



ORIGINAL ARTICLES

THE TIES THAT UNDERMINE

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ABSTRACT

Do biological relations ground responsibilities between biological fathers and their offspring? Few think biological relations ground either necessary or sufficient conditions for responsibility. Nevertheless, many think biological relations ground responsibility at least partially. Various scenarios, such as cases concerning the responsibilities of sperm donors, have been used to argue in favor of biological relations as partially grounding responsibilities. In this article, I seek to undermine the temptation to explain sperm donor scenarios via biological relations by appealing to an overlooked feature of such scenarios. More specifically, I argue that sperm donor scenarios may be better explained by considering the unique abilities of agents involved. Appealing to unique ability does not eliminate the possibility of biological relations providing some explanation for perceived responsibilities on the part of biological fathers. However, since it is unclear exactly why biological relations are supposed to ground responsibility in the first place, and rather clear why unique ability grounds responsibility in those scenarios where it is exhibited, the burden of proof seems shifted to those advocating biological relations as grounds of responsibility to provide an explanation. Since this seems unlikely, I conclude it is best to avoid appealing to biological relations as providing grounds for responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Consider the following scenario, borrowed from Jeff McMahan:¹

Sperm Donor I: A man voluntarily donates to a sperm bank and absolves himself of any legal responsibility for children conceived with his sperm. Later a woman artificially inseminated with his sperm births a child who requires a bone marrow transplant. She approaches the donor and requests he donate his bone marrow to save the child's life.

McMahan notes that despite the apparent absence of parental responsibility on the part of the biological father, he seems somewhat responsible for providing

bone marrow.² McMahan's intuition is that a biological relationship, at least partially, grounds the biological father's responsibility. McMahan is not alone. Several philosophers urge that biological relationships at least partially ground responsibilities.³ Call this the **Partial Thesis** and advocates **Partial Theorists**. For **Partial Theorists**, the biological father should donate bone marrow *in*

² Though not explicit in Sperm Donor I, the biological father is presumably a stranger to the child and artificially inseminated mother.

³ See E. Abegg. The Moral Significance of the Genetic Relation. *Journal of Bioethics*. 1984; 5(2): 134–140; N. Kolodny. Which Relationships Justify Partiality? The Case of Parents and Children. *Philos Public Aff* 2010; 38(1): 43–47; M. Lemmons. The True Source of Parental Obligations: Response to Andrew Peach. *Life and Learning XIV, Proceedings of the Fourteenth Faculty for Life Conference*. 2004; 2; E. Page. Parental Rights. *J App Philos* 1984; 1(2): 187–189; J. Velleman. II. The Gift of Life. *Philos Public Affa* 2008; 36(3): 147–154 for advocates of the Partial Thesis.

¹ J. McMahan. *Ethics of killing: problems at the margins of life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2003. p. 226, 375.

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part due to the biological relation between himself and his offspring. Some argue further that biological relations *alone* ground responsibilities held by biological fathers⁴. Call this the **Sole Thesis** and advocates **Sole Theorists**. For **Sole Theorists**, biological fathers should donate bone marrow *solely* due to biological relations. Opponents of both theses find such explanations unsatisfying for numerous reasons. For instance, it is not clear what *delimits* a biological relation. Individuals have various biological relations. Arguably, each could ground responsibility. Furthermore, it is not clear whether *degree* of biologically relatedness is important. If a neighbor's child shares more of my biological makeup than my own offspring does, will I have more responsibility to my neighbor's child than to my own?⁵ More importantly for our purposes, it is not clear *how* biological relations ground responsibility. On this last point, opponents of both theses urge the alleged grounding of responsibility on biological relations seems mysterious⁶ or implausible⁷ at best, and trivial or unhelpful at worst.⁸ I tend to agree with the opponents of the **Sole Thesis** who find it indefensible. Additionally, I think a strong case can be made against **Partial Theorists**.⁹

In Section I, I work through scenarios illustrating features typically considered relevant to responsibility, pointing out when and why **Sole Theorists** have trouble explaining these scenarios and why **Partial Theorists** are in better shape. I then argue, with respect to Sperm Donor I, the implicit Uniqueness between the biological father and offspring likely grounds responsibility. I conclude this section noting that appealing to Uniqueness adequately explains such scenarios. In Section II, I note the above explanation does not definitively undermine

⁴ See A. Peach. Abortion and Parental Obligation. *Life and Learning XIV, Proceedings of the Fourteenth Faculty for Life Conference*. 2004; 14(4): 4–7; and S. Schwarz. *The moral question of abortion*. Chicago: Loyola University Press; 1990. 118 for advocates of the Sole Thesis.

⁵ I do not address *delimiting* or *degrees* of biological relations. I only mention these additional worries here. Incidentally, one might also object that advocates of biological relations focus on the wrong target. Austin, for instance, claims advocates of biological relations grounding responsibility are actually concerned with *causal* transfer of genetic material, which noticeably complicates matters. See M. Austin. The Failure of Biological Accounts of Parenthood. *J Value Inq* 2004; 38(4): 498–501.

⁶ D. Boonin. *A defense of abortion*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2003. 229.

⁷ R. Weinberg. The Moral Complexity of Sperm Donation. *Bioethics*. 2008; 22(3): 169.

⁸ T. Rulli. Preferring a Genetically-related Child. *J Moral Philos* 2014; 23–25.

⁹ A biological father's responsibility to his offspring is a *special* responsibility. *Special* responsibilities stem from a special relationship (parent, grandmother, employee, etc.) and are typically contrasted with *natural* responsibilities one presumably owes to everyone (perhaps according to some normative theory). Uniqueness is not a *special* responsibility. It is an *additional* responsibility. This claim is defended in Section II, and *assumed* for exegetical purposes in Section I.

the **Partial Thesis**. I then argue in favor of the Uniqueness explanation, rather than appealing to biological relations, by responding to two objections. The first response establishes an *additional* responsibility stemming from Uniqueness. I claim this explains *how* Uniqueness grounds responsibility. The second response undermines the **Partial Thesis** by arguing that the *additional* responsibility explanation is unavailable to them, and that it is not clear *how* biological relations are supposed to ground responsibility. From the results of Section I and II, I conclude that Uniqueness, rather than biological relations, provides the best explanation for Sperm Donor I.

I. UNIQUENESS DEFENDED

In this section, I examine several scenarios in an attempt to find evidence in favor of Uniqueness grounding responsibility on the part of the biological father in Sperm Donor I. Many of the examined scenarios provide no conclusive evidence, but examining these scenarios illustrates potential sources of responsibility that may complicate attempts to understand the purported role Uniqueness plays in grounding responsibility, and undermines the **Sole Thesis**. Second, I illustrate the strength of the **Partial Thesis**, by providing plausible explanations for each of the preceding scenarios, and a few others, without appealing to Uniqueness. Third, despite the explanatory strength of the **Partial Thesis**, I provide a scenario where Uniqueness grounding responsibility is apparent, and biological relations cannot provide ground for responsibility. I then argue Uniqueness, perhaps in combination with other sources of responsibility but notably without resting on biological relations, adequately explains Sperm Donor I. I consider many scenarios, and so have provided a table for reference when explicating the conclusion of this section.

False Starts and Sources of Responsibility

In Sperm Donor I, it is implied that the biological father is in a unique position to offer bone marrow. Bone marrow donations require compatibility, and compatibility is rare.¹⁰ Biological relatives are an obvious donor choice since relatives are significantly more likely to be compatible donors than strangers are. This implicit feature of Sperm Donor I is likely relevant to elicited intuitions that the biological father has a responsibility to donate. Yet, this feature is often overlooked. Instead, one might suspect the biological relation is grounding the

¹⁰ Bethematch.org. Be the Match: Key Statistics. 2013. Available from: <http://bethematch.org/news/facts-and-figures-pdf/>

biological father's responsibility.¹¹ If the biological relation, rather than Uniqueness, is grounding his responsibility, then his responsibility should remain if the unique compatibility is eliminated. A variation of Sperm Donor I will perhaps make this transparent:

Sperm Donor II: Same situation as Sperm Donor I, but *anyone* can provide the bone marrow, including the consenting parents caring for the sick child.

It seems reasonable that in Sperm Donor II the consenting parents would have a responsibility to donate bone marrow for the child. The biological father, when asked for a bone marrow donation by the parents in full knowledge of the parents' compatibility, could reasonably respond, "Why won't *you* donate *your* bone marrow to save *your* child?" To compare, Sperm Donor I suggests the biological father has a responsibility to donate bone marrow that seems absent in Sperm Donor II. One salient difference between the scenarios is the unique ability of the biological father to provide bone marrow in the former, and the absence of this unique ability in the latter. Notably, the responsibility on the part of the parents in Sperm Donor II does not stem from Uniqueness.

Of course, another salient difference between the scenarios is the explicit consent of the parents to care for the child in Sperm Donor II, and the absence of parental consent on the part of the biological father in Sperm Donor I. Parental consent likely grounds a responsibility and may mask or outweigh the alleged significance of other features of the scenario, including a biological relation.¹² If parental responsibility outweighs the significance of a biological relation in Sperm Donor II, then a biological relation might still ground some responsibility on the part of the biological father. Additionally, Sperm Donor II provides no conclusive evidence that Uniqueness grounds the biological father's responsibility in Sperm Donor I rather than other features of the scenario. More specifically, if parental responsibility adequately explains the elicited intuitions in Sperm Donor II, it is not clear eliminating Uniqueness from Sperm Donor I provides evidence in favor of Uniqueness. Perhaps eliminating parental responsibility will provide such evidence:

¹¹ In the literature mentioned above, "biological relations" are restricted to holding between those involved in the transfer of genetic material (as opposed to biological relations among siblings, grandparents, cousins, etc.). The biological relations discussed here will be further restricted to those between a biological father and his offspring.

¹² Rulli claims if parental responsibility so clearly outweighs biological relations in explaining commonsense intuitions in such scenarios, then biological relations appear unimportant, and perhaps trivial. T. Rulli. Preferring a Genetically-related Child. *J Moral Philos* 2014; 23–25. This seems too quick. Scenarios examined below *which lack* explicit parental responsibility, suggest biological relations *may* ground perceived responsibilities. It is not obvious biological relations are unimportant because they can be outweighed.

Sperm Donor III: Same situation as Sperm Donor I, but only the adopted siblings of the child, of which there are several, and the biological father, can provide compatible bone marrow.

Presumably, there is no parental responsibility between siblings and thus no parental responsibility for any of the siblings to donate bone marrow to save the sick child. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable for the biological father, if asked to donate in full knowledge of the siblings' compatibility, to respond, "Why won't the siblings donate?" If the biological father can reasonably reject a request for his bone marrow for this reason, then perhaps the biological relation does not ground the father's perceived responsibility in Sperm Donor I. If it did, then it seems likely biological relations would ground a responsibility in Sperm Donor III above, where the biological relation is maintained and explicit parental responsibility is absent. Additionally, the presence of Uniqueness in Sperm Donor I where the biological father has a responsibility to donate, and the absence of Uniqueness in Sperm Donor III where it seems the biological father does not have such a responsibility, suggests Uniqueness plays a role in grounding the biological father's responsibility.

Of course, there is another salient difference between Sperm Donor II and III. Perhaps what grounds the responsibility in Sperm Donor III is that the siblings are members of the same *family*. Plausibly, bonds form among siblings through shared experiences as members of a family. The siblings in Sperm Donor III may have a responsibility to donate bone marrow to a non-biologically related sibling due to this familial relation. If familial responsibility outweighs the significance of a biological relation in Sperm Donor III, then a biological relation might still ground some responsibility on the part of the biological father. Additionally, Sperm Donor III, much like the preceding cases, provides no conclusive evidence in favor of Uniqueness grounding responsibility in Sperm Donor I rather than other features of the scenario. More specifically, if familial responsibility adequately explains the elicited intuitions in Sperm Donor III, it is not clear that eliminating Uniqueness from Sperm Donor I provides evidence in favor of Uniqueness.

Preliminary Judgments and Better Explanations

While there appears to be no decisive evidence in the preceding scenarios in favor of Uniqueness grounding perceived responsibilities, the scenarios do undermine those advocating the **Sole Thesis**. While easily able to explain intuitions in Sperm Donor I, they must provide explanations for the elicited intuitions in Sperm Donor II

and III without appealing to parental or familial responsibilities as potentially outweighing the biological relations.¹³ It is not obvious how this can be accomplished without undermining the purported fundamental importance they find in the biological relation as the grounds of responsibility between parents and offspring (7).

However, **Partial Theorists** are in better shape. Biological relations in combination with other responsibilities might provide an adequate explanation for Sperm Donor I, II, and III. Of additional importance for our purposes, **Partial Theorists** are able to provide explanations for intuitions elicited from other common scenarios in debates over biological relations and responsibility without appealing to Uniqueness. This might undermine attempts to appeal to Uniqueness as grounding responsibility in these scenarios by suggesting Uniqueness is explanatorily superfluous. Consider the following:

The Cad: A consenting male and female engage in intercourse with reasonable protection and without any intention to procreate. Nevertheless, this results in pregnancy. The woman chooses to carry the fetus to term. The biological father refuses any responsibility, as he never intended to procreate. When the infant is born, it requires an immediate bone marrow transplant to live. The biological father is the only known compatible donor.

Few would look favorably on the biological father's refusal of responsibility. For, while the father had no intention to procreate, and explicitly rejects any responsibility he might have for raising the resulting child, he seems accountable for providing bone marrow. If explicitly rejecting responsibility here is insufficient for removing some responsibility to offspring, then perhaps some responsibilities are *persistent*, or unable to be expressly rejected.¹⁴ For example, individuals responsible for transporting hazardous materials are typically unable to deny responsibility in the event of an undesired outcome the

material handler should expect as likely. An oil tanker striking an iceberg and contaminating a local ecosystem is an unfortunately common example. The risk and responsibility associated with transporting hazardous materials is inherent in the nature of the activity. Following Weinberg (7), one might argue that the biological father in The Cad intended to engage in intercourse using hazardous materials (gametes) knowing the risk of pregnancy even with protection, and in that respect is responsible for the child in the event of pregnancy. Gametes, Weinberg argues, should be considered hazardous materials since they are able to create extensive burdens on individuals. Agents wielding gametes then should be responsible for foreseeable consequences. More generally, those engaging in consensual intercourse are responsible for reasonably foreseeable consequences.¹⁵

Persistent responsibility, if maintained even when explicitly rejected by the biological father in The Cad and Sperm Donor I, could explain the perceived responsibility of the father to donate bone marrow. In Sperm Donor II, the persistent responsibility may be outweighed by the explicit parental responsibility of the parents. Similarly, in Sperm Donor III, persistent responsibility might provide a reason for the biological father to donate bone marrow that is outweighed by the familial responsibility of the siblings in the scenario. The upshot is that biological relations and persistent responsibility are consistent with each other and seem to provide an adequate explanation for elicited intuitions in the preceding scenarios. Furthermore, when combined with the inconclusive evidence garnered from the previous sub-section, it seems difficult to determine whether Uniqueness is grounding any responsibility in these scenarios. At best, we have only learned that Uniqueness, if exhibited, is likely consistent with a range of other responsibilities. This is no surprise, but also no evidence against the **Partial Thesis**.

Thought Experimentum Crucis

The Cad reveals a potential source of systematic responsibility in the preceding scenarios. Perhaps eliminating this feature will prove helpful in determining other potential sources of responsibility. Consider the following (adapted from Bayne & Kolors):¹⁶

responsibility, as done here, provides no conclusive evidence for Uniqueness or biological relations when considering financial support variations of The Cad.

¹⁵ Weinberg (7) would likely not advocate the **Partial Thesis** as he dismisses biological relation accounts of parental responsibility as untenable. An advocate of the **Partial Thesis** can understand gametes as Weinberg describes, however, without accepting his dismissal of biological relations partially grounding responsibility.

¹⁶ T. Bayne & A. Kolors. Parenthood and Procreation. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2008 ed.

¹³ **Sole Theorists** may simply deny the intuitions, arguing instead that the biological father has an overriding responsibility to provide bone marrow in Sperm Donor II and III in virtue of the biological relation. Further unintuitive consequences follow on this view. Peach (4), approvingly quoting Schwarz, suggests we ought to condemn, or at least be suspicious of, sperm donation since it severs the biological bond. I hope to accommodate, rather than reject, intuitions elicited in each scenario discussed in the current paper.

¹⁴ One might propose a variation of The Cad as an argument against Uniqueness grounding responsibility. Consider, biological fathers are expected to provide child support to offspring even if they explicitly reject responsibility. However, a biological father is not *solely* able to provide financial support for the child. Grandparents, cousins, or a stepfather may equally provide financial support. If we nevertheless find the biological father responsible for supporting the child, this suggests biological relations ground responsibility. Persistent responsibility however provides an explanation for the biological father's perceived responsibility in this variation that is consistent with either Uniqueness or biological relations (or both). Moreover, appealing to persistent

Misplaced Sperm: An individual, S, has a sperm bank hold his sperm for future use in procreation with his wife. Due to an office misunderstanding, his sperm is used successfully during artificial insemination with someone other than his wife. S does not learn of the situation until much later, when he returns to the sperm bank with the intention of having his reserve destroyed, as he has decided he does not want children. S is informed on arrival of the situation, and further, that the resulting child requires a bone marrow transplant. S is the only compatible donor.¹⁷

It seems unreasonable to suggest that *because* S knew the risk in having the sperm bank preserve his sperm, S is responsible for donating bone marrow. Thus, it seems unlikely that a persistent responsibility grounds S's perceived responsibility to donate. Nevertheless, S seems to have a responsibility to donate bone marrow.¹⁸ As in Sperm Donor I, the biological father is unique in his ability to provide bone marrow to the sick child. Unlike, Sperm Donor I, however, it appears unreasonable that the biological father in Misplaced Sperm has a persistent responsibility.¹⁹ The biological father in Misplaced Sperm was not careless with his hazardous materials. He did not engage in consensual intercourse aware of the potential risk of pregnancy. If the biological father bears some responsibility for providing bone marrow in this scenario then it seems due to his unique ability to do so.

In what should seem a familiar refrain, while Misplaced Sperm eliminates one potential source of responsibility, it only hints at Uniqueness grounding responsibility. For, biological relations are still exhibited between the biological father and the offspring. A conclusive scenario should eliminate confounding features mentioned in the preceding scenarios so that no feature potentially outweighs the explanatory role played by Uniqueness. With that in mind, consider a scenario where persistent responsibility, biological, parental, and familial relations are eliminated:

¹⁷ The original scenario does not exhibit Uniqueness. Bayne & Kolors (16) employ this scenario to illustrate the importance of intention in procreation and the unimportance of biological relations. They do not consider whether features of the scenario are outweighing the biological relation.

¹⁸ Weinberg, interestingly, might hold the sperm bank responsible. They have misplaced the hazardous material and must take responsibility for the mistake. In the above variation, however, the sperm bank would be unable to provide bone marrow to the child.

¹⁹ One *could* argue persistent responsibility grounds S's responsibility to donate just as it does in Sperm Donor I, and in this manner provide an objection to Uniqueness grounding responsibility here. However, this would place a rather heavy burden on S, making him responsible even in scenarios where his gametes are forcibly stolen. Additionally, appealing to persistent responsibility in Misplaced Sperm will not undermine Uniqueness in the following scenario.

Golden Arm: James Harrison has a blood plasma composition that effectively prevents Rhesus Disease. His blood donations are responsible for the survival of 2.4 million infants around the world.

Harrison did not decide to have this particular blood composition, nor did he consent, as a parent would, to care for the children saved by his donations. He has neither biological nor familial ties to those benefitted by his donations. Nevertheless, Harrison has a responsibility to donate his blood. Luckily, Harrison feels obliged. The intuition that Harrison has a responsibility to donate blood seems to stem, much like in Misplaced Sperm, from Harrison's Uniqueness.

Misplaced Sperm and Golden Arm provide evidence that Uniqueness grounds certain responsibilities. In both scenarios, persistent responsibility is not an explanatory option. Furthermore, in Golden Arm, responsibility grounded in biological relations is not an option and potentially confounding sources of responsibility have been eliminated. Uniqueness provides explanations for perceived responsibilities in scenarios where biological relations are absent. This provides rather substantial evidence that Uniqueness grounds responsibility in scenarios where it is exhibited. Recall, Sperm Donor I is typically employed to motivate the importance of biological relations between biological fathers and offspring. Notably, persistent responsibility, biological relations, and Uniqueness may ground responsibility in this scenario. Now, Sperm Donor I, Misplaced Sperm, and Golden Arm are similar insofar as they each exhibit Uniqueness. Only Uniqueness can be appealed to in Golden Arm, and only Uniqueness and biological relations can be appealed to in Misplaced Sperm as grounding responsibility. The common feature of these scenarios, Uniqueness, seems to ground some responsibility in each. Additionally, appealing to Uniqueness provides an adequate explanation of elicited intuitions from Sperm Donor I that does not require appealing to biological relations. Namely, the biological father should donate bone marrow because he is uniquely able to do so.

I have argued Uniqueness provides an adequate explanation for Sperm Donor I. However, the role of biological relations in this scenario was not ruled out. Indeed, a **Partial Theorist** might accept Uniqueness as grounding responsibility, only adding that biological relations ground responsibility as well. In Section II, I argue that since it is not clear *how* biological relations ground responsibility, and clearer *how* Uniqueness grounds responsibility, appealing to Uniqueness offers a better explanation for these scenarios, and so should be preferred. To summarize this section, I have included a table (Table 1) where preceding scenarios and sources of responsibility are outlined for quick reference.

Table 1. Preceding Scenarios vs. Potential Sources of Responsibility.

Scenario ²⁰	Biological Relation	Parental Relation	Persistent Resp.	Familial Relation	Uniqueness	Donate?
Sperm Donor I	✓	X	✓	X	✓	Yes
Sperm Donor II	✓	X	✓	X	X	No
Sperm Donor III	✓	X	✓	X	X	No
The Cad	✓	X	✓	X	✓	Yes
Misplaced Sperm	✓	X	X	X	✓	Yes
Golden Arm	X	X	X	X	✓	Yes

II. OBJECTIONS

Section I established Uniqueness as potentially grounding responsibility in Sperm Donor I but noted that the **Partial Theorists** could accept this conclusion. In this section, I argue that reliance on biological relations as grounding responsibility is not the best explanation of Sperm Donor I. More specifically, I argue that Uniqueness provides an *additional* responsibility, beyond a presumed standing responsibility to aid others, and this explains *how* Uniqueness grounds responsibility. Then, noting the lack of explanation for *how* biological relations ground responsibility, I show why **Partial Theorists** cannot employ the same explanation for *how* biological relations ground responsibility, although this might be expected. I accomplish these tasks by responding to two objections. Finally, I note it is not clear *how* biological relations ground responsibility and is clearer *how* Uniqueness grounds responsibility. After invoking the conclusion of Section I, I conclude that the **Partial Thesis** has been undermined.

Objection: Additional Responsibility

Consider the following scenario:

Accidental Realization: Several individuals are attending a party on a dock. One guest, Frank, who cannot swim, falls into the water. Frank will drown if no one saves him. One of the guests in attendance, Steve, suddenly realizes with certainty that no one else will save Frank.

If Uniqueness implies responsibility, then Steve should have a responsibility to save Frank. One might think this odd since it entails that if you were to *realize* that you are the only person willing to provide something, perform some action, or perhaps save a life, you have a responsibility to do so. Though Uniqueness implies that Steve *does* have a responsibility, it is unclear that this is actually counterintuitive. If it *is* counterintuitive then it seems the following scenario should be also:

Lonely Dock: Steve and Frank are strangers alone on the dock. While Steve is watching the clouds, Frank falls in the water. Steve is a capable swimmer, and if he does not save Frank, Frank will surely drown in a matter of minutes.

That is, if Steve has no responsibility to save Frank when there are several people on the dock and Steve realizes that no one else will save Frank, then Steve should have no responsibility to save Frank if they are alone. It seems clear, however, that on the Lonely Dock Steve *does* have a responsibility to save Frank. Consequently, Steve should have a responsibility to save Frank when others are around and he realizes no one else will do so.

This response is too quick. I have assumed throughout Section I that Uniqueness magnifies a standing responsibility to provide aid to others. Plausibly, this explains *how* Uniqueness grounds responsibility. *A fortiori*, I have assumed there *is* a standing responsibility to aid others. I will continue to assume there is a standing responsibility to aid others, but perhaps Uniqueness does not magnify this standing responsibility. Then Uniqueness would provide no *additional* responsibility. Consequently, it would be unclear *how* Uniqueness grounds responsibility. This would undermine attempts to provide evidence in favor of explanations of Sperm Donor I that rely on Uniqueness over biological relations. In pursuance, one might object by noting the lesson learned from Accidental Realization is not that Uniqueness would entail counterintuitive responsibilities in some circumstances, but rather that Uniqueness grounds no *additional* responsibility in these circumstances. For instance, in Accidental Realization, Steve has a responsibility to save Frank, but so does everyone else on the dock. If they each have such a responsibility, then Steve's realization adds no *additional* responsibility to save Frank. Similarly, in Lonely Dock, Steve's unique ability does not ground an *additional* responsibility to save Frank since Steve would have that responsibility regardless. For comparison with previous scenarios, in Golden Arm, anyone would have a responsibility to donate blood to save lives. That Harrison is unique in his ability adds no *additional* responsibility. Similarly, in Sperm Donor I, the biological father has a responsibility to donate bone marrow that anyone would have in that situation. The biological father has no

²⁰ To be read, "Is there a (biological relation, parental relation, persistent responsibility, familial relation, Uniqueness) between the biological father (or Harrison) and the recipient of donation in this scenario?"

additional responsibility beyond this. Yet, if Uniqueness does not magnify a standing responsibility to provide aid to others, then it is unclear *how* Uniqueness grounds responsibility in each of these scenarios. Consequently, it may be argued Uniqueness grounding responsibility in Sperm Donor I is just as “mysterious” as appeals to biological relations are.

One way to rebut this objection would be to show, despite assuming a standing responsibility to help others, there is also an additional responsibility stemming from Uniqueness. Consider the following thought experiment:

Button: Ten individuals in a room, empty but for a single button on a wall, are told that if one, and only one, of the ten does not press the button within half an hour, a stranger in a separate room will die. The ten agree that they each have a standing responsibility to save the stranger. In determining who will press the button, they draw ten uneven straws one individual has provided. The individual drawing the longest straw decides first whether he will press the button or not. If not, then the individual drawing the second longest straw decides whether to press the button. This continues until the individual with the shortest straw has to make a decision. The first nine individuals decide not to press the button. The tenth individual, X, confident no one else will press the button, also decides not to press the button.

Presumably, each of the individuals has done something blameworthy. They have each decided to allow the stranger to die. X’s decision, however, seems *worse* than the other nine decisions not to press the button. X knows he is the only person able to save the stranger, and yet he decides not to press the button. While X, and each of the other individuals, may have a standing responsibility to save the stranger, X’s action seems *more* blameworthy. If X’s decision not to press the button is *more* blameworthy than the other nine individuals’ respective decisions, and the only salient difference between X’s decision and the respective decisions of the other nine individuals is X’s Uniqueness, this suggests Uniqueness does ground an *additional* responsibility distinct from a presumed standing obligation to aid others. Similarly, the preceding scenarios where Uniqueness is exhibited imply an *additional* responsibility for the unique agent. Indeed, this *additional* responsibility is *how* Uniqueness grounds perceived responsibility in scenarios where it is exhibited, by magnifying a standing responsibility to aid others.

The How of Biological Relations

A **Partial Theorist** might accept the above arguments and yet *still* maintain that biological relations ground some responsibility. For, **Partial Theorists** might argue that biological relations *also* magnify a standing responsibility

to aid others. It may be argued that *how* Uniqueness grounds responsibility in Sperm Donor I is *how* biological relations ground responsibility in this scenario. Consequently, there is no reason to favor an explanation of Sperm Donor I with Uniqueness rather than biological relations. The **Partial Theorist** might add that the scenario where biological relations cannot ground responsibility, Golden Arm, can be explained by Uniqueness, but scenarios where biological relations and Uniqueness are exhibited may be *overdetermined*. Both Uniqueness and biological relations might magnify a standing responsibility, providing *additional-additional* responsibility.

If this objection is correct, then the following scenario should elicit intuitions that the biological father bears a greater responsibility:

Sperm Donor IV: Same as Sperm Donor I, except exactly 100 individuals can donate bone marrow. They are all strangers to the sick child. One stranger happens to be the child’s biological father.

It is not clear the biological father has *more* of a responsibility to donate than the other strangers do. Admittedly, if the biological father does not donate bone marrow he may be blameworthy. However, would the biological father be *more* blameworthy than the strangers would be if no one donates? This seems unlikely. If the biological father is not *more* blameworthy here then it is also unlikely he has *more* responsibility than the strangers do. They are all equally responsible. Then it seems **Partial Theorists** cannot appeal to the same explanation for *how* Uniqueness grounds responsibility. For, if biological relations magnify a standing responsibility then the biological father should have *more* responsibility to donate in this scenario than the strangers do. However, he does not.

CONCLUSION

As indicated in Section II, it is not clear *how* biological relations ground responsibility. Combined with the conclusion of Section I, appealing to biological relations to explain Sperm Donor I seems superfluous or mysterious. Uniqueness likely grounds responsibility here and in Misplaced Sperm. Additionally, Golden Arm shows the significance of Uniqueness in grounding responsibility in other scenarios. Moreover, Uniqueness grounds an *additional* responsibility for the biological father in Sperm Donor I, a responsibility beyond any presumed standing responsibility he might have to provide aid. The burden of proof is shifted by these considerations to the **Partial Theorist** to provide some explanation for *how* biological relations ground responsibility. Otherwise, the best explanation for Sperm Donor I, and similar scenarios, will not depend on appealing to biological relations.

Sperm Donor I is an important weapon in the arsenal of the **Partial Theorist**. To that extent, **Partial Theorists** should be uniquely worried.²¹

APPENDIX: UNIQUENESS CHARACTERIZED

Uniqueness, roughly, is the *specific* ability, SA, of an agent, G, to perform an action, ϕ , no one else is able to perform, in some circumstance C. Additionally, Uniqueness:

- (i) Does not depend on *consent* (accepting SA is not necessary)
- (ii) Is *zero-sum* (G is either unique or not)
- (iii) Is *environment-sensitive* (spatiality/temporality affect SA)
- (iv) Is *epistemically-sensitive* (ignorance of capability affects SA)
- (v) Entails *additional responsibility* for G (magnifies a standing responsibility to aid others)
- (vi) Is consistent with special responsibilities such as persistent, parental, biological, and familial responsibilities

I briefly elaborate these features of Uniqueness with respect to Golden Arm. Recall, Harrison has a responsibility to donate his blood plasma grounded in a unique ability. Harrison did not decide to have this blood plasma. This suggests Uniqueness does not depend on

²¹ An appendix has been included that provides a semi-formal characterization of Uniqueness developed from considerations in this article.

consent. Expanding the scenario to include multiple people capable of offering comparable blood plasma eliminates Harrison's unique ability and thus, his *additional* responsibility. This suggests Uniqueness is *zero-sum*, i.e. the burden of donation would be shared among those with the appropriate blood plasma. Further considering novel sources of blood plasma suggests Uniqueness is *environment-sensitive* and *epistemically-sensitive*. For instance, if all potential donors but Harrison were located in a remote part of the world and unable to donate blood, or perhaps could not be retrieved so that donations could be made, then Harrison would remain unique. Similarly, if all others were ignorant of having this particular blood plasma, then it seems unlikely that they have, respective, *additional* responsibilities, beyond responsibilities anyone might have to donate. On the other hand, if these donors all lived in the same community and were capable of donating, then it *does* seem intuitive that Harrison's *additional* responsibility to donate, stemming from Uniqueness, has vanished.²²

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²² I note here, though not explicitly discussed in the preceding scenarios, Uniqueness should be refined to reflect generality and particularity. Harrison is unique in his ability to donate, but likely could not extract and preserve the blood plasma on his own. Harrison then is *particularly* unique whereas, say, The Red Cross donation center on 24th Street and affiliated employees are *generically* unique.