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INTENDING REPRODUCTION AS ONE'S PRIMARY AIM:
ALEXANDER PRUSS ON 'TRYING FOR A BABY'

May a couple have the aim of conceiving as their primary purpose in having marital relations? Yes, we might say, thinking especially of childless couples anxious to conceive, but Alexander Pruss in Chapter 10 of his magisterial book *One Body* (2011) takes a different view. For Pruss, just as certain things are too evil for us to intend, the good of conception is too *good* for us to intend (407)—at least as the sole or main purpose of what we are doing (as opposed perhaps to a secondary purpose¹ or 'defeater of a defeater'²). That is so assuming the *individual* good of the child's life is not in-

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¹ On the partial intention to conceive, Pruss comments: "while procreative sexual activity is morally acceptable, the primary purpose should be something other than procreation itself. This condition can be satisfied if, for instance, the purpose of sex is to engage in reproductive-*type* activity, for instance, because one recognizes the value of that activity. There is **probably** [emphasis added] nothing morally objectionable in acting so that procreation should be a *part* of one's reason for the action, or even in modifying the action so that it might be done in a way that is more likely to result in procreation. For then insofar as one has a further good reason, beyond procreation, for sex, the resulting child does not exist *solely* for the sake of fulfilling her parents' intentions for her." (402)

² "A married couple always has a good reason to have sex. At the same time, the couple may have reasons *not* to have sex—reasons that function as "defeaters" for their general reason to have sex... sex may be inconvenient, but considerations of this inconvenience are overridden by considerations of the benefits brought by the child. **The goods in respect of which the child is fungible, then, need not be the main goods aimed at in the sexual act.**

The couple can still be having sex primarily because sex is good. But the goods that the child provides enter into their deliberation as defeaters to defeaters, as overriding reasons not to have sex." (403–4).

We might think here of Frances Kamm's famous 'Party Case' (KAMM 2006) where a party is planned in the awareness, but without the intention, that friends will feel guilty afterwards and help clean up. In that case there is a desire for a party 'in itself', and (one assumes) no overwhelming desire to clean up, even in the company of friends. In contrast, the stressed subfertile

tended, as Pruss believes it cannot be intended, by the couple wishing to conceive. It is, Pruss thinks, insulting to treat human beings as fungible, at least in their creation: only God, who knows human beings individually before their creation and their unique features and vocation can intend their creation for the sake of the unique individual. For human parents, the child aimed at is necessarily unspecified in regard to any unique features. Moreover, a particular unique child will only exist if conception goes ahead, so it cannot be for the *child's* sake, Pruss argues, that the child is conceived. Rather, the child is conceived for some instrumental purpose of the parents for which he or she is treated as fungible, as other possible children would equally 'fit the bill'. For example, to intend to conceive a child just to have a new human being in the world or just to have someone to love (401) is to treat the child as fungible, and would be impermissible, on Pruss's view.

In this brief comment, I want to take issue with Pruss's position on the wrongness of intending conception as one's primary aim in having intercourse. Several objections immediately present themselves, beginning with the fact that this view seems at first sight to exclude the phenomenon of 'reproductive success' as something not only good to appreciate, like other instances of healthy functioning, but good, at least in some sense,³ to pursue in a rather focussed manner. Even mouse reproduction is in the interests of the parent mouse, who fulfils an important function in reproducing; how much more is human reproduction, in which incomparably more valuable creatures arise, in the interests of those who conceive (and not just in some truncated biological sense of 'interests' shared with mice, but hopefully in all the richly inclusive interpersonal sense available to rational human beings). With all due regard for the *sui generis* place of sex and reproduction in human life, it seems anomalous to claim that the interest in reproduction alone, among all our interests in physiological success, may be acknowledged and appreciated but may not be 'directly' or 'primarily' pursued. True, human reproduction, while always a form of biological success and a manifestation of reproductive health, can often be morally inappropriate (as indeed can

couple may see intercourse in their current state of mind as a chore that only the possibility of conceiving could motivate them towards. This is more like Kamm's 'Prize Party' case where the cleanup will make one eligible for a prize for neatness—or indeed a case where the motive for organising a party is primarily the desire to have heart-to-heart talks with friends while washing up the glasses. Recognising that parties, and even this party, have other rational attractions, one may find those attractions insufficiently motivating *for oneself* in the absence of any current desire for them, and be primarily drawn towards a further outcome that one intends rather than just foreseeing.

³ For more on these issues, see WATT 2015; WATT in press. See also MCCARTHY in press..

many other instances of successful functioning). But when reproduction is not wrong at least to *anticipate and accept* (the parents are fully committed and able to care for any child conceived) why is this area alone one where 'success' cannot be pursued as one's primary aim?

SEXUAL CONCEPTION WITH MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

Pruss does very much recognise the good of reproductive functioning, and certainly allows for the permissibility of doctors assisting a subfertile couple to conceive sexually. He comments:

...a medical professional's intention is not just to increase the population of the world, but to help a couple suffering from a fertility problem. The professional is acting in part on behalf of the couple, and hence their intention is in part normative for the professional. Now the couple should be intending not just that there be another person, but that their marital union be fruitful. The good that is willed is still tied to the marital act. Of course, the child is desired and intended **as well** [emphasis added], but the child is not the sole object of the action. For if the activity of intercourse is valuable and its biological end is valuable, then there is a great value for intercourse to be biologically successful, and it is this with which the professional helps. Consequently, even in the act of enhancing the fertility of a sexual act, the focus is not just on the child. (406–7)

Clearly, Pruss is right to say that the couple is and should be focused on each other, and the doctor on them: it is wrong to be so focussed on the child that the human interaction that should carry spousal meaning in itself rather drops out of the picture. That said, we cannot, of course, separate *successful* conception from the very life conceived which *makes* for success or complete success in this particular area. And while the child conceived should not, and in a sense *cannot*, be the *sole* object of the couple's action or even the doctor's (the *immediate* focus of the spouses, in particular, should be very much on each other), conception, and thus the child, may well be the *overarching* focus of the doctor and couple in these situations. After all, this focus is something without which the couple might well have chosen to watch a movie instead that night, at least if there was no particular desire for sex in the abstract (as may be the case especially with those suffering from fertility-related stress).⁴ Only when the child is conceived (and ideally survives to term and beyond) will the couple's sexual activity be biologically

⁴ See note 2.

successful beyond the success of the immediate act. Moreover, while the focus of the doctor and couple should be not just on the child but on the marital activity the child will make fully (or further) successful, something rather similar could surely be said if the child is conceived—as the same child may and almost certainly *will* be conceived—as someone for the parents to love: an intention Pruss regards as an unduly instrumental, fungible-type ground for having children.

Admittedly in that case, the parents' success in loving will be anticipated as coming *from* the child's conception, while the parents' 'reproductive success' at the most fundamental level will come *in* the child's conception. However, it is not clear why that kind of difference between the motives should be morally conclusive. With all due regard to the fact that neither spouse should treat the other as a mere tool for having (or raising) a child, success in the shared goal of conceiving a child (which will incorporate the value of the child's life), as well as the goal itself and its pursuit, is surely very much part of the conjugal good. And the child conceived in the pursuit of reproductive success is no less 'fungible' when envisaged in advance, and no more precisely specified than the child conceived to be loved—who is of course always a unique child *in fact*, not some faceless bearer of value.

CONCEPTION AND VOCATION

Actions such as charting menstrual cycles and taking hormone prescriptions are not the only actions that are rather closely focused—admittedly against a background of marital activity—on the aim of conceiving. Praying to conceive, for believers who do this, is an act that is very directly and, at that point, *exclusively* devoted to the aim of conception. True, there are some things that may perhaps be prayed for but should not be otherwise intended: one's own death might be one example, for those who see death, at least for innocent people, as something that should come 'at God's hand'. However, death is at any rate bad in itself, and a new human being, as something *good* in itself, seems an odd thing to place in the category of things that may not be 'directly' or 'primarily' promoted, except perhaps through prayer. Note also that Pruss earlier in the book (264–5) makes clear that he accepts that couples may intend *not to conceive* in choosing periodic abstinence (as opposed to simply not intending to conceive, which is a different mental state).

Moreover, it would seem odd to say that such an important 'crown' or 'gift' of the marital vocation as having children may not be pursued in a fo-

cused manner, whether via prayer or in other good ways,⁵ albeit submitting ultimately to God's will. Is it not just as surprising to say that those with a marital vocation may never intend conception in any primary way as to say that a priest in carrying out some priestly function may never intend primarily to save souls? Of course, the priest should not be intending to save souls *come what may*, perhaps treating the soul-bearer or others as purely instrumental to the process, or even seeing himself as saving souls 'on his own', rather than paving the way for God to save them. But to say that he may never intend primarily that souls be saved would be very odd: this is a task in which (at least as the priest sees it) God himself has invited him to participate by accepting his vocation and trying to live it as best he can. Is the marital vocation, for those who believe they have one, and are well placed to care for any child they may conceive, so very different in that the 'crown' of that vocation may never be primarily pursued?

CONCEPTION AND THE CONJUGAL GOOD

On the subject of the conjugal good, something clearly more comprehensive than generic biological success in conceiving, Pruss comments:

The couple that makes love in order to reproduce needs to be reproducing *as a part of the conjugal good*... It is not that the child is a *means* to a conjugal good, since that would be treating the child instrumentally. It is not even that the existence of the child is a *part* of the conjugal good, since then the act would be an attempt to define the child's value in a way dependent on the parents' conjugal good, rather than as an independent value, an end in itself or a creature whose ends can only be set by God. Rather, it is the *act* of reproducing that needs to be a part of the conjugal good. (405)

However, it is hard to see why treating the good of a child's life as part of the conjugal good ('reproductive success' in some inclusive sense) is any more disrespectful to the child than treating a *spouse's* life (particularly the life of a spouse one is materially supporting) as part of the conjugal good—or at least, a necessary precondition for it, and promoted especially for that reason. Whether or not we see the life of the spouse, as opposed to attempts to promote that life, as part of

⁵ Pruss leaves it open which fertility treatments involving intercourse he would support apart from ovulation induction and the removal of physical barriers to conception, mentioning the possibility of removing and reinserting sperm after intercourse as something that would need to be further investigated (418). For an examination of this possibility, see Watt (2011).

(though not reducible to) the conjugal good—this is easier to accept in the case of the child whose conception itself marks conjugal success in reproducing—would the supportive spouse be failing to respect the dependent spouse by working partly in aid of the conjugal good that conjugal survival will enable? Is this really a harmful instrumentalisation of the life of another human being?

FUNGIBILITY AND CONCEPTION

To this, Pruss would no doubt reply that there is a difference here, as after all, the supportive spouse can point to an identifiable ‘someone’ who is the focus of the action: the spouse whose life is materially sustained. In contrast, in the case of conception, the ‘someone’ who may or may not be conceived cannot be so precisely identified before conception and thus cannot be intended for reasons which would not also apply to another child. This is a very important point for Pruss: imagining a couple who conceive a child called Sophie, he reflects:

Of course, the couple could intend the good of a new human being existing, the good of a child of theirs existing, the good of *having* a child, and so on. But none of these is the value of Sophie herself, as all of these goods would still be present had the reproductive activity resulted in the existence of another human being, say, Bob or Jennifer...If we say that an individual *x* is fungible with respect to a good *G* providing that good *G* could have been equally well promoted by a different individual, then we have to say that Sophie is fungible with respect to all of these goods. (399-400)

Pruss’s reflection is not without some force; however, we should remember that when we promote or celebrate the lives of *existing* human beings (long-lost relatives, say) we sometimes know very little about them. This is certainly true of newborn babies, with whom some parents bond extremely quickly, despite their ignorance of many of their more distinctive features. Admittedly, we can ‘point’ to the child once he or she is known to exist—but even then, such pointing may be really quite approximate. During pregnancy, parents may already love their child but may not have seen it and may know very little about it, and even after birth, a new father arriving at the hospital might think loving thoughts about his baby without even knowing where in the building to find the child or the mother (who will hopefully be able to fill him in).

True, to have loving thoughts about someone who certainly *does* exist is rather different from having loving thoughts about someone who does not merely not exist, but may *never* exist: in one case, but not the other, there most definitely is a real object for our love. It may therefore be going too far to say that couples con-

ceive *out of love* for a child, as love presupposes existence—but why should couples not conceive *in order to share* love: to share that good and others with any child conceived? If anyone in fact conceived will benefit thanks to the couple's choice to conceive, though no benefit is 'conferred' on any pre-existing child, is there not a sense in which they conceive 'for' the actual child who is inevitably fungible before he or she exists?

FUNGIBILITY WITHOUT DISRESPECT

On the question of when human beings may be treated as fungible without disrespect, Pruss notes that we *do* treat people as fungible permissibly in some cases, as when we ask a helpdesk to put us in touch with someone—anyone!—who knows about WiFi configuration.⁽⁴⁰⁰⁾ However, Pruss argues that the standard is higher for reproduction, as this concerns the value of the *existence* of human beings and not their mere *presence*. Yet while in many cases this will indeed be so, whenever we intend to save or protect existing lives whether as parents, hospital staff or charitable givers it will be the existence of human beings (as opposed to any spiritual fragment we think survives death) with whose value we are concerned. Does this mean that it is somehow wrong to intend to save lives—to promote the existence of some human beings—in cases where these lives cannot be identified?

When a health administrator allocates resources, patients may be grouped into categories such as 'people with diabetes' or 'very elderly people'. The administrator wants to save whoever can be saved as she uses up (say) the diabetes budget: she does not save these unknown people as individuals but saves them as unspecified members of a group whose welfare she is attempting to promote. Providing she knows that those in need now or later are *in fact* individuals with an individual welfare, there is surely nothing morally wrong with her unspecified benevolent intention. Indeed, such intentions are particularly hard to avoid if what she is funding is research to improve the lives of people with diabetes who do not yet exist but will exist in years to come. Is the moral verdict so very different when it is a question of intending to conceive lives, as opposed to saving lives already existing or that will exist independently of our current choices?⁶

On the subject of Sophie as a unique locus of value, Pruss distinguishes between "the value of Sophie herself" and "goods that Sophie's existence makes

⁶ Of course, couples also consider the needs of children who will exist independently of their *current* choices, as when they buy a house big enough to accommodate the children they will no doubt at some point conceive.

possible” including those “partially constituted by Sophie’s existence, such as the existence of the next generation or the existence of yet another human person” (399). But if Sophie’s existence “partially” (not wholly?) constitutes the good of “the existence of yet another human person”, why are we not in *some* sense valuing the individual good of Sophie’s life when we value (without of course *knowing* Sophie) the individual who may be conceived? Even if there is *some* truth in the claim that, as Pruss says, “the value of an individual cannot be grasped in abstraction from that individual”, cannot we grasp *enough to intend* that value under some ‘catch-all’ description, just as we do when we try to save the life of someone who does exist but whom we may not know, or know very well? Are there not indeed limits to our grasp of the goodness of *any* human being?—let alone the goodness of God, whose existence we can and do value nonetheless.

GOD’S INTENTIONS IN CREATING

Moreover, if it is impossible for the couple to conceive a child for the sake of the child, as the value of the child’s life presupposes conception, why would that not also apply to God’s choice to create the child? bearing in mind that God’s foreknowledge of our lives ‘comes from’ God’s actual choice to create us (*ex nihilo* in the case of the soul) and not the other way around. Pruss refers to people’s unique features and vocations known only to God (401), but vocations presuppose both God’s actual choice to create and other choices made by God, and by human beings. Genetic features at the moment of conception will *affect* psychology and thus ‘life possibilities’, but God’s designs for us depend not only on his choice to create us with those features but to some extent on choices we ourselves make—which is one reason why at least some kinds of vocation can sometimes end earlier than they would have done, had certain choices not been made. (For example, if someone rejects a genuine vocation to enter a monastery, and subsequently contracts a genuine marriage, that person’s new vocation is marriage; similarly, if a monk is injured by a drunk driver, he may no longer have a vocation in his monastery if he now needs indefinite medical care.)

UNIQUENESS AND MORAL IRREPLACEABILITY

While recognising that “[t]he view that there is some peculiar good in each existing individual, precisely as that individual, is somewhat controversial” (400),

Pruss lays great stress on human uniqueness, which he wants to link closely with love relationships and with moral irreplaceability. Yet as Stephen Brock (2005) has observed, uniqueness and human dignity seem to be two quite different things. We do not, Brock argues, have to assume that every person makes a unique contribution to the world, “as though, if no category were overlooked, every person would find his or her way into the book of world records.” More fundamentally, the value of someone for their own sake appears to be something different from the value of their achievements, unique or otherwise. Nor does it seem that God’s love for us is contingent on (as opposed to reflecting in its manifestations) our particular characteristics, which in any case change over time, not least as the result of our own decisions. God does not love us because we are unique in some way, and lack of unique qualities would not imply moral replaceability of a kind that is indeed morally excluded once a person actually exists. If *per impossible* identical twins were *qualitatively* the same throughout their lives, they would still have a *numerically* unique welfare and (when old enough to have one) a numerically unique experience of the world. Even if I and my identical twin experience things in exactly the same way (whether as born or unborn babies or *per impossible* throughout our lives), her perspective will not be my perspective, her welfare not (or not in the same way) my welfare and so on. If God should speak to me, it will be me to whom he speaks—and similarly if God should speak to her. There is no obvious reason why two qualitatively identical people could not be loved by God, and following God, by their fellow human beings, as the precious and (at least) *numerically* unique individuals they would surely be.

COOPERATION OF PROSPECTIVE PARENTS WITH GOD

To return to prospective parents: cannot a couple, unaware as they are of the precise child they may conceive, intend (again, using a ‘catch-all’ description) to facilitate what God is intending, as they cooperate in God’s creative activity? Rightly, Pruss notes a possible problem with his position: it appears to rule out deliberate collaboration with God in the very creative work in which married couples are presumptively invited to participate. While reluctant to admit that couples may have a ‘purpose’ for their children—even the purpose of fulfilling God’s loving will—Pruss suggests that a couple may not actually intend the *child* as an instrument of God’s will, but may instead intend their *act of reproduction* as a fulfillment of God’s will.(407) One might reply that the child’s existence at conception is inextricable from reproduction, such that for the couple to intend to

serve God's will in reproducing is for them to intend *some* kind of Divine purpose for the child—if not God's other purposes for the child, which are again not obviously wrong for the couple to intend, however vaguely.

CONCLUSION

As always, there is much to admire in Pruss's reflections, not least his warning in the chapter of the dangers of taking an excessively God-like attitude in precisely that area where we are most God-like: the co-creation of new lives. This danger is very real in the case of non-sexual conception via manipulating non-personal materials, which inevitably resembles 'manufacture' of subordinate, non-personal entities. Yet surely the character of sex as an unreserved interpersonal act of self-giving with its own spousal meaning is sufficient safeguard for conception, without requiring that couples never primarily intend such a key aspect of the marital vocation as having children. While existing human beings are morally irreplaceable, in the sense that they must be individually valued and respected, whatever unique features they may have, it is not at all clear that it is wrong to conceive new people of some unknown, indeterminate kind.

Indeed, we could see the couple's very flexibility on this point as a manifestation of that generous, open-ended acceptance with which they should approach parenthood, not only after conception but *mutatis mutandis* before it. The 'openness to gift' element of parenthood can be respected by the couple seeing themselves as open to *or* intending 'whatever God sends them'; for example, a boy or a girl i.e. precisely, a child who is fungible before he or she is conceived. It is part of the glorious gratuitousness of our conception that our lives and those of our children have the value they do have whatever the value of the lives with which they could so easily have been substituted, perhaps only a second later. Being open to and (sometimes) intending unspecified children, far from instrumentalising the unspecified child, is a way of being open to God's action in creating unknown good of an ultimately very specific kind. For humans, it is enough to know that the good at which one aims, in loving interaction with one's life partner, will be a great good, whether Sophie, Bob, Xenophon or Zara should ensue.

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PLANOWANIE POTOMSTWA JAKO CEL PODSTAWOWY:
ALEXANDER PRUSS O „STARANIU SIĘ O DZIECKO”

Streszczenie

Czy para może stawiać sobie poczęcie za główny cel relacji małżeńskiej? W niniejszym artykule opowiadam się przeciwko pogładowi Prussa, że jest to czymś niewłaściwym ze względu na potraktowanie istot ludzkich jako zamiennych w chwili stworzenia, gdy ich unikalne cechy nie są znane ich rodzicom. Argumentuję, że Pruss nie może odseparowywać zabiegów o potomstwo jako składowej powołania małżeńskiego od zabiegów o nieznaną, nieokreśloną dziecko, które jest częścią sukcesu w tej konkretnej dziedzinie. Podczas gdy żaden z małżonków nie powinien traktować partnera instrumentalnie w perspektywie posiadania dziecka, pomyślność we wspólnym dążeniu do poczęcia (które będzie brało pod uwagę wartość życia dziecka), jak również ów cel sam w sobie i jego realizacja, jest bardzo ważnym elementem dobra małżeńskiego. Żyjące istoty ludzkie są moralnie niezastępowalne w tym sensie, że muszą być oceniane i szanowane w sposób indywidualny, ale też możemy promować życie nieznaną a istniejących ludzi w ramach ogólnej kategorii—możemy także w sposób zmierzony zabiegać o poczęcie nowych ludzi, o nieznanym, nieokreślonym rodzaju.

INTENDING REPRODUCTION AS ONE'S PRIMARY AIM:
ALEXANDER PRUSS ON 'TRYING FOR A BABY'

Summary

May a couple have the aim of conceiving as their primary purpose in having marital relations? In this paper, I argue against the view of Alexander Pruss that it is wrong to do this since it treats human beings as fungible in their creation when their unique features are not known to their parents. I argue that Pruss cannot separate seeking reproduction as part of a marital vocation from seeking the unknown, unspecified child who is part of what makes for success in this particular area. While neither spouse should treat the other as a mere tool for having a child, success in the shared goal of conceiving (which will incorporate the value of the child's life), as well as the goal itself and its pursuit, is very much part of the conjugal good. Existing human beings are morally

irreplaceable in the sense that they must be individually valued and respected, but we may promote the lives of unknown existing people under a ‘catch all’ description—and may also deliberately conceive new people of some unknown, indeterminate kind.

Słowa kluczowe: rozrodczość, rodzicielstwo, stosunek płciowy, etyka rozrodcza, etyka seksualna, zamienialność, wyjątkowość, dziecko, prokreacja, poczęcie.

Key words: Reproduction, parenthood, sex, reproductive ethics, sexual ethics, fungibility, irreplaceability, child, procreation, conception.

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