this part to paraphrasing Shiffrin's arguments in slightly different terms, by drawing out elements, already implicit in them, of an Aristotelian conception of human well-being. I will then draw some conclusions that are congruent with Shiffrin's and a few more that I doubt whether she would endorse.

The best way to explain Shiffrin's conception of harm, I think, is to apply it, not to cases of harm per se, but to the philosophical problem of distinguishing between pain and suffering. That pain and suffering are distinct is obvious from the many cases of pain that do not occasion suffering (stubbed toes, skinned knees), as well as cases of suffering that do not necessarily involve pain (loneliness, boredom).

What makes the difference between pain and suffering is *coping*. Suffering occurs when someone cannot or does not cope with adversity of some kind. To cope with pain or other adversity is to exercise, or to give oneself the sense of exercising, some degree of control over the

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mother to sleep together unless there are additional benefits to follow up on this initial gift and to consolidate it with additional services to the child. It is not living which is the good, but living well. And I do live well. But I could have lived badly" [Section 38, Inwood's translation].

4. That the goods and ills of existence are in some sense asymmetric is an intuition discussed by several philosophers. See, e.g., Trudy Govier, "What Should We Do About Future People?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 105–13; David Benatar, "Why It Is Better Never to Come Into Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1997): 345–55; Michael Tooley, "Value, Obligation and the Asymmetry Question," *Bioethics* 12 (1998): 111–24. The issue is discussed by Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 391.

adversity itself or, at least, over one's reactions to it. Coping is therefore a way of exercising one's will in the face of adverse circumstances, by managing one's response to them and maybe also by managing the circumstances themselves.

When someone fails to cope, we describe him as going to pieces, falling apart, breaking down—all expressions that reflect damage not just to the body or to personal projects but to the self.[5] Failure to cope entails damage to the self because it entails a defeat or disabling of the will. The person is thrown into a condition of helplessness in the face of some obstacle or assault. Stripped of his agency, he is damaged in his very personhood. The fact and the experience of this damage to the self are constitutive of suffering.[6]

This brief account of suffering echoes Shiffrin's account of harm. She suggests that harm consists in a condition toward which a person finds himself in a position of passive subjection—the position, as Shiffrin puts it, of an "endurer." She thus reverses the order of explanation between the badness of harm and our unwillingness to undergo it. It's not that we're unwilling to undergo something harmful because it's bad; rather, something is bad enough to qualify as harmful if and because we find ourselves undergoing it unwillingly.

Shiffrin also briefly suggests a corresponding account of benefit. What she says is that unsought benefits are not as good as benefits that the recipient has chosen to pursue and has succeeded in obtaining. She thereby suggests that, while being passively withstood is constitutive of harm, being actively sought and attained is at least characteristic of benefit.

These remarks about harm and benefit ground Shiffrin's explanation of the asymmetry between the harms and benefits entailed in the gift of life. In Shiffrin's view, the asymmetry arises from the fact that the gift of life is never sought or even accepted by its recipient. He simply becomes

5. For this account of suffering, → Eric J. Cassell, "Recognizing Suffering," *Hastings Center Report* 21 (1991): 24–31. See also Kathy Charmaz, "Loss of Self: A Fundamental Form of Suffering in the Chronically Ill," *Sociology of Health and Illness* 5 (1983): 168–95.

6. Because coping is an exercise of the will, it requires choice on the part of the subject. That's why we can sometimes think that people have *chosen* to suffer, although we're never quite sure. There is no clear line between inability and unwillingness to cope, but there certainly are cases in which someone could cope but chooses not to; or maybe he cannot choose to cope.

aware, long after the fact, of having been stuck with it. Even if the recipient welcomes this gift retrospectively, his will was nevertheless preempted when it was given to him, since he had no chance to refuse or accept. The harms that accompany this gift are consequently aggravated by having been imposed on him willy-nilly, with the result that he is already in a relation of passive subjection to them from the start. And the associated benefits are somewhat undermined by lacking the features of choice and successful effort that belong to the most significant benefits.

Thus Shiffrin. Much as I admire her attempt to explain the asymmetry between the goods and ills of existence, I do not believe that a balance of goods and ills can account for what is morally equivocal about procreation. Still, I think that her explanation points us in the right direction, by pointing us toward an Aristotelian conception of human well-being.

According to Aristotle, human well-being consists in the exercise of capacities that are in excellent condition, and pleasure is that complete absorption in the exercise of one's capacities which their being in excellent condition tends to facilitate.[7] The excellent condition of one's capacities is what Aristotle called *aretê*. His claim that pleasure consists in being absorbed or engrossed in exercising one's capacities has been confirmed by research into what psychologists call "flow."[8]

Aristotle's conceptions of well-being and pleasure are hospitable to Shiffrin's account of harm and its asymmetrical relation to benefit. Anything that casts a person into a state of passive subjection will prevent him from exercising his capacities, and it will also deprive him of the enjoyment of becoming absorbed in their exercise. Conversely, any good that is acquired through the exercise of the relevant capacities will bring with it a bonus of flourishing and "flow," like a destination that lies at the end of an engrossing journey.

I think that Aristotle's conceptions of human well-being and pleasure also carry implications for the value of the so-called gift of life, because they imply that human happiness *takes work*. It takes work in the form of exercising one's proper capacities; more importantly, it takes work

7. 'Well-being' and 'flourishing' are not precise equivalents for Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, since they can be achieved at a particular time, whereas *eudaimonia* can be achieved only over the course of an entire life.

8. Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

because the relevant capacities must be acquired by practice and habituation. In this respect, humans are unlike other animals, whose well-being consists mostly in the exercise of capacities that are innate. A cat is born already equipped for the activities that will constitute its flourishing; a human being must be educated and trained for his most rewarding activities.

According to the Aristotelian view, then, a human child is born with the general, second-order capacity to acquire the further, specific capacities whose exercise will eventually constitute its flourishing as an adult. The gift of life is therefore the gift of an opportunity—the opportunity to do the work and thereby gain the reward of human well-being.

This opportunity is accompanied by a corresponding threat and a corresponding risk. The threat is that if the child doesn't undertake the work prerequisite to flourishing, it will suffer harm. And we can now see that it will be harmed quite literally, because without the capacities needed for human flourishing, the child will find itself in a position of passive subjection to its circumstances, lacking the resources to cope with them. The corresponding risk is that even if the child accepts the challenge of flourishing, it may nevertheless fail. (The streets of every large U.S. city are littered with individuals who are not coping with their circumstances, or are coping only poorly, and who are consequently faring poorly.)

The opportunity wrapped up in the gift of life is thus an offer of the sort that the child cannot refuse. To be born as a human being is to be handed a job of work, with a promise of great rewards for success, a threat of great harm for refusal, and a risk of similar harm for failure. The scene on which a human child appears willy-nilly is the scene of a predicament, a challenge with very high stakes. Hence the so-called gift of life is indeed a mixed blessing, as Shiffrin claims.

Shiffrin and other philosophers tend to view parental obligations as arising from the harms and benefits that parents confer on children by bringing them into existence. As I argued in the previous part, however, parents are metaphysically incapable of conferring either harms or benefits in that way. The Aristotelian spin that I have now put on Shiffrin's arguments enables me to conceive of parental obligations in different terms.

What is equivocal about procreation is not that it confers both benefits and harms on the resulting child; what's equivocal is that it throws that child into a predicament, confronts it with a challenge in which the stakes are high, both for good and for ill. Moreover, it is a challenge that no child can meet without the daily assistance of others over the course of many years, since the human infant is not at all equipped to acquire the necessary capacities on its own.

Consider the hackneyed example of a child who is drowning at the deep end of a swimming pool. People lounging around the pool obviously have an obligation to rescue the child. But the obligation to fish the child out doesn't fall on the bystanders equally if one of them pushed the child in. The one responsible for the child's predicament is not just a bystander like the others, and he bears the principal obligation.

Obviously, if the responsible party cannot or will not help the child, then others are obligated to act. The child has a right to be saved by somebody if not by the person who caused its predicament. But just as obviously, the person who pushed the child into the pool should have considered beforehand, not just whether someone or other would come to its assistance, but whether he himself was willing and able to fulfill the obligation of assistance that he was about to incur. You shouldn't go pushing children into the deep end if you aren't willing to get wet.

Likewise with procreation and parenting. In my view, parents who throw a child into the predicament of human life have an obligation to lend the assistance it needs to cope with that predicament, by helping it to acquire the capacities whose exercise will enable it to flourish and whose lack would cause it to suffer. By choosing to create a child, perhaps even by choosing to have sex, adults take the chance of incurring this obligation. To risk incurring the obligation without intending to fulfill it is irresponsible; actually to incur it and then not to fulfill it is immoral.

I will shortly consider whether it is morally permissible for biological parents to delegate this obligation to others. Is the obligation incurred through the act of procreation an obligation to see that the child receives the needed assistance in coping with the human predicament? Or is it an obligation to render that assistance oneself, in person?[9]

9. Jeff Sebo has directed me to Sidgwick's remarks on the subject: "This . . . we might partly classify under . . . duties arising out of special needs: for no doubt children are

Of course, parental obligations must sometimes be transferable in practice. A child has a right to grow up in the care of parents who are willing and able to care for it. If its biological parents do not rise to the task, then the child has a right to adoptive parents who are willing and able to take their place. Thus, the mere unwillingness of biological parents to discharge their obligations may be sufficient to ensure that those obligations may be transferred to others, in deference to the rights of the child.

But this practical accommodation does not mean that the biological parents are morally permitted to abdicate their responsibilities at will. We do not think that parents are permitted to relinquish a newborn for adoption because of a last-minute social engagement, for example, or dismay at the size of its ears.

More importantly, we don't think that adults are permitted to conceive a child with the prior intention to put it up for adoption. A woman may not decide to conceive simply in order to have the experience or health benefits of pregnancy, we think, no matter how confident she may be of finding suitable adoptive parents to take over her subsequent responsibilities. Thus, we regard parental obligations as transferable, morally speaking, only under exigencies that make their transfer beneficial for the child rather than convenient for the parents.

In one case, however, we tolerate a practice equivalent to creating a child for adoption. Those who "donate" their sperm and eggs play their role in conceiving children whom they have no intention of parenting. Indeed, they play their role in conception precisely on the condition that they will never be called upon to deal with the resulting children, a

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naturally objects of compassion, on account of their helplessness, to others besides their parents. On the latter they have a claim of a different kind, springing from the universally recognized duty of not causing pain or any harm to other human beings, directly or indirectly, except in the way of deserved punishment: for the parent, being the cause of the child's existing in a helpless condition, would be indirectly the cause of the suffering and death that would result to it if neglected. Still this does not seem an adequate explanation of parental duty, as recognised by Common Sense. For we commonly blame a parent who leaves his children entirely to the care of others, even if he makes ample provision for their being nourished and trained up to the time at which they can support themselves by their own labour. We think that he owes them affection (as far as this can be said to be a duty) and the tender and watchful care that naturally springs from affection: and, if he can afford it, somewhat more than the necessary minimum of food, clothing, and education" (*The Methods of Ethics* [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981], p. 249).

condition readily accepted by those who purchase their gametes, which would be unacceptable if they came with parental strings attached.[10] Why do we condone the antecedent intention to transfer parental obligations in this case?

Before I discuss the transferability of parental obligations, I want to discuss a different question raised by donor conception, about the provision that one must be able to make for future children in order to be justified in creating them. People should not create children for whom they cannot provide adequately; but what is an adequate provision? In particular, does an adequate provision require an opportunity for the child to know and be reared by its biological parents?

Here I am using the word 'adequate' in a sense that is relativized to a particular decision, namely, the decision whether to create a child. Most adoptive parents make more than adequate provision for their adopted children, but the relevant standard of adequacy is premised on the children's already existing and needing a home. My question is what provision for a child is adequate to justify the decision to create it, in the first place. And my view is that the standard of adequacy applicable to the procreative decision is different from the standard applicable to decisions made after the child already exists.

My arguments in Part I imply that the adequacy of a child's initial provision is not relative to what could have been provided to the selfsame child. The child will not be in a position to identify his interests with those of the better- or worse-provisioned children he might have been. From the child's perspective, the better or worse starts he could have had in life will not be a matter of self-interest, because his self-concern will extend only to his actual present and possible future selves, not to children inhabiting possible histories that will already have diverged from reality. When the child compares the hand he has been dealt at birth with those he might have been dealt, he will not be able to see himself as ahead or behind in the game of life; he will only see himself as starting a life that amounts to a whole new game. Hence what could

10. My discussion of donor conception will be confined to the typical case of anonymous donation between strangers. Cases of donation within families, or of "open" donation, are significantly different in respects that would call for different treatment.

have been provided to him in particular is not especially relevant to the standard of an adequate provision.

A standard that philosophers sometimes apply to procreative decisions is whether the resulting child would have "a life worth living." In Part III of this series, I will argue that this phrase has no meaning that can apply to procreative decisions. 'A life worth living' can mean "a life worth continuing," but procreative decisions concern whether a life should be started, not whether to continue it. Alternatively, 'a life worth living' can mean "a life not to be regretted," but I will argue that people are biased against regretting their existence by considerations that depend on their already existing, considerations that are irrelevant to the decision whether to bring them into existence. In any case, what's barely preferable to nonexistence is not enough for a child by the standard of adequacy that I consider appropriate.

The standard that I consider appropriate does not peg a child's initial provision at any particular level of happiness or well-being. Hence it is not what philosophers call a person-affecting standard; it is rather a personhood-respecting standard.[11] An adequate initial provision for a child, in my view, is one that expresses due consideration for the importance of human life.

When creating human life, we are obligated to show due consideration for *it*, not just for its individual possessors. The importance of human life itself forbids us to treat it lightly in creating it.

Human life is important because it is a predicament faced by a creature that matters—that is, by a person, whose success at facing it will entail the flowering of personhood, and whose failure will entail a disfigurement of that value, in the form of damage to the self. Just as we are obligated to realize the value of personhood in ourselves, so we are obligated, in creating human lives, to create ones in which that value is most likely to flower and least likely to be disfigured. In this respect, the importance of human life is like the importance of art—the kind of importance that makes something worth creating well if worth creating at all.

Due consideration for the importance of human life requires us to ensure that the human race does not go extinct, but it does not require us

11. For a similar view, → Rahul Kumar, "Who Can Be Wronged?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 31 (2003): 99–118.

to create any particular human lives, or any particular number of them. With respect to individual lives, it mainly requires that we avoid creating lives that will already be truncated or damaged in ways that seriously affect the prospects for personhood to be fully realized within them.

I claim that a life estranged from its ancestry is already truncated in this way. This claim is no less than universal common sense—though it is also no more, I readily admit. I cannot derive it from moral principles; I can at best offer some reflections on why we should trust rather than override common sense in this instance.

When I say that my claim is universal common sense, I mean that people everywhere and always have based their social relationships, in the first instance, on relations of kinship, of which the basic building block is the relation between parent and child. Not every society has favored the nuclear family, of course, but virtually every society has reared children among their kin and in the knowledge of who their biological parents are. The universal consensus on this matter is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 7, paragraph 1, states: "The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents."[12]

12. The Convention is posted at ⟨http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm⟩. See Eric Blyth and Abigail Farrand, "Anonymity in Donor-Assisted Conception and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child," *International Journal of Children's Rights* 12 (2004): 89–104. The *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child* makes clear that the term 'parents' in this clause includes biological parents in the first instance, and that the Convention therefore militates against the practice of anonymous gamete donation (Rachel Hodgkin and Peter Newell, *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child* [UNICEF, revised edition 2002], pp. 117–19).

For some social-scientific and legal perspectives, with further references, see Michael Freeman, "The New Birth Right? Identity and the Child of the Reproductive Revolution," *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 4 (1996): 273–97; Amanda J. Turner and Adrian Coyle, "What Does It Mean to Be a Donor Offspring? The Identity Experiences of Adults Conceived by Donor Insemination and the Implications for Counselling and Therapy," *Human Reproduction* 15 (2000): 2041–51; Lucy Frith, "Gamete Donation and Anonymity," *Human Reproduction* 16 (2001): 818–24; *Truth and the Child: A Contribution to the Debate on the Warnock Report*, ed. N. Bruce, A. Mitchell, and K. Priestley (Edinburgh: Family Care, 1988); *Truth and the Child 10 Years On: Information Exchange in Donor Assisted Conception*, ed. Eric Blyth, Marilyn Crawshaw, and Jennifer Speirs (Birmingham: British Association of Social Workers, 1998).

When people deny the importance of biological ties, I wonder how they can read world literature with any comprehension. How do they make any sense of Telemachus, who goes in search of a father he cannot remember? What do they think is the dramatic engine of the Oedipus story? When the adoptive grandson of Pharaoh says, "I have been a stranger in a strange land," what do they think he means? How can they even understand the colloquy between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker? Surely, the revelation "I am your father" should strike them as a piece of dramatic stupidity—a remark to be answered, "So what?"

As the stories of Telemachus, Oedipus, Moses, and even Luke Skywalker illustrate, people unacquainted with their origins have been seen throughout history as dramatically, even tragically disadvantaged. There must be some reason why people living at different places and times, under very different conditions, have converged on the opinion that a relationship with biological parents is essential to the minimally adequate provision for a child. To be sure, other articles of age-old consensus have been rejected fairly recently in history—the permissibility of slavery, for example. But they have been rejected on the basis of soul-searching reflection, whereas the rise of donor conception has been driven by the procreative preferences of adults, with little thought for the children involved.

Ironically, the preferences of these adults are often based on the same common sense that ought to raise questions on behalf of the children. The reason for resorting to donor conception, after all, is usually the desire of an adult to have a biologically related child despite lacking a partner with whom he or she can conceive. Yet whereas the parent will be just as fully related to the child as any mother or father, the child will know only half of its biological ancestry. These adults seek to enlarge their own circle of consanguinity by creating children who will never know half of theirs. Where is the common sense in that?

The material cited here argues that donor-conceived offspring should have access to information about their biological parents. In this part I argue for a stronger conclusion—that donor conception as usually practiced is wrong. In my view, the reasons for concluding that children should have access to information about their biological parents support the stronger conclusion that, other things being equal, children should be reared by their biological parents. For many children already born, other things are not at all equal, and adoption is therefore desirable; but as I argue below, other things are indeed equal for children who have not yet been conceived.

As I have said, I cannot prove that knowing and being reared by biological parents is part of the minimally adequate provision for a child; the best I can do is to make plausible the venerable and worldwide conviction to that effect. People have tried living in vastly diverse ways, but they have almost always settled on lifeways that accord central importance to biological family ties. Let me offer some considerations that may explain why.

Part of the task facing a human being is to find goals and activities in pursuit of which to develop and exercise the capacities relevant to human flourishing. A human being needs to find work, employment: he needs, as we say, to get a life. A cat does not need to get a life: it instinctively does what it needs to do in order to do well. Getting a life is a task peculiar to the human being, who is not born to do anything in particular, and must therefore figure out what to do with himself.

A human being accomplishes this task by becoming a self worth doing one thing rather than another with. That is, he forms an identity—a complement of traits and attitudes, reflected in a self-image by which to guide their expression in practice. The task of identity formation is not optional for a human being. As soon as he acquires the cognitive wherewithal to ask, "Who am I?" and "What am I like?," he is obliged to start coming up with answers, in order to form a specific identity for which there will be specific ways of flourishing.[13]

The task of forming an identity is carried out on raw materials that are not infinitely plastic. A human being begins life with a somewhat determinate temperament and set of aptitudes, which can be kneaded into many different shapes but not into just any shape whatsoever. These individual raw materials are present at birth, as determined by the child's genetic endowment (and perhaps by the intrauterine environment as well).

Research on twins and adoptees has shown that many psychological characteristics are heritable to a considerable degree. Genetic differences are responsible for a proportion of the variance between people

13. As Sophia Moreau has pointed out to me, there are cultures in which one's identity is largely dictated by social convention. Even within these cultures, however, the individual remains responsible for a significant degree of self-definition. From our cultural distance, the nineteenth-century British housemaid seems to have been stamped with a prefabricated identity; below stairs, however, that housemaid may have been no less self-defined than we are today.

not only in IQ (somewhere above 50 percent) but also for the variance in their traits of personality such as extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience (around 50 percent); in whether their interests are artistic, social, enterprising, or conventional (around 30 percent); in their inclination toward authoritarian or conservative attitudes (around 50 percent); and even in their degree of religiousness (around 30 percent).[14] These measures of heritability are manifested, for example, in greater similarity between identical twins than between fraternal twins, or between biological siblings reared apart than between unrelated children reared together. In many cases, the effects of genetic endowment tend to increase with age, possibly because the influence of guardians wanes. As people approach adulthood, in other words, they come into their genetic inheritance.

Thus, the predicament into which you were born, though generically human in many respects, was also highly individual, because it required you to fashion an identity out of a genetically inherited supply of raw materials. The possibilities and constraints inherent in those materials gradually came to the fore as you grew up and formed your adult identity.

A few people in the world had already coped or were already coping with predicaments similar to yours in its distinctive features—namely, your biological parents and siblings. Not only did each of your parents form an identity out of a genetic endowment half of which was to become half of yours, but also they jointly forged an identity as a couple, by reconciling between themselves the manifestations of what were to become the two halves of your genetic endowment. Or that's

14. My argument does not rest on any particular quantitative measures of heritability. I cite these statistics only for the sake of suggesting a rough order of magnitude to which psychological traits are probably heritable. In considering the statistics, keep in mind that what accounts for variance among individuals does not necessarily account for variance among groups. For example, individual variance in skin color is largely heritable, but the variance between lifeguards and coal miners is almost entirely due to environment.

The statistics cited here are drawn from Thomas J. Bouchard Jr., "Genetic Influence on Human Psychological Traits: A Survey," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 13 (2004): 148–51. On the heritability of values and religious attitudes, see Laura B. Koenig and Thomas J. Bouchard Jr., "Genetic and Environmental Influences on the Traditional Moral Values Triad—Authoritarianism, Conservatism, and Religiousness—as Assessed by Quantitative Behavior Genetic Methods," in *Where God and Science Meet; How Brain and Evolutionary Studies Alter Our Understanding of Religion,* Volume I: *Evolution, Genes, and the Religious Brain,* ed. Patrick McNamara (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006), pp. 31–60.

what they did if they *were* a couple. For that very reason, however, you stood to benefit from their being a couple; and for similar reasons, you stood to benefit from their rearing you together with your biological siblings, if any.[15]

This claim depends on an assumption about heritability that is politically incorrect, I know. We are supposed to believe that every child is born with the capacity to fulfill any arbitrary human aspiration. In private, however, most parents realize that part of their job is to help their child form realistic aspirations, folded into an identity in which it can truly flourish; and they realize that their ability to do so is greatly enhanced by their ability to recognize in the child various traits, inclinations, and aptitudes that they have seen before, either in themselves or in other members of the family.

In the first instance, of course, family resemblance is physical, and family members usually value the physical resemblances among them. There is a temptation to dismiss this attitude as shallow, but I think that it expresses a deep human need. For as human beings, we need to reconcile our identities as persons with our identities as animals.

The structure of human memory is such as to elicit an identification between the self who remembers and the self of the experience retrieved from memory.[16] Locke thought of that identification as constituting personal identity. Even if his metaphysics was shaky, his phenomenology was impeccable: we certainly seem to have existed at whatever times and places we remember experiencing, so that our sense of persisting through time does not depend on reidentifying our bodies on different occasions. Our relation to our bodies can therefore seem to be contingent. We feel embodied in but not identical to our bodies, and so we can imagine, for example, swapping bodies with other people.

15. My arguments in Part I imply that the benefit in question consisted, not in a counterfactual life-history that would have been preferable, but rather in an improvement that could have been brought about in your actual future prospects. Of course, if your parents conceived you with the intention of transferring their parental obligations to others, then this benefit may have been ruled out before you existed, hence before you had any future prospects to be improved. As I explain at the end of this part, however, it would have been wrong of your parents to conceive a child with the intention of refusing to provide the relevant benefit when it became possible to provide it.

16. I discussed this phenomenon in Part I, and I have discussed it before in "Self to Self" and "So It Goes."

To be born in a human body is thus to be susceptible to alienation from it. We are probably the only animals capable of feeling uncomfortable in our own bodies, even hating them—and loving them, too, for that matter. Coming to terms with our bodily selves is thus a part of the human predicament.

A connection to biological parents helps us to cope with this aspect of our predicament. In infancy we learn to love human faces whose features will eventually be blended in the face that emerges in the mirror as we reach adulthood. We grow into a body akin to the bodies from which we came, while growing into a personality akin to the ones that animate those other bodies. We thus repeatedly have the sense of becoming our own parents, a common form of intergenerational *déjà vu*. Those who do not know their parents can only wonder who they are becoming. Hence they can only wonder, How did someone like *me* come to be living in a body like *this*?

Some people say that they have nothing in common with their parents and siblings. I think that they are speaking figuratively; or maybe they are just in denial. Almost all of us look and sound and feel and move and think like the people from whom we came: a genuine sport of nature is very rare. What is more likely is that a person's similarities to his relatives lie in aspects of himself that don't matter to him, or that he dislikes and rejects. Not valuing commonalities is indeed a way of not having anything in common, figuratively speaking; it just isn't a way of literally having nothing in common.

Someone who doesn't value what he has in common with his relatives may think that he need never have known them in order to forge his independent identity. I doubt it. This person is likely to have defined himself as different from his relatives precisely because they exemplified aspects of himself that he would otherwise have been unable to discern clearly enough to disdain. Learning not to be like his relatives has still involved learning from them: if he had never known them, he might well have ended up more like them.

The point is that biological origins needn't be worth embracing in order to be worth knowing. Someone who doesn't know his relatives cannot even turn up his nose at them. The question for him is not "Shall I follow my progenitors?" but "Am I following them?" and to this latter question he can never know the answer. He can have neither the

satisfaction of continuing in their footsteps nor that of striking out on his own, because their footsteps have been effaced.

Even if a child never knows its biological parents, they usually remain significant figures in its life, figures to whom it is likely to develop an attachment. That's why roughly half of adopted children search for their biological families at some point,[17] and it is why the children of donor conception are now starting to search for their families as well.[18] In my view, the tendency to become attached to unknown parents bears on whether parental obligations are transferable, a question to which I now turn.

Why do these children search for absent parents who can no longer rear them and are unlikely to form a significant relationship with them? Having reached adulthood, haven't they finally made these parents redundant? Apparently not, although we can only speculate why. Here are my speculations.

17. A recent literature review concludes: "Following conservative estimates of more recent studies in countries with open records policies, about 50% of all adopted persons will, at some point in their life, search for their birth parents" (Ulrich Müller and Barbara Perry, "Adopted Persons' Search for and Contact With Their Birth Parents I: Who Searches and Why?" *Adoption Quarterly* 4 (2001): 5–34, at p. 8). These numbers have recently been increasing (p. 9), perhaps in response to greater awareness and acceptance of such searches.

18. See, for example, the Donor Sibling Registry (http://www.donorsiblingregistry.com/); the Donor Offspring/Parents Registry and Search Page (http://www.amfor.net/DonorOffspring/); the "Donor Offspring" page of the Donor Conception Support Group of Australia (http://www.dcsg.org.au/); the UK Voluntary Information Exchange and Contact Register (http://www.ukdonorlink.org.uk); and New Zealand's Human Assisted Reproductive Technology (HART) Register (http://www.dia.govt.nz/pubforms.nsf/URL/HARTbrochure.pdf/$file/HARTbrochure.pdf). A series by David Plotz in the online magazine *Slate* resulted in many inquiries from donor offspring seeking their biological families (http://slate.msn.com/id/98084/); Plotz discusses these inquiries, and many other aspects of donor conception, in *The Genius Factory: The Curious History of the Nobel Prize Sperm Bank* (New York: Random House, 2005). See also an op-ed entitled "Give Me My Own History" by David Gollancz (*The Guardian*, May 20, 2002, http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,718666,00.html); and a series of slides from the Oprah Winfrey Show (http://www.oprah.com/relationships/slide/20080208/rel_20080208_101.jhtml).

On the similarities between donor conception and adoption, see Eric Blyth, Marilyn Crawshaw, Jean Haase, and Jennifer Speirs, "The Implications of Adoption for Donor Offpsring Following Donor-Assisted Conception," *Child and Family Social Work* 6 (2001): 295–304.

Humans are unlike other creatures in being at risk for feeling unmoored. We have both an egocentric conception of the world and an objective conception of a creature whose conception it is, a creature who is identical with the "I" at the center of that egocentric conception. Seeing the world from within our own point of view and also from without makes us susceptible to a sense of alienation. Unless we can reconcile these two conceptions of ourselves, we may suffer what might be called existential insecurity—an insecure sense of our own concrete reality.

The creature who I am is securely rooted in the objective order. It is rooted in the objective order not only by being located in time and space but also by its location in the web of causality. It didn't just appear out of nowhere: it is the result of causal antecedents that tie it to the rest of spatiotemporal existence. Of course, I am that creature, and so I didn't just appear out of nowhere, either: I came from the same origins. Yet in order to feel that its connections to the rest of reality are mine, I must find a way of translating them into my egocentric perspective—a way of seeing them from my point of view.

The challenge, in other words, is to identify subjectively with the objective reality of the creature who I am, by seeing how that creature's place in reality can possibly be mine. In order to make that identification, I must see how the connections anchoring that creature in the objective order can have, from my personal point of view, the subjective significance of connections.

But of course, the "I" of my egocentric perspective is a person, for whom connections are most real when they are personal connections, consisting in felt attachments. The way to identify subjectively with the creature who I am objectively is to see its place in the objective world as my place in a personal world. Personal attachments to my causal origins, in the form of my biological parents and ancestors, enable me to experience firsthand the objective reality of the creature who I am. If I lack such subjective correlates for the connections anchoring that creature in objective reality, I am existentially insecure, because I am unable to see from my perspective how its place in reality is mine. That's why people who don't know their origins speak of feeling adrift in the cosmos, out of place in the world.

This sense of rootlessness is especially acute in light of elementary knowledge about the realm of living things. That realm is structured by the life-function of self-replication, which locates every living thing in a

chain of progenitors and progeny. To be a living thing is to be a link in that chain. Not to experience oneself as located in that chain is to lack a sense of one's membership in the realm of life, which is the locus of one's membership in reality.

Most people feel a need for a connection to that realm. It can be expressed as a need for roots, for a home—for a family. It is manifested in religious creation stories and cosmologies, in the perpetuation of traditions, and in the ceremonies surrounding ancestors and memorials. The same need naturally leads children to seek an attachment to their biological parents. And it is another peculiarity of human beings to be capable of becoming attached even to figures with whom they are not acquainted.

Many animals become attached to members of their family or group, and they appear to experience grief when these attachments are severed. But they become attached only to others with whom they are acquainted and whom they can recognize by sight or sound or smell. Humans, too, become attached to one another by acquaintance, of course; but they have the unique capacity for attachment to others whom they have never met and wouldn't recognize.

Those who study and counsel adoptees believe that they feel the loss of the birth parents they never knew, and that their sense of loss is comparable to that of children who experience parental death or divorce.[19] How can a child experience the loss of parents with whom it has had no relationship to begin with? The answer is that a child is capable of forming attachments to absent figures, provided that they are present to its thoughts as real objects.

Typically, an object is first presented in thought when it is perceived, whereupon a mental file may be opened to store information received from it via perception.[20] Such a file is used for thinking about the thing

19. See David M. Brodzinsky, "A Stress and Coping Model of Adoption Adjustment," in *The Psychology of Adoption*, ed. David M. Brodzinsky and Marshall D. Schechter (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Steven L. Nickman, "Retroactive Loss in Adopted Persons," in *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, ed. Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman (Washington, D.C.: Taylor and Francis, 1996), pp. 257–72.

20. See Robin Jeshion, "Acquaintanceless *De Re* Belief," in *Meaning and Truth: Investigations in Philosophical Semantics*, ed. Joseph Keim Campbell, Michael O'Rourke, and David Shier (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2002), pp. 53–78. I am grateful to Jeshion for suggesting this way of expressing what was a vague intuition on my part.

directly, in a way that is not mediated by a description or a concept. One does not merely have an existentially quantified belief to the effect that something satisfies various predicates; one does not merely have various beliefs whose subject-terms pick out the same thing under various descriptions; one has a mental file that stands for the thing and collects predicates descriptive of it, much as the thing itself unifies a bundle of properties.

Though a mental file is typically connected to its object by a channel of perceptual information, it can also stand for an object without such a connection.[21] If a creature can have intentions with respect to its own mental representations, then it can open and maintain a file intended to stand for a single thing. It must somehow pick out what the file is to stand for, but thereafter it can use the file to treat the thing as an immediate object of thought.

Of course, there is no point in opening a mental file for something that probably doesn't exist or cannot be picked out as its intended referent. But no such risks can deter a child from opening mental files for a biological mother or father with whom it is unacquainted. Every child can be certain of having one and only one such mother and father, to whom it can refer as "my mother" and "my father," and for whom it can therefore open files in the assurance of their standing for unique individuals. The child can fill these files with speculations about its parents, and it can become attached to those parents by thinking about them in this distinctively objectual way.

These considerations about the need and the capacity for attachment to biological parents are what lead me to think that parental obligations are nontransferable. The obligations are nontransferable, I think, because they arise in the context of a personal relationship.

Let us consider the daughter of a sperm donor, so that we can rely on pronomial gender to keep the parties straight. If the mother is like other recipients of donated sperm, she may insist that the girl has no use for her biological father, because he is "nobody to her." This statement is demonstrably false. *The daughter* may be nobody to *him*, because he can think of her only under the description "my possible children," never

21. Again, see Jeshion, "Acquaintanceless *De Re* Belief."

knowing whether he is referring to anyone at all. But to her he is a real person, locatable in thought, no matter how elusive he may be in time and space. Like every human child, she knows that with the word 'father', she can reach down a causal chain to address a single other human who is partly responsible for her existence.

In trying to cope with the predicament entailed by her existence, the daughter can want to be helped, not just by some paternal figure or other, but by the particular father who introduced her into that predicament; who links her to humanity, the realm of life, the causal order; who is her prototype and precursor in personal development; and who could give her a hint of how psyche and soma might be reconciled in her case. Out of those needs, the child can establish a mental representation capable of sustaining an emotional attachment to her father, and she can then frame a demand addressed directly to him, whether or not she knows his earthly address. So personal a demand, so obviously justified, deserves to be answered in person.

I know that my view seems grossly unenlightened. What passes for enlightenment today, however, strikes me as the mirror image of the purported enlightenment of the eugenics movement a century ago. Back then, the people who claimed to know better than common sense believed that a person's biological heritage was all-important; today they believe that it is utterly insignificant. Neither belief is true; either belief can lead to a wholesale violation of rights. The rights violated in the present case are the rights of children.

One objection to arguments like mine is that they seem to cast aspersions on donor-conceived children, by implying that they should never have been born. I do not think that my arguments yield that implication in a form that should give offense; in Part III of this series, I explain why. Another objection is that the children of donor conception are likely to waive any claims they may have on their biological parents. I deal with this objection in Part III as well.

A final objection to my arguments is that donor-conceived offspring have received the gift of life, which they wouldn't have received without the help of a sperm or egg donor. But I have argued that life is not a gratuitous benefit but a predicament with which the recipients require a kind of assistance that they will justifiably call on their biological parents to provide.

Note, moreover, that an obligation undertaken in bad faith cannot be excused by the fact that the party to whom it is owed was better off for its having been undertaken. If my promise to assist you with a risky project gives you the necessary confidence to begin it, then I am still obligated to assist you even if, in retrospect, my defaulting on the promise would not cause you to regret having begun. And if I know in advance that I am going to default on my promise, then I cannot justify issuing it on the grounds that it will induce you to begin a project that you will subsequently be glad to have begun, despite my expected default.

In this last example, my behavior is somewhat analogous to that of a sperm donor, only not quite as bad. The sperm donor doesn't induce his offspring voluntarily to enter the predicament of human life, on the grounds that they will be glad to have entered it; and he doesn't just expect to have all-things-considered reason to default on those obligations. The sperm donor throws his offspring into the human predicament willy-nilly, on the basis of a positive intention to default on the obligations that he thereby undertakes, since he wouldn't have undertaken them, in the first place, if he hadn't planned to default on them. I don't think that he is morally entitled to bank on his children's forgiveness in this way, even if they do eventually forgive him.

III. LOVE AND NONEXISTENCE

The birth of a child can move us to value judgments that seem inconsistent. Consider, for example, a fourteen-year-old girl who decides to have

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This part bears some similarity to Larry Temkin's "Intransitivity and the Mere Addition Paradox," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 16 (1987): 138–87. Both seek to show that a combination of views about future persons is not as paradoxical as it seems. The difference between the papers is this. Temkin focuses on failures of transitivity among comparative judgments; I address a different problem, in which the value of a general state of affairs appears inconsistent with the values of all possible instances. I am unsure whether the metaethical solution that I propose for the latter problem is called for by the former.