

MEANING TO THE RESCUE? Lorraine K. C. Yeung

Facing a recent surge in anti-natalist arguments saying that human procreation is immoral, some defend human procreation by saying that procreative parenting adds meaning to parents' life. This article examines one such defence, and argues that it does not suffice to rescue human procreation from the challenges to procreation.

It is not uncommon for people to believe that parenting brings meaning to parents' lives. Having children makes one stop thinking about committing suicide, writes the *Guardian* columnist Tim Lott (23 January 2015). A parent once told me that upon becoming a parent, she gained a clear reason to work hard and live well. Parenting orients her life to the project of raising children. However, even if parenting adds meaning to parents' lives, does it follow that procreation is morally permissible? Indeed, there has been a surge in anti-natalist arguments in recent decades claiming that human procreation is immoral. Also, the alleged meaning-endowing features of parenting can be realized by adoption (when available), which is arguably closer to environmental and social justice than procreation is. To advocate procreative parenting specifically, one has to show why creating a child is conducive to life's meaning, and what values can be realized through procreative parenting alone.

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To this the philosopher Luara Ferracioli advances an account of the distinct value of procreative parenting in relation to meaning in life, hoping that it can fend off some challenges to procreation. She intends to show ‘why prospective parents are morally permitted to procreate despite the environmental harms and opportunity costs involved’.¹ In this article, I argue that such an appeal to meaning fails to justify procreative parenting. I first reveal a morally fraught side in the account of the distinct value of procreative parenting. After considering a few possible defences from proponents of procreative parenting, I conclude that prospective parents should opt for adoption instead of procreation.

The Distinct Value of Procreative Parenting

Ferracioli’s account makes a few assumptions, many of which are reactionary. First, in response to the anti-natalist David Benatar’s view that coming into existence is always a serious harm, Ferracioli assumes that a life worth living is a benefit. Second, she takes the concerns of environmental and social justice as challenges against parenting but not procreative parenting. She suggests that parenting is a kind of self-regarding project for which morality must carve some space, for parenting potentially contributes to, though it is neither necessary nor sufficient for, ‘the pursuit of a meaningful life by both parties to the relationship’ (Ferracioli, p. 82). She adopts the philosopher Susan Wolf’s theory of meaning, according to which meaning in life arises when one is subjectively attracted to, and is actively engaged in, objectively valuable projects.

Ferracioli deems that the value of parenting necessarily consists in a deep, robust and loving bond between the child and their parent. Parental love is ‘deep’ in that parents are willing to sacrifice a lot for their child. It is ‘robust’ in that parents will continue to love the child irrespective of significant changes in the parents’ lives or in the child’s

qualities. It is a special kind of love that is distinct from other forms of intimate relationships. A parent is significantly more disposed to sacrifice her career for her child than for a friend; the sacrifice for one's child is more irresistible and unavoidable. Also, in comparison to romantic love, parental love is less contingent on the endurance of some facts about the recipient. Parental love is therefore 'the deepest and most robust mode of human caring' (Ferracioli, p. 84). Ferracioli defends her conception of parental love by saying that it explains why it is harder to justify a parent's unwillingness to enjoy a relationship with her severely disfigured child than a wife's decision to separate from her husband who has a newly acquired physical deformity.

Accordingly, if adults do not have children, they will 'miss out on the enriching moral experience of feeling significantly compelled to create the conditions for someone else to lead a good life' (Ferracioli, p. 85). The value of parental love lies in the fact that it renders moral acts (namely, sacrifice and cost-taking) irresistible and unavoidable across one's lifetime as a parent. Parent-child relationships offer adults the opportunity to assist another human being in overcoming the challenges and difficulties associated with both childhood and adulthood, which include the 'inability to identify and autonomously pursue the good' and 'heart-break, illness, financial stress' (Ferracioli, p. 85). Ferracioli's account is a 'dual interest' one, as it is simultaneously in the interest of the child to be the recipient of deep and robust parental love.

Ferracioli goes on to say that proactive parenting provides a distinct justification for parental love: the mere fact that a parent 'intentionally brought a vulnerable child into the world for the purposes of parenting' gives the parent 'a weighty *pro tanto* reason for loving the child deeply and robustly', as well as 'reasons to take on costs and make sacrifices for the good of the child across a lifetime' (Ferracioli, pp. 87, 90). Parental love through proactive parenting is more likely to be the deepest and the most

robust love, and hence more likely to contribute to meaning. Procreative parenting justifies love regardless of the child's qualities or facts about the relationship. This love is recipient-specific and is the closest to unconditional love. Conversely, such a *pro tanto* reason for love is unavailable in adoption. A reason is that it would be very strange if an adoptive parent asserts that in completing the adoption procedure, they were justified in loving the adopted child deeply and robustly.² Adoptive parenting has to justify love by appealing to the child's qualities or facts about the relationship. This is the non-trivial distinction between reasons for love in procreation and in adoption.

Taken together, her main argument runs as follows:

1. 'As a pursuer of the good, one is allowed to prioritize one's own projects and relationship in the face of conflicting demands of morality, so long as such projects and relationships are important ingredients of their conception of the good and have non-trivial value – that is, are of the kind that contribute to their leading a meaningful life without violating other people's basic interests' (Ferracioli, p. 80).
2. Procreative parenting is one such project and relationship.
3. Therefore, prospective parents are allowed to prioritize and pursue procreative parenting in the face of conflicting demands of morality.

For the sake of argument, I grant that the first premise is true. I also accept that existence is not always harmful. Having granted these points, however, I call the second premise into doubt.

For the Goods of Adults

Ferracioli's account can be seen as an adult-centred justification for procreation, which holds that having children is

beneficial to adults. For example, all the reasons for having children on Lott's list are adult-centred: having children gives parents a new social life; it creates topics for one to talk about with one's partner; and children are a source of laughter and 'aesthetic delight' for their parents. The justification goes on to say that the alleged benefits to adults justify procreation.

The philosophers Sarah Hannan and R. J. Leland examine one particular adult-centred justification, which says that parenting contributes to the well-being and flourishing of adults, for parents can gain the profound interest of developing capacities and virtues in their own selves from parenting. These parental interests are secured when they help children cope with difficulties and incapacities.³ However, on this particular justification, securing these parental interests requires that (i) children are especially vulnerable to their caretakers and generally lack the capacity to exit the family; (ii) the inability of children to take care of themselves requires parental coercion and manipulation; and (iii) children need to be taught a determinate conception of their own good. Parental interest is therefore conditional on what Hanna and Leland dub 'the bads of childhood', which include 'the children's asymmetric dependence, vulnerability and incapacities and thus the need for extensive parental care and control' (Hannan and Leland, p. 370). Hannan and Leland then ask: why is it justified for one to gain interest from a relationship in a way that essentially requires putting the person on the other end of the relationship 'in seriously bad states' and creating 'scenarios in which someone is in need of care' (p. 370)? Clearly this is a legitimate question: even if a doctor can gain a profound interest in loving and caring for their patients, it does not justify the act of intentionally making people sick so that they can take the patients under their care and cure them.

Ferracioli's account faces a similar problem. Her 'parental love' features the parental disposition to sacrifice and take on costs for their children in times of challenges and

difficulties. Some of the challenges and difficulties Ferracioli instances indeed result from the bads of childhood, while others are deemed 'the risk of coming into existence' by anti-natalists. Simply put, parental love logically requires subjecting the child to the bads of childhood and the risk of coming to existence across a lifetime in the first place.

This is not to suggest that any loving relationship that requires one person in the relationship to face bads or risks is morally suspicious. When a health professional of Médecins Sans Frontières cares for, and eventually develops a relationship with, people affected by a pandemic or conflicts, the relationship is also bound up with the fact that the people are vulnerable and unfortunate. When an adoptive parent takes an orphan home and raises them, the relationship is also essentially linked to the child's dependence and incapacities. Rather, the problem is specific to Ferracioli's account of procreative parenting. As an important ingredient in the prospective parents' conception of the good, the parents intentionally conceive a child, in full recognition of the fact that the child is going to be needy, incapable and vulnerable. The decision is made with the expectation that the child will be exposed to the risk of existence across a lifetime. The parents knowingly toss the child into this state while anticipating challenges and difficulties to befall them. The parents do so at least partly to enjoy the enriching moral experience of feeling parental love, and to derive meaning in their lives.

Consider also that the child is put into this scenario non-consensually. As the famous German philosopher Immanuel Kant remarked, each child is brought into the world 'without his consent' and on the parents' own initiative.⁴ Differently put, on Ferracioli's account, a parent is analogical to a health professional who, in order to gain meaning in their life, transports people, without their consent, to a place affected by a pandemic, whereby they have to rely on the health professional's help if they become infected. Even if the health professional can take very good care of them, the act of transporting them to an

unsafe place reveals what Hannan and Leland call ‘a defect of character or motivation’. This is the morally fraught side of Ferracioli’s account. The prospective parents’ conception of the good is a misguided one.

At this juncture, I must say that I agree with Ferracioli that having intentionally brought a child into the world gives a parent *pro tanto* reason to love the child deeply and robustly. However, I would say that this reason is bound up with the obligation of caring for the child, which stems from the parents’ causal and moral responsibility for putting the child non-consensually in an unsafe place. The obligation in turn explains why it is harder to justify a parent’s unwillingness to sacrifice and take on costs for her child compared to her friend or spouse, and why a parent should feel compelled to create the conditions for the child to lead a good life.

For the Goods of the Child

Some might suggest that to meet this challenge, we can draw on the dual interest aspect of Ferracioli’s account and turn it into a child-centred justification. We can say that the primary motivation for parents to create the scenario in which someone is in need of care is to benefit the child but not the parents. In this regard, I think Ferracioli’s appeal to meaning may have merit over a mere appeal to parental interest. Gaining interest from a relationship does not necessarily involve benefitting the person on the other end of the relationship, though it may typically do so. Conversely, on the theory of meaning Ferracioli adopts, a legitimate meaning-endowing project has to be objectively valuable; that is, the value has to be independent of oneself, and the recipient of value should ‘lie partly outside of oneself’ as well.⁵ This is also a feature that distinguishes meaning from self-interest as a legitimate reason for action. It follows that if an objectively valuable project is a loving relationship, there must be a recipient of love and value.

Taken together, the good of a parent–child relationship in Ferracioli's account logically requires the child to be a recipient of love and value. In fact, Ferracioli says that the distinct value of procreative parenting can contribute to the pursuit of a meaningful life for the parents *as well as* the child. In this way, procreative parenting is inherently bound up with the interests of the child. So one might argue that procreative parenting is justified based on the child's interest alone. Recall also the assumption that a life worth living is a benefit. If procreative parental love contributes to making the child's life meaningful or worth living, then one might justify the non-consensual subjection of the child to the scenario in which the child is in need of care by referring to the expected benefit that a life bestowed with parental love can offer to the child.

This revised strategy, however, incurs another burden. Many philosophers have already questioned the moral permissibility of subjecting a non-consenting person to a cost-imposing, potentially harmful condition in order to benefit them. It is generally agreed that under normal circumstances, subjecting a non-consenting person to a cost-imposing, risky situation is permissible only if doing so can save them from greater harm.⁶ Compare a case in which a doctor performs a somewhat risky medical procedure on a non-consenting patient just to enhance their attractiveness with one in which a doctor does so to save a patient from a skin disorder that is going to ruin their appearance. Other things being equal, it is far harder to justify the former than the latter.

One might respond that it is sometimes permissible to impose risk or cost on another person without their consent in order to benefit them. After all, parents non-consensually expose their children to risks of suffering all the time, such as when they feed their children, transport them in cars or sign them up for sports. These are cases in which if something goes wrong, the child runs the risk of suffering. But it is counterintuitive to assert that the parents are wrong in doing so.

A possible assumption underlying this analogical argument is that the potential benefits of being fed, transported and doing sport far outweigh the risks of harm posed by poisonous food, car accidents and sport injuries. Nevertheless, to what extent this empirical assumption is applicable to existence in general is a disputable point. Some might say that if we grant that existence is not always harmful, then the odds are good that a financially and emotionally stable couple will give their kids a good life overall. However, humans are facing soaring risks of harm, many of which are attributable to overpopulation and human activities. As I write this article, the world is in the new COVID-19 pandemic era. This infectious disease has already indiscriminately impacted the lives of millions of people in various ways, including those from advantaged classes in wealthy countries. This is not to say that the disease suffices to make existence bad overall, but that it is reasonable to believe that the odds of human beings having good lives are getting slimmer, if we take all sorts of soaring risks of harm into consideration.

Next, if we look more expansively, the analogical argument is weak for another reason. The expected benefits and risks of suffering in question result precisely from the parents' intentional decision to bring the child into existence in the first place. Had the parents not created the child – a being who needs to be fed with food, transported and do sports in order to satisfy other needs, desires and perhaps the yearning for a life worth living that arises from having to live a life – the risks of suffering would have been avoided. Also, if the child already exists and has such pertinent needs, desires and yearning, they would probably be harmed (in the sense of 'made worse off') if these needs, desires and yearning are not fulfilled. This explains why it is justified to subject children to the risk of injury while travelling in cars, doing sport, and so on. The risks are high inevitable once the child has needs, desires and yearning conditioned into their existence. However, the same does not seem to apply to the imposition of the risk of existence

to a child by procreation. As the saying goes, 'being is not mandatory'. The risk of coming into existence is avoidable. Moreover, it is not clear how the otherwise non-existent child would be made worse off if they were not brought into the world. Procreative parenting is still in need of further justification.

Other Possible Defences

Some might attempt to loosen the knot between parental love and any bads or risks by revisiting the conception of 'love'. One might say, after all, as Wolf remarks, that loving someone is a 'disposition to benefit, to comfort, to help the loved one *if she needs it*'.⁷ Ferracioli likewise characterizes parental love as a disposition, or a feeling of being compelled to sacrifice and take on costs. So, unlike the parental interest account which requires the child actually to suffer from the bads of childhood, the experience of parental love does not require the actualization of the risk associated with existence. The parents may well experience parental love, namely the disposition to sacrifice and take on costs for the child, even if the child never needed parental help or sacrifices.⁸

However, it appears to me that the positive value of Ferracioli's conception of parental love is contingent upon having subjected children to a scenario where they indeed need parental help and sacrifice. Imagine an extreme case in which human babies are born self-sufficient, autonomous and invulnerable. They are like the girls born of the Lichfield Experiment in the episode titled 'Eve' of *The X-Files* series (S1, ep. 11), who are endowed with heightened physical and psychological strength and intelligence. As a result, they do not experience the bads of childhood and are immune to illness, accidents, heartbreak, financial difficulties or any risks associated with existence. While some anti-natalists may concede that this condition makes

procreation less impermissible, it will paradoxically dilute the value of Ferracioli's parental love, if not make it obsolete.

One may also wonder about people who take procreative parenting as the sole source of meaning in life, for whom not having children would leave them shattered and devoid of any further reason to live on. For such people, their lives may feel akin to empty containers that can only be filled with another container of their own making. If we assume, as Ferracioli does, that morality is not unconditionally overriding, is it acceptable for these people to pursue procreative parenting?

This response turns to an appeal to parental goods again. If my argument against such an appeal in the first section is convincing, then the response involves a case in which a meaning-providing project conflicts with morality. In response to conflicts like this Wolf has suggested that one can explore if one has left out any options that 'would allow one to be more faithful to both morality and the competing value than the ones first thought of'.⁹ If we follow this suggestion, adoption is clearly an option. It certainly would be unfair to say that Ferracioli has left out this option. However, I think the problematic aspects of her account prompt a reconsideration of this option. In fact, Ferracioli admits that the value of procreative parenting comes mostly from parenting, and that although the *pro tanto* reason for love in procreative parenting is not trivial, it is not earth shattering either. What's more, she does not hold the view that procreative parenting is a superior form of parenting.

On the other hand, the unique value of adoption is compellingly established. As the philosopher Tina Rulli argues, in procreation, one creates the needs of a child and then satisfies them – but 'only adoption helps an existing child with an unmet need'.¹⁰ The parental love one experiences in adoptive parenting amounts to loving a stranger as one's own, and it is morally exemplary. It merges impartial, other-regarding concern with personal well-being. If a love that is closer to unconditional love is more valuable, as Ferracioli seems to hold, then in the account of the unique value of

adoption, adoptive parent–child relationships offer an opportunity for a kind of love that can be closer to unconditional love than procreative parenting. This love is not conditional on the biological link between the child and the parents, and consequently the child ‘may not share the same personality traits, look, ethnicity, culture, or place of origin’ (Rulli, p. 119) with the parents. It does not depend on the fact that the parents are causally and morally responsible for its existence.

I have shown that the force of the *pro tanto* reason for love in Ferracioli’s account is undercut by the fact that it requires the intentional creation of the scenario in which a child is expected to face the bads of childhood and the risk of existence. It renders the prospective parents’ conception of good a misguided one. I have considered a revised strategy that turns her account into a child-centred justification for having children. Still, this account has yet to show why it is justified to impose risk on a non-consenting child in order to benefit them. I have also examined two possible defences and shown that one paradoxically undermines the value of parental love, while the other brings back the option of adoption. I conclude that such an appeal to meaning does not succeed in justifying procreative parenting. Prospective parents should prioritize adoption over procreation.¹¹

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Notes

¹ Luara Ferracioli, ‘Procreative-Parenting, Love’s Reasons and the Demands of Morality’, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 68.270 (2018): 77–97, at p. 78.

² She presents cases to show this point (pp. 88–9), which I find dubious. However, as the fact that the parent intentionally

brought the child into the world is sufficient to show the difference between procreation and adoption relevant to the current discussion, I am not dealing with those cases.

³ Sarah Hannan and R. J. Leland, 'Childhood Bads, Parenting Goods, and the Right to Procreate', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 21.3 (2018): 366–84, at p. 367.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1797/2017), 280–1.

⁵ Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 43.

⁶ See Seana Shiffrin, 'Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility and the Significance of Harm', *Legal Theory* 5.2 (1999): 117–48; Gerald Harrison and Julia Tanner, 'Better not to Have Children', *Think* 10.27 (2011): 113–21; Jimmy A. Licon, 'The Immorality of Procreation', *Think* 11.32 (2012): 85–91; Asheel Singh, 'The Hypothetical Consent Objection to Anti-Natalism', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 21 (2018): 1135–50.

⁷ Susan Wolf, *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 190.

⁸ Although it is not clear whether Ferracioli requires the disposition to be actualized in order to make the parental love 'full-fledged', I take it that it is not required. For if it were, her account would reveal a graver flaw, that is, it would actually require the child to suffer from some conditions that call for parental sacrifices, which would include things like illness, heartbreak, financial difficulties, and so on.

⁹ Susan Wolf, 'Meaning and Morality', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, 97 (1997): 299–315, at p. 311.

¹⁰ Tina Rulli, 'The Unique Value of Adoption', in Françoise Baylis and Carolyn McLeod (eds.) *Family-Making: Contemporary Ethical Challenges* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 109–28, at p. 112.

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