Partiality, Identity, and Procreation

According to commonsense morality, while we have reason to be concerned about the effects of our actions on anyone's welfare, we also have reason to be partial towards the welfare of people to whom we have certain special relationships. I have, for example, more reason to make sure that my own child gets into a good school than that my neighbor's child does. In this paper, I want to examine a kind of decision where the *identity* of people to whom we bear the special relationship depends on our action – in particular, the identity of our future children.

Ordinary moral thinking holds that even in such identity-affecting cases, the fact that my decision will lead to my future child having a better life counts in a special way in its favor, and the main accounts in the literature explicitly addressing such cases agree. I will argue that this is mistaken. This is because more generally, special concern doesn't give us reason to *be picky* – to select better identities for the occupants of our special relationships – and therefore does not give us reason to have better-off children rather than worse-off ones. Given that most of our decisions before our children's conception *are* identity-affecting, it will follow that our reasons to make sure our future children are well-off are merely reasons of *general* concern with the same character and strength as our reason to make sure anyone else is well-off. This thesis, that our future children are strangers to us morally, has surprising implications for the ethics of procreation, genetic engineering, and other identity-affecting practical decisions.

Introduction

There are many relationships that plausibly generate reasons of special concern. Philosophers have argued that we have special obligations to children, parents, siblings, spouses, pets, and fellow countrymen, and each of these claims has a strong grounding in moral common sense. On the commonsense view, these relationships magnify the importance of various sorts of reasons – for example, reasons to promote welfare, be honest, and keep promises. In this paper, I want to focus on

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one kind of reason – the intensified reason to promote *welfare*,[1] and one kind of special relationship – the one we have to our children. I think considering the case of children is illuminating for several reasons.

First, we are often in a position to affect the identity of our children (unlike, for instance, our parents). Second, we do not typically have overwhelming non-welfarist reason to decide their identity a certain way (unlike, for instance, our spouses). Third, unlike most other special relationships, we typically affect the identity of our children by affecting whether or not they exist, which makes the question of special obligation to children interact in an interesting way with general obligations when existence is at stake. Finally, I think it is in the case of children that the implications of different views are least appreciated. Indeed, I will argue that certain views about special concern for children are so obviously false when applied to other relationships that we should reject those views.

To introduce the claim I am going to defend, it will be helpful to consider a pair of cases.

Career Choice

Rose must decide between two jobs. The first job would put her in charge of a charitable nonprofit organization which would be made much more effective by her leadership, and significantly improve the lives of many people in developing countries. However, she has a son, Adrian, and her job would require so much of her time that Adrian would get less attention from her than would be best for him. Additionally, she would have to move to a city where he would get only a so-so education, and have an adequate if unexceptional start in life. The second job would put her in a cushy university position working on interesting but obscure and impractical philosophical questions. She would not contribute much to the general welfare, but the light teaching load would give her considerable time to devote to Adrian. Moreover, it is in a city with an excellent educational system, and his life would be considerably better. Both jobs are equally attractive to her in other respects.

Cases like *Career Choice* present a kind of moral tension. On the one hand, Rose should have some general concern for the well-being of others. This favors choosing the job at the charity. On the other

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[1] There may be other kinds of obligations – some that don't have anything to do with welfare, and others that concern welfare but in a different way – for example, *sufficientarian* obligations to make sure that children's lives meet a minimum standard, or obligations to make sure that they don't suffer individual harms of a certain type or seriousness (see e.g. Feinberg 1984, Steinbock 2009). These obligations might be real and important, but I think moral common sense *also* licenses caring more, in general, about our children's welfare relative to the welfare of others, even when these obligations are satisfied.

hand, Rose should have a special concern for the well-being of her child. This favors choosing the job at the university. Additional welfare just *matters more* for Rose's decision when it accrues to her son than to strangers.

It is not important for my purposes whether one thinks the tension is easily resolved in one direction or the other in this particular example. To settle that, we would likely need more details. My aim is rather to contrast this kind of case with another which seems, on the surface, very similar.

Identity-Affecting Career Choice

Like Rose, Rosemary must choose between a job at a charity and a job at a university. The jobs are equally attractive to Rosemary in all respects except for the opportunities they would offer her child, and the good they would do for the world. However, Rosemary does not yet have a child. She does intend, with her partner, to have one in the next few years. (She may not, we will postulate, change her career path after she makes her choice.)

It is very natural to see this case as having essentially the same considerations at stake as the first. We expect Rosemary to be sensitive to the needs of the people the charity would help. But we also expect her to feel the force of the thought that as a mother, she has a strong reason to give her own child a good start by taking the academic job. Indeed, it is not uncommon for people to find themselves in positions much like Rosemary's, and to make decisions for reasons much like these. On this way of thinking, Rosemary, like Rose, must balance reasons of general concern against reasons of special concern. The main claim of this paper is that thoughts like these are mistaken. Unlike Rose, Rosemary fully satisfies her reasons of special concern whether or not she takes the academic job.

The Non-Identity Problem

As the name suggests, what distinguishes *Identity-Affecting Career Choice* is that Rosemary's choice affects not just the *welfare* of her child, but also the *identity* of her child. The child she will have if she takes the job at the charity (call them Charity) will be a different child than the one she will have if she takes the job at the university (call them Dean). This is because, with a probability approaching certainty, the conditions of Dean and Charity's respective births (including the time of conception, the identity of the sperm and egg from which they grow, etc.) will be different enough to guarantee

that they are different people. This claim is not *completely* uncontroversial,[2] but it is widely accepted, and for the purposes of this paper I will be assuming it.[3]

The identity-affecting character of Rosemary's decision gives it a structure analogous to the so-called *non-identity problem*, a longstanding puzzle in population ethics. It will be helpful before we go forward to clarify the relation of our topic to this traditional debate.

We can represent the difference between the implications of Rose and Rosemary's choices in the following diagrams, where each entry represents the welfare of the person labeled in the column, given that the action labeled in the row is performed (with "Ø" signifying that the relevant person does not exist), and where shading indicates a parent-child relationship. For simplicity, we will present the case with just one stranger being affected, preserving the crucial fact that the impact of Rose and Rosemary's decision on the stranger's welfare is greater in magnitude than the impact on their children's welfare.

Career Choice (Rose)

	Adrian	Stranger
Nonprofit	5	20
University	10	0

Identity-Affecting Career Choice (Rosemary)

	Charity	Dean	Stranger
Nonprofit	5	Ø	20
University	Ø	10	0

It is straightforward in Rose's case why choosing the nonprofit is bad from the standpoint of special parental concern – it is worse for Adrian, her child. But it is not as straightforward why choosing the nonprofit in Rosemary's case would be objectionable. If she takes the nonprofit job, her child is Charity, and there is no option that is better for Charity.

This may be sounding familiar. In a kind of case famously discussed by Parfit (1984), a prospective mother, Mary, must choose between conceiving a child now, in which case the child that is born, Mariette, will have a moderate disability, such as blindness, or waiting a month, in which case the child that is born, Harry, will be perfectly healthy.

Non-Identity (Mary)

	Mariette	Harry
Conceive Now	5	Ø
Conceive Later	Ø	10

Parfit's case was intended to present a problem for purely *person-affecting* views about the moral significance of welfare. On a person-affecting view, what has moral significance is the way your action affects the welfare of particular individuals in positive or negative ways – that is, the *harms* and *benefits* produced by your action. On such views, in order to something wrong, there has to be some *victim* – someone who has a complaint in virtue of a harm inflicted or benefit owed to them. The person-affecting view could not, Parfit thought, explain why it was wrong for Mary to have the disabled child.

If Mary conceives now, Mariette is as well-off as she could be, and Harry doesn't exist, so there is nobody who is worse-off because of that decision.[4]

Given the similarity between the cases, and the puzzle they present, one might expect that whatever explains the wrongness of Mary's action will also, perhaps with minor adjustment, explain why Rosemary has a reason of special concern favoring the university job. But this is too quick. The most natural explanation for why Mary ought to conceive later does not easily transfer to Rosemary's case.

The lesson Parfit drew, and perhaps the most standard response to the non-identity problem, is that at least some welfarist reasons have to do with *impersonal value* – the value or disvalue of the world brought about by your action, in a way that can't be reduced to person-affecting harms and benefits. Having the disabled child is wrong because it makes *the world* worse than having the healthy child, even though no *individual life* goes worse.

This famously led Parfit to try, unsuccessfully, to give an account of these impersonal reasons that did not lead to equally counterintuitive implications. Nowadays, fueled by a history of failures, philosophers are generally pessimistic about the prospect of a view that would respect ordinary intuition when the number and identity of people who exist depends on our action.[5] As a result, it is controversial whether the best theory will ultimately vindicate the intuitive judgment that Mary's action is wrong (Heyd 2009, Boonin 2014) and if it does, how the wrongness is to be explained. The point I want to emphasize, however, is that whether one agrees or disagrees with this way of resolving Parfit's non-identity problem, it cannot explain why Rosemary would have special reason to take the university job.

Although Parfit's original example involves a mother and her child, he and the philosophers that have followed in his wake are primarily engaged with the nature of *general* welfarist reasons, not reasons of special concern. Impersonal value is a plausible source of such general reasons. But it is not a plausible source of reasons of special concern.

Whether I have a reason of special concern towards a particular child depends on my relation to that child. Other people do not have the reasons to promote the welfare of my child that I do. These reasons are, in other words, *agent-relative*. But the impersonal value of the world, at least as far

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[4] However, see Harman (2004) for an attempt to explain the wrongness of Mary's decision in person-affecting terms.
[5] Greaves (2017) provides a good summary of the state of the debate.

as welfare is concerned, is a function of the distribution of welfare in that world – it is the same for each agent. Impersonal reasons (at least on standard views[6]) are *agent-neutral*. Consequently, the presence of Stranger, and the great benefit that choosing Nonprofit would provide them, means that choosing Nonprofit would maximize impersonal value on any reasonable view, even in the non-identity-affecting case, and we could not make sense of the moral tension partiality is supposed to present.[7]

So we cannot find our special obligations contained in our pursuit of the impersonal good. There are two lessons here. First, insofar as we expect the explanation or justification of the intuitive judgments about the classic *Non-Identity* case to match the explanation or justification of the intuitive judgment in *Identity-Affecting Career Choice*, the widespread appeal to impersonal reasons in the literature has been a mistake.

Second, and more importantly for our purposes in this paper, even if we do want to appeal to impersonal reasons in cases of non-identity where only general welfare is at stake, these reasons will be of no help justifying the intuitive verdict in either Rose or Rosemary's case. Parents have reason to care about *their children*, and this comes apart from their reasons to make the world a better place. Indeed, the non-identity-affecting version of *Career Choice* is a paradigmatic example where these reasons point in different directions.

The platitude that parents have special reason to promote their children's welfare, however, turns out to be ambiguous. And different readings have different implications for cases like Rosemary's. In the next part of the paper, I will explore several ways of understanding reasons of special concern.

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[6] Recently, some philosophers have argued that we can make sense of agent-relative impersonal moral value (Portmore 2001), and therefore claim that a world might be impersonally better relative to one agent but worse relative to another. There is controversy over whether such a view really latches on to any familiar sense of "better" (see Schroeder 2007), but we do not need to enter this debate, which would just push the issue back one step. If we hold such an agent-relative view, then the question will arise whether the world in which Rosemary takes the charitable job is worse relative-to-Rosemary for reasons having to do with special concern (and why), and the views I will go on to describe later in this paper can be understood as possible answers to this question.

[7] Even if we think it is impersonally good that parents look out for their children, this would not draw the boundaries in the right way. For I might be in a position where, by not looking out for my own child, I could ensure that two other people look out for their children. I take it to be intuitively clear that my reasons of special concern tell me to favor my own child even in such a case.

De Dicto and *De Re* Concern

My claim is that Rosemary fully accommodates her reasons of special concern given that she takes the charitable job. The first-pass argument for this is simple: given that her decision is identity-affecting, there is nothing else that she could have done to make her child better off, and if she could not have made her child better off, there is no room for reasons of special concern to raise an objection.[8]

But as Caspar Hare (2007) points out, there is a potential equivocation lurking here. It is true in *one* sense that Rosemary could not have made her child better-off – Charity is Rosemary's child, and Rosemary could not have made Charity better-off. But in another sense, Rosemary *could* have made her child better-off. She could have had Dean, and then she would have had a child who was better-off.

An action X makes one's child better-off than action Y in the former sense, the *de re* sense, when, whoever one's child actually is, *that individual* is better-off if one does X than if one does Y. X makes one's child better-off than Y in the latter sense, the *de dicto* sense, when the child one has if one does X is better-off than the child one has if one does Y. When the identity of our children is not affected by our decision, we make our children better off *de re* if and only if we make them better of *de dicto*. But these come apart precisely in identity-affecting cases.

My contention, then, is the following:

Modest De Re: If A does Y, and no option makes A's children better-off *de re* than Y, then there is no reason of special concern against Y.

I call this principle modest, because it follows from a range of more committal views about the conditions under which we have reasons of special concern. For example, it follows from the view that we have such reasons whenever an action is best for our *actual* children, present and future. It follows from the view that we have such reasons whenever an action is best for our *existing* children. And it follows from the view that we have such reasons whenever an action is best for our *necessary*

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[8] I will be focusing on our *objective* reasons here – those reasons which are grounded in the way things are and which are not sensitive to the agent's ignorance and uncertainty. What I say will be true of the agent's *subjective* reasons as well, provided that they know all the relevant facts of the case.

children, those who will exist no matter what we do. And on its face the principle is intuitively plausible.

But it is not *too* modest, for it is incompatible with the approach taken in the literature by those explicitly considering identity-affecting cases. My aim, then, will be to defend *Modest De Re* by arguing against the most natural alternative accounts of special concern.

De Dicto Betterness

Some qualification will become necessary, but in its most basic form, the view held by Hare and others following him is:

> *De Dicto Betterness*: If X makes A's children better-off *de dicto* than Y, then there is a reason of special concern against Y.

The rough idea behind *De Dicto Betterness* is that in virtue of their role as a prospective parent, agents in Rosemary's position have an obligation to the *office* of "their child" to see that it is filled by someone happy, in a way that can't be reduced to an obligation to any particular individual. If it is correct, then Rosemary has a reason of special concern to take the academic job. If *Modest De Re* is correct, she does not. Given the ambiguity between *de re* and *de dicto* readings of ordinary platitudes about our children's welfare, it looks like we will have to look elsewhere to adjudicate the conflict.

De Dicto Betterness captures the commonsense approach to cases like Rosemary's – that is one point in its favor. But ultimately, I think it must be rejected. The main problem is that analogous *de dicto* principles are extremely implausible when applied to special relationships that we'd antecedently expect to be governed by similar norms of special concern, and that there are unacceptable implications even in other instances of the parent-child relationship – in particular, in cases of adoption.

The closest counterparts to our relationships with children are those we have with our partners, parents, siblings, friends, and pets. All of these, at least paradigmatically, involve substantive, loving, personal relationships between individuals, and plausibly involve responsibilities of special concern. Some of these, like our relationships with parents or siblings, won't be much help as test cases, because we are not normally able to affect the identity of the other party, and so we won't find cases where the relevant analogue of *De Dicto Betterness* comes apart from the relevant analogue of

Modest De Re. But we do have some control over the identity of partners, friends, and pets. So let us see what a *de dicto* view says about identity-affecting cases of these sorts.

According to the analogue of *De Dicto Betterness* for these other relationships, I have a reason of special concern to make sure that the office of "my partner", "my friend", and "my pet" is filled by someone well-off. In cases where I am in a position to determine who will be my partner, friend, or pet, this means I have reason to pick the happiest to fill that office. So I ought, all else equal, find the happiest looking puppy in the pet store, spend time with the happiest people to make friends, and date the happiest potential partners.

Now, there might very well be reasons to date or spend time with cheerful people, or adopt a dog that wags their tail a lot. Perhaps they tend to make better partners, friends, or pets. But these are basically self-interested reasons; acting on them is not an expression of special concern for one's partner, friend, or pet. Special concern is a component of living up to the ideal of the relevant relationship – being a *good parent* or *good friend* or *good partner*. But it would be absurd to praise someone who managed to match themselves up with an antecedently happy spouse for how good a partner they are.

We do not even have to leave the parent-child relationship to see the implausibility of the *de dicto* view. For not all cases where we affect the identity of our child look like Mary or Rosemary – we can also choose who fills the office of our child in cases of *adoption*. We have reason to be specially concerned with the well-being of our adopted children just as we do with our biological children. Now consider the following case, where an agent may choose between adopting one of two children.

Orphanage

	Oliver	Bruce
Adopt Oliver	5	11
Adopt Bruce	4	10

De Dicto Betterness suggests that we have a reason of special concern to adopt Bruce rather than Oliver, because this would make our child better-off *de dicto*, despite this being worse for *both* Bruce and Oliver, and better for nobody. This is far worse than any counterintuitiveness of *Modest De*

Re's implication about Rosemary's case. Importantly, we could not plausibly describe this scenario as involving a tension between, on the one hand, our special obligations, pushing us towards adopting Bruce, and on the other hand, our general beneficence, pushing us towards adopting Oliver. Someone who adopts Bruce is not doing better with respect to being a parent but worse in some other respect. There is simply *no moral reason at all* to adopt Bruce rather than Oliver.[9]

Restricting *De Dicto* Betterness

Others have raised worries about how *De Dicto Betterness* handles adoption (Boonin 2014), and Hare himself acknowledges that it would be implausible to give a *de dicto* story about all special concern. But, he points out, the fact that *de dicto* obligations do not *always* matter does not mean that they *never* matter, and some restricted form of *De Dicto Betterness* might be true. Nevertheless, there is a presumption in favor of norms of special concern sharing a similar structure across different relationships, and *especially* across the relationship between biological and adoptive children. A satisfactory response to the worry, then, should identify a principled distinction between the cases in which our special obligations have a *de dicto* form and the cases in which they do not, and which draws that line between procreative parenthood and the other special relationships. What Hare says on this score, I will argue, is unsuccessful.

Hare holds that far from being *sui generis* for biological parent-child relationships, cases where what matters morally is the well-being of some class of people *de dicto* are commonplace. Hare gives the example of a safety officer in charge of regulating automobiles. The officer has special reason to be concerned with accident victims, Hare thinks, but this could not be understood *de re*. The choices they make will affect driving behavior in subtle ways that alter the identity of the people who get into accidents, and so they are inevitably quite *bad* for accident victims *de re* – most of those people would not have gotten into accidents but for the safety officer's decisions. Rather, Hare thinks, the safety officer has a role-affecting obligation to make things better for the health of accident victims, *de dicto*.[10]

Hare's general diagnosis is that *de dicto* obligations arise under two conditions. First, when "it is appropriate to expect the person to be partial" towards some group characterized by a definite

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[9] This is one reason Haramia's (2014) response to similar cases – that the reason provided by *de dicto* concern just isn't *strong enough* in this case to make it obligatory to adopt Bruce, is unsatisfying.
[10] He also gives a similar case involving a cancer researcher, who Hare thinks should be concerned with the health of cancer patients *de dicto*.

description (their children, accident victims, etc.) Second, when "in virtue of the causal circumstances the person finds herself in, that partial concern has no *de re* expression." (519)

If this will save the view from the objections in the previous section, it must be through this second condition. What does it mean, exactly? Hare's thought is that partial concern has no *de re* expression if, for any choice the person might make, either whatever she does will turn out to be *de re* better for the object of special concern or whatever she does will turn out to be *de re* worse for the object of special concern. This is, of course, precisely Rosemary's situation. And, Hare thinks, this contrasts with cases of adoption, like *Orphanage*, and other special relationships, where we have ways to affect the welfare of prospective candidates without affecting their identity, and therefore where *de re* concern could play a nontrivial role.

One initial issue to flag is just how odd the resulting picture of the moral landscape is. Why should the existence of a *de dicto* obligation depend on whether the corresponding *de re* obligation would make a difference to our decisions? It's as though the obligation to care about one's children is so desperate for work that, finding that it would be idle if it took a *de re* form, it morphs into an obligation with an entirely different structure. As far as I can tell, there is no other moral phenomenon with this character. Even if it distinguishes the cases extensionally in the right way, it would be unsatisfying, absent further elaboration, as an *explanation* of why some obligations take one form or the other.

But we need not dwell on this worry, because the account does *not* distinguish the cases in the right way. First, as a number of critics have pointed out, it is just not plausible that obligations like that of the safety officer are captured by an analogue of *De Dicto Betterness*. The safety officer could make accident victims better-off *de dicto* by, for example, making sure that accidents befall healthier people (by, for example, focusing their attention on preventing accidents around hospitals). (Boonin 2014, Wasserman 2008) But this clearly would not be a satisfaction of their obligations. The duties of the safety officer are better understood as concerning a kind of *harm-type reduction* – a duty to reduce the harm or risk associated with accidents.

More importantly, however, Hare's conditions do not distinguish procreative cases from other relationships in the way the defender of the *de dicto* view needs. The fact that we are typically able to make choices that affect the welfare of future adopted children, spouses, friends, and pets, without

affecting their identity, and that we are typically *not* able to make choices that affect the welfare of our future biological children without affecting their identity, is purely contingent.

Imagine a world where there are so many children constantly being adopted that entering the adoption agency at even a slightly different moment would lead to the adoption of a different child. Then any change in our behavior would affect the identity of our future adopted children, in much the same way that changes in our behavior affect the identity of our biological children in the actual world. Consequently, our partial concern for our future adoptive children has no *de re* expression, and Hare's conditions imply that it takes a *de dicto* form. In such a world, then, parental concern would tell us to time our visit to the adoption agency so we are presented with a happy rather than an unhappy child, if possible. But it is not plausible that this change in the mechanics of adoption could make this kind of moral difference.

Conversely, imagine a world where our reproductive systems and other contingent causal circumstances are such that at least some of our actions would not change the circumstances of conception enough to alter the identity of our future children. Consequently, our partial concern for our future biological children does have a *de re* expression, and Hare's conditions imply that it takes a *de re* form. In such a world, Rosemary, who faces a particular choice about her future children that *is* identity-affecting, has no reason of special concern to take the academic job. But again, this would not plausibly make a difference – anyone attracted to the commonsense line on Rosemary's case would hardly abandon it here.[11]

The fact that this attempt at a principled restriction on *De Dicto Betterness* fails does not mean that no defense along similar lines is possible. But I think there is a more promising strategy available to someone who wants to reject *Modest De Re*.

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[11] One might try to object that even if *some* choices could preserve identity, in her particular decision Rosemary's cannot, and so the obligation takes the *de dicto* form specifically for that decision. But Hare does not go this way, and one can see why: if the form of the obligation depends only on the causal circumstances of the particular decision in question, then it is even clearer that the response will not distinguish procreation cases from adoption and other special relationships, since even in the *actual* world many of those decisions, taken in this isolated way, allow for no expression of *de re* concern.

De Dicto Benefit

To see the path towards this more promising strategy, recall *Orphanage*:

Orphanage

	Oliver	Bruce
Adopt Oliver	5	11
Adopt Bruce	4	10

De Dicto Betterness tells us that our reasons of special concern are determined by the relationship between the values in the shaded cells. Because Oliver's absolute welfare, given that we adopt Oliver, is less than Bruce's absolute welfare, given that we adopt Bruce, we have a reason of special concern to adopt Bruce. One diagnosis of what is so absurd about this begins by pointing out that adopting Bruce *harms* him, while adopting Oliver *benefits* him. And it is facts like these that should be guiding us, not facts about absolute welfare. Information about the harms and benefits of our choices to our children depend on more than just the content of the shaded cells.

Nevertheless, one might say, the *de dicto* view was right in one important respect – we can't, as *Modest De Re* implies, simply stop with the observation that adopting Oliver benefits him most, and conclude our special obligations are satisfied. We do have to compare Oliver to Bruce. But we should be comparing *benefits*, not absolute well-being. The operating principle, the thought goes, is:

De Dicto Benefit: If X benefits A's child more (or harms them less) than Y, *de dicto*, then A has a reason of special concern against Y.

To say X benefits one's child more than Y, *de dicto*, is to say that the person who is one's child if X is benefited more by X than the person who is one's child if Y is benefited by Y. On this view, then, there is a reason of special concern to adopt Oliver – Oliver is benefited more than Bruce by their respective adoptions.

We require one further assumption before *De Dicto Benefit* can give my opponents what they are looking for in Rosemary's case: causing someone to exist with a good life benefits them. Some theorists will deny this, on the grounds that one is only benefited if one would have had lower welfare

given some other choice, and someone who fails to exist does not have any level of welfare. But I think it is plausible, and we may grant it here. Now we can re-examine Rosemary's case:

Identity-Affecting Career Choice (Rosemary)

	Charity	Dean	Stranger
Nonprofit	5	Ø	20
University	Ø	10	0

De Dicto Benefit, like *De Dicto Betterness*, implies that Rosemary does have a reason of special concern to take the university job. Unlike *De Dicto Betterness*, this is not explained by the fact that Dean is better-off in absolute terms than Charity, but rather by the fact that Dean benefits more from being created than Charity.

De Dicto Benefit, I believe, is a much more plausible view than *De Dicto Betterness*. It gets the same results in cases like Rosemary's, but does not fall apart quite so fast when applied to other special relationships, and even gets the right result in cases of adoption like *Orphanage*. I commend it to my most unsympathetic readers as the best way to challenge *Modest De Re*.

Nevertheless, I think this view too should be rejected. The problem is subtler than those facing *De Dicto Betterness*. While we have no moral reason at all to pick the objects of our relationships so that they are well-off in the absolute sense, I think we do have some reason to pick them based on whether they would be benefited by a relationship with us – for instance, by adopting a child whose life we would be in a good position to improve. But, I claim, this is not a reason of *special* concern. It is just part of the general reason we have to benefit others.

Problems for De Dicto Benefit

De Dicto Benefit, and its analogues for other special relationships, implies that when we are distributing benefits, we have a reason to make sure that the recipient of the greatest benefit ends up attached by the special relationship to us. This licenses a distinctive kind of objectionable behavior.

Consider the following case:

Adoptive Career Choice

Moira is an expert in disabilities, in particular blindness in children. She faces a choice between two jobs, each in a different city. If she takes the first, she would become head of a charitable nonprofit organization dedicated to helping blind orphans, and her skills would make a large positive contribution to their welfare. If she takes the second, she would become a professor of disability studies, where she would make a much smaller impact on the lives of the blind. Moira also plans to adopt a child in the next year. For bureaucratic reasons, she would need to adopt a child from the local orphanage. As it turns out, the university job is in a town where the local orphanage has a large population of blind children, and if she moves there, she would adopt one of them (call them Cecil). Because of her expertise in dealing with blindness in children, Cecil would benefit significantly from being adopted by her. If she takes the charitable job, she would end up adopting a sighted child (call them Kira), who would benefit somewhat less from being adopted by her.

We can represent this case like this:

Adoptive Career Choice (Moira)

	Kira	Cecil	Stranger
Nonprofit	10	5	20
University	8	10	0

De Dicto Benefit implies that there should be a moral tension here, of the same character as other conflicts between special concern for our children and general beneficence. General beneficence points towards taking the charitable job, since the potential benefit to strangers is so much more than to Cecil. However, Cecil would be more grateful for his adoption than Kira, and the view dictates that this matters more than comparable harms and benefits to other blind orphans. Whether Moira ought to take the charitable job depends, then, on the weight of reasons of special concern.

But this just seems wrong. Intuitively, there is no tension here between general and special concern. Indeed, there would be something perverse about Moira taking the university job in order to adopt Cecil. If Cecil *were* her child already, then there would plausibly be reason for her to benefit him at the expense of other children. But currently he is not her child – he is just a blind orphan she is in a position to help. She does not have a special reason to *make* him her child, at significant expense to

other blind orphans in need of her help, in order to make sure that the office of her child is filled by someone who she has benefited a lot. More generally: we have special reason to benefit the people who are significant in our lives. But we do *not* have special reason to make sure that people we benefit *become* related to us in a significant way. And *De Dicto Benefit* fails to make this distinction.

Another facet of this problem presents itself when we consider cases where someone is in a position to benefit the same person in multiple ways, one of which will lead to them being attached by the relationship and one of which will not. Consider, for example, a version of Moira's case where Cecil *himself* would be one of the orphans benefited if Moira takes the job at the nonprofit, and moreover that he would be benefited *more* by her work at the nonprofit than by her adopting him. In such a case, *everyone* might be better-off if Moira adopted Kira, and yet *De Dicto Benefit* suggests that there is some reason to adopt Cecil anyway. This is hardly more plausible than *De Dicto Betterness*'s verdict in *Orphanage*.

To summarize the lesson: one might be in a position to benefit others by various means, including by entering into a relationship with them. These potential benefits should play some role in one's decisions. But one should not grant greater moral weight to benefits to some present stranger that are a result of entering into a relationship with them, than to other sorts of benefits to that same person, or to benefits to other present strangers.

Picky Parents and Existence

Both *De Dicto Betterness* and *De Dicto Benefit* entail that prospective parents have special reasons to be *picky* about who gets to occupy the role of their children. *Betterness* tells us to pick occupants by how well-off they are. *Benefit* tells us to pick occupants by how much doing so benefits them. On a view where one should be picky, a good friend or a good parent plays something like the role of an interviewer, and expresses their concern by being judicious in their selection for the job.

I've tried to argue that when we look at other special relationships and at adoption, it is not plausible that special concern demands that we play this kind of interviewing role. And what goes for these cases, I claim, goes for our relationship to our biological children as well. Nevertheless, I think there is something about Rosemary's case which makes it hard to appreciate why choosing the university job would amount to being picky in the same objectionable sense as someone like Moira. Unlike the cases I have been using as counterexamples to the *de dicto* views, Rosemary does not just

affect the *identity* of her child – she also affects the *existence* of her child. However, I think we can factor these out in a way that makes the situation clearer.

First, note that Rosemary's decision actually affects the existence of many other people who are not related to her in a way that generates reasons of special concern. Her presence in whichever city she moves to will ever so slightly alter the circumstances of countless conceptions in a way that will lead to a different set of people being born, in much the same way it will alter the circumstances of her own child's conception. There is, on plausible views, reason for her to care about the welfare of all of these people. But there is no reason for her to privilege them over other existing people – certainly, at least, not in the way she should privilege her own children. So this aspect of her choice only gives the difference between Charity and Dean's well-being the kind of impartial value that is easily outweighed by benefits to strangers.

With this in mind, Rosemary's choice is really between the existence of two very different *sets* of people, and if the considerations of general beneficence are completely equal, between a set of which she gets assigned one of the happier members, and a set of which she gets assigned a less happy member. And choosing on *this* basis is just being picky in one of the ways we saw was morally groundless.

In case the reader is not yet convinced, let us consider a case where these features of Rosemary's choice are brought more to the surface. Let us imagine that in the distant future, humans have lost the ability to conceive naturally. Anyone who wants a child submits a form to the relevant bureaucrat, and each month, the local birth center processes the forms and creates, in their laboratory, the relevant number of children. These children are then sent to the prospective parents. Some of the children have better prospects than others due to genetic variation, and normally, they are assigned to parents randomly.

Now suppose that as a prospective parent, you are approached by a corrupt official who offers you a bargain. For a fee, they will manipulate the process in such a way that you end up getting assigned one of the children with better prospects. Their manipulation will, because of the sensitivity of the production process, affect the identities of all the children that are produced. But, they sincerely assure you, the overall welfare distribution will be unaffected.

I think it is clear in this case that paying the official is *not* an expression of special parental concern. It is like being picky in the adoption center. Arranging to "get one of the good ones" is not

a way of being a good parent. But this case has the same structure as Rosemary's, setting aside the reasons of general beneficence. If you have no parental reason to pay the official to get assigned a good child, then Rosemary has no parental reason to take the university job.

Practical Implications

If *Modest De Re* is true, then Rosemary has no special parental reason to take the job that leads to the birth of a child with a happier life. And this is no small matter, because decisions like Rosemary's are not uncommon. Indeed, most decisions we make before our children's conception, and certainly most significant decisions we make, will affect the identity of our children. This includes decisions about what to do about our careers, about where to live, about when to have children, and about how to manage our finances and organize our lives. Ordinary moral thinking gives concerns about our future children a prominent role in deliberation about these matters, but if the thesis of this paper is correct, this is a mistake. Before our children are conceived, the prospect of their welfare will matter only in the same way that the prospect of anyone's welfare matters. Before we end, I want to consider some additional concrete practical consequences of accepting this thesis.

First, I think taking the claim seriously should temper our criticism of people who have children in less than ideal circumstances. People who have children young, outside of ideal relationships, or in conditions of scarcity, may be failing in some way with respect to reasons of general concern. But they are not *bad parents* – that is, they are not thereby failing to respect special reasons they have to care about their children. This matters because failures to promote the general welfare do not carry anything like the stigma that failures of parental obligation do in most contemporary societies, and this leads to unjustly disproportionate censure of many parents in already difficult positions.

Second, it means we should not make sacrifices to our satisfaction of *other special obligations* when making identity-affecting decisions about children, beyond those demanded by general beneficence. We might have special reason to take our *own* welfare into account, for instance, or the welfare of our existing children or partners, and these reasons are not threatened by any arguments here. So, for example, if I have a child in middle school and another child planned, and must choose whether to move to a town with a quality high school or a town with a quality preschool, my reasons of special concern weigh unambiguously in favor of the high school, which better suits the needs of my existing child.

Third, there are significant implications for the ethics of genetic engineering. At least some forms of genetic engineering are identity-affecting – preimplantation genetic screening, for instance, allows us to select from different embryos (which, on standard accounts, will become different people) on the basis of their genetic qualities.[12] Savulescu (2001) has argued that we have strong reason, in such circumstances, to select the embryo that will have the best life. But if our reasons for special concern do not apply, then at best we have reason to select embryos for the greatest general benefit. The welfare of the prospective child counts, but so does everyone else's, to an equal degree. This means, for instance, that we have equally strong reason to select embryos for *altruism*, even when the resulting child will be less happy. Lest one think this is veering into science fiction, there is already work suggesting candidates for genes that dispose towards altruism (Thompson, Hurd, & Crespit 2013). Because the positive impact on the general welfare of an altruistic but not especially happy person is arguably much greater than that of a happy but not particularly altruistic person, this at least suggests prioritizing the engineering of *good* children over *happy* children.

These implications are, I think, significant, surprising, and increasingly relevant, as technology increases our control over the identities of those we bring into existence. I would not take these consequences on board lightly – I have tried to argue that other readings of the platitude that we should be specially concerned with the welfare of our children are quite implausible. If one thinks that these implications are themselves unacceptable, then what I have presented is a puzzle for defenders of reasons of special concern – to give an account which can explain how such reasons apply in identity-affecting decisions without running into absurdity when applied to other special relationships and in cases of adoption, or which can explain in a principled way why reasons of special concern should vary fundamentally in their structure across these relationships.

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[12] Other forms of genetic engineering, such as directly editing the genes of a sperm, egg, or embryo, are also plausibly, but not obviously, identity-affecting.

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