

# The Ethics of Procreation and Adoption

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## Abstract

It is widely assumed that people have a moral right to procreate. This article explores recent arguments in opposition to procreation in some or all contexts. Some such views are concerned with the risks and harms of life that procreation imposes on non-consenting children. Others articulate concerns for third parties – the environmental damage or opportunity costs that procreation poses to already existing people. The article then surveys arguments that favor procreation despite the risks to the children created and third parties. The best argument for procreation is based on the significant interest people have in forming the parent–child relationship. An important under-discussed middle ground is suggested – one that avoids the criticisms of the anti-natalist while fulfilling the best aims of procreation – viz. adoption. The duty to adopt is summarized and objections to it considered. Thoughtful people who deeply desire to become parents but do not wish to participate in the range of potential procreative harms should consider adoption as a first choice.

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Most people probably don't think about it; they do as the birds and the bees do. But if pressed to defend themselves, they would insist that there is a right to have children. There is a right to form a family, to become parents. It is even enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family' (Article 16).<sup>1</sup>

While philosophers have been debating specific ethical issues of procreation – for example, the permissibility of abortion and the use of genetic therapies – it has long been taken for granted that people have a right to procreate. Some may even think that the right to procreate is immune from moral scrutiny. But this is implausible. In procreating, we create a vulnerable and needy person whose life could go well or badly. Procreation adds more people to a planet that many think has already reached its carrying capacity. People already endorse plausible limits to procreation: most of us think it would be wrong to intentionally have a child when we are only 14,<sup>2</sup> or to create a child who will relentlessly suffer, or to have 15 children in an overpopulated world.

Christine Overall argues that the default position on procreation needs to be inverted: rather than thinking those who choose to not have biological children are odd and must explain themselves, those who choose to procreate need to justify their decision (*Why Have Children* 3). The pressure is on. Recent *anti-natalist* arguments create a burden for those who would defend a right to procreate to articulate the basis for this right.<sup>3</sup>

This article will use the concept of a moral right loosely: people have a morally significant interest in procreating that is protected from a demanding morality that might otherwise require a person to sacrifice her interest in procreating for the sake of the greater good. The discussion begins with the challenges to a right to procreation, detailing the anti-natalist positions based on harms to those created and harms to third parties. This includes *precautionary* positions on procreation – those not entirely opposed to procreation, though they emphasize the risks of procreation. The next section rehabilitates the arguments in favor of the idea that people do

have an important interest in procreation, narrowing in, specifically, on the significant interest one might have in parenting. Finally, an important, under-discussed alternative is suggested – one that avoids the criticisms of the anti-natalist while fulfilling the legitimate aims of procreation. That alternative is adoption.

Some clarifications are in order. First, the focus here is on morality. If one denies that there is a moral right to procreation, this does not entail that people have no political right to procreate. It does not entail that the state has permission, for instance, to sterilize its people. Second, certain other issues that fall under the ‘procreative ethics’ umbrella will be set aside. These include questions of how to go about procreating (e.g. whether to use artificial reproductive technologies) or whether one must have the best child possible (e.g. whether genetic therapy or enhancement is morally permissible). Third, the focus is on voluntary procreation, that is, for those who have a socially supported choice in the matter. Fourth, the scrutiny here is on the procreative decision that occurs pre-conception. The arguments here do not constitute an all-things-considered position on the permissibility of abortion, because this requires additional determinations about the moral status of fetuses and the moral and political rights of women to control their reproduction. Finally, philosophical scrutiny of the decision to procreate need not entail a negative judgment on people who choose to procreate. To question whether we should procreate is to distance ourselves from our social practices and ask what they are worth. A progressive morality challenges us to rethink our commonly held, traditional practices without judging people’s character or motives.

### 1. *Anti-natalism and Precautionary Views*

The most prominent anti-natalist is David Benatar, who wrote in *Better Never to Have Been*, that bringing a person into existence is always a considerable net harm to that person. Benatar’s primary argument relies upon his claim that bads and goods for people, for example, pain and pleasure, are asymmetrical in the following way: though the presence of pain is bad and the presence of pleasure is good, the absence of pain is good (even if there is no one to experience its absence), but the absence of pleasure is not bad (if there is no one to experience its absence) (*Better Never to Have Been* 14, 30). Existence will bring about both good and bad for a person, that is, both pain and pleasure. Non-existence, however, is not bad with respect to the absence of pleasures but is good with respect to the absence of pain. Thus, existence is a net harm over nonexistence. Supplementing the above ‘axiological asymmetry’ argument, Benatar gives a quality-of-life argument: most lives are far worse than people realize. Therefore, the harm of existence cannot be justified by appeal to the good it creates for others. From this, Benatar claims that it is always morally wrong to procreate.

Benatar’s view implausibly entails that no amount of good in a life could outweigh the bad in a life (McMahan, ‘Asymmetries’ 63). A life with a hangnail’s worth of pain for an otherwise extremely happy person is one that is worse than nonexistence. This is because even if the good of a person’s life has value if she exists, its absence if she does not exist is not bad. However, the absence of the bad of the hangnail is good even if she does not exist. Nonexistence has an advantage over existence – it is in one way good and in no way bad. Benatar embraces this counterintuitive implication (*Better Never to Have Been* 48). But as Overall notes, this is a highly risk-averse position – avoiding existence to avoid some pain that we might palliate in another way (*Why Have Children* 101–102).

To avoid Benatar’s conclusions, one could reject his pain/pleasure asymmetry. The absence of pain is not good for a person.<sup>4</sup> No person exists for whom it is good. Nor is it good impersonally. It has neutral value just like the absence of good. Benatar thinks this would sacrifice a straightforward explanation of the wrong of bringing a miserable person into

existence. He emphasizes: 'Avoiding the pains of existence is more than merely "not bad." It is good' (*Better Never to Have Been* 39). But this confuses evaluation of an action with that of states of affairs. It is good, that is, right, to refrain from creating a harmed life, though the state of affairs of an absent harm is itself not good for the person not created (Overall, *Why Have Children* 105; Harman 781).

Benatar employs an idiosyncratic method for assessing the relative advantages of existence and nonexistence. He compares the presence of pain to its absence; then he compares the presence of good to its absence. Why not instead add up the goods and bads of nonexistence on one side, then compare to the net goods and bads of existence on the other (Harman 781)? If the latter total is greater than the former total, then existence is good for the person. This is an intuitive and plausible method for reckoning the goods and bads of existence and nonexistence, respectively, which avoids his widespread anti-natalism.<sup>5</sup>

Whether you're convinced by Benatar's arguments or not, he brings much needed attention to the possibility that existence can harm a person and that procreation is a morally risky endeavor. Other philosophers emphasize the risks of procreation to the children created, though they endorse more modest conclusions. They are not anti-natalists, but their arguments put pressure on the pro-natalist to justify procreation. Seana Shiffrin argues that procreation is an 'intrinsically' morally fraught act because it risks imposing on a person, without the person's consent, significant, absolute harms (136). Absolute harms are noncomparative in nature. One is in a harmed state in virtue of being in a bad condition (123); one need not be in a state that is worse than some other state she was or could be in in order to be harmed. Even though existence may benefit a person, on Shiffrin's view, we do not usually think that we may impose significant harms on people in order to give them net benefits (unlike imposing harms on people in order to avert greater harms). Shiffrin is not advocating full stop the view that procreation is morally impermissible but that it is a morally problematic act and procreators may be held responsible for the harms they impose on their children (139).

In a new book, *The Risk of Lifetime*, Rivka Weinberg argues that procreation is not a gift, for the benefits of life do not come for free. We must work at having good lives, at the risk of much suffering (18). Although she denies that children have consent rights, procreation is still a risk imposed on children for the sake of the procreators (138). As such, our gametes are a kind of hazardous material, and we are responsible for the people that can result from them. Despite the precaution, Weinberg proposes a contractualist principle:

procreation is permissible when the risk you impose as a procreator on your children would not be irrational for you to accept as a condition of your own birth, in exchange for the permission to procreate under these risk conditions (200).

Although procreation, for Weinberg, is not forbidden, it is a 'morally weighty' act that must be taken with deliberation and care.

The famous Non-identity Problem complicates the assessment of procreative harms (Parfit 351–79). Most people think it wrong for someone to create a child with a genetic condition when he could have created a healthier child instead. But given that the child has a life worth living, explaining the wrong is philosophically tricky. The child is not worse off existing than not existing at all. And the child is not worse off than *she* would have been if one had created a child without the genetic condition, for that would have been a different person altogether. In what sense is the child harmed or wronged by being created? The problem could generalize against the anti-natalist or precautionary views. Who exactly is at risk of being harmed in being created, as long as the person stands a reasonable chance of a life worth living? Full discussion of the Non-identity Problem is beyond the scope of this piece, but the anti-

natalist and precautionary views have responses. Shiffrin's account of noncomparative, absolute harms can avoid the problem since on her view one can be absolutely harmed by existence even if she has a life worth living. Likewise, Weinberg argues that the major ethical theories are not committed to a sense of moral permissibility that relies upon the narrow conception of harm that the Non-identity Problem depends upon (103). Benatar's view avoids the Non-identity Problem since he thinks no lives are worth living.

The above positions, from Benatar's anti-natalism to Shiffrin and Weinberg's precautionary views, see procreation as an inherently risky endeavor. It subjects a person, one who cannot consent, to a life that will involve suffering and death. These arguments focus on the risks to the person being created. Other anti-natalist positions gain traction by focusing on the impact of procreation on third parties.

Thomas Young claims that if people are opposed to individual overconsumption of resources, then they should be opposed to procreation. Having a child in the developed world impacts the environment to the same extent, at least, as excessive consumption behavior (183). Defending the analogy, Young states that the reasons for having a child are not better than the reasons for overconsumption. People procreate for 'cultural expectations, improved status, elevated self-esteem, increased happiness, or an altruistic desire to share with others' (187). His is a parity argument: to be consistent, people must oppose both overconsumption and procreation or think that both are morally permissible. Young then supports the position that opposes both overconsumption and procreation because of the better results it will bring for people and the environment.

An objector to Young might claim that any one child created imposes only a small, imperceptible contribution to climate change. This small contribution doesn't matter morally. But Young's point is to make an analogy with overconsumption. Insofar as environmentalists would not accept this drop in the bucket argument as convincing, they should not accept it here (185). However, it's worth emphasizing: the consumption of one additional person in the developed world is 50 to 300 times more than a person in the developing world (184). Also, when one has a child, she is creating the possibility for her child to have children. The potential increase in consumption, for just one procreative act, compounds quickly (Young 185, fn. 4; Murtaugh and Schlax, 'Carbon Legacies' 14).

Another objection to procreation is based on its opportunity costs. Stuart Rachels says conceiving and raising children is immoral because it requires money – about \$227,000 for a middle-income family in the USA to conceive and raise a child to age 18 – and time and energy that could be spent on giving to charitable organizations that save lives (570). Further, Rachels argues that it is not too demanding of morality to require people to abstain from procreating; what is demanding is having children (576). We cannot appeal to the sacrifice in happiness if people do not have children. Rachels cites the recent psychological literature, which suggests that remaining childless does not negatively impact happiness (577).

A formidable aspect of the third party-focused anti-natalist arguments is the challenge they pose to the procreative rights claims of the pro-natalist. Even if there is a right to procreation, it might be defeated by the competing rights of others who are negatively impacted by procreation (Young 188; Conly 109). Insofar as adding more people to the world results in increased carbon emissions, and increased carbon emissions result in a warming planet, then creating more people ultimately contributes to the loss of arable farmland. This in turn is a factor in some people not having enough to eat. So some people's procreation results in other people's not having their right to food met. Yet worse, John Nolt estimates that the average American's emissions are responsible for the suffering or death of one or two future people (3). A straight defense of procreative rights is not sufficient for the pro-natalist. They must show that these rights take precedence over other rights of existing people.

One objection to any of the anti-natalist arguments arises from a worry for what a successful prohibition on procreation would mean for the entire human species. Humans would go extinct. This is assumed to be an awful predicament. But there are several responses here. First, one can reject this requirement to imagine one's actions under full compliance. It simply is not the case that everyone will stop procreating (Young 191; Rachels 575). Some will procreate despite hearing the forceful arguments against it. Others will procreate because they have no opportunity to hear these arguments or their contraception fails. Some people are not politically or socially empowered to have a choice in the matter. People should not worry about the fantastical scenario in which all procreation ceases given the very real, looming harms caused by increasing human population.

Also, this assumes that human extinction is a bad thing in itself (beyond the suffering most extinctions involve). But this is debatable. Benatar has a *misanthropic* anti-natalist argument that questions the positive value of the human species altogether (Benatar and Wasserman, *Debating Procreation* 78–121). Humans are a destructive, dangerous, species that have caused immense harm to other humans, animals, and the environment. In contrast, extinction itself is bad for no particular person. It is not obvious at all that our species ceasing to exist would be so bad after all.

In summary, the anti-natalist and precautionary views show that even if there is a right to procreate, this right must be balanced with the interests of others who are potentially negatively impacted by procreation – including the non-consenting child who is created and third parties for whom procreation can be a harm or an opportunity cost.

## 2. What Can Be Said in Favor of Procreation?

The anti-natalist arguments put the pro-natalist in a corner. People cannot just do as the birds and the bees do. We have to justify our procreation. What value is there in procreation that could contend with the significant anti-natalist concerns?

Establishing an obligation to procreate might offer the most forceful rebuttal. Saul Smilansky claims there would be a strict obligation if the human species were at risk of dying out, but until then, there are moderate, 'inclining' considerations in favor of procreation (51). Anca Gheaus argues for a collective responsibility to procreate in order to avoid the suffering of a last generation (87–106).<sup>6</sup> But her argument does not apply to a world that is not decreasing in population; at most, there may be a latent duty to reproduce in such a scenario. Proponents of a duty to procreate must also contend with Overall's important reminder that it is women who bear and give birth to children. Women have significant autonomy interests at stake and cannot be obligated to procreate (*Why Have Children* 8 and 58). Overall's argument is a crucial contribution to a literature on procreation that oftentimes abstracts away from the real, gendered nature of procreative decisions.

One could also argue that there is an obligation to procreate due to the untenability of what is known as the Asymmetry.<sup>7</sup> The Asymmetry describes the popular pair of intuitions that there is an obligation to refrain from creating a person who will have a miserable life, but there is no obligation to create a person who will have a happy life. Critics of the Asymmetry claim that, while it may be intuitive, it is unmotivated. Absent compelling reason for the asymmetry, we should demand either negative symmetry – there is no obligation to create happy people nor to refrain from creating miserable people – or positive symmetry – there is an obligation to refrain from creating miserable people and to create happy people. Positive symmetry seems more palatable than negative symmetry, since it can account for the intuitive wrongness of creating a miserable person.

Positive symmetry may offer the most promising argument for an obligation to create happy people, or at least for good *reasons* to create happy people. After all, creating happy people

creates more well-being. Well-being is a moral good. So perhaps there is moral reason to create happy people. Perhaps an increase in the quantity of people with lives worth living has moral value, as does increasing well-being by improving the quality of lives. The pro-natalist who holds this view must explain, however, how an increase in quantity of lives could compensate for reduction in quality of lives (Parfit 386). Imagine two worlds. World A has 2 billion people in it, all with a high quality of life. World Z has 60 billion people in it, all with lives barely worth living. One less loaf of bread each and they would each have lives not worth living. But the total well-being of everyone in World Z is far greater than the total well-being of everyone in World A. If someone had a choice between creating A and Z, and she believes that quantity of lives can compete with quality of lives, then she should create Z. But this is so deeply unintuitive – *repugnant*, even. Hence, this problem has been called the *Repugnant Conclusion* (Parfit 388). Avoidance of the Repugnant Conclusion is one of the major motivations for denying that there is moral reason to create happy people.<sup>8</sup>

In any case, the philosophical arguments about benefiting people by creating them do not reflect the actual reasons for which people have children. People do not procreate for the sake of the possible children – who do not yet exist or have a stake in the matter prior to existing – but for self-regarding reasons. It is because the parent wants to have a biological child, not for the potential benefit to the child. This creates a difficulty in justifying procreation without inappropriately making the child a means to the fulfilling the parent's interests (Overall 64; Brighouse and Swift 102; Weinberg 23–24). The concern applies to those who would procreate primarily to pass on their name, property, or genes (Overall 77), or who see children as a vehicle for the parent's self-expression and carriers of the parent's values (Brighouse and Swift 102; Weinberg 23–24). If we locate the value of having children in the parent's interest in something other than the child herself, we instrumentalize the child in pursuit of that interest.

It is possible to have a self-regarding reason for having a child and to still treat that child as an end in herself. Treating her as an end herself would require taking account of the risks of her creation to her, as well as valuing her existence for its own sake, meeting her needs, and recognizing her nascent and budding autonomy. And this just is a plausible description of the prospective parent's interest in having and experiencing the relationship of raising a child – an experience characterized by other-regarding love and care.

Overall argues for the desire to enter into the parent–child relationship as the best reason for procreation. Procreative parenthood is a unique opportunity for self-transformation. She claims, 'In becoming a parent, one creates not only a child and a relationship, but oneself; one creates a new ideally better self-identity' (*Why Have Children* 218). Further, parenthood offers an opportunity for people to exercise and develop their capacities – to flourish. Weinberg adds that the goods of parenthood include the opportunity to nurture and be nurtured and to form family ties (39–40).

Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift offer a similar argument that parenting can make a 'distinctive and weighty' contribution to well-being (86) and that this good cannot be substituted for by another relationship. It is a unique fiduciary relationship unlike any other consensual relationship with another adult – lover, friend, colleague – in the asymmetrical relationship of care between adult and young child, with a distinctive quality of intimacy (91). They too recognize parenthood as a novel opportunity for adults to develop and exercise specific capacities that enhance their flourishing (91). They argue that these reasons can ground a weak right to parent.<sup>9</sup>

Brighouse and Swift are explicit that this is a right to parent, however, not specifically a right to procreate, and that the biological relationship with a child, if valuable at all, is not the foundation for this right (107). This reveals a gap between procreating and parenting. If the best

argument for procreation is an argument for people's interest in experiencing *parenthood*, the argument for *procreative* parenthood in particular is still wanting.

### 3. Adoption: A Middle Way Through

The gap between parenthood and procreation can be filled by an important alternative – one that unlike procreation seems indisputably morally permissible. Adoption of children is morally valuable as an alternative to problematic procreation, but it is morally valuable in its own right (Rulli, 'Unique Value'). The opportunity to adopt children puts additional pressure on the pro-natalist in two different ways. First, procreation may be wrong because there is an alternative that meets the goals of procreation – viz. parenting – while not being subject to the anti-natalist challenge. Second, procreation may be wrong because there is a duty to adopt children instead. This argument does not depend upon any anti-natalist arguments (though it is strengthened by them).<sup>10</sup> I sketch the argument for a duty to adopt rather than to procreate. Along the way, I will address concerns that relate to the first argument.

### 4. A Duty to Adopt Rather Than Create

The exact number of children in need of adoption worldwide is a matter of deep controversy.<sup>11</sup> But there is little doubt that the number of children who could benefit from adoption far surpasses the number of actual adoptions in a year (Carlson 52–35). Adoption is obviously good for children in need of new families (van IJzendoorn and Juffer). This situation is structurally similar to familiar duty to rescue cases: a person is in need of a critical benefit, one that will most likely prevent them from coming to great harm, and others can provide it without comparable cost to themselves. Many people have exactly what these children need – a desire to engage in the parent–child relationship and to provide a loving home with food, shelter, and financial support. There is a strong case for a *pro tanto* duty to adopt – a duty that has genuine strength, though it may be overridden or defeated by other considerations (Rulli, 'Preferring'; Friedrich, 'A Duty').

It is plausible that the duty would be limited to those people who want to have children. Most people think there are moral permissions to act less than optimally beneficent when they have a special project or significant interests at stake. If there are exemptions to protect personal projects, then people are not morally required to become parents in the first place. For becoming a parent significantly alters the character of one's life and one's freedom to pursue other worthwhile projects. Those who would object to a duty to adopt would agree there are such *moral options* to do less than the best.<sup>12</sup> But if they agree to this, then those who do not want to become parents are exempt from the duty. The duty falls on prospective parents. The appropriate baseline for assessing the putative burdens of adoption is *procreative* parenthood.

Some arguments for the duty to adopt target only subfertile prospective parents, those who, for a variety of reasons – infertility, sexual orientation – would need to use artificial reproductive services to have biological children (Petersen). This narrow target is unfair. Some might think that fairness concerns exempt subfertile couples from a duty to adopt (Rivera-López). Tina Rulli argues that there is unique value for all prospective parents in adopting rather than procreating, and all prospective parents have the parental resource to offer ('Unique Value'). We should not restrict the scope of the duty to adopt to subfertile individuals.

How would adoptive parenthood differ from *procreative* parenthood? And would this difference defeat a *pro tanto* duty to adopt children? Rulli argues that reasons to prefer having a genetically related child fail to defeat a *pro tanto* duty to adopt ('Preferring'). Typically, in order for an agent's interest to defeat a duty to rescue, it must have positive, nontrivial value and play an important role in her projects and goals. The desires to have a child who looks like oneself, who shares a family resemblance, who has one's personality and talents, as a symbol of one's

romantic love, or to have an immortal lineage of sorts, or for the putative value of the genetic connection itself, or simply to be a procreator cannot rise to the level of an option-grounding project (Rulli, 'Preferring'). Rulli argues that the above reasons are trivial, empirically flawed, or inappropriate as normative parental reasons. For instance, though we may desire children who look like us or share our personality traits, we cannot desire this too strongly, for even genetic children may fail in these expectations. But if we are flexible, then these desires cannot ground a project-strength interest that would compete with a duty to adopt (17). Overall asks, 'Is anyone's biological composition so valuable that it must be perpetuated?', and charges this preference with being conceited (*Why Have Children* 61–62).<sup>13</sup>

Rulli concedes that the desire to experience pregnancy – because it is an intimate and unique experience – might ground a moral option against the duty to adopt for those with a strong desire ('Preferring' 25–28). Overall, however, argues that child-bearing is not itself intrinsically valuable but is in the service of other values connected to the family (*Why Have Children* 59–60) and cautions against over-romanticizing pregnancy and breastfeeding ('What is the Value?' 98). Brighthouse and Swift warn that gestational accounts create an asymmetry between men and women parents (109). (The distinction should be between gestational and non-gestational parents.) They question whether there can be a specific intimate relationship with a fetus *in utero* (109).

One might reject the analogy to the duty to rescue: adoption is far more demanding than a simple duty to rescue case. It requires raising a child. But it is a mistake to conceive of adoption as extended, long-term rescue. The beneficent act of adoption is that of entering into a special relationship with a child, who becomes a child of one's own. When a parent cares for his adoptive child, he is not rescuing her at every moment (Rulli, 'Unique Value' 123). The baseline for assessing the burden of this act is creating a child with whom to enter into this special relationship instead.

Travis Rieder argues that the choice of how to form a family is a type of *intimacy* – much like the choice of whether to have an abortion (303; Little 'Intimacy'). As such, it is protected from obligations of beneficence. But the analogy between being morally required to carry in one's body an unwanted child and being morally required to adopt a child, when one wants to become a parent anyway, is tenuous. Adoption does not require bodily occupation. Moreover, in joining your family, the child becomes one of your intimates. Morality is well-suited for exactly this kind of case – providing impartial reasons to enter into a partial relationship with another.

Others may point out that there are not enough children available for adoption to satisfy all of the people who desire to become parents. This is in part due to the fact that not all children who would greatly benefit from adoption are available for adoption (Rulli, 'Preferring' 4). But even if we had better child welfare policies and a more efficient international and domestic adoption system, if all people adopt children rather than procreate, at some point, there would be no children to adopt (Weinberg 43). This would be a great 'problem' to have. But it is not the case *now*: as long as there are children in need of families and people desiring to parent and able to adopt, then adoption can satisfy the parental desire while avoiding some of the potential harms of procreation.

Relatedly, adoption is often logistically, legally, and financially onerous. This may count against adoption in certain circumstances (some may think, for instance, against adoptions of older-age children or children with disabilities) or for specific prospective parents (those who cannot afford adoption). Perhaps then it is permissible for some people to procreate. But this would be because they cannot adopt to become parents instead, not because there is some fundamental right to procreate (and reasons to procreate may still be defeated by the anti-natalist concerns). Even if the duty to adopt is defeated for particular people, we have a derivative duty to change existing child welfare systems so that more children are benefited from adoption (Rulli, 'Preferring' 30). Changing prospective parents' attitudes towards

adoption and arguing that adoption is a superior alternative to problematic procreation could go a long way in building momentum and activism for changing the system. This is compatible with, not undercut by, increased concern for the situations of birth parents who relinquish their children (Weinberg 43). Focusing on changing unjust systems while ignoring children presently in critical need of adoption is morally inexcusable (Rulli, 'Preferring' 7).

Why isn't the middle ground instead that we both procreate and adopt? Overall argues that, given the anti-natalist arguments, each person is permitted to procreate once (*Why Have Children* 180–184). But how is this particular compromise justified? Parental resources (time, money, emotional commitment, and so forth) are finite and scarce; thus, an allocation of the resources one way (to a biological child) is a choice to not give those resources to a child in need, for each child one parents. The compromise position implies that procreation is superior to adoption. Since adoption would better respond to the anti-natalist concerns, then it is implied that there is some reason to procreate and not adopt at least once per person. But the argument in favor of procreation is wanting.

The environmentalist may yet object to adoption. The adoption of a child from the developing world to the developed world increases her carbon footprint by a large amount. But this argument is disanalogous with the environmentalist anti-natalist argument because it is about prioritizing avoidance of environmental harms over the critical welfare of an existing child in need, not a potentially existing child. If we would deny critical benefits to a child in need of adoption due to environmental concerns, we should be committed to reducing our own consumption to the point at which our critical needs are unmet. Few would accept this entailment.

## 5. Conclusion

The anti-natalists give us reasons to find procreation, at worst, morally wrong, and at best, morally risky. The best reason to procreate is in order to experience the parent–child relationship. But adoption offers a viable and worthwhile alternative to procreation for those who want to parent. Adopting an already existing child does not make one complicit in the potential harms of procreation, nor does it add a new person to an overpopulated planet.

The adoption option will not put to rest entirely the pro-natalist/anti-natalist debate, for some people may be unable to afford adoption, and it is contingent on there being children in need of adoption. But in the actual world, there are. Many prospective parents do have the resources to adopt children. Adoption offers an important moral alternative to procreation, which has been widely ignored or quickly dismissed in the procreation literature. It should be considered by reasonable and moral people who desire to experience the goods of a parent–child relationship while being concerned about the potential harms of procreation.

## Short Biography

Tina Rulli is an Assistant Professor in the Philosophy Department at the University of California, Davis. Her work spans normative ethics, practical ethics, and bioethics. On the normative side, she is interested in moral demands and moral options, as well as population ethics. Much of her work is an expansion of her argument for a duty to adopt children rather than procreate. She has written on the moral significance of the genetic relationship and the unique value of adoption. Her publications in bioethics focus on applications of the duty to rescue in health and research contexts. Recent publications can be found in *Philosophical Studies*, *The Journal of Moral Philosophy*, *The Journal of Medical Ethics*, and *the Journal of the American Medical Association*. Prior to UC Davis, she was an Assistant Professor at Purdue University. She held a

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See also John Harris, 'The Right to Found a Family'.

<sup>2</sup> This is a reference to the famous Non-identity Problem, discussed below. See Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* 358.

<sup>3</sup> There is a surge in attention to the ethics of whether to procreate. For a selection of books (from 2006 onward), see: Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*; Benatar and Archard, *Procreation & Parenthood*; Overall, *Why Have Children?*; Baylis and McLeod, *Family-making*; Benatar and Wasserman, *Debating Procreation*; Brighouse and Swift, *Family Values*; Hannan, Brennan, and Vernon, *Permissible Progeny*; and Weinberg, *The Risk of Lifetime*;

<sup>4</sup> One could reject the asymmetry by claiming that the absence of pleasure is in fact a bad thing for a person, just as the absence of pain is good. Overall argues for this possibility (*Why Have Children* 99). But this implies not only that there is moral reason to bring happy people into existence (Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been* 39) but that we harm people by not creating them. This is a highly counterintuitive claim.

<sup>5</sup> Benatar anticipates this objection, using his Healthy and Sick analogy (*Better Never to Have Been* 46). Harman does not discuss it.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Scheffler captures their suffering in detail in *Death and the Afterlife*.

<sup>7</sup> As coined, but not endorsed, by Jeff McMahan, 'Problems of Population Theory'. For more, see Melinda Roberts, 'An Asymmetry in the Ethics of Procreation'.

<sup>8</sup> The Regnant Conclusion is often the implication of avoiding the Non-identity Problem. See Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Book IV.

<sup>9</sup> Brighouse and Swift employ a more robust conception of rights than I do in this paper. For them, a right implies a duty of others to provide the good in question (53).

<sup>10</sup> Travis Rieder, 'Procreation, Adoption and the Contours of Obligation', labels the combined position the ANPA (Anti Natal Pro Adoption) View. He ultimately rejects an obligation to adopt children.

<sup>11</sup> For more details, see Rulli, 'Preferring' 4.

<sup>12</sup> Except for someone like Stuart Rachels who may argue from a consequentialist standpoint that becoming a parent in any way is a waste of resources. Instead of spending money and time adopting and raising a child, we should donate those resources to save many more lives.

<sup>13</sup> For other excellent essays interrogating the priority placed on biological relatedness, see Sally Haslanger, 'Family, Ancestry and Self' and Charlotte Witt, 'Family Resemblances'.

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