

HAVING CHILDREN: REPRODUCTIVE ETHICS IN THE FACE OF OVERPOPULATION

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Abstract Overpopulation is a serious threat to future persons' quality of life. One that I believe can only be addressed by adopting reproductive values that inspire justice for future generations. In this paper I discuss theorists whose views I argue support limiting the right to procreate. I believe enforcing reproductive responsibility is necessary to curb the problem of overpopulation and therefore maintain a standard quality of life for future generations.

It's common to think of having kids as a personal opportunity to experience a unique happiness and our ability to make choices about procreating as a key expression of our identity and personal autonomy. These factors make us feel that the decision to have kids is a deeply individual choice and more importantly that there exists no ethical justification which could diminish this fundamental right.

Our world population has doubled in the last 40 years, which means by 2050 we could potentially have 12 billion people in the world. Overpopulation occurs when the rate of birth exceeds the rate of death. People today have the capacity to live longer lives than ever before, yet lack of access to clean water alone prematurely kills millions across the globe every year. Despite the countless global struggles that lead to premature death we are still

reproducing at a rate that surpasses our rate of death. If we were to fix all the world's problems that lead to unnecessary death we must still contend with the fact that we are subsisting on a planet with a limited ability to provide space, supply food and produce energy. Even if it were possible to overcome the injustices of inequality by radically altering the distribution of resources or achieve technological advancements that are more sustainable there will still come a point at which none of these achievements will be enough to support the sheer number of people that will populate the earth. Overpopulation is a subject we do not breach publicly for fear of appearing absurd or anti-freedom; however I feel it is an issue of major ethical concern and one that needs to be addressed in order to negate this impending situation.

Discussing overpopulation is taboo because it threatens to breach the fortified value we have placed on reproductive autonomy. But I feel that the possibility of bringing people into a world headed for self-destruction is a greater ethical concern than avoiding taboo. Overpopulation is something that threatens the wellbeing of future generations and taking steps to alter this trajectory necessarily demands sacrifices from present generations, namely sacrificing complete reproductive freedom. I believe present people remain unconvinced of this necessity because their current reproductive values do not foster/support concern for future generations. So in order to properly address this issue of overpopulation, which greatly threatens future generations we need both a change in reproductive policy as well as a change in social values. Success is dependent on the implementation of both to make a difference because it would be impossible to enforce such infringing policies if they didn't reflect actual social values. In this

paper I will discuss some philosophical reasons as to how we might justifiably limit the right to procreate in the face of overpopulation. I am concerned specifically with the ethics involved and how we are able to reconcile concern for future generations vs. our own desires for procreative liberty. First, I will establish that a state of overpopulation is in fact undesirable and a situation to be avoided because it has negative consequences for the societies where it occurs. Secondly, the defining characteristic of overpopulation is that it's a problem which worsens over time, so next I will argue for why present generations should feel a connection to future generations who will inherit a worse problem than the generation before. Namely, I argue that the connection between generations is representative of how we understand our procreative duties and this in turn plays out in our reproductive ethic and how we relate to future generations. I will devote a section of the paper to deconstructing some of the reproductive ethics and customs we have now and examining how these views impact where our values lie regarding future generations. In the next section I will look at alternative ethics which carry different perspectives on procreation, therefore creating a different value system that I believe naturally prioritizes future generations. Finally I hope to make an appealing case for limiting procreative freedom in a way that reflects our values regarding having children, both present and future and provides them with a better quality future.

How Having Too Many People Negatively Affects Everyone's Quality Of Life

In his work "Tragedy of The Commons" Garrett Hardin

argues that there must be a restriction placed on limitless population growth because of existing persons' inability "to bear the full burden of the children they have." He insists that overpopulation is inherently a no win situation and the biggest mistake we make when thinking about overpopulation is our inability to factor in institutional sacrifice as a reputable solution. Population grows geometrically, i.e. exponentially and this means that eventually the world's resources are guaranteed to diminish because it is not possible to support an infinite population on a terrestrial landscape that is finite. Hardin uses the example of a "herder", who sees the common pasture as a limitless means to expand his herd of cows because they can graze freely and in as many numbers as he is capable of procuring. The herder does not consider this use of the pasture to negatively affect him on the individual-level, especially since he stands to gain so much personally from having a large and ever expanding herd. The "tragedy" is that everybody else has come to the same conclusion and so the pasture is not able to maintain itself under the strain of so many cows, let alone actually nourish them all. This is a simple analogy for the effect of large populations of self-interested people living in a limited world. Pollution also originates from the same thinking, except that instead of taking something indiscriminately from the commons something is indiscriminately put into the commons, which leads to the destruction of the original fruitfulness, so that we are effectively "fouling our own nest."¹ Having a limitless population, (again, actually impossible) or at

¹ Hardin, Garret, "The Tragedy of the Commons," in *Ethics and Population*, ed. Michael D. Bayles, (Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman Pub. Co., 1976), 9.

least a population double the current size would require that we learn to limit consumption of resources so as not to exceed the bare minimum needed to survive. That means if a man must eat a minimum of 1600 calories a day to survive/manage all his daily obligations then all calories consumed beyond that amount would be considered possibly beneficial but not necessary and therefore no longer part of his diet. Consuming more than this would be taking something beyond his share and therefore impending on someone else's ability to live. I do not think we can conceive of living on a planet with 20 billion people where our lives are so dependent on just servings for total survival. Hardin uses this example to emphasize that the more people we have on the planet the more we will be forced to downgrade from our expected quality of life, if we expect to continue without destroying our own living environment.

But this brings up questions like: Why care what happens to the planet beyond my lifespan? Or about the lives of people who don't already exist now? If having 15 babies and spoiling them to their heart's content suits me and is within my power to bring about then why not do it? I believe these ultimately disastrous sentiments reflect the current vision of reproductive liberty and can only be addressed by first understanding and then assuming other interpretations of reproductive rights.

Reconsidering Commonly Accepted Values Regarding Procreation

Procreation is normally understood as an autonomous decision in two fundamental and problematic ways: as an autonomous bodily decision and as something related to an

individual's self-conception. Understanding procreation as simply an expression of a one's bodily autonomy and an extension of one's ownership over their physical self is inherently problematic. This view focuses on the right to experience one's body in anyway one pleases, including pregnancy; and furthermore that being pregnant is a phenomenon like any other biological process. This makes it seem as if the birth of a child is an extension of one's physicality in the same way that growing out one's hair is, i.e. as if the unborn child were simply a by-product of one's sole individual organs. But becoming pregnant and maintaining the intention to carry the child to term so that it can eventually flourish as its own independent organism is something that's different in kind, not degree, from any other bodily function. Yes, any child who is born was at some point part of its mother's body. But after its birth it no longer functions as an extension of her body and instead lives as its own being; again, showing that the mother's body does not continue to wholly account for this new being's continued existence. In this case pregnancy acts as the original link in the causal chain that will become someone's entire life. While the pregnancy should necessarily be identified as this causal link it also means that the biological mother cannot claim her decisions affect only her and her own body when pregnancy leading to birth necessarily means that her decisions will come to affect at least two persons.

Here I think it is important to clarify a distinction made by Ruth F. Chadwick between begetting, bearing and rearing children because all of these are separate concepts silently at play when we talk about "having children". The fact that we indiscriminately employ the vague term "having children" inevitably leads to

misunderstandings. For example begetting is often a major part of how men conceptualize their procreative role; but if a man over emphasizes his role as begetter over and above his other duties because he has not internalized the two other roles associated with fatherhood then he might behave indifferently and spawn many illegitimate children. The greater outcome of this self-ascribed definition of father is that it can leave many children without the proper care they deserve.

What is important to grasp here is that each step in the procreative process is meaningful and necessary for creating new life but also potentially isolated from the other aspects involved. Secondly, a procreator may feel an emotional connection with any of the steps including: conception, gestation and labor, and the care/ raising of the child. It is also possible to connect with none of them, which is problematic for cultivating a society which demands accountability for their children's quality of life. In the same vein I realize not everyone is capable of every aspect of the procreative process; while some cannot conceive or carry a child others may not be able to rear one because of some critical personal deficiency/hardship. The problem remains that "having children" is an ambiguous undertaking at best. It might seem like this lack of clarity "issue" can be solved simply by separating out the rights that should pertain to each role (begetting, bearing or rearing) but on the whole this isn't too far from the system we have now. Currently, everyone has a right to procreate and to bear children at their own convenience. The same goes for rearing their children until reasons surface that expose them as unfit to care for a child and their right to raise their children can be taken away. But someone's right to conceive and bear children cannot be

terminated. We do not feel it is within anyone's moral capacity to force sterilization on someone who has demonstrated a severe inability to raise their own children in a loving, stable home. Similarly, but less problematic is that no one can be forced to raise a child they have conceived. These rights are all negative rights that allow us to relinquish our responsibility in some regard to our offspring and while we do have laws in place that require us not to brutalize, starve or sell our children I can't say that we have any that prioritize our children's right to a quality life over our own individual freedom.

Hopefully one can see that current procreative liberty operates as a very complex and far-reaching right. This is because the societal attitude implies that it involves anything one finds meaningful and fulfilling for his or her own private life. The problem is that what's considered meaningful and or personally beneficial to someone about reproducing is subjective and might include: experiencing the miracle process of labor, passing on one's genes by donating sperm or the choice to give up custody and terminate all parental rights. All of these examples involve extremely different intentions but nonetheless result in the creation of a new life. I think it's contradictory to be concerned with the wellbeing of existing children yet sanction all of the varied intentions that create new children who may end up suffering from difficult situations caused by those intentions. There are some possible intentions held by the begetters of children that directly lead to a lower quality of life for their child as they are assisted by attitudes of indifference, self-centeredness, or shortsightedness. A set of values that demands total procreative freedom as well as welfare for children is creating a hierarchy of values, which places

the interests of parents first and then scrambles to address the problems directly resulting from that hierarchy. I believe it's sound to question the intentions behind someone's involvement in any aspect of the reproductive process and more importantly to accept that some intentions are not justified when the impact or result of that decision carries such huge implications for persons other/beyond oneself. My point is that just because it is possible to separate the roles involved in procreating doesn't mean we should limit the responsibility regarding the care of children by believing that some roles bear no weight in the welfare of children.

Why Care About People Who Do Not Exist?

Philosopher Derek Parfit is also very concerned with doing the best for our children yet runs into a wall he calls "the non-identity problem" when considering choices that may affect their future. In a classic thought experiment we consider a woman who contracts an illness while pregnant, one that would cause a considerable deformity in the child resulting from the pregnancy. However, if the woman waits just three months to have a child the illness will be gone completely and her child will be perfectly normal. According to Parfit one's identity is necessarily rooted in the unique circumstances of their birth, three months later the circumstances would be entirely different the resulting person would be a product of these different circumstances and therefore a different person. Although at first it seems like the woman should wait to have the baby because it would be better for her child on closer inspection we realize that she is actually choosing between two different people and on this view we can't say that it would be better for the first child if the non-afflicted second child were born

instead. This realization leaves us in a bind where it would be better for no one either way as potential persons i.e. people who are not born have no concrete identity. However, Parfit does not want his view of identity to create an apathetic view of the future, and I feel that as long as we know that future people will exist, and they will, then we have a responsibility to them not to cause any harm, “Remoteness in time has, in itself, no more significance than remoteness in space. Suppose I shoot an arrow into a distant wood, where it wounds some person. If I should have known that there might be someone in this wood, I am guilty of gross negligence. Because this person is far away, I cannot identify the person who I harm but his is no excuse. Nor is it any excuse that this person is far away. We should make the same claims about the effects of people who are temporally remote.”²

Unfortunately Parfit runs into more trouble when he tries to reconcile the non-identity problem with utilitarian values regarding future persons. He calls this new problem the “repugnant conclusion” and it stems from the idea that if we want to maximize happiness then if we have a population whose happiness is on average what we consider optimal then by adding a few extra people whose happiness is slightly below this the total amount of happiness increases from result from this addition. This ends up being a slippery slope where by adding more and more people we end up with an overlarge population whose lives are barely worth living. I believe these dilemmas to be counterintuitive in that they both assume what is important is that “happy people” be born, and

² Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. (Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Clarendon Press.), 375.

seems to construct people as merely “happiness machines”. “Just as a boiler is required to utilize the potential energy of coal in the production of steam, so sentient beings are required to convert the potentiality of happiness, resident in a given land area, into actual happiness. And just as the engineer will choose boilers with the maximum efficiency at converting steam into energy, Justice (utilitarianism) will choose sentient beings who have the maximum efficiency at converting resources into happiness.”³ It’s not good that people exist because they’re happy but that happiness is good for people who exist. What the repugnant conclusion assumes and the theorists that I reference deny is that we have an absolute duty to bring happy people into existence.

Alternative Viewpoints That Better Support Future Generations

When it comes to procreating *it is* possible to have a kid whom you love dearly, that you can provide for, who never experiences random terrible tragedy, who you have a great relationship with, who’s healthy, that loves their life and is a good person. It might be the case that all of this characterizes your parenting experience, or it might not be... but there is no guarantee either way. David Benatar⁴ is keenly aware of this and says that life inherently holds suffering as it necessarily involves enduring bodily decay and confronting mortality; there is however, no one who is possibly harmed by non-existence. He also believes that

³ Bayles, Michael D. 1980. *Morality and Population Policy*. (University: University of Alabama Press.), 390.

⁴ Benatar, David. 2000. "The Wrong of Wrongful Life". *American Philosophical Quarterly*. 37 (2): 175-183.

there are lives so miserable that by our own standards we could consider them not worth living. We therefore have a responsibility to avoid this cruelty and to not bring about such lives. So even on utilitarian grounds, more is not always better. But because the nature of existence is at best neutral (containing both happiness and suffering) we have no duty to bring “happy” people into existence either. The “neutrality” of life does not imply that great happiness and minimal suffering and great suffering and minimal happiness are ultimately equal in their value but that the potential for either scenario to occur or the scales to tip in either direction remains equally possible. Even if all precautions are taken to ensure a happy life for someone their life will necessarily contend with the presence of unhappy scenarios, which means there is no such thing as a non-tempered, unaffected and therefore totally happy life. We cannot say that existence holds the potential for total happiness and is therefore preferable to non-existence because we cannot possibly produce a sliding scale that shows the point where life is total happiness. Therefore you cannot bring into existence nor account for totally happy people in the world. However, you may be able to discern circumstances where someone’s life is total suffering and therefore not worth living. The best that we could hope for is that they are contentment with the proportions of suffering and happiness in their life. Not bringing such people into existence causes them zero harm, not a proportional amount of harm, and so this option is always justified. The obvious consequence of adopting this view is that procreation is rendered seemingly... unnecessary.

Yet Benatar’s view is that we may still choose to procreate if we wish so long as we’re bringing into existence people whose

lives would be worth living. But how do we define a life worth living? This is where Benatar gets a lot of flack since it's unclear what decides whose life is worth living and whose is not. I think this is a misinterpretation of Benatar's intention in that it fails to differentiate ceasing to exist from having never existed. Benatar recognizes that people may have lives that started out as barely worth living but became lives of high quality and conversely that there are lives which started out worth living but are now barely worth continuing. Whatever the circumstance people's lives are necessarily linked to the individual suffering they've experienced, and asking whether they wish they'd never been born is completely futile. Despite whatever handicap they are faced with Benatar says people often view their lives through a distorted lens of attachment regardless of what they would say of their own circumstances objectively. What we are really talking about is not terminating existing beings but refraining from causing lives to begin that are not worth living; it's preventative. In effect, by limiting the amount of actual people who are harmed.

Shiffrin further uses the concept of harm to help us see how exactly the role of parent is to be understood. Like myself, she makes it clear that what she is *not* trying to do is belittle the difficulty involved in properly carrying out parental duties, but to draw attention to the moral implications involved in *creating* a life. She is therefore talking about a situation involving strict liability because of the inherent one-sidedness of this relationship where *the parent and only the parent* chose the life of the child. Furthermore this child will inevitably come to suffer harm in their life, the existence of which is a product of the parent's desire to have a child. She calls this "wrongful life". Shiffrin defines harm as it "primarily involves the imposition of

conditions from which the person undergoing them is reasonably alienated or which are strongly at odds with the conditions she would rationally will;” furthermore “harmed states may be ones that preclude her from removing herself from or averting such conditions.”⁵ What is important to note is that harm is firstly something that the person being harmed *did not will*. Harm is not just loss or pain but anything which, “exerts an insistent intrusive and unpleasant presence on one’s consciousness that one must just undergo and endure.”⁶ This to me is a perfect description of the anxiety that is an inherent part of survival

The analogy often used involves a rescue scenario in which it is necessary to break the arm of an individual in order to get them free of a car wreck (where the danger could potentially escalate) and save their life. By choosing to harm this person in the act of breaking their arm you have also carried out the action necessary to save them from harms greater than a broken arm. The relevance is that it’s necessary for people to suffer some harm in existence in order to enjoy the great benefit of life. Shiffrin openly denies that this is an accurate parallel. She says a “pure” benefit is not solely the removal of harm but the ability of the benefit to improve the overall quality of life for the recipient. The rescue case is not an example of a pure benefit because it addresses only the removal of a single greater harm, (greater injury or death for the victim in the accident), but does not necessarily disallow the existence of yet another harm to this person later in life. In real life procreation does act as a benefit which avoids obstructs any greater harm. The rescue scenario exemplifies Shiffrin’s insistence that this analogy “illegitimately trades upon a common equivocation of

⁵ Shiffrin, Seana Valentine. 1999. "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm". *Legal Theory*. 5 (2):750

⁶ *Ibid.*, 750

“benefit.”⁷ In other words that we speak as though removing someone from harm is what benefits that person. In reality it does not follow that it is the act of *doing the saving* which is the moral justification for inflicting harm but the greater positive (beneficial) outcome that is the result of the saving. Conversely the beneficial act of creation doesn’t allow justification for harm because the greater outcome of procreation is not that a greater harm is averted. It is not appropriate for us to think it acceptable to harm someone just to gain a benefit. Such an action only becomes morally innocent when we do it to remove some greater harm. We are certainly not justified in inflicting a minor harm for the prospect of a greater benefit.

There is another often-cited example used in attempts to emphasize the inherent good of life by drawing a connection between life and benefits which I believe is relevant. In this scenario the hypothetical character called “Wealthy” injures another character, “Unlucky” in an attempt to bestow benefits which would improve the overall quality of Unlucky’s circumstances. Wealthy is a philanthropist of sorts who decides to charter a plane so that he may distribute his solid gold bricks indiscriminately by randomly throwing them overboard. One of these bricks falls on Unlucky and the impact injures him as one expects a hit from a gold brick would. Though Unlucky is caused significant pain from his injuries he will definitely live and the gold brick is his to keep. Once again the given example presupposes many things, including as already stated, the fact that it is morally justified to harm someone simply for the sake of what is *assumed* as a benefit at the time without the “beneficiary’s”

⁷ Ibid., 751

consent. Now, what if Wealthy included an additional 1.5 million dollars meant as anticipatory compensation for the injury caused by dropping the brick? Shiffrin and myself believe this is a false solution; if the compensation is “built in” to the harm then it seems as if Wealthy is preemptively pardoning himself from any culpability as well as disregarding his subsequent duty to seriously address any and all harm done. In order to legitimately act in compensation for a harm then one must seriously address the harm itself as it stands alone. This means as separate from the delivery or execution of the harm i.e. certainly not exploiting any potential for benefit in order to justify doing the harm itself. I think the concept of wrongful life is inherently different from the rescue or financial scenarios used in thought experiments for them to be compared. In the case of procreation not only are we committing the much more serious act of creating brand new life but in this case we neither save nor prevent anyone from a greater harm.

The key to understanding the wrongful life concept is being able to come to terms with naming all the things that are scary and difficult about having and raising children. No one wants his or her child to suffer, so then, why is it so difficult to understand that they *will* suffer? And how is it not in the nature of a parent to naturally assume responsibility for all that their child feels, endures, achieves, etc? This theory is really not much more than a reflection of these basic inclinations that are intrinsic to good parenting. I believe this appeals to the greatest of all parental instinct and that is to shield one’s child from harm. Opponents to wrongful life might again say that any possible horror experienced by a child is not cause enough for a parent to call their child’s life wrongful. I think Shiffrin would disagree and say that a parent’s

instinct to protect is so severe that the failure to do so could potentially create such guilt that they'd prefer their child to never have been born. Not because they do not value their child's life but because they acknowledge the unfairness of a child suffering who did not ask to be brought into this world.

Another critique of wrongful life questions the point where a parent should cease to be liable for all harm experienced by their child. The concern for how far into lives of future people we are responsible for is something that concerns Parfit as well.

Personally, I think that the point at which a parent ceases to be liable is relative to the initial harm incurred by the child in their youth. Again following Shiffrin and as well as intuition I think the concern is really whether the parent took proper steps prior to conception as well as during the child's early years that showed consideration for their future. Ideally, the child will become completely responsible for itself so far as they were provided the tools to do so by their parents. If the point at which their life becomes unmanageable can be traced back to an original and significant harm done by the parent then that parent should be held responsible contributing to the current situation. But again appealing to intuition it should follow that the older the child gets the murkier that trace line should be due to the growing agency (autonomy!) of the child. And this is true for Parfit as well; it would be wrong to deny the initial connection we do have to our children's future because we are not able to see forever into the results. The better it is seen to that children are given what they need to make their own decisions and inform their own actions the less it can be said that their lives are limited by the decisions of their parents. Similarly we must leave behind a quality of life that

reflects our own standards for our children or be responsible for negative quality of life they experience. Giving life is currently seen as a gift, something for which we should be never-endingly grateful for, something that is beyond reproach, we should not demand more of the giver. But giving life is not something that pardons you from your responsibilities, in fact quite the opposite, having children only extends your responsibility indefinitely.

What Different Values Means Practically

When we begin to grasp the kinds of values regarding parenting and procreation perpetuated by Benatar and Shiffrin I believe we are better able to accept a difficult course of action like limiting population. We see limiting our procreative liberty as less about our own limited freedom and more about doing what's right by future persons by providing them a certain quality of life. It's easy for us to accept that we have a moral duty not to force undesirable situations on others. We now have the ability to include future persons based on a strong understanding that we actually dictate who these people will be and therefore have just as much of a relationship with them.

According to population scholar Michael Bayles, the greater the need for population control the more likely there will be a greater need for limits on freedom as well. This is referring to problems which are dire (immediate) and require solutions beyond volunteerism or family planning. For Bayle guilt plays a major role in our society; it influences how we feel about our own actions; however it does not necessarily change them. The desire not to harm future generations may be instilled in present generations but it does not curb the tragedy of the commons. That is why we will

eventually need policies that allow us to execute these views. He insists that because no specific values regarding quality of life have absolute priority (subjective) it's necessary to evaluate policies based on their ability to successfully accomplish objectives for present and future persons. This means that a policy is only justifiable if it actually realizes the desired effects. Bayles also emphasizes that some freedoms are greater or more important than others and that this should also dictate how we are to address certain population concerns. He advocates a pragmatic use of our perceived spectrum of freedoms. For example, it is less of an infringement on peoples' freedom to be able to have up to two children rather than no children. The main difficulty of implementing such policies, whether they be positive incentives, negative incentives or compulsory is to insure a level of equality regarding the actual effects. Neither Bayles nor myself thinks that it is ethical for people of lesser means to bear the greater burden of limiting population growth. Again what this means is a pragmatic approach and an emphasis on equality. I think that it's also important to emphasize that poverty does not necessarily make for life barely worth living. There are other values in regards to quality of life to be prioritized which are more universal like, mental stability, sobriety etc.

Hardin states that humans intuitively feel guilt for however they've failed ethically. But regardless of whether guilt is a naturally occurring response, it's also useless in bringing about an optimal desired result. Along this line I believe any person is capable of feeling a deep love for their child and still failing them. Hardin proposes what he calls "Mutual coercion mutually agreed

upon.”⁸ He feels that coercion regularly practiced simply means bringing about the desired result that everyone wants but doesn’t want to contribute to themselves, like taxes, and that the same can be said of limiting the resources/rights to reproduce infinitely. Responsibility Hardin says, is a product of social arrangement and does not occur on its own. We cannot measure, control, or affect how much a procreator loves their progeny but what we can do is take steps to ensure a basic quality of life for them so that they are able to pursue lives worth living.

Conclusion

By adopting reproductive ethics that inspire justice for future generations I believe the limits on procreative freedom become less burdensome for present generations. Whether institutionally enforced social responsibility is successful relies on our own personal relationship with the values we are upholding. Overpopulation is a threat to future persons’ quality of life, which means essentially that it’s a threat to our children and our children’s children as well as to ourselves.

⁸ Hardin, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, 7.

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