The Ethics of Procreation and Parenthood in Affluent Nations

by

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Abstract

There are many things that we might feel obligated to justify to other people, but having a child is not usually one of them. It is difficult to imagine a decision more personal, or more apparently within one's rights to make. Yet in recent decades a number of thinkers have raised questions and doubts about whether procreation and the obligations of parenthood are as morally uncomplicated and unquestionable as might be presumed. In this project, I specifically focus on how the challenges raised to procreation and parenthood apply to morally reflective and financially secure individuals living in affluent nations. These challenges can be roughly broken down into two broad categories.

The first category involves concerns about how a person is impacted by being brought into existence. Focusing on this side of things means wondering whether the chance that a person brought into existence will experience bad things in her life might be a reason that counts against bringing her into existence. It also might mean worrying about how we can bring people into existence, and so expose them to harms, without their consent. We can call these sorts of concerns "child-centered concerns". They involve how an individual who is brought into existence might be wronged as a result of coming into existence.

The second category involves concerns which focus on how other people are impacted when someone is brought into existence. Focusing on this side of things means wondering whether other people might be made worse off by bringing someone into existence, directly or indirectly. We might worry that having more children in affluent nations with high emitting lifestyles will increase the burden we place on our planet's ecosystem. We might also worry about the amount of money it takes to raise a child in the

developed world, money which might have been donated to reliable aid agencies with considerably greater impact, perhaps saving the lives of many children. I shall call these "third party concerns". Both sorts of concerns play a role in developing an approach to understanding the ethical issues surrounding procreation.

I find these challenges alarming and I believe they are sufficiently weighty to deserve consideration by any morally reflective and financially secure person, particularly those who plan to procreate and parent themselves and live in affluent nations. When and how can we say that procreation is morally permissible on the part of morally reflective and financially secure citizens of affluent nations when considering the arguments arrayed against it? My project seeks to offer an answer to this question. I investigate the different arguments against procreation. I argue that their shared conclusion—that having children in a world like our own is either always wrong or at least morally problematic—should be rejected.

In my response to these arguments, I aim to find a way between those who would say that procreation is always morally problematic or even morally impermissible and those who would embrace the common assumption that bringing new life into being is a practice to be accepted uncritically. I defend a view where procreation is permissible provided that certain conditions are met. First, that there is a reasonable expectation that the child will have a life that contains overall more benefits than harms. This condition also involves the understanding that there are strong reasons to benefit existing people, meaning that benefits must be pursued for the child, and costs avoided, once existing. Second, that the child will be prepared by parents with character education to provide her with resources for resilience which better enable her to face and endure the tragedies of life. Their provision of these is what in my view distinguishes "typical" procreation from cases of wrongful life. And, third,

that (at most) children be prepared to be able to work toward leaving the world a better place than it would be had their parents not had them, a condition aimed at answering third party concerns driven by environmental destruction and global poverty.

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Introduction

Why Is Procreation and Parenthood A Moral Issue?

There are many things that we might feel obligated to justify to other people, but having a child is not usually one of them. It is difficult to imagine a decision more personal, or more apparently within one's rights to make. Yet in recent decades a number of thinkers have raised questions and doubts about whether procreation and the obligations of parenthood are as morally uncomplicated and unquestionable as might be presumed. In this project, I confine my focus to how these challenges apply to morally reflective and financially secure citizens of affluent nations. The challenges can be broken down into two broad categories.

The first category involves concerns about how a person is impacted by being brought into existence. Focusing on this side of things means wondering whether the chance that a person brought into existence will experience bad things in her life might be a reason that counts against bringing her into existence. It also might mean worrying about how we can bring people into existence, and so expose them to harms, without their consent. We can call these sorts of concerns "child-centered concerns". They involve how an individual who is brought into existence might be wronged as a result of coming into existence.

The second category involves concerns which focus on how other people are impacted when someone is brought into existence. Focusing on this side of things means

wondering whether other people might be made worse off by bringing someone into existence, directly or indirectly. We might worry that having more children in affluent nations with high emitting lifestyles will increase the burden we place on our planet's ecosystem. We might also worry about the amount of money it takes to raise a child in the developed world, money which might have been donated to reliable aid agencies with considerably greater impact, perhaps saving the lives of many children. I shall call these "third party concerns". Both sorts of concerns play a role in developing an approach to understanding the ethical issues surrounding procreation.

I find these challenges alarming and I believe they are sufficiently weighty to deserve treatment by any morally reflective person, particularly those who are financially secure, living in affluent nations, and plan to procreate and parent themselves. When and how can we say that procreation on the part of morally reflective and financially secure individuals in affluent nations is morally permissible when considering the arguments arrayed against it? My project offers an answer to this question. I investigate the different arguments against procreation and argue that their shared conclusion—that having children in a world like our own, or, more limitedly, having a child as a resident of an affluent nation, is always wrong—should be rejected.

In the course of reviewing the ongoing debate over the permissibility of procreation, I develop my own contribution to the literature by investigating the moral conditions that apply to permissible procreation and the moral obligations of parenthood. This contribution includes bringing the population ethics literature and my own "resources for resilience" character education view to bear on child-centered concerns, and the discussion of

normative principles of beneficence and effective altruism to bear on third-party concerns in ways not previously seen in the literature.

My ultimate aim is to provide a way to see procreation as justified under certain conditions. (Again, when I speak of "procreation" in this project, I restrict the scope of my investigation of the ethics of procreation and parenthood to those persons who are financially secure and who live in developed nations like Canada and the United States.) By way of an answer to the arguments of antinatalists and others who see procreation as morally problematic, I argue that procreation is morally permissible and the moral obligations of parenthood minimally fulfilled provided that three broad conditions are met. First, bearing on the realm of child-centered concerns, I argue that parents can permissibly procreate if they can reasonably expect the benefits in their child's life to outweigh the harms with the understanding that there are strong reasons to provide benefits and avoid costs for existing children. Second, I argue that parents owe it to their children to provide them with a supportive relationship which includes preparation in the form of character education, or what I call "resources for resilience", to face the sorts of tragic life events that cause some to argue that procreation is morally impermissible, something parents must provide at least until children reach adulthood. Parents owe this to their children as a practical necessity of procreation and because it allows us to handle certain elderly father cases, and their ability to provide character education distinguishes "typical" cases of procreation which are permissible from wrongful life cases. Third, bearing on the realm of third-party concerns, I argue that (at most) parents owe it to third parties to raise their children to be well-equipped to make the world a better place, so that their existing will bring about more good than otherwise would have been produced if they had not existed. This condition is aimed at

defusing third-party concerns about whether having a new child in a developed nation has a worrying impact on climate change, or uses up resources that could have saved the lives of many existing children.

These strategies in responding to concerns about procreation ultimately allow us to shift our focus to moral education—to preparing children to make their world a better place, rather than to leave it worse off than it would be had they not existed. These claims will be further explained and articulated in what follows. In the remainder of this introduction, I explain the methodological approach I employ in this project. I conclude the introduction by providing a brief overview of the major positions and my planned contributions to different areas of the debate over procreation before turning to consider the arguments in more detail in Chapter 1.

Methodology

This project is decidedly focused on the applied side of ethics. However, as my approach to particular ethical matters might be thought to be guided and informed by the sorts of theoretical commitments one can have in metaethics and normative ethics, a few words ought to be said about the sort of methodology in use here.

This project is largely framed negatively, as it considers how to develop responses to various arguments against procreation and parenting by morally reflective and financially secure individuals in developed nations. Through that process, however, a positive account of the conditions of permissible procreation is developed that is judged on how well it can respond to all the concerns on offer in the debate so far. The idea is to determine how

different arguments might be answered and avoided, so that a position emerges as we make the moves that the arguments and our moral judgments leave open to us. As much as possible, I try to approach issues in the broadest possible way, looking to respond to arguments in ways that representatives of many different perspectives might be able to accept, regardless of their views in matters of metaethics and normative theory.

In this project I shall be employing a version of the method of reflective equilibrium, so named by John Rawls, although it is an approach that has probably been common for as long as people have been reflecting on ethical matters.[1] Reflective equilibrium as construed by Rawls begins with our existing moral judgments. In following the method, we can leave aside questions of whether there are moral truths or values that exist independently of our moral judgments to which these moral judgments might correspond. Rather, in employing reflective equilibrium we see how far we can get by weighing up our considered judgments, the judgments we have upon reflection, that pertain to both candidates for moral principles and particular moral cases, searching for a coherent set of principles that best accounts for our judgments. As Rawls explained in an early work,

> … the objectivity or the subjectivity of moral knowledge turns, not on the question whether ideal value entities exist or whether moral judgments are caused by emotions or whether there is a variety of moral codes the world over, but simply on the question: does there exist a reasonable method for validating and invalidating given or proposed moral rules and those decisions made on the basis of them?[2]

[1] See Chapter 1 of John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of University of Harvard Press, 1971).
[2] John Rawls, "Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics," *The Philosophical Review* 60 (April 1951): 177.

The idea is that those who believe in the objectivity of morality and those who believe in the subjectivity of morality (and those who don't have beliefs one way or the other) can set aside their differences and talk about their judgments so that they can come to decisions on particular moral issues and act on them without having resolved perennial debates about the metaphysics of morality. They can discuss and debate the plausibility of different proposed moral principles and their judgments about what to do in particular cases and, attempting to achieve some coherence of the two, arrive at positions in ethics.

We have to make decisions all the time based on our considered judgments, those judgments about what to do that we retain after reflection. Reflective equilibrium, recognizing this as a way we commonly operate in deliberating about what to do, follows this everyday sort of reflection and deliberation in moral matters, searching for coherence among our judgments.

This is the approach that I follow in this project, thinking that, whatever we believe or however much we are unsure in matters of metaethics, we can ultimately weigh up our different considered judgments about cases and principles we encounter in the debate over the ethics of procreation and parenthood on the part of citizens of affluent nations and come to a view that attempts to do justice, as much as is possible, to all of them. Whether these judgments, or "intuitions", as they are often called, can be made true by something objective or whether they are more like subjective judgments or commitments, does not matter for

our purposes here.[3] (I use "considered judgments" and "intuitions" interchangeably.[4]) As the defender of reflective equilibrium Michael DePaul explains:

> It is even possible for those irrealists who hold that moral "beliefs" are not subject to epistemic evaluation at all to think that moral inquiry ought to be guided by intuitions. One might, for example, hold that morals are nothing more than a reflection of a person's preferences regarding how others conduct themselves, and still think that the proper way to determine a particular person's morality is by taking the person's intuitive moral judgments and trying to work out the most simple system of principles that captures these intuitive judgments.[5]

What matters is whether we can develop some "overlapping consensus" together that takes the form of a coherent account of judgments about principles and cases that apply to

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[3] Brad Hooker puts the point this way: "Many people do not like the cognitivist sound of the term 'intuition'. But I think that pretty much everything I want to say about ethical intuitions could be expressed in terms of ethical judgements or ethical commitment." See "Theory versus Anti-Theory in Ethics", in *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes From the Ethics of Bernard Williams* ed. by Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23. Relying on intuitions, then, does not commit one to classic forms of intuitionism. As Jan Narveson explains, referring to the more modest position of relying on intuitions as "methodological intuitionism" to distinguish it from earlier forms of non-naturalist intuitionism: "Much later in the past century, a quite different sense came to the term 'intuitionism.' In this new sense, an "intuition" is simply a prephilosophical moral belief or judgment, but no assumptions are made about the exact logical or metaphysical constitution of that judgment. In this new sense, it is not claimed that moral judgments are judgments about the presence or absence of funny unanalyzable qualities. In principle no claim at all, they held, needed to be made about that, one way or the other. What was claimed, instead, is that it is the job of ethical theory to "make sense of" our pretheoretical (prephilosophical) moral beliefs. The theory we come up with should systematize these beliefs… Ross and Prichard… may have felt that their theoretical intuitionism entails methodological intuitionism… The two types are compatible, but neither, in principle, actually entails the other." See *This is Ethical Theory* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2010), 58-59. Note that Narveson himself rejects methodological intuitionism. See also, R.M. Hare, "This activity which I have called 'thinking something to be wrong' is called by the objectivist 'a moral intuition'. By the subjectivist it is called 'an attitude of disapproval'. But in so far as we can identify anything in our *experience* to which these two people could be alluding by means of these two expressions, it is the same thing — namely the experience which we all have when we think that something is wrong. So far, then, the objectivist and subjectivist appear to be saying the same thing in different words — words which are distinguished from each other, or from the ordinary way of describing the same experience, only be the degree of abstruseness of their jargon. And things are no better when we come to consider the phrase 'the act has a certain non-empirical quality'. What, I ask, is the difference between the act having this non-empirical quality of wrongness which my intuition discerns, and the act arousing in me an attitude of disapproval? None whatever, as far as I can see." "Nothing Matters", in *Applications of Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 41.

[4] Cf. Jeff McMahan, who writes, "As I will understand the term, a moral intuition is a moral judgment – typically about a particular problem, a particular act, or a particular agent, though possibly also about a moral rule or principle – that is not the result of inferential reasoning. It is not inferred from one's other beliefs but arises on its own." See "Moral Intuition", revised version, in Hugh LaFollette and Ingmar Persson, eds., *Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory, second edition* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 104-105.

[5] Michael R. DePaul, "Intuitions in Moral Inquiry", *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (2005), 598.

the matters of procreation and parenthood. As Rawls explains the procedure of reflective equilibrium:

> That is, adopting the role of observing moral theorists, we investigate what principles people would acknowledge and accept the consequences of when they have had an opportunity to consider other plausible conceptions and to assess their supporting grounds. Taking this process to the limit, one seeks the conception, or plurality of conceptions, that would survive the rational consideration of all feasible conceptions and all reasonable arguments for them.[6]

A major objection to reflective equilibrium is that it can only ever amount to a reflection of the biases of its practitioners, as Richard Brandt says, "a reshuffling of moral prejudices."[7] In Rawls' case, the worry is that the equilibrium he arrives at merely amounts to sweeping generalizations based on the biases of a well-off, white, educated American male. Elizabeth Anderson offers a recent version of this criticism of reflective equilibrium while arguing that a coherentist process like reflective equilibrium was used by pro-slavery advocates to justify their views in antebellum America.[8] In place of reflective equilibrium, Anderson calls for a different approach, which she refers to as a pragmatist perspective. Anderson stresses that her "alternative research program does not reject intuitions… They are a basic material of moral thinking; we have no way around them."[9] However, she proposes that we should be intelligently updating our beliefs by carefully attending to empirical research that can help us screen out biases in our intuitions. As Anderson puts it,

> This pragmatist perspective suggests an alternative research program for moral philosophy, reaching beyond the a priori methods to which we philosophers are so wedded. My point is to expand the tools we use, and to reduce our excessive reliance on the old tools. Just as a bolt will turn uselessly without a nut to fasten it, or glued joints will be weak if they haven't been

[6] John Rawls, "The Independence of Moral Theory," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 48 (1974 - 1975): 8.
[7] Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 22.
[8] Elizabeth Anderson, "Moral Bias and Corrective Practices: A Pragmatist Perspective," *Proceedings and Addresses of the APA* 89 (2015): 29-32.
[9] See Anderson, "Moral Bias and Corrective Practices: A Pragmatist Perspective," 40.

> clamped, our abstract moral arguments will spin without conclusion or fall apart uselessly unless they are used in conjunction with empirically grounded tools. We can make better progress by working in close conjunction with the social sciences and history to consider empirically how different circumstances, including social relations, shape our moral thinking. If we discover an influence on our moral thinking that we can't justify, or that experience shows us to lead to untoward consequences, we have discovered a moral bias. Then we can seek empirically reliable methods to correct, block, counteract, or bypass those biases, keeping in mind that pure reasoning may not be enough.[10]

In response to charges that reflective equilibrium relies on potentially biased intuitions that are mere moral prejudices, Norman Daniels has defended the view by appealing to what has become known as "wide" reflective equilibrium. "Wide" reflective equilibrium, which was first explicitly identified by Rawls himself, is a version of reflective equilibrium that takes into account not just the cohered set of principles and intuitions that seem plausible to a particular investigating theorist. Wide reflective equilibrium also examines rival conceptions and determines how they fare. As Daniels explains:

> We do not simply settle for the best fit of principles with judgments, however, which would give us only a narrow equilibrium. Instead, we advance philosophical arguments intended to bring out the relative strengths and weaknesses of the alternative sets of principles (or competing moral conceptions). These arguments can be construed as inferences from some set of relevant background theories (I use the term loosely). Assume that some particular set of arguments wins and that the moral agent is persuaded that some set of principles is more acceptable than the others (and, perhaps, than the conception that might have emerged in narrow equilibrium). We can imagine the agent working back and forth, making adjustments to his considered judgments, his moral principles, and his background theories. In this way he arrives at an equilibrium point…[11]

Indeed, even as Anderson criticizes reflective equilibrium and goes on to offer a rival pragmatist perspective, I argue that this pragmatist perspective simply seems to be a "wider"

[10] Anderson, "Moral Bias and Corrective Practices: A Pragmatist Perspective," 40.
[11] Norman Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics," *The Journal of Philosophy* 76 (May 1979): 256-282.

reflective equilibrium which takes these very considerations about bias and a lack of diverse perspectives into account in engaging in moral reflection, especially since Anderson does not reject intuitions but sees them as the "basic material" of moral reflection.[12] Anderson encourages us to turn to examining our biases to make sure we don't simply accept biased intuitions into the process of reflective equilibrium. But surely this careful scrutiny of intuitions for biases is a practice the wide reflective equilibriumist can take up. It seems very much in line with the effort not to accept just any old judgments we happen to have but our considered judgments, those we retain after serious reflection. And, on Daniels' wide reflective equilibrium, we are to look at rival views as well as those that seem plausible to us initially, which would include debunking views that held that the initial moral judgments in question were really biases or tainted by biases and should be abandoned.

Thus the worry about biases that Anderson identifies should be a critical part of the ongoing process of scrutinizing our initial judgments on wide reflective equilibrium. We certainly should be willing to check for biases and abandon an intuition if it turns out to be merely an unjustifiable bias. Once the wide reflective equilibriumist is aware of this kind of worry, checking for these biases can form a part of the continual and ever ongoing scrutiny to which we are to subject our intuitions. The point is that concerns about biases and a lack of diverse perspectives are themselves crucial data points to take up into the process of wide reflective equilibrium. They are things the wide reflective equilibriumist will want to know about since they are important considerations that need to be part of the process of

[12] Similar points are raised in the question period of Anderson's lecture "The Social Epistemology of Morality: Learning from the Forgotten History of the Abolition of Slavery" given on April 4, 2013 at the Harvard University Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics. The recording is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODPm1jjoPCw.

reflection. The way to counter criticisms of reflective equilibrium is to take them very seriously and actually take them up into the process of reflection, considering them as rival conceptions of the data under investigation under wide reflective equilibrium. When I endorse the method of reflective equilibrium here it is wide reflective equilibrium that I have in mind.

Wide reflective equilibrium is not the only game in town when it comes to ethical methodology. However, although I employ wide reflective equilibrium in this project, I certainly do not think this excludes adherents of rival approaches such as principle foundationalism from the discussion of applied matters as it proceeds.[13] I suggest that reflective equilibriumists and principle foundationalists (and Anderson's pragmatist, if her view is indeed distinct from wide reflective equilibrium) can arrive at the same place downstream from disagreements about ethical methodology and proceed from there without worrying too much about these disagreements in the discussion of applied matters.[14] Even as principle foundationalists like Henry Sidgwick, and contemporary advocates of the view like Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek, Peter Singer, and Howard Nye, reject

[13] Nor do I think that my use of wide reflective equilibrium excludes adherents of approaches that focus on bottom-up case intuition-based reasoning, such as more modest forms of particularism that allow some role for general principles in ethics even as they may understand their status differently. See, for example, Mark Lance and Margaret Little, who write, "We ourselves believe that, in its most interesting form, moral particularism is both more insightful and less hostile to theory than many suppose: The upshot of particularism, as we see it, is not to dispatch explanatory generalizations in morality, but to offer a fundamentally different view of what they are and how they do their job." "Particularism and Antitheory", in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 567-594.

[14] Even if Anderson is right that her approach is distinct from wide reflective equilibrium she or anyone taking the pragmatist method she offers would certainly not be precluded from approaching the applied issues in this project in the way that I do, especially since Anderson agrees that we must rely on intuitions. And even if wide reflective equilibrium needs the added tools of the pragmatist approach to be complete, we still must engage in a thorough examination of the arguments surrounding procreation and parenthood. This is what I undertake in this project and it would presumably look much the same for the pragmatist approach. See Anderson, "Moral Bias and Corrective Practices: A Pragmatist Perspective," 40.

a justificatory role for case intuitions as is present in reflective equilibrium, they still rely on intuitions to play a justificatory role, albeit principle intuitions about directly plausible principles.[15] And case intuitions still play a role in the process of moral reasoning for these theorists. Singer is willing to use case intuitions to illustrate the plausibility of principles and their implications, while Nye sees a role for case intuitions in suggesting principles and illustrating principles.[16] Although in the end justification for principle foundationalists must be a matter of principle intuitions, they still typically see some role for case intuitions and can engage, I believe, in the same sort of approach as I use here alongside their reflective equilibriumist peers.

That being said, my own motivation for preferring reflective equilibrium over principle foundationalism where ethical methodology is concerned stems from worries about what can happen when we dismiss a justificatory role for our case intuitions entirely. In his intellectual autobiography, Singer recalls as an undergraduate facing the classic utilitarian dilemma that asks you to imagine that you are a judge in a town where a murder has been committed. To prevent a deadly riot in which six people will die, a riot that will ensue if the murderer is not caught, you can frame one innocent man, hang him for the crime,

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[15] Henry Sidgwick would be the classic example of a principle foundationalist who dismisses a justificatory role for case intuitions (what he calls "commonsense morality") in *The Methods of Ethics* Seventh Edition (London: Macmillan and Co., 1907), Project Gutenberg, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/46743/46743-h/46743-h.htm. See Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer's defense of a Sidgwick-style position in *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). For my worries about their evolutionary debunking argument to leave only the principle of beneficence standing and reject the principle of prudence, see Peter Andes, "Sidgwick's Dualism of Practical Reason, Evolutionary Debunking, and Moral Psychology," *Utilitas* 31, no. 4 (2019): 361-377. See also Peter Singer's classic dismissal of Rawls and reflective equilibrium, reiterated in Chapter 2 of *Practical Ethics*, Third edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 17-19. Howard Nye defends principle foundationalism in "Directly Plausible Principles", in *The Palgrave Handbook of Philosophical Methods* ed. by Christopher Daly (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 610-636.

[16] As is evident in Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (1972): 229-243. See Nye, "Directly Plausible Principles," 610.

and keep his innocence secret. Singer says that his teacher, H.J. McCloskey, argued that clearly this showed that the utilitarian principle was wrong. Singer remembers thinking on the contrary that if the utilitarian principle said it was right to frame and kill the innocent man then it could be right:

> But I wasn't as certain about my intuitions in this case as McCloskey seemed to be. If framing one innocent man really was the only possible way of preventing the deaths of six innocent men, and there would be no other bad consequences from the frame-up, maybe that really was what the sheriff ought to do?[17]

In an interview, Singer states, "I always thought that the sheriff would be justified in framing the innocent man, if that was the only way to save six innocent men from being lynched, and there would be no other bad consequences."[18]

In opposition to Singer, I have come to think that the temptation to dismiss a justificatory role for case intuitions entirely when they get in the way of principle intuitions is a worrying one because we might end up doing something that, had we not dismissed our case intuitions, we would recognize is deeply wrong. My point here is not that the utilitarian principle in particular is wrong, but that the case intuitions that Singer dismisses should not be so blithely dismissed. Even if we did decide that case intuitions should give way eventually in a situation where they conflict with principle intuitions, as can happen on reflective equilibrium, this should not be done so hastily. They should not be given no justificatory weight at all. Yet this is what a principle foundationalist approach can license. Of course,

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[17] See "An Intellectual Autobiography", in *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, ed. by Jeffrey A. Schaler (Peru, Illinois: Open Court, 2009), 5-6. Of course, in the early part of his career, Singer was not a Sidgwick-style rational intuitionist, but still adhered to the utilitarian principle to the exclusion of case intuitions as he does now as a follower of Sidgwick's rational intuitionism.

[18] See his interview with *What is it like to be a Philosopher?* http://www.whatisitliketobeaphilosopher.com/peter-singer/.

plenty of principle foundationalists would not agree with Singer's judgment in this specific case because they differ on the application of the utilitarian principle or because they endorse different principles or more than just the utilitarian principle as directly plausible.[19] But given the path that Singer takes it is a worry I have about the position. Even as we should worry about our case intuitions being mere prejudices, we should also worry about committing too quickly and inflexibly to a principle, come what may, and then ignoring the alarm bells coming at us from our case intuitions because we have decided that only principle intuitions matter. We might end up doing something really terrible if we do this. That is why I prefer reflective equilibrium, where both principle intuitions and case intuitions play a justificatory role, even as I believe principle foundationalists and reflective equilibriumists can generally set aside our differences for the applied discussion that follows.

When it comes to the perspectives and intuitions that will be considered in this project, the scope of this project with respect to procreation and parenthood, as has been stated, is deliberately narrow. My conclusions derive from reflection on the status, situation, and potential moral obligations of the morally reflective, financially secure citizens of affluent nations. To try to specify conditions for permissible procreation and parenthood that would conceivably apply to all human beings in all times and places is not my goal. Such a project would require the evaluation of a vast and highly diverse array of cultures, time periods, forms of life, and all manner of considerations difficult to pin down and likely in competition with more pressing ethical issues, as well as lying far beyond my own limited

[19] I think Sidgwick is more prudent in this regard, as he does not think that most people should use the utilitarian principle in their moral reasoning, but rather should stick to commonsense morality. Nye, as a Rossian pluralist, would not be susceptible to this particular criticism as it is framed here.

experiences. The aim here is far more modest, to develop an approach to permissible procreation and parenthood for morally serious citizens of affluent nations who are financially secure. Such people are not facing more pressing and immediate problems and are implicated in high-emitting lifestyles and engage in luxury spending. The people I have in mind are also morally serious, meaning that they are already committed to being moral, and so committed to following moral reflection where it leads in an examination of these issues. As such there is a place for moral reflection on procreation and parenthood as it pertains to this population and given the sorts of concerns examined in this project this reflection appears to be very much needed.

A Brief Outline of the Dissertation

The dissertation begins with Part I focused on discussing child-centered concerns, the various moral considerations that arise in reflecting on procreation and parenthood that relate to how a person can be harmed by coming into existence. In Chapter 1, I first offer an initial overview of whether a person who did not previously exist can be harmed by coming into existence. This involves tricky issues such as if an individual can be harmed without having been made worse off as well as David Benatar's particular treatment of these issues. Benatar specifically argues for the extreme view that everyone is harmed by being brought into existence and so we should not bring anyone into existence, at least not in a world like our own, which contains harms. Benatar calls his view "antinatalism".

Benatar offers "The Asymmetry Argument" in favor of his view. He argues that there is an asymmetry concerning existence and nonexistence. The asymmetry in question is that

while it is not a benefit for a person to be brought into existence, it *is* a benefit for that person to be kept out of existence. Suppose that we say that there is no reason to bring someone into existence for the benefits she will experience in life. Many people will want to say this to avoid committing to an obligation to have as many children as possible so as to benefit them by bringing them into existence. However, on such a view, when someone points to the harms of existence as reasons to keep a person out of existence, it seems all we have are the harms counting against bringing someone into existence and no countervailing benefits to bring the person into existence. Existence contains both bad and good, but nonexistence contains good (avoiding suffering) and not bad (missing out on the good in life, which Benatar thinks we don't want to count). Therefore, in his view, it is better not to exist.

In response, I explore three main ways of replying to Benatar. David DeGrazia and Elizabeth Harman argue that if the harms of existence count as reasons to keep someone out of existence, then we can also count the benefits of existence as weighing in favor of bringing someone into existence. If the expected benefits can outweigh the expected harms, then we have a life worth starting. This is one route to what I call the "Net Goods View", the view that a life is permissible to start if that life will contain more goods than harms, and the DeGrazia-Harman view is just one way of getting to it. At first, the DeGrazia-Harman view appears to lead to an obligation to bring people into existence which many of us would not want to accept. However, bringing someone into existence is very demanding on the person bringing her into existence. DeGrazia also defends the harm/benefit asymmetry, the view that it is harder to justify harming someone than it is to justify withholding benefits from her. These considerations result in the view that the force of the obligation to bring someone into existence to experience the goods of existence is less than the force of the obligation to keep

out of existence those who will be harmed by existence. Hence, on this view, although it would be good to bring individuals into existence for the benefit they experience, we are not obligated to bring as many individuals into existence as we possibly can, since the reasons to confer benefits on others are weaker than the reasons to avoid harming others, and because bringing a being into existence is so demanding of the agent doing so. The success of this reply turns on acceptance of the harm/benefit asymmetry and evaluation of the demandingness of procreation. I argue that, despite the difficulties presented by these issues, we can plausibly side with DeGrazia and Harman against Benatar here, in that their view is at least more plausible if not far more plausible than Benatar's view. If this judgment is accepted, then Benatar's antinatalism is defeated.

Benatar also offers another argument, the Quality-of-life Argument, which holds that people generally are bad at evaluating their lives accurately. Benatar argues that many more lives are likely to be objectively filled with more bad than good and so not worth starting. In response I support DeGrazia's view that we lack measures sufficiently objective to warrant overriding individuals' own self-assessments. I introduce the literature on preference adaptation to suggest that people can also come to cope with difficulties faced and so mitigate them over time. I also argue in line with Harman that there are reasons to believe that some goods are of a higher quality, or can be preferentially ranked, so that they are greater than even a great many harms and outweigh them, making a life worth starting.

For those with doubts about the success of the DeGrazia and Harman response to Benatar's Asymmetry argument, I defend another alternative using the work of Melinda Roberts. Roberts offers a view she calls "variabilism". The idea is that persons have moral

status across both existence and nonexistence, but the moral significance of losses and gains to them is variable, based on whether or not the person will indeed come into existence and so experience the costs and benefits of existence. If someone always remains out of existence, then her losses are not of moral significance, for she would never have existed and on variabilism the losses of the nonexistent are not of moral significance. She is not "missing out" on existence, and so there is no reason to think we should bring nonexistent people into existence for the benefits they would experience. If someone will come into existence, then both the costs and the benefits she will experience are of moral significance, so that so long as the individual does come into existence, and the benefits can reasonably be expected to outweigh the costs, the person's life is worth starting. In other words, although there is no reason to bring people into existence, the lives it is permissible to start are those where someone does come into existence and the benefits can be expected to outweigh the harms. Where the harms outweigh the benefits, we have reason not to bring people into existence. If the harms do outweigh the benefits, resulting in a "miserable child", we do have reason to avoid conceiving the miserable child, because if the child really will come to exist then the costs of existence matter morally, and this counts against bringing the child into existence.

Following this, and after exploring Jeff McMahan's examination of a possible hybrid view, I develop my own hybrid view combining a person-affecting variabilism and an impersonal weak reasons view. This view avoids the weaknesses of the Harman-DeGrazia view dealing with the miserable child. At the same time, it avoids the weaknesses of variabilism dealing with the Quality-of-Life Argument.

In the end, I conclude that Roberts has the more defensible case for going with the Net Goods View against Benatar, even as the DeGrazia and Harman view and the hybrid personal variabilism/impersonal weak reasons view are also viable alternatives. We thus have at least three reasonable ways of rejecting antinatalism for the Net Goods View, where a life is worth starting so long as the expected goods outweigh the expected harms, and possibly a fourth view if the view developed from McMahan's is entertained. So long as these views are at least as plausible as Benatar's view, and I argue that they are more plausible than Benatar's view, then Benatar's Asymmetry is defeated, and, combined with the responses to the Quality-of-Life argument, the Quality-of-Life argument is also defeated.

In Chapter 3, I move on to consider Benatar's use of Seana Shiffrin's argument that it is morally problematic that children are brought into existence without their consent to argue for the antinatalist conclusion. Shiffrin holds a noncomparative view where a person can be made worse off even though that person has not been harmed. She argues for this view with an elaborate example, the details of which will be explored in the chapter. Roughly, just as we wouldn't think it permissible to drop gold bricks from a plane on a comfortably off community, knowing that there is a chance the bricks could injure their recipients even as they would be compensated by the gold, we shouldn't think it permissible to bring a child into existence even if we can reasonably expect that the benefits of existence will outweigh the harms. At least, we cannot do such a thing without obtaining the consent of the person who will be at risk on Shiffrin's view, and we cannot obtain anyone's consent before bringing her into existence. In response, I argue that Shiffrin articulates a compelling vision of what we need to provide to children beyond the Net Goods View, the parent-child relationship, but that owing reparation for not getting a child's consent to be born is not the way to

theoretically justify the parent-child relationship requirement. I argue that children are properly understood as under their parent's care in a way that justifies inflicting harms for the sake of what Shiffrin terms "pure benefits". Parents have to make decisions on behalf of their children all the time beyond simply those Shiffrin identifies as permissible cases of imposing harms, avoiding severe harm or disability, and so Shiffrin's standards are too stringent. Therefore there is a disanalogy between the gold brick case, where we run the risk of dropping a gold brick on a stranger, and the case of parents making decisions on behalf of children where their consent cannot be obtained and lesser harms are inflicted for greater pure benefits. I argue that making decisions for children in such cases may well have to happen a great deal.

I then go on in Chapter 3 to consider whether Shiffrin's view leads to antinatalism in its own way, as Benatar argues. In doing so, I examine DeGrazia's effort to argue against Shiffrin-style antinatalism. DeGrazia draws an interesting distinction between imposing harms on children (wrongful life cases as Shiffrin is concerned to say are morally problematic) and exposing children to harms (typical cases of procreation). However, I argue there is a better way to draw a distinction between wrongful life cases and cases of typical procreation. In wrongful life-style cases, there is no hope of parents offering their children a character education that could help them find meaning in their suffering to endure it. Whereas, in "typical" cases, parents can offer their children a character education that can help them find meaning in their suffering and endure it. I argue based on empirical research on the importance of character education that part of the parent-child relationship should be a requirement that parents offer resources for resilience to their children, at least until the age of 18, to help prepare them to face tragic and challenging life experiences and so help

to mitigate their effects. This can take the form of character-building experiences or the form of ways of understanding and dealing with suffering that would form part of character education. I argue that we can look to the revival of virtue theories to see that it is through character building and character education that we can raise more resilient people who can both lead better lives. In this sense, I argue that we should go beyond the Net Goods View and also include the parent-child relationship requirement as a practical necessity of responsible procreation and parenting.

In Part II, the realm of third-party concerns, I present and critique Stuart Rachels' argument that we should not have children because of the impact (or lack of impact) that this will have on the climate and the global poor respectively. I argue that we can either reject the Singer-level demandingness of Rachels' argument to reject his conclusion, by appealing to Travis Timmerman's response or what I call the Incomparability Objection, or we can accept the level of demandingness but still procreate by raising our children to produce more good than would have been done otherwise if they had not come into existence. Timmerman's response is to challenge Singer's principle with a thought experiment aimed at showing that when considering our obligations to the global poor over time, we are permitted at least once to indulge in something of trivial value even if it means sacrificing something of greater moral importance. The Incomparability Objection points out that strong value pluralists hold that values are incomparable and so both donating to the global poor and child-rearing can be of value but we cannot say that one is necessarily more valuable than another. That strong value pluralists can reasonably disagree that these two things of value can be compared suggests that Rachels is depending on a controversial assumption in making his argument.

A different third-party view, developed by Daniel Friedrich and Tina Rulli, supports adoption as preferable to procreation. Adopting children is thought to avoid many of the objections to procreation while still allowing us to raise children. I show that we can still make sense of saying that procreation can be morally permissible by properly understanding our obligations toward the global poor. I argue that, in principle, adoption may have an advantage over having one's own child, for it could involve saving a child or children from death who would die if not adopted. At the same time, however, I caution that adoption may still not have the net benefits that donating the funds otherwise allocated to adoption to a reliable aid agency would.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I turn to a consideration of the case against having children out of a concern for the negative impact of procreation on the environment and the affect this has on future generations. First, I explore how having children can violate the requirements of intergenerational distributive justice by not allowing a fair turn with a functioning ecosystem. Following Alan Habib and a common perspective among environmental ethicists, I take it that that it is plausibly an issue of distributive justice that we ought to preserve important natural resources and the environment for the next generation to enable a functioning biosphere. However, there is evidence that having children adds to carbon emissions and risks undermining the biosphere. I argue that this *prima facie* case can be overcome by an accurate calculation of just how much we have to reduce our emissions and realizing that having at least one child is still possible within this carbon budget.

Second, I consider how we can directly harm future generations through procreation and how procreation would thus *prima facie* violate our duty of nonmaleficence. In doing so,

it is important to come to an understanding of how future people can be harmed, specifically dealing with Derek Parfit's Depletion Case. I argue that on any of the three views explored in Chapter 2, the Harman-DeGrazia view, variabilism, and the hybrid personal variabilism/impersonal weak reasons view, future generations can be harmed. Drawing on arguments from John Nolt and Christopher Morgan-Knapp and Charles Goodman, I then consider that having children produces more carbon emitters especially in highly developed and industrialized nations, and that emissions can even be linked to causing the deaths of one to two people per person due to their contribution to climate change. This initially seems to present an environmental case for antinatalism. However, I argue that parents can still make provisions to raise their children in ways that mitigate or offset environmental effects and raise their children to do enough good where the environment is concerned so that they do more good than otherwise would have been done if they had not existed.

Speaking of both issues of global poverty and the environment, we can then, even on very demanding views of our duties to aid others and avoid environmental destruction, see an increase in the ranks of those who do more good for the global poor and the environment than would have been done had they not existed as an overall benefit, rather than a harm, to the global poor and the environment. With this brief outline of the debate and my own contributions to the literature in place, I now turn in Chapter 1 to the debate over child-centered concerns.

Chapter 1 – Child-Centered Concerns and the Challenge of Benatar's Antinatalism

Introduction

Child-centered concerns involve how a child will be impacted by being brought into the world. In this chapter, I examine the recent debate surrounding child-centered concerns. I discuss the non-identity problem and Benatar's antinatalism which bear on the ethics of procreation in the context of child-centered concerns. I will develop a response to Benatar's positions in Chapters 2 and 3.

The Non-Identity Problem

The non-identity problem as formulated by Derek Parfit has been highly influential in population ethics. The problem raises difficult questions about how an individual with a life worth living can be harmed by coming into existence. It is best illustrated with an example.[20]

Suppose a couple decides to have a child. They learn that if they have the child now it will ensure that she develops a seriously debilitating genetic disorder, even though her life will still contain more goods than harms. As a result, they might decide to wait until the risk has passed. They might decide this because they think to give birth to a child with a genetic disorder would be to harm her, to make her worse off. But if the parents wait, they will

[20] My discussion of the non-identity problem draws on Melinda Roberts, "The Non-identity Problem," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2015), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/nonidentity-problem.

actually be having a different child, for different gametes will combine at a later time. The first child cannot exist without also having the genetic disorder. She will only exist if had then.

Such a case raises a non-identity problem, notably explored by Parfit.[21] The first potential child is not identical to the second potential child. And the realization that the two potential children are non-identical might lead us to believe one could never be capable of harming someone by bringing her into existence, so long as what we might take to be harm is inseparable from her coming into existence, and her life contains more goods than harms. Straightforward acceptance of this conclusion has become known as the "bullet-biting" approach to the non-identity problem.

The difficulty arises because on a comparative notion of harm, in which we count someone to be harmed where she has been made worse off, we cannot speak of someone being harmed when harm is inseparable from that person existing. The first child would never exist except with the genetic disorder, and so has not been made worse off by existing—there is no way in which she could exist without the genetic disorder. This seems to suggest that no one could ever be harmed by coming into existence, at least when, without the harm she would otherwise not have existed, and so long as her life contains more goods than harms.

Parfit himself thinks that although a common initial reaction is to think the child with the genetic disorder has been harmed, we are actually mistaken to think that someone is being harmed in such a case. He points out two errors that he believes are commonly made in assessing non-identity problems. People reacting to non-identity problems commonly

[21] See Chapter 16 of Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

suppose that the child conceived at two different times is one and the same individual. But this is of course not the case. Parfit summarizes this in what he calls "The Time-Dependence Claim", namely that "If any particular person had not been conceived when he was in fact conceived, it is in fact true that he would never have existed."[22] The second error Parfit points out is the failure to realize that in this case we are talking about the life prospects of two distinct individuals. The child had later is a different individual from the one had earlier. It is not that we are talking about the life prospects of one single individual who could exist at two different times with two different sets of gametes. As Parfit writes of a mother in a non-identity case:

> Were we right to claim that her decision was worse for her child? If she had waited, this particular child would never have existed. And, despite its bad start, his life is worth living.[23]

Initially, a common reaction is to suppose that one's child will be better off if had later. But of course the later child is a different life, with different life prospects.

The reason that Parfit's view is so much discussed is that it upends typical views about responsible parental procreation. When people are tested to see if they will pass on diseases like Huntington's Chorea, Tay Sacks, or Cystic Fibrosis this seems to be motivated by the view that having a child with these diseases would harm the child. But if Parfit's conclusion is correct, then, so long as the child's life is minimally worth living, the child is not made worse off by being brought into existence with these diseases, because the child can only exist then with the condition.

[22] Ibid., 351.
[23] Ibid., 359.

A number of strategies have been developed for dealing with the non-identity problem that attempt to avoid Parfit's conclusions or the bullet-biting approach that simply accepts that children in these cases are not harmed by coming into existence. Some have attempted to avoid the non-identity problem by suggesting that we can make sense of someone being harmed by being brought into existence, either comparatively or non-comparatively.[24] Thus some make the case that someone brought into existence in the non-identity case can indeed be said to be made worse off than that person might otherwise have been, while others think the person would be harmed in some sense without being made worse off.[25] I discuss the approaches of David Benatar, David DeGrazia, and Melinda Roberts in this project, as well as an approach inspired by Jeff McMahan's work, in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I discuss Seana Shiffrin's approach. For now, it will do to mention a few other approaches that have been influential in the discussion of the non-identity problem.

In his original treatment, Parfit recognizes that what is called the impersonal total approach would be an obvious way to deal with the non-identity problem. Consequentialists who take the view that we should maximize total pleasure, for example, can explain how it would be wrong to bring a child into existence who would have a debilitating genetic condition, rather than a healthy child, for total pleasure will be maximized by having a

[24] Notable efforts include Harman, "Can we harm or benefit in creating?," *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 89-113 and Joel Feinberg, "Wrongful life and the counterfactual element in harming," in *Freedom and Fulfilment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 3-36. In her 2004 article, Harman develops a noncomparative notion of harm, while Feinberg's effort is comparative. In response to Benatar, Harman is willing to accept for the sake of argument Benatar's comparative view, and argue that even on this view his antinatalism doesn't succeed. My survey of proposed solutions to the non-identity problem has benefitted greatly from Melinda Roberts' article, "The Nonidentity Problem."

[25] There are also approaches that suggest that one can be wronged without being harmed, as in, among others, David Velleman's position that we have a right not to be brought into a flawed existence. This notion draws on the idea, originally raised by Robert Adams, that if Smith is denied access to a plane due to racial prejudice, and the plane crashes killing all aboard, Smith has still been wronged even though he has actually been spared from harm by the act of denying him entry to the plane. See Melinda Roberts, "The Non-Identity Problem." See also David Velleman, "Persons in Prospect," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 36 (2008): 221–288.

healthy child. It seems that it would not matter for the consequentialist that no one individual would be made worse off, since she counts total pleasure as what matters. However, this view, known as the impersonal total view, rather infamously leads to what Parfit calls the "Repugnant Conclusion".[26]

Parfit poses a challenge for people who would say that what matters is maximizing total pleasure. For any large population that experiences a great deal of pleasure, there is always a much larger population each individual of which experiences just enough pleasure as to have a "very low but positive quality of life".[27] A greater amount of total pleasure than experienced in the first population is distributed in the second among a much larger number of people. On the impersonal total view, a population might simply add more people in order to increase total pleasure, and indeed this might be required under consequentialist theories, even up until the point that everyone has a "very low but positive quality of life."[28] This seems to be the danger of having the impersonal total view. The challenge then becomes one of attempting to handle the Repugnant Conclusion, with some theorists straightforwardly accepting it despite its apparent counter-intuitiveness.[29]

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[26] See Chapter 17 of *Reasons and Persons*.
[27] Gustaf Arrhenius, Jesper Ryberg, and Torbjörn Tännsjö, "The Repugnant Conclusion," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2017), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/repugnant-conclusion.
[28] Ibid.
[29] See Torbjörn Tännsjö, "Why We Ought to Accept the Repugnant Conclusion," *Utilitas* 14 (2002): 339-359. Parfit also explores how a paradox which he calls the "mere addition" paradox also gets us to the repugnant conclusion. Parfit compares two populations, A and A+. A+ contains a group of people as large as that in A with the same high quality of life, but it also contains a group of people with a lower quality of life. By adding people to A to make A+, A+ seems to be better even as some in the population have a lower quality of life. Then consider population B, which has the same number of people as A+, with everyone having lives worth living and an average welfare level just above the average welfare level in A+, but lower than A. B seems better than A+ since it is better with respect to average welfare as well as total welfare equality (all the people have the same welfare). But then you can run B+, C, C+, and on until you get to a population Z where all lives have a very low welfare even as they are still worth living. This means that Z is better than A, which is the repugnant conclusion. See Gustaf Arrhenius, Jesper Ryberg, and Torbjörn Tännsjö, "The Repugnant Conclusion," Section 1. Note also that although I illustrate the repugnant conclusion with a consequentialist view, it arguably raises issues for adherents of other normative theories as well.

At the other end of the spectrum, David Boonin is an influential theorist who defends the bullet-biting approach. Boonin argues that the act of bringing someone into existence whose existence is inseparable from some debilitating condition is not actually morally wrong, but morally permissible, so long as the life is actually worth living.[30] As an explanation for the counter-intuitiveness of this position, Boonin thinks that non-identity cases seem so difficult to accept as morally permissible because in other sorts of cases a lower quality of life involves someone having been made worse off, while this is not so in non-identity cases. We bring our normal judgment to bear on a peculiar case, and this is why many of us seem to think that it is impermissible to bring a person into existence in such cases.

Whether we take a comparative or noncomparative view of harm, or approach the non-identity problem in some other way like the impersonal total approach or by invoking a notion of wronging without harming, will play a role in how we interpret claims that someone is made worse off by her having been brought into the world. Those arguing in this area must develop some view of harm in these cases, for, if it is the case that no one can be harmed by coming into existence so long as the life in question contains more goods than harms, then those who defend various child-centered concerns as counting against the moral permissibility of procreation will be hard pressed to explain where the harm, and so moral impermissibility, comes in. Those who do defend child-centered views that hold procreation is morally impermissible, or at least morally problematic, must develop some kind of answer to Parfit's formulation of the non-identity problem.[31]

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[30] David Boonin, "How to Solve the Non-Identity Problem," *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 22 (2008): 129-159.
[31] Others, such as Seana Shiffrin, who thinks that there are at least some cases where it is wrong to bring someone into existence because of the suffering she will experience, sometimes known as wrongful life cases,

Benatar's Antinatalism

Perhaps the most extreme view presently defended among those writing on the ethics of procreation is that of David Benatar. I consider Benatar's view because it represents the maximal moral prohibition on procreation possible.[32] Benatar argues that procreation is never permissible in a world like our own which contains harms, and is even impermissible in a hypothetical world where a being brought into existence will have many goods in her life and only a single pinprick of pain.[33] His view thus represents the most extreme position on one side of the debate.

When considering the range of positions available to us, at one end we have Benatar's position that all procreation is morally impermissible. On the other end would be the position that all procreation is morally permissible, or the even more extreme position, such as the impersonal total view, under which procreation is morally obligatory.[34] In the middle, we will find other views, which seek to identify some conditions which account for there being some instances of procreation that are morally permissible. The view I will develop in Chapters 2 and 3 falls in the middle of this spectrum. I will thus proceed by developing a

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but who do not always view procreation as morally impermissible, must also develop a response to the non-identity problem.

[32] In my discussion of the literature, I draw on Tina Rulli's very helpful survey of these debates in "The Ethics of Procreation and Adoption," *Philosophy Compass*, Vol. 11 (2016): 305-315.

[33] Since his case is motivated by the harms that exist in this world, in an imagined world without any harms procreation would be permissible. For the pinprick case, see *Better Never to Have Been*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 48.

[34] The impersonal total view, which generates Parfit's "Repugnant Conclusion," would have us continue to bring people into existence for the pleasure they would experience, regardless of what this might mean for the pleasure of existing people. We might also imagine different motivations for encouraging procreation, such as the continuation of the species, or traditional views such as the importance of procreation for the continuation of the family, and so on.

response to Benatar in Chapter 2, arguing that at least some instances of procreation are morally permissible, and, in the process, identifying those conditions which mark these instances as morally permissible, to be supplemented in Chapter 3. If Benatar's arguments can be answered, then at least some procreation is morally permissible, and then the question becomes a matter of what conditions apply to make a case of procreation morally permissible. Proceeding in this way allows us to work back from the strongest moral restrictions on procreation, in order to see which, if any, apply.

On the way to his conclusion, Benatar formulates a way of dealing with the non-identity problem, as indeed he needs to in order to account for the harm of coming into existence. Benatar opts for a version of the comparative view of harm, holding that we can talk of someone being made worse off by thinking about two possible worlds, one where she exists and one where she does not.[35] Understanding this view helps shed light on his at times paradoxical phrasing in his discussion of coming into or remaining out of existence.

In his book and in an article replying to critics, Benatar claims that it is "better never to have been." It is better to never come into existence. But without further clarification, this is a rather paradoxical claim. For those who never come into existence are not just neither harmed nor benefited, since they never come into existence to experience anything, but actually never even exist to be affected in any way at all. To not exist is never to be a distinct person and so we could not even talk about nonexistent persons in an intelligible way. A

[35] Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) my Critics," *The Journal of Ethics* 17 (2013), 126. Benatar suggests in his book-length development of his argument *Better Never to Have Been*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 168-178, that his antinatalism can solve the non-identity problem (by saying that to come into existence is always a harm) and Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion (by encouraging that no more people be born). Though this is a possible solution, to many it probably seems like swapping one repugnant conclusion for another. Where possible I draw from Benatar's later article, as it represents his most recent presentation of the view.

nonexistent person would never be individuated, and so would not be a particular person at all, and so to speak of such a non-individuated person, and even of benefits for this person, does not make much sense.

But Benatar emphasizes that when he speaks in his arguments of a nonexistent person's being actually benefited by never coming into existence, as in the phrase "better never to have been", this way of speaking stands in for a more sophisticated notion. If a person never exists, then she can indeed never benefit. But Benatar wants to compare two possible worlds, one where the person exists and one where she does not.[36] In this way we can make claims about the person being better off, in the sense of it being worse for her in the possible world where she does exist. We imagine two possible worlds, one with her, and one without her. If she suffers in the world where she does exist, then we can speak of how the world where she doesn't exist is better for her (assuming Benatar's view, to be discussed below). To speak of doing something for the sake of someone who is nonexistent is to speak in this way, to think about what she would have suffered had she existed, not to claim literally that a nonexistent person is benefited

With this approach to the non-identity problem in hand, Benatar argues for the position he calls "antinatalism", which holds that having children, in a world like our own which holds intrinsic harms for them, is always wrong. He offers two main arguments for this view.[37] The first, which Benatar refers to as "The Asymmetry Argument", derives from his claim that there is a fundamental asymmetry in pleasure and pain when existence and

[36] Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been," 126.
[37] Benatar also offers a third argument, which he dubs the "Misanthropic Argument", but it involves third-party effects, which is the topic of Part II, so I will not discuss it here.

nonexistence are compared.[38] The second, which Benatar refers to as "The Quality-of-Life Argument", puts forward the idea that humans are bad at accurately estimating the quality of their lives, and that the vast majority of human lives contain significant harms, with the conclusion that we ought not to risk having a child who experiences significant harms (as he thinks parents always do).[39] Benatar contends that the two arguments can be run together or separately, such that to reject one is not to reject both.[40]

Benatar illustrates the Asymmetry Argument by considering the differences between the value of pain and pleasure across existence and nonexistence.[41] When pain is present it is bad, and when pleasure is present it is good.[42] Where the asymmetry comes in is in recognizing that one cannot hold a symmetrical view for the absence of pain and the absence of pleasure. This is because, Benatar contends, the absence of pain is still good, even if there is no one who experiences this good.[43] And he further contends that the absence of pleasure is not bad, if there is no one who exists who would miss out on experiencing it.[44] As Benatar writes,

> Consider pains and pleasures as exemplars of harms and benefits. It is uncontroversial to say that (1) the presence of pain is bad, and that (2) the presence of pleasure is good. However, such a symmetrical evaluation does not seem to apply to the absence of pain and pleasure, for it strikes me as true that (3) the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas (4) the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.[45]

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[38] Ibid., see Chapter 2.
[39] Ibid., Chapter 3.
[40] However, whether this is true is debatable. At least some asymmetry is needed, it seems, for with no asymmetry, with the impersonal total view, we would only care about total good, and so the risk of harms in coming into existence would be outweighed by the goods. We still would seem to need to care about harms more than goods for the force of the second argument in terms of risk to be felt.
[41] He notes that the argument need not be put in hedonistic terms, and could be characterized in another way of talking about harms and benefits, in "Still Better Never to Have Been," 122.
[42] Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been," 122.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., 123.
[45] Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, 30.

So while pain is good and pleasure is bad, the absence of pain is always good but the absence of pleasure is not bad unless it occurs for someone who exists.

Benatar thinks that many people accept this asymmetry, even if only implicitly, and that, further, this asymmetry is also the best explanation for a number of other asymmetries he identifies. These are four further asymmetries which he believes stem from his initial "basic asymmetry".[46] Their plausibility, Benatar contends, lends plausibility to the basic asymmetry. Here these asymmetries are merely stated as Benatar explains them. They will be critically evaluated later.

The Asymmetry of Procreational Duties embodies the recognition that we have an obligation not to bring people into existence who will suffer, but that there is not a corresponding obligation to bring people into existence when they might be happy. The Prospective Beneficence Asymmetry embodies the recognition that it seems bizarre for someone to say that she is having a child because that child will benefit from coming into existence, while it is not so bizarre for someone to say that she is not having a child because that child will be harmed by coming into existence. The Retrospective Beneficence Asymmetry embodies the recognition that it seems one could regret having brought a now suffering child into existence for the child's sake, while it does not seem that one could regret not bringing a happy child into existence for the child's sake. The Asymmetry of Distant Suffering and Absent Happy People embodies the recognition that while we feel sad for those distant from us who suffer, we do not feel sad for those who do not exist in uninhabited distant regions.[47] If we find these asymmetries plausible, and find it plausible that the basic

[46] Ibid.
[47] These asymmetries are named and described in this form in "Still Better Never to Have Been," 123.

asymmetry is the best explanation of them, then Benatar thinks we must conclude that it is always a harm to come into existence, and that it is always better never to have been.

On the matter of the basic asymmetry, a number of commentators have taken different views. In Chapter 2, I will turn to discuss at length the work of four critics of note, Elizabeth Harman, David DeGrazia, Melinda Roberts, and Jeff McMahan.

Benatar's second argument, the Quality-of-Life Argument, starts with his contention that we are bad at accurately assessing the quality of our lives.[48] Benatar claims that "If people realized just how bad their lives were, they might grant that their coming into existence was a harm even if they deny that coming into existence would have been a harm had their lives contained but the smallest amount of bad."[49] Citing psychological research, he argues that, in light of a widespread Pollyannaism that skews our views in favor of positive assessments, the human ability to adapt to circumstances that leave them worse off, and our tendency to overlook harms that affect everyone, we are likely to have an overestimation of the quality of our lives:

> First, there is an inclination to recall positive rather than negative experiences. For example, when asked to recall events from throughout their lives, subjects in a number of studies listed a much greater number of positive than negative experiences. This selective recall distorts our judgement of how well our lives have gone so far. It is not only assessments of our past that are biased, but also our projections or expectations about the future. We tend to have an exaggerated view of how good things will be. The Pollyannaism typical of recall and projection is also characteristic of subjective judgements about current and overall well-being. Many studies have consistently shown that self-assessments of well-being are markedly skewed toward the positive end of the spectrum.[50]

[48] Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, 64-69.
[49] Ibid., 60. That is, the pinprick of pain.
[50] Ibid., 65.

Benatar goes on to identify all sorts of things that are commonly missed in our own appraisals of how good our lives are, down to how we often ignore common discomfort that arises from simple things like hunger, thirst, fatigue, stress, and so on.[51] And he points out that often we adapt to discomforts and suffering, even when this doesn't remove this objectively existing suffering from our lives:

> When a person's objective well-being takes a turn for the worse, there is, at first, a significant subjective dissatisfaction. However, there is a tendency then to adapt to the new situation and to adjust one's expectations accordingly. Although there is some dispute about how much adaptation occurs and how the extent of the adaptation varies in different domains of life, there is agreement that adaptation does occur. As a result, even if the subjective sense of well-being does not return to the original level, it comes closer towards it than one might think, and it comes closer in some domains than in others. Because the subjective sense of well-being tracks recent change in the level of well-being better than it tracks a person's actual level of well-being, it is an unreliable indicator of the latter.[52]

Benatar also points out that because as human beings all of us share some discomforts and hardships common to our species we tend not to count these when they should be counted. Based on these psychological phenomena, Benatar thinks we are very bad at estimating the quality of our lives and that being born into a life replete with such discomforts as we subjectively discount but objectively endure is a significant harm, such that it should discourage us from ever having children in a world with intrinsic harms like our own. Lest anyone think this should lead us to a "pro-mortalist" view where the death of existing people would be better for them than continuing to exist, Benatar does distinguish between a life not worth starting and a life not worth continuing. Although no life is worth starting, some lives, once underway, may be worth continuing to those who live them (since, once existing, to die would be to be deprived of benefits) or for other-affecting reasons.

[51] Ibid., 71.
[52] Ibid., 67-68.

Even with this bleak assessment, the possibility remains that there might be a few rare lives that escape significant harms. Still, says Benatar, parents are playing "procreational 'Russian roulette'" should they risk bringing their child into existence in the hope of seizing this rare possibility that she will have a good life:[53]

> A charmed life is so rare that for every one such life there are millions of wretched lives. Some know that their baby will be among the unfortunate. Nobody knows, however, that their baby will be one of the allegedly lucky few. Great suffering could await any person that is brought into existence. Even the most privileged people could give birth to a child that will suffer unbearably, be raped, assaulted, or be murdered brutally. The optimist surely bears the burden of justifying this procreational Russian roulette. Given that there are no real advantages over never existing for those who are brought into existence, it is hard to see how the significant risk of serious harm could be justified. If we count not only the unusually severe harms that anybody could endure, but also the quite routine ones of ordinary human life, then we find that matters are still worse for cheery procreators. It shows that they play Russian roulette with a fully loaded gun—aimed, of course, not at their own heads, but at those of their future offspring.[54]

Potential parents rarely confront just how likely it is that their child will have a life that contains so much harm in in it that it is not worth starting. Benatar wants to argue that, given how likely it is that one's children will suffer sufficiently bad harms, one should not take the risk, and so not procreate. Even if existence is not always so bad as to be not worth starting, the great likelihood that one's child will suffer significant harms that would make it not worth starting means that one should never risk having children.

Benatar takes his two main arguments to arrive at the conclusion that we should never have children. This leads him to positively recommend abortion as best for the child,[55] so as to avoid bringing children into existence, and to welcome the extinction of humanity

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[53] Ibid., 92. I have modified Benatar's quotation marks to place them inside my own quotation.
[54] Ibid., 92.
[55] This view assumes that children do not matter morally before birth as much as they do after birth, because they are not yet capable of having various interests, like the interest in having a future, until later on, since Benatar does not endorse infanticide.

that would result from the cessation of procreation.[56] Whatever sadness might come as a result of the end of humanity is dwarfed by the vast suffering that transpires as a result of our existence. I develop a response to these arguments in Chapter 2.

Conclusion

The strongest moral restriction on procreation is antinatalism, which holds that we should never have children in a world like our own. In developing an approach to these issues, I begin with antinatalism as the most restrictive view. If the response to the arguments for antinatalism developed in Chapter 2 succeeds, then I can justify my move from that view to consider the less restrictive Net Goods View, the view that a life is worth starting so long as it contains more goods than harms. My overall goal is to determine what moral restrictions there should be on procreation, if any. Having outlined the debate and the positions that have emerged, I shall now turn to develop a response to the most restrictive view, Benatar's antinatalism.

[56] These conclusions are developed in chapters 5 and 6 of *Better Never to Have Been*.

Chapter 2 – Responses to Benatar's Antinatalism and the Net Goods View

Introduction

In this chapter, I respond to Benatar's arguments for antinatalism and explore several possible responses that allow us to reject the Antinatalist View. I first develop a response to antinatalism through a discussion of the work of two critics, specifically Elizabeth Harman and David DeGrazia. This view holds, as Benatar does, that we can make comparisons between how someone fares when not existing and how the same individual fares when existing. I discuss the view that seems to come out of Harman and DeGrazia's defense of procreation under certain conditions, what I ultimately call the Net Goods View. The Net Goods View holds that a life is worth starting so long as it is expected that the life will contain more goods than harms.

I then turn to a discussion of the work of Melinda Roberts and Jeff McMahan. I argue that Melinda Roberts' variabilism can help us out of some of the difficulties that emerge in the defense of Harman and DeGrazia's comparative position. I consider that Jeff McMahan's view could offer a response to Benatar's antinatalism but ultimately suffers from a number of weaknesses. McMahan's view rejects the idea that we can make comparisons between how someone fares when not existing versus how the same individual fares when existing, since it denies that we can make sense of talking about someone who does not actually exist faring well or poorly.

Despite the differences between these approaches, all three approaches (Harman and DeGrazia's comparative view, Roberts' variabilism which is also comparative, and McMahan's noncomparative view) lead us to the Net Goods standard, which considers a life to be worth starting if that life is expected to contain overall more goods than harms. I explore a further view, a hybridization of the Harman-DeGrazia view and variabilism, before ultimately suggesting that, taking any of these approaches, an argument can be made that rejects Benatar's conclusion that having children is always wrong and leaves us with the Net Goods View.

Whichever of the views we take that arrive at the Net Goods standard, we are left with a position where at least some procreation is morally permissible, procreation that is expected to lead to a life in which there are overall more goods than harms. Following the argument in this chapter, I go on to consider whether there are further conditions that should apply to morally permissible procreation in Chapter 3, where I engage a further argument Benatar makes for antinatalism using a noncomparative approach developed by Seana Shiffrin.

Existence as a Benefit as a Response to Antinatalism

I have explored the initial form of Benatar's arguments in Chapter 1. I now turn to develop a response to them by interacting with the work of two of his most serious and charitable critics, Elizabeth Harman and David DeGrazia.

The Asymmetry Argument

Recall that in his first argument Benatar is arguing that it is good when someone is kept out of existence because she misses out on pain, but not bad that she misses out on pleasure.[57] Before considering alternative ways of dealing with the asymmetry, I briefly want to highlight the "pinprick objection" Benatar himself anticipates, which I think illustrates well the extremism of his position. As Tina Rulli puts it, on Benatar's view, "A life with a hangnail's worth of pain for an otherwise extremely happy person is one that is worse than nonexistence."[58] Benatar himself says that if a life contained only a pinprick, there would still be no reason to start that life and a reason (the pinprick) against starting it.[59] This is the result of his view that there is always a reason to keep someone out of existence for the pain she would experience, but no reason to bring someone into existence for the pleasure of existence. Any amount of pain in a life, no matter how small, is a reason not to start that life. And no amount of pleasure is ever a reason to start a life. This lands Benatar with the pinprick objection, since even the pinprick is a reason to keep someone out of existence while even if the potential existence would contain utter bliss this is no reason to start that existence.

To many of us, this will seem deeply implausible from the start, but Benatar accepts this view. I think the pinprick objection is a concise way to show how initially extreme Benatar's position seems. If we aren't inclined to accept his position on the pinprick, we already find ourselves a good distance from where he wants us to be. However, there is still the question of how we ought to handle the asymmetry, if not in the way Benatar handles it,

[57] Recall too that pain and pleasure are meant as a shorthand here and, at least according to Benatar, can also be replaced with talk of harms and benefits.
[58] Tina Rulli, "The Ethics of Procreation and Adoption," *Philosophy Compass* 11 (2016): 306.
[59] Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, 48.

and it is to this issue that I now turn. Given the position's initial implausibility, I argue that as long as we can offer several reasonably plausible possible understandings of the asymmetry that avoid the antinatalism of the Asymmetry Argument, then antinatalism, at least as motivated by that argument, is defeated.

In her direct criticism of the basic asymmetry, Harman offers that we might indeed dispute that pleasure that is absent is not bad, arguing that it is bad for someone to be deprived of pleasure.[60] Harman thinks that, for a person in question in Benatar's manner of speaking, if the absence of pain is good for her, the absence of pleasure should be bad for her.[61] Harman straightforwardly denies that there is an asymmetry on such a view:

> …it seems that what makes it good, for the non-existent person we might have created, that his suffering not occur, is that his suffering would have been bad for him. But then it seems it should be bad, for the non-existent person we might have created, that his pleasure not occur, because it would have been good for him if it had occurred.[62]

She further writes,

> If we are willing to grant that the absence of something that would have been bad for someone, is good for him (that is, good relative to his interests, even in a world where he doesn't exist), then it seems that the absence of something that would have been good for him, is bad for him (that is, bad relative to his interests, even in a world where he doesn't exist).[63]

That is, if there is pleasure that could have been had, and it is absent, this seems bad for her. If we are willing to talk of the interests of a person regardless of whether or not she exists (in the counterfactual way Benatar wants to allow), and we talk of the absence of pain being good for her, then we can also talk of the absence of pleasure being bad for her.

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[60] Harman, "Critical Study," 181-182. See also footnote 3.
[61] Ibid., footnote 3.
[62] Ibid., 782.
[63] Ibid.

Benatar thinks that this denial of the basic asymmetry would come at the expense of no longer being able to agree with the other asymmetries he lists, asymmetries which he thinks most people would not be willing to give up.[64] If this is so, the way forward for his opponent seems to be to come up with an alternate explanation for the other four asymmetries that Benatar considers, so that we could maintain them, or at least some of them, while denying the basic asymmetry.

Both Harman and DeGrazia argue that we have strong reasons to avoid inflicting suffering on someone and much weaker reasons for conferring benefits on them.[65] We can call this the harm/benefit asymmetry. Accepting the harm/benefit asymmetry would mean a number of things. It would mean that we might deny the basic asymmetry (and so affirm that the absence of pleasure is bad). At the same time, we could also affirm the asymmetry of procreational duties. We do not feel obligated to bring people into existence when their lives will be happy because our reasons for conferring benefits are weaker than our reasons for preventing harms. We especially want to avoid causing suffering through bringing people into existence, but there are weaker reasons for providing benefits to someone, and this is what explains our inclination to emphasize preventing suffering over bringing happy people into existence.

Benatar thinks that this explanation of the asymmetry of procreational duties is unlikely to appeal to many people. He argues that even those who agree that we have some obligations to bring happiness to other people will deny that these include even weak reasons for bringing them into existence.[66] Most people just do not seem willing to say that

[64] Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been," 126.
[65] Harman, "Critical Study," 781. DeGrazia, "A Reply to Benatar," 322.
[66] Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been," 127.

we have obligations to non-existent people to bring them in to a happy existence, not even a very weak obligation, Benatar thinks.[67] Benatar believes that his understanding of the asymmetry of procreational duties in terms of the basic asymmetry is superior to the one that Harman and DeGrazia suggest on the grounds that more people who accept the asymmetry could take his view.[68]

To begin to evaluate these claims, I would argue that it is not so clear from the exchange between Benatar and his critics that the alternative view, on which "there are much stronger duties not to harm than to benefit," does not offer a viable explanation for the asymmetry of procreational duties.[69] If we are already willing to talk hypothetically and counterfactually, then, talking in this way, perhaps many people at first find it difficult to believe that we have *any* duties to bring anyone into existence, even weak ones. But it might not be so far-fetched to imagine that there is some reason, however weak, for bringing someone into existence, if that existence should be happy. Perhaps such reasons are so weak that we would never be obligated to bring someone into a happy existence, for, as Benatar himself notes, bringing someone into existence takes considerable sacrifice.[70] Perhaps because of how much sacrifice is required we could never be obligated to bring someone into existence, for we do not think people should be obligated to make great personal sacrifices to make others happy. Benatar objects to this way of thinking because it suggests that, if there were no sacrifice involved, then we would have some reason to bring more people into existence for the pleasure they would enjoy.[71]

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[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] DeGrazia, "A Reply to Benatar," 322.
[70] Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, 33.
[71] Ibid.

I do not think it is quite so far-fetched as it might at first seem. And all we need allow, as Harman and DeGrazia suggest, are weak reasons to bring someone into existence because of the pleasure (or satisfied preferences, or goods) she will experience. I do not think it is so unbelievable that parents might want to have children so as to share with them the many wonders and joys of being alive.[72] They might even think of this as a positive reason for having children, that one might be able to bring a life of joy into existence, that we might have children to see them happy. I think this other side of things should not go unacknowledged.

One concern with the acceptance of the harm/benefit asymmetry is that it might entail, as addressed by Jeff McMahan and Melinda Roberts, what is called the problem of the "miserable child", which I discuss in greater detail below.[73] If we want to say that there are only weak reasons to have happy children, then this might seem to mean that, while there are strong reasons to, say, avoid hurting existing children, there are also *only weak* reasons *not* to have a miserable child, a child whose life is so bad as to be not worth living. That is, if only weak reasons apply to potential people, and strong reasons to existing people, then we only have weak reasons not to bring a miserable child into existence.

The Harman-DeGrazia view might be thought to entail that only weak reasons are involved in bringing those who do not exist into existence, so as to avoid the claim that we are all obligated by a very strong duty to have children. Adopting this view that only weak reasons are involved when considering potential individuals can help us avoid the conclusion that rather than helping existing people who are suffering, we can simply bring

[72] To say this is already to deny the prospective beneficence asymmetry I turn to in a moment.
[73] See Jeff McMahan, "Problems of Population Theory," *Ethics* 92, no. 1 (1981): 96-127 and "Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist," in Melinda Roberts and David Wasserman, eds., *Harming Future Persons: Ethics, Genetics and the Nonidentity Problem* (New York: Springer, 2009). See also Melinda Roberts, "The Asymmetry: A Solution," *Theoria* 77 (2011), 333 and Peter Singer, "A Utilitarian Population Principle," in *Ethics and Population*, ed. M. Bayles (Cambridge, M.A.: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1976).

new people into existence. If potential people count as much as existing people, then this would mean that we have just as much obligation to bring new people into existence who would have overall happy lives as we would to help existing people who are suffering. If only weak reasons are involved where potential people are concerned, we can say that people are not obligated to have children or have more children, and we can also say that we should not bring people into existence rather than helping existing people.

But if only weak reasons apply to potential people then this would mean that there would also be only weak reasons to avoid the harm that might occur in bringing those who do not exist into existence. If only strong reasons concern helping and not harming existing people, then it seems that only weak reasons concern bringing new people into existence or refraining from doing so. But that seems problematic—surely there are *strong* reasons not to have a miserable child whose life contains more harms than benefits?

One response is to acknowledge that although there are only weak reasons to bring the child into existence whether we are talking about reasons to avoid harm or to confer benefits, the reasons to avoid harm are still stronger than those to confer benefits.[74] In other words, only weak reasons would apply to nonexistent, merely potential people, but even so the weak reasons against harming would still be stronger than the weak reasons to confer benefits. However, we might worry that what we need are strong reasons to avoid harm, and not just weak reasons that are still stronger than the weak reasons to confer benefits.

Consider a case. Suppose there are two amounts of suffering. The first amount of suffering, let us refer to it as S1, can be prevented by preventing a merely potential child from coming into existence. The second amount of suffering, S2, can be caused to a child in a coma

[74] This was helpfully pointed out to me by Jennifer Welchman.

in order to wake her or else she will never experience anything. If S1 is greater than S2 it seems more important to prevent the existence and suffering of the miserable child than to prevent the suffering of the existing child. But this is not what the harm/benefit asymmetry and weak-reasons view would say with respect to the miserable child. The weak-reasons view would say that there are stronger reasons to prevent harm to existing children, and would thus have to attend to preventing S2 even though S1 is a greater amount of harm. This is counterintuitive. And by introducing so many different levels of strength for reasons it becomes very complicated to try to compare different strengths of reasons and how they fit with our intuitions about causing harm or benefitting existing vs. potential children.

If some way of dealing with different strengths of weak reasons can work, the response to Benatar's antinatalism that employs the harm/benefit asymmetry may not work because some argue that it seems difficult to distinguish between harm being done versus there being a lack of benefit. What is the difference, we might ask, between refusing to confer benefits and harming? Is there really a morally significant difference between harming and withholding benefits (thus resulting in harm)?[75] Questions like these are classically debated among ethicists and those nervous about being able to defend the moral significance of the distinction between failing to confer benefits and harming will probably be uncomfortable with this potential solution to the Asymmetry Argument. Whether or not we find the Harman and DeGrazia approach plausible, at least as regards the Asymmetry Argument, depends at

[75] Clearly most legal traditions hold that there is. There is a difference between drowning a child in a pond and failing to save a child in a pond. If there are duty to rescue laws in a particular jurisdiction then the case of failing to save a child in a pond is still one of breaking the law, but not an instance of homicide. Given its intuitive plausibility and common acceptance I am inclined to favor the harm/benefit asymmetry. But a number of consequentialist moral philosophers reject any distinction between harming and failing to benefit. See, for example, James Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia", *New England Journal of Medicine* 292 (1975): 78-80 and Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

least partly on whether or not we can accept the harm/benefit asymmetry. The views of Melinda Roberts and Jeff McMahan that I explore later in this chapter do not rely on the harm/benefit asymmetry, and so, for those skittish about its endorsement, may ultimately be more promising.

We might also think of bringing happiness to others as supererogatory, for those who accept this category, while we consider preventing harm to others to be obligatory. It might be a good thing to bring a being into existence so that there would then be a being who experienced happiness even though we do not consider it our duty. This would not entail that absent pleasure was of no worth. On the contrary, it provides a reason to bring beings into existence. But it is not a reason that can give us an obligation because such actions are supererogatory. Benatar seems to think that, if we allow for even weak reasons in favor of bringing people into existence, we thereby allow that we have a duty, at least sometimes, to have a child.[76] But if having children is supererogatory this would not follow. A discussion along these lines probably comes back to how much sacrifice is involved in having children. If the sacrifice is considerable then perhaps this is itself an indication that it should not be morally obligatory but rather supererogatory to have children. And the sacrifice involved on the part of the mother and on the part of the person engaged in parenting does seem considerable. But the point to take away is that an alternate explanation of the asymmetry of procreative duties is available, such that, if we go in for these moves, we can affirm it while denying the basic asymmetry.

I think these considerations make Benatar's case much less persuasive. If we must choose between saying there are weak reasons to make more happy people and endorsing

[76] Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been," 131.

the harm/benefit asymmetry, and choosing Benatar's antinatalism, then I think many people will be quite happy to go with weak reasons and the harm/benefit asymmetry. For surely if one is weighing these options by their plausibility, even if a weak duty to procreate is implausible, it is arguably less implausible than the view that having children is always wrong and would be wrong even if the child's life in question contained only a pinprick of pain and otherwise innumerable goods. In the method of wide reflective equilibrium, the best we can do is weigh up competing intuitions and find that equilibrium that best coheres all of them, even if it means some have to give way in the process. Pitting these two views against each other, we should sacrifice our intuitions that go against weak reasons to save the stronger intuitions we have against antinatalism and in line with the pinprick objection to the Asymmetry Argument.

Benatar argues that to reject his conclusion merely because it is counterintuitive is to forget how unreliable intuitions can be. He thinks many who say they reject the basic asymmetry in favor of weaker reasons for bringing others into existence will merely *say* this and go on to act as if they do not reject it, as if there is no weaker duty to procreate.[77] But in making claims about the unreliability of intuitions one wonders what intuitions one is relying on, presumably the ones that are reliable? How could they be distinguished, when there are intuitions in fundamental disagreement? Benatar's skepticism about the reliability of our intuitions in these matters stems from his argument that there is a pro-natal bias, influenced by evolutionary and cultural pressures which favor procreation, which should

[77] Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, 204. He also asks why some counter-intuitive conclusions, like Peter Singer's understanding of our stringent obligations to the distant poor, are less likely to be dismissed for being counter-intuitive than views like his own, 33, footnote 24. Singer expresses his views in his well-known article "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229-243.

lead us to be more skeptical of the common belief that having children is permissible and even good.[78] As he explains:

> Anti-natalist views, whatever their source, run up against an extremely powerful pro-natalist bias. This bias has its roots in the evolutionary origins of human (and more primitive animal) psychology and biology. Those with pro-natal views are more likely to pass on their genes. It is part of the pro-natal bias that most people simply assume that passing on one's genes is both good and a sign of superiority.[79]

This functions as a kind of evolutionary debunking argument, suggesting that our pro-natalist intuitions about the permissibility and desirability of procreation may be unreliably influenced by evolutionary pressures. That such a bias would exist is plausible, but then which of our judgments could ever escape external influence from evolutionary and cultural forces? Certainly we should not dogmatically refuse to entertain the idea that some of our intuitions may be in need of revision, and indeed one cannot do so on wide reflective equilibrium. But it is not as if we can clearly isolate any intuitions from evolutionary influences, as Benatar would seem to want to isolate his own intuitions about the permissibility and desirability of procreation in a way that makes them different from our allegedly compromised pro-natalist intuitions, since they run counter to the bias he argues evolution would seem to favor. Are not even his antinatalist intuitions likely the result, at least in part, not just of biological mechanisms resulting from evolutionary forces, but also cultural and even personal idiosyncrasies?

Although circumspection about our initial judgments is important, I would suggest that we need not jettison strongly felt beliefs merely because they happen to be more obviously explained away by evolutionary debunking arguments than other beliefs.

[78] Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, 8-9.
[79] Ibid.

Presumably all of our beliefs are in some way shaped by our evolutionary and cultural history, evolved and enculturated creatures that we are, not to mention our own idiosyncratic personal histories. This observation might lead us to conclude that there is not much else we can do when there is conflict among our intuitions but see how we might make the judgments in question cohere with the rest of our beliefs.[80] For most people, I suspect, that will mean retaining their firmly held view, however they do it, that having children is not always wrong.

Unlike Harman, DeGrazia goes on to consider the other three remaining asymmetries that Benatar thinks are best explained in relation to the basic asymmetry. Regarding the prospective beneficence asymmetry, which holds that it is strange to talk of bringing a child into existence for her own sake, DeGrazia disagrees that this is so. He notes that we can talk of someone being benefited by coming into existence, since, once in existence, there is indeed a real person who benefits.[81] As DeGrazia explains, "For even if we deny, as I think good sense requires, that nonexistence is a harm (there being no determinate, actual subject who is harmed), we might reasonably hold that coming into existence with good prospects is a benefit (there being an actual subject who benefits once she comes into existence)."[82] And he points out that it's difficult to make sense of *not* having a child for that child's sake, as Benatar wants to say.[83] For, by not having the child, there would never be a real person who benefits.

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[80] For criticisms of evolutionary debunking arguments that make similar points, see Guy Kahane, "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments," *Nous* 45 (2011): 103-125 and "Evolution and Impartiality," *Ethics* 124 (2014): 327-341. See also William Fitzpatrick, "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking of Ethical Realism," *Philosophical Studies* 172 (2015): 883-904 and R. Rini "Debunking Debunking: A Regress Challenge for Psychological Threats to Moral Judgment," *Philosophical Studies* 173 (2016): 657-697.
[81] DeGrazia, "A Reply to Benatar," 322-323.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

In response, Benatar argues that "it is possible for somebody to think that a person was benefited by being brought into existence without thinking prospectively that this benefit is a reason to bring that person into existence."[84] He takes this to show that DeGrazia's argument does not follow. But I would not have read DeGrazia's claim as needing that everyone must think prospectively that the benefit a child will receive is a reason for bringing that child into existence. It seems to me that DeGrazia is only saying that it would make sense to say this, not that no other view is possible, or that people might not think of the benefits of life as their reason for having a child. I read him as saying that, because a child will actually benefit, we *can* think of this as a reason for having the child for her own sake. To challenge the asymmetry in question we must only show that it is reasonable to think (and thereby not quite so strange) that one could have a child for that child's sake, not that this is *always* how people think about the benefits their children enjoy through being born. As I noted above, it is not actually so uncommon to hear people talk about having children to bring them a life of joy and happiness, to make a good life for them. Thus, this asymmetry, I think, can be plausibly denied.

DeGrazia goes on the offensive against the second half of the asymmetry to deny that it makes sense to *not* have a child for that child's sake, since the child will never exist to experience the benefit.[85] DeGrazia writes that "If no child is brought into existence, there is no actual individual who can benefit from one's restraint. Only actual beings have interests."[86] In response to this, Benatar actually invokes the idea used against him by Harman and DeGrazia, that we have stronger reasons to avoid harming than conferring

[84] Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been," 130.
[85] DeGrazia, "A Reply to Benatar," 323.
[86] Ibid.

benefits. He argues that there would be stronger reasons "to avoid the harm (even if nobody benefits) than to bestow the benefit."[87] For this reason, Benatar thinks, we should still talk of avoiding harm for the child's sake.

It is unlikely that invoking the notion that he denies elsewhere will work for Benatar, nor that it can actually accomplish what he wants. For, even if there are stronger reasons to prevent suffering, what was at issue was whether it makes sense to talk about not having a child for that child's sake. DeGrazia's point was that, if the child is never had, there will never be a child to benefit. That still seems to hold, whether one embraces the view that we have stronger reasons to avoid harm than to confer benefit or not.

As for the remaining two asymmetries, DeGrazia offers an alternative explanation for both to suggest that they can be explained without recourse to Benatar's basic asymmetry. Recall that one states that we can regret bringing someone into existence for her sake, but not regret having not brought someone into existence for her sake. The other states that we can be sad that distant people are suffering, but not about potential people who would have experienced happiness if they had existed. In both cases, DeGrazia notes that we accept these two asymmetries not because we accept the basic asymmetry but because there is no subject to be harmed: "I explain [the third asymmetry] by reference to the fact that in the former case there is a subject who can be harmed, whereas in the latter case there is no subject to be harmed… again, I think that this [fourth] asymmetry is easily explained by the existence of actual victims in the first instance and the lack of any such victims in the second."[88] When we are talking about people who have not been brought into existence, there is no one to talk

[87] Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been," 131.
[88] DeGrazia, "A Reply to Benatar," 323.

of being harmed by not experiencing the happiness that they would have experienced had they existed.

In contrast to Benatar's basic asymmetry, then, and after a review of the other asymmetries, DeGrazia brings together an opposing view. For those that exist, we can say that benefit is good and that harm is bad, while for those who never come to exist, we can say that the lack of benefit and the lack of harm are neither good nor bad (since they do not exist to be benefited or harmed).[89] This conclusion comes because DeGrazia endorses the view that only the existing can be harmed or benefited, for only they have interests.[90] Even if we do want to talk as Benatar does to compare lives hypothetically and counterfactually, DeGrazia thinks (along with Harman) that the lack of benefit is as bad as the lack of harm.[91] This is so even when we think that our reasons to avoid harm are usually stronger than our reasons to confer benefits.

I side with Harman and DeGrazia against Benatar here. They hold that, in distinguishing between the two ways of speaking at issue, we can respond to Benatar's Asymmetry argument. So long as we are talking about nonexistent beings, in one sense nothing is good or bad for them, since there are no beings to be benefited or harmed. If we do begin to talk of how nonexistent beings might fare comparatively if they were to exist or not exist, then it seems that we can say that, once they have imagined interests, we can talk of how they would have been harmed or benefited. Once we are talking of imagined interests, it does not seem clear why we must take the imagined absence of pain seriously while the

[89] Ibid., 324.
[90] DeGrazia agrees that people who may exist in the future have potential interests that must be factored in, but points out that this does not mean that they have interests now, "A Reply to Benatar," 321, footnote 11.
[91] DeGrazia, "A Reply to Benatar," 324.

imagined absence of pleasure would count for nothing.[92] Benatar wants to say based on the asymmetries that we do tend to assign less importance to absent pleasure than absent pain. But DeGrazia has offered reasonable alternatives to the basic asymmetry for why we find three of Benatar's asymmetries plausible, and directly challenged one of them, without relying on the idea that we should count absent pleasure less than absent pain. If one favors these alternative explanations as I do, then we can reject the basic asymmetry while finding some of the other asymmetries plausible.

Moreover, as Harman suggests, that Benatar frequently switches back and forth in his discussion between these two senses—the more literal manner of speaking and Benatar's hypothetical manner of speaking—may explain something about why Benatar is able to set up his argument as he does. As Harman explains,

> …it seems that what makes it good, for the non-existent person we might have created, that his suffering not occur, is that his suffering would have been bad for him. But then it seems it should be bad, for the non-existent person we might have created, that his pleasure not occur, because it would have been good for him if it had occurred.[93]

It seems that Benatar wants us to treat absent pain in the counterfactual sense, such that its absence is good for a person who might have existed, while he wants us to treat absent pleasure in a more literal sense, such that there is no one who exists who is deprived of pleasure and so no bad comes of its absence.[94] Why treat them differently? He wants to do this, it seems, because he thinks this is how we intuitively handle the other asymmetries. We think it would be bad to cause pain, even hypothetically, but do not worry much about not creating individuals who would experience pleasure, thinking more literally. But, as we have

[92] To take this position against Benatar is to embrace the view he illustrates alongside his in Fig. 2.2 in *Better Never to Have Been*, 39.
[93] Harman, "Critical Study," 785, footnote 3.
[94] Ibid.

seen, we can understand that we only think it bad when there are actually existing persons who suffer. In order to get us to think that we can think of bad even for non-actual nonexistent persons who would be suffering, we have to speak hypothetically, but then Benatar has to keep us speaking more literally about absent pleasure so that we do not find its absence to be a bad thing. For, if we speak hypothetically of absent pleasure as well, then it surely seems a bad thing. The only way it could not be is if we feared some kind of duty to procreate so much that we insisted on treating them differently. This does seem to be what Benatar thinks should motivate us to go with his view. But, as Harman and DeGrazia suggest, we can think of that duty in terms of a weak one which can be overridden by the amount of sacrifice involved, and, as I have suggested, we can think of it not as a duty but as a supererogatory act supported by weak reasons.

I have devoted considerable attention to the moves and countermoves involved in considering Benatar's first main argument motivated by asymmetries. The more important points to take away, I think, are these: (1) Benatar's first main argument can be rejected by saying that the absence of pleasure is still bad, hypothetically speaking, thus denying the basic asymmetry; (2) To make sense of the other asymmetries we can take DeGrazia's view that we normally do not think that we must bring more people into existence because we think more literally about their nonexistence (they do not exist to be deprived absent pleasure); (3) As well, we think that we should not bring people into existence when they would experience harm because there will be an actual person who is harmed (thinking more literally); (4) Even if we think hypothetically about absent pleasure, we can still make sense of our tendency not to feel obligated to procreate due to weak reasons on the harm/benefit asymmetry, the sacrifice it takes to do so, or by embracing a notion of

supererogation. Having argued that the Asymmetry Argument can be rejected for the Harman-DeGrazia approach, at least as constructed on Benatar's original position, I now turn to examine Benatar's second main argument for his antinatalism.[95] It is an ambitious effort to weigh up just how bad existence is by considering the vast array of harms and benefits in life.

The Quality-of-Life Argument

Harman responds to the Quality-of-Life argument that, in making his case that life contains so much bad, Benatar has not considered whether there might be pleasures of higher quality, as Mill suggests, that are so valuable as to make our lives worth living even filled as they may be with many bad things.[96] Such higher quality pleasures might even make our lives worth living in the face of serious tragedies, for we might appreciate things like friendship, loving relationships, and rewarding work.[97]

DeGrazia confronts Benatar's assessment of how bad life is across the three kinds of theories of well-being that Benatar himself engages. DeGrazia argues against Benatar that, on a hedonistic theory of well-being, only those pains that are noticed by the subject would matter, since they would be what affect the subject's felt pleasure, and so Benatar's effort to reveal pains in our lives we might not normally notice does not provide evidence that our lives are so bad as to be not worth starting.[98] DeGrazia argues that

[95] I will return to a modified argument for Benatar's antinatalism again in the next chapter when I examine a version he runs based on Shiffrin's position.
[96] Ibid., 783.
[97] Ibid.
[98] DeGrazia, "A Reply to Benatar," 326.

> …the most plausible forms of hedonism will not focus on sensations except to the extent that they matter to the subject. In other words, at least in consideration of persons as opposed to sentient nonpersons, the focus will shift away from sensations and towards the subject's attitudes… Since fairly many people are more or less satisfied with their lives, embracing this version of hedonism would support an assessment of human life that is far more optimistic than Benatar's."[99]

DeGrazia is contending that Benatar's identification of everyday environmental discomforts is irrelevant, since these must be noticed on the hedonist view to matter. This is to take one controversial position in the debate over hedonism on DeGrazia's part, for there are different forms of hedonism.[100]

On an experientialist view, so long as something is not experienced it is not considered to affect the individual. Epicurus offers an infamous argument that death cannot be bad for the individual who dies because that individual never exists to experience death. However, another version of hedonism would not just think that something must be experienced, and even, in the case of Benatar's environmental discomforts, directly acknowledged, for it to matter. For example, classical hedonistic utilitarians who recommend tallying units of pleasure and pain, regardless of whether particular agents are aware of these things, offer an example of a different hedonist view. Consider a case where there are two possible worlds, one where a child has been locked in a basement all her life and knows no other existence, and one where the same child has a typically healthy childhood. For the Epicurean or experientialist, the agent is leading a good life in both worlds. For the classical hedonistic utilitarian, the second world is clearly better, since we are assessing total pain and pleasure in both worlds. The child, knowing nothing else, may not

[99] Ibid.
[100] DeGrazia is not a hedonist, but rather defending a version of hedonism as the most plausible version in response to Benatar.

realize how bad she has it, but on an objective measure the second life is far better. This suggests that an analysis of the pleasures and pains in lives based on classical hedonistic utilitarianism would indeed support Benatar's view that our lives are filled with many more pains, and that these should be counted. For surely cases like the child in the basement are a major objection to the experientialist or Epicurean position.

However, as John Stuart Mill argued, some pleasures, higher pleasures, are more important than pains. Mill had in mind intellectual pleasures, the sciences and the arts. We need not commit ourselves to exactly Mill's view in order to maintain that there are qualitative differences in the satisfaction we tend to take in our successes. These differences can be ranked preferentially. The classical utilitarian view would also seem to entail the impersonal total view that, as Parfit argues, would require us to bring as many people into existence as possible, leading to the "repugnant conclusion". This would be a reason for us to reject it in favor of some other view, even if we were to be hedonists in our selection of a theory of well-being.

DeGrazia also disputes Benatar's take on desire-fulfillment, arguing that though we have many unsatisfied desires in our lives we also have many satisfied ones, and that, as Harman suggests but with respect to desires, it may be that having some desires satisfied (having a family, having friends, etc.) is so rewarding that they outweigh many unsatisfied desires.[101] He writes that "Even if one has lots of lesser desires that are unsatisfied, one may have several global desires (e.g., to raise a family, to have a decent career, to stay healthy into old age) that are satisfied and that count substantially in the hierarchy of desires that largely

[101] DeGrazia, "A Reply to Benatar," 326.

determines what it means for one to be doing well."[102] This ties in with an idea DeGrazia endorses that it is primarily the individual who should decide whether her life is worth living, for she decides what is most important in it.

In response to Benatar's charge that objective-list theories are insufficiently objective, DeGrazia raises the point that we may never be able to have some view *sub specie aeternitatis* by which we can determine which human lives are worth living.[103] Benatar objects in *Better Never to Have Been* that objective list theories always consider our well-being from the human point of view, they do not really capture our situation from the view of eternity, which is what he wants to do with his assessment that human lives actually contain more bad than good. If we are working from a human point of view, then presumably Benatar would say that point of view is still infected with Pollyannaism. As Benatar puts it, objective list theories "are taken to be objective only in the sense that they do not vary from person to person… They are not taken to be objective in the sense of judging what a good life is *sub specie aeternitatis*."[104] Benatar needs this view from eternity to argue that human life is lacking, since objective list theories would hold that human lives containing certain goods are worth starting.[105]

DeGrazia defends objective list theories by arguing that the perspective we take on well-being should not be *sub specie aeternitatis* but rather

> must take into account what sort of creature human beings are… In my judgment, a list that includes autonomy, accomplishment, deep personal relationships, esthetic enrichment, health, and enjoyment takes proper account of human beings as potentially autonomous and

[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid., 328.
[104] Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, 81-82.
[105] Benatar has to argue that assessments of the quality of human life, including those stemming from objective list theories, which hold that human lives contain more goods than bad are to be rejected. Benatar thinks that only a view sufficiently removed from human Pollyannaism, his view from the aspect of eternity, will truly capture the objective quality of our lives.

> healthy, goal-pursuing, social, beauty-appreciating, and fun-loving beings… given the sorts of creatures we are, I doubt that such a radically impartial standard would be apt for evaluating the quality of our lives.[106]

If we think that what is good for us must be in some sense determined by an understanding of what sorts of creatures we are, and so what sorts of things are going to fit with our needs and desires, then we have already rejected a view from the aspect of eternity, and for the very reason that such a view would not take into account important facts about ourselves that would not hold true of other creatures. To offer a simplistic example, it doesn't seem like eating dirt is very good for humans, though it may be good for earthworms. The human-specific, species-specific fact that humans don't tend to benefit much from eating dirt seems rather relevant to deciding what sorts of things might be good for us. Benatar seems to be assuming here the very point he is trying to prove against objective list theory by arguing that our evaluations must be *sub specie aeternitatis*, when this very claim would be denied by objective list theorists.

I view this last point which challenges the possibility of viewing the good and harm for human beings *sub specie aeternitatis*, along with the idea that some pleasures or desires might be of much greater importance than minor pains, to seriously weaken Benatar's case. For Benatar's part, it seems that he must convince us that, by some standard higher than our own evaluations, our lives are not valuable. But, we might well ask, how does he come by this standard? Why should we find his assessment somehow more objective than our own? If we take our own assessments of the quality of our lives to matter the most, since they are what affect our happiness, then it is difficult to see why we should adopt Benatar's view if we do

[106] Ibid.

not share it already. And, if we take some pleasures or goods to be so important that they can outweigh much pain—such as friendship, loving relationships, the pleasures of the intellect, and so on—then many more lives are far better than Benatar has suggested. Surely, hunger, thirst, and other mundane discomforts pale in comparison to the great and varied rewards of such goods.

Mill's admittedly much criticized view is a classic instance of this. He argued that competent judges would prefer certain "higher" pleasures to "lower" pleasures and that these higher pleasures could outweigh many pains.[107] More sophisticated contemporary accounts have emerged in the discussion of versions of desire-fulfilment theory that can rank different preferences.[108] On such a view, my preference to avoid a headache would be ranked lower than my preference to have friends, or to write poetry. Approaches like these can justify considering some goods to be of much greater importance because they are of greater value, than, for instance, the incidental environmental harms listed by Benatar.

Benatar replies to these sorts of points that he has provided reason to think that we should not leave people to their own evaluations.[109] He also questions whether we can make sense of DeGrazia's move when it came to hedonism, DeGrazia's argument that we should only take into account an individual's self-evaluations, the individual's own sense of what pains she happens to be aware of, in assessing her well-being. Benatar argues that we should not take self-evaluations this seriously as this would mean that people could alter their evaluations without their circumstances changing at all and we would have to say, because

[107] See Roger Crisp, "Well-Being", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2017 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/well-being.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been," 141.

of these altered evaluations, that their well-being had actually changed.[110] As Benatar explains:

> A person judges his overall life satisfaction to be poor. At a later time, forgetting his earlier assessment or underestimating how bad it was, he judges his overall life satisfaction at that earlier time to have been better. If subjective assessments of overall life satisfaction are infallible, as they seem to be on Professor DeGrazia's account, then we are left with the odd implication that the quality of life during a particular period improved after that period had ended—not because anything during that period changed, but rather because one recollects it differently. By contrast, if one recognizes that subjective assessments of life satisfaction can be wrong because, for example, people can forget, then we open the way to thinking that judgments about life satisfaction can be mistaken because they rest on errors like failing to remember bad sensations.[111]

Benatar further adds that the list of goods marshaled by DeGrazia in his defense of objective list theory exhibits "cherry picking and error", for Benatar thinks that if we really add up the sorts of goods and bads in our lives with less "cherry picking and error" we would come to his conclusion, that life contains more significant bad things than good things.[112] In response to the Millian suggestion of Harman about higher quality pleasures and the Millian suggestion of DeGrazia about more significant desires, Benatar responds that we can correspondingly think that there are "higher quality pains" and significant desires that commonly go unsatisfied.[113]

To respond to these sorts of counter objections, I do not think that we are taking people to be infallible in giving them priority in assessing their own lives.[114] Rather, we are recognizing that they are to be responsible for their own evaluations. Moreover, I do not think we can manage to rise far above the evaluations people give of their own lives to

[110] Ibid., 142.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid., 144.
[113] Ibid., 145.
[114] Ibid., 142.

provide some sort of higher evaluation that Benatar seems to need. I think that his evaluation must compete at the same level as all the rest, and that in this competition it comes up as overestimating the bad and underestimating the good. As for the matter of cherry picking, it seems that any discussion of the goods and ills of life is bound to be rather open-ended due to all the considerations one might invoke—all of life is on the table, after all. I do not see how one could be anything but selective and self-serving, wittingly or not, in trying to take into account all that one must in such an assessment.

As for "higher quality pains" and significant desires being unsatisfied, I would reject this move on Benatar's part. Mill's original account in *Utilitarianism* does not consider there to be pains of a profoundly different quality. On a preferentially ranked view there is also no need to suppose that we have to rank different unsatisfied desires, and no need to suppose on an objective list view that we rank different bads or evils. Although Benatar is right to point out that there are very bad things that happen to people, I think (sticking to hedonism here) they are distinguished not by their quality but only in the intensity and duration and amount of pain involved — and not in a difference of quality.[115] Harman's example of a pain that is possibly in a different category is knowing one's children are suffering horribly.[116] But if we imagine that one knows one's children are suffering only a little bit (they all have scraped knees, say), and then we imagine that at another time one's children are suffering moderately (they all have influenza, say), when we turn to consider the situation where they are suffering horribly (they are being electrocuted), is there really a difference in *quality*? It seems like what was bad about the scraped knees or the flu is just what is bad about the

[115] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Project Gutenberg, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11224/11224-h/11224-h.htm.
[116] Harman, "Critical Study," 783.

electrocution case (the pain), it's just that the electrocution case is far worse because there is far more pain. (We may also worry about the long-term effects of any horrible pain on the child's health. I have tried to pick electrocution as a case where there is horrible pain but perhaps not long-term damage.) And, even granting the existence of higher quality pains, I would still argue that they tend to be few enough as to be outweighed by higher quality pleasures so that they do not make the bad in a life outweigh the good.[117]

Strangely, Benatar argues that most people would not endure an hour of excruciating suffering in exchange for an hour of the "most sublime delights", as if to suggest that we often rate pains as more important than pleasures in our considerations.[118] But with these delights left unspecified, and with their having no specified impact beyond the hour in which they are experienced, it is no wonder this seems like a bad deal — an hour of intense delights, otherwise unspecified, sounds just like lower pleasure. Indeed, who would trade an hour of excruciating pain for an hour of lower pleasure? But that is not what is being contended here. What about trading an hour of pain for an hour of some higher pleasure? What if one could trade an hour of excruciating suffering in exchange for making an incredible discovery in one's field of study, or in exchange for producing the greatest work of one's artistic career? Explorers and artists arguably do precisely this in their lives if they must go on long expeditions in extreme conditions or endure great discomfort in creating their works (consider explorers in deserts and scaling mountains or painting elaborate scenes on the ceiling of buildings). We might even think of parenting as a prime example of people enduring burdens for the sake of being there for a moment of joy in their child's life.[119] People

[117] I am grateful to Scott Woodcock for his insights on this matter.
[118] Ibid., 245.
[119] I owe this example to Scott Woodcock.

are indeed willing to endure hardship and make considerable sacrifices so that their lives contain great accomplishments that are recognizably of a different quality than base pleasures.

As for the failure to satisfy significant global desires in our lives counterbalancing the satisfaction of significant global desires, this certainly seems like a problem for the desire-satisfaction view. But here we could raise the occurrence of preference adaptation.[120] If a man wants to be an Olympic marathon runner but loses his legs early in life due to an accident, it is true that one of his significant global desires for his life has gone unsatisfied. But if his preferences adapt, if from the experience of his disability he actually comes to find his life meaningful as a researcher into prosthetic technologies (where he helps not only himself but also many others), then for his life considered as a whole he might end up not having the global desire to be an Olympic marathon runner, and so this would not be unsatisfied. Of course, he may not ever find anything meaningful to place among his global desires, and he may wallow in self-pity for the rest of his days, dreaming about what might have been. But that some people keep going in the face of disability, and even contend that their lives have been improved by their disability through being rendered more meaningful, suggests that unsatisfied global desires may be more malleable or massageable in a way that would sometimes mitigate them in the evaluation of satisfied and unsatisfied desires in our lives.[121] There seems to be an asymmetry between global satisfied desires (which are satisfied) and global unsatisfied desires (which may be massaged away through preference adaptation). Even if they are often not massaged away, that this happens not uncommonly

[120] See Elizabeth Barnes, "Disability and Adaptive Preference," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 23, (2009): 6.
[121] Ibid.

suggests a way in which even the desire-fulfillment theorist can suggest that many lives will be worth starting, since even if global desires are unsatisfied many of us will go on to no longer have them as global desires. Perhaps many of us can only live without the grapes for so long before we declare them sour and move on.

I think, then, that there are compelling reasons to reject Benatar's second argument, or at least to reject it as applying universally. For, as DeGrazia notes, one can even share Benatar's view to a large extent and still think that procreation is sometimes permissible. One can share the view that most people are impermissibly harmed by being brought into existence while still thinking that some experience enough benefit to make their lives worth living. One does not need to make a happy life out to be as extremely improbable as Benatar does. And it is these happy lives, however numerous or few they may be, that we might hope to make ever more probable in our efforts to better a world that is far too often marred by tragedy.

The Net Goods View

Through this discussion of the response to Benatar by Harman and DeGrazia we have arrived at a view that can be given a positive characterization as the "Net Goods View". The Net Goods View holds that a life is worth starting if the goods outweigh the harms. The Harman-DeGrazia approach is just one way to get to this position. On the Harman-DeGrazia approach we get the following views. In contrast to Benatar's basic asymmetry, where no amount of goods in a life could make up for any harms, since non-existence always contains fewer (i.e. no) harms, we have seen that a position can be defended that allows that goods

and harms can be weighed up against one another. Harms count against bringing someone into existence, and, so long as we are going along with talk about hypothetical, non-existent people, goods count in favor of bringing someone into existence. If the expected goodness of the goods of a person's existence outweighs the expected badness of the bads, then, since we have denied the basic asymmetry and are holding that both goods and harms count, that person's life is minimally worth starting.[122] The net goods outweigh the harms. That, at least, is the position we are initially left with upon denying Benatar's basic asymmetry with the DeGrazia-Harman view. It is a very simplistic view, assuming as it does that we can predict and expect to determine goods and harms in a life, which raises problems familiar enough to those acquainted with debates about how utilitarians might manage to quantify units of good and bad. It can become more complicated if we factor in Harman's view that some goods may be significant enough to outweigh harms, also a notion familiar in discussions of Mill's utilitarianism. But though this is our initial view, we may have cause to become more restrictive in our understanding of what instances of procreation are permitted, and it is to suggestions to this effect that I will turn in Chapter 3. But first I will discuss alternative approaches to the asymmetry to note the further resources they offer in responding successfully to Benatar.

[122] It is necessary to speak of the "goodness of the goods" and the "badness of the bads" because if we simply tallied all the individual goods and bads this would not account for different qualities of badness and goodness. The position must be that when considering the goods and bads, we must consider their qualities and not just their quantities, for it is quality we care about. We do not want to say that just because I have many bads in my life in terms of quantity (many more runny noses, say) that these could outweigh goods of such significance as great accomplishments or meaningful relationships merely because they are great in quantity. I am grateful to Howard Nye and Jennifer Welchman for this point.

Alternative Responses to Antinatalism

Melinda Roberts' Variabilism

In Melinda Roberts' variabilism, when a person will indeed exist, any losses or benefits the individual would experience matter morally. So, it would indeed be a reason not to bring someone into existence that the life she would experience would contain considerable suffering. However, if a person were to never exist, then, according to variabilism, that person's losses do not matter morally. That is, the moral significance of that person's losses, since that person will never exist, varies from if that person were to exist. As Roberts explains:

> According to Variabilism, all persons matter morally but they all matter variably. Specifically, according to Variabilism, the moral significance of any particular loss is a function not of the moral status of the person who incurs that loss but of – and this is the above-referenced critical factor – just where that loss is incurred in relation to the person who incurs it. Incurred at a world where that person does or will exist, a loss has full moral significance. Incurred elsewhere, a loss has no moral significance at all.[123]

As Roberts puts it, "a loss incurred by that very same person at a world where that person never exists at all has *no moral significance whatsoever*."[124] Roberts' variabilism would allow one to say that we do have reasons to prevent people coming into existence who would suffer, while we don't have reasons to bring people into existence for the happiness they would experience, since costs and benefits to people don't have moral significance unless those people actually come into existence. Their moral significance varies based on whether or not they will come into existence, even as their moral status remains the same in both worlds where they don't exist and worlds where they exist. The nonexistent do not miss

[123] Roberts, "The Asymmetry: A Solution," 335.
[124] Ibid., 356.

out on existence, even as we think that we have reasons not to bring people into existence if they will suffer. This seems to leave us with reasons to avoid the miserable child (the child whose life contains more harms than goods), but not reasons to bring people into existence that would generate the repugnant conclusion, or that would mean we could replace existing people with new people.

For if we apply this to the miserable child case, we will see that because an individual will exist in the world and incur losses, there would indeed be a reason not to bring the child into existence. But if we consider the repugnant conclusion case or the replacing of an existing person with a new person, it seems we will not have a reason to bring as many people into existence as possible for the goods they would experience, or a reason to think that we can bring people into existence and treat this as a benefit just as we could think of ourselves as conferring benefits on those who already exist. For only if people were going to exist in the world would we have reasons that concern their losses, only if they are going to exist would any losses on their part have any moral significance whatsoever. The repugnant conclusion requires that we think of nonexistent people as being benefitted by the goods they will experience and that we count this as a reason to bring them into existence. But if they will not exist, then, because they will not exist, any losses they might have experienced from not existing, on variabilism, have no moral significance whatsoever.

The same applies for the merely possible people in the replaceability case. The losses we might attribute to individuals if they do not come into existence, and so what they miss out on by not existing, do not count in the world where they do not come into existence. This means that we have reason to avoid bringing the miserable child into existence, the child who will come into existence and suffer more harms than benefits. But we have no reasons

to bring as many people into existence as possible for the goods they will experience, or any reason to think that we can replace existing people with new people. Losses to existing people have a moral significance on variabilism that the losses of nonexistent people do not have.

Where the miserable child case might cause problems for the Harman and DeGrazia comparative view, Roberts' variabilism, a different kind of comparative view, can handle the miserable child well. Because the miserable child will actually exist in the world in question, losses the miserable child incurs are of moral significance. However we might worry that Roberts' view, by solving the repugnant conclusion and replaceability case by not counting the losses incurred by the nonexistent, fails to give us any reason to bring people into existence, since the nonexistent (those who never actually come to exist in the world in question) do not miss out on existence on her view. And if we have no reason to bring people into existence for the goods they will benefit from, unlike Harman and DeGrazia, who *do* say we have weak reasons to bring people into existence for the goods they will benefit from, then it might at first seem that Benatar can point to this lack of a reason to bring people into existence while emphasizing that there is serious suffering in our lives to make his case.

If there is no reason to bring people into existence for the benefits they will experience, and if Benatar is right, according to the Quality-of-Life Argument, that many more lives are far worse than many people suppose, then we may have a problem on variabilism. That is, if our lives really are quite bad, as Benatar contends, then there may be reasons not to have brought any of us into existence; and if we had not existed, there would be no reasons to have thought that we should be brought into existence. The counterarguments to the Quality-of-Life argument have been based on challenging Benatar's

assessment and based on a Millian idea of higher quality pleasures (or significant satisfied global desires, or certain higher quality goods). But on Roberts' view, that someone would miss out on these higher quality pleasures (or significant satisfied global desires, or certain higher quality goods) by not existing would not be a reason to bring her into existence, since in not existing their losses incurred would have no moral significance whatsoever.

Variabilism can handle the miserable child and avoid the repugnant conclusion and the replaceability case, but it does not seem to handle the Quality-of-Life Argument very well. It seems to deny us recourse to emphasizing the benefits in life, including qualitatively superior benefits, as reasons to bring someone into existence, since on variabilism only the harms count as reasons for not bringing people into existence, while the benefits do not count as reasons to bring people into existence. This leaves us with only the strategy of disputing Benatar's assessment of our lives, which we may find leaves us without much to say in the face of the serious suffering that many lives contain. And it initially suggests that we should either prefer the Harman and DeGrazia comparative view, or look still further than Roberts' variabilism.

However, we can look at things in the following way on variabilism. If, so long as a life does come into existence, the expected goods in that life outweigh the harms, then that life is worth starting. Variabilism allows us to say, because in a world where someone will come into existence her losses *and benefits* will matter, that the goods in the person's life can outweigh the harms. Then both the expected goods and the bads of the life will both count, so long as the child does indeed come into existence, and so if we take the Millian approach or another approach like it, we can count qualitatively superior pleasures (global desires satisfied, qualitatively superior goods) so long as the person will come into existence. And so

Roberts, although not giving us a reason to bring children into existence for the benefits they will experience when they would otherwise not have existed, does, so long as a child does come into existence, offer us a view where the goods can count as counterbalancing the bads, in a world where the person does exist. Variabilism gets us to the Net Goods View, albeit with the qualification that only when children do in fact come into existence, can we say that the goods counterbalance the bads if they do. We cannot just count in general the goods in life as a reason to bring people into existence, since losses to the nonexistent are of no moral significance.

Where does this leave us with Benatar's argument? We can still appeal to higher quality pleasures (significant satisfied global desires, higher goods) but only in the lives of those who do in fact come into existence, not generally as reasons to suppose that we should bring more children into existence. And on variabilism, if we were to agree with Benatar that the harms are much greater in most lives than most people think, or that such lives are far more likely than most people think, and if we thought that our child could be expected to have one of these lives where harms are much greater than most people might otherwise think, there would then only be reasons not to have the child. I have argued above that we should not prefer Benatar's assessments over more typical assessments of human lives. If the variabilist were to side with Benatar's assessment, then there would be reasons to keep children out of existence. On variabilism, the only appeal left would then be to the goods to parents or third parties. But if Benatar's grim assessment is correct, it will become more difficult for the chance of a life with great harms in it to be outweighed by these third party appeals. I think, therefore, that for the variabilist approach to work in responding to antinatalism we will need to reject, as I have, Benatar's assessment of the quality of our lives.

Why suppose that variabilism is a better approach to the asymmetry other than because it can address Benatar's argument? Variabilism is a directly plausible way to approach the asymmetry. This is because, as Roberts points out, we do tend to intuitively think comparisons are possible between timelines where an individual exists and doesn't exist. It makes sense, she argues, to say that someone who comes into a miserable existence is made worse off. She writes, referring to the view that we can make comparisons as the "Comparability" claim,

> For one thing, it is clear that any arguments against Comparability are of necessity going to be highly speculative and highly technical. Moreover, the claims that Comparability blesses seem perfectly understandable. We seem perfectly able to understand, for example, the claim that it really is worse from the perspective of the miserable child that agents bring that child into existence rather than not – that things would have been better for that child had he or she never existed at all. And similarly we seem perfectly able to understand that it is better from the perspective of the happy child that agents bring that child into existence rather than not – that existence is better for that child than never having existed at all. Under these conditions, a defence of the Asymmetry that does not require Comparability to be false should be of interest to anyone who has an interest in defending the Asymmetry to begin with.[125]

On wide reflective equilibrium, not just case intuitions but intuitions about directly plausible principles count too, and variabilism is a directly plausible approach to these issues. Given its direct plausibility and the way it can handle various problems that arise for the Harman and DeGrazia weak reasons view, variabilism is a plausible alternative way of tackling the asymmetry.

Another worry that may arise is that we still will have trouble with various types of non-identity problems. Take, for instance, what Roberts calls a "can't-expect-better" non-identity problem.[126] Consider Gregory Kavka's "slave-child" case, where parents have

[125] Ibid., 340.
[126] See Melinda Roberts, "The Non-Identity Fallacy: Harm, Probability and Another Look at Parfit's Depletion Example," *Utilitas* 19 (2007): 274.

entered into a binding contract to conceive a child and sell this child into slavery to a wealthy man.[127] The parents could have conceived the child without signing the contract, but then the timing of the conception would be off and a different child would have been conceived. The "slave-child" has slightly more good in her life than bad. And she will actually exist. In such a case, doesn't the good in the child's life, if she actually comes into existence, outweigh the harm, and so make her creation permissible? And isn't that a problematic result of variabilism?

Roberts argues that such a problem is actually an example of a fallacy of probability. As Roberts puts it:

> We can then recognize that the very low chance of a given person's coming into existence being as high as it in fact is - at the critical time just prior to performance - is after all independent, under an expectational account, of the bad act's having been performed, since agents after all have other, better, alternatives for creating at least that great a chance of that person's coming into existence.[128]

Roberts argues that on a proper understanding of probability, even though there is only a very low chance that the slave-child could have come into existence instead in the case where her parents would not sell her into slavery, this is still enough to say that her parents could have not sold her into slavery — there was still some chance, however small, that the gametes of the slave-child would still combine even if the parents had not undertaken the decision to sell the slave-child into slavery. As she puts it, "entering into the contract is not necessary to achieving that very low chance of coming into existence that [the slave-child] has at the critical time."[129] For Roberts describes how the couple might have feigned signing

[127] See Gregory Kavka, "The Paradox of Future Individuals," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 11 (1981): 93–112.
[128] Roberts, "The Non-Identity Fallacy," 310.
[129] Ibid., 308, footnote 52.

the documents in just the way they would have if they actually sold the child into slavery, but instead they merely pretend to do all the steps, and then repair to a hotel, so that they can conceive the child.[130] Sometimes in philosophy it takes pages and pages of strenuous argument based on detailed analysis of probabilities to get to a fairly basic conclusion, one that perhaps anyone might have said in response to the slave-child: "But if they didn't sell the child into slavery, there's still a chance they might have had the child, so they shouldn't sell the child into slavery."

Roberts goes on to clarify that this probability clarification does not help us with "can't-do-better" problems. As she explains:

> That [clarification of "can't-expect-better-cases"], however, has no implications for the can't-do-better problem, which raises the question of whether it is permissible to bring a child into existence whose well-being, though clearly positive, is unavoidably capped at a low level in a case where (for example) the well-being of each existing and future person, including the child, has been maximized. As suggested in section I, it is not clear to me that that procreative choice would be wrong.[131]

Thus there does remain the issue of whether we can say that it is permissible to bring into existence a child who like the slave-child has slightly more goods than harms in her life, but, unlike the slave-child, really cannot do better than to have goods that are only ever "unavoidably capped at a low level". Roberts is not convinced that it would be wrong to bring such a child into existence. I agree that on variabilism and the Net Goods View it is not wrong to bring such a child into existence. In the following chapter, I will argue that the Net Goods View must be supplemented with a further condition for permissible procreation, namely, the parent-child relationship requirement. But this will not necessarily mean that "can't-do-

[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid., 310.

better" cases become morally impermissible instances of procreation, because we might imagine that parents could bring into existence a "can't-do-better" child (perhaps having a congenital condition) and also provide that child with the kind of parent-child relationship that gives their child a character education and resources for resilience that help the child adjust to the condition. If it does seem to be a case where we can literally do no better for the child, and if it is possible that character education can be provided for the child to possibly find meaning in her suffering (as opposed to wrongful life cases, where this is not possible, as I propose in Chapter 3) perhaps this is not a morally impermissible instance of procreation. I will have much more to say about the resources for resilience view in the following chapter. For now, it suffices to say that variabilism helps us to avoid the miserable child, the repugnant conclusion, and replaceability cases, while still being able to deal with Benatar's Quality-of-Life-Argument (so long as one denies Benatar's assessment) and with "can't-expect-better" non-identity problems, via Roberts' probability clarification. It thus offers another plausible path, in addition the Harman-DeGrazia approach, for rejecting antinatalism.

Jeff McMahan on Noncomparative Benefit and Impersonal Reasons

Jeff McMahan explores a number of different approaches to the asymmetry. He does not himself necessarily commit to a particular view of how to approach the asymmetry, but he does consider a number of alternative views and weigh up their merits. The aspects of his discussion that I explore here are the notions of individual-affecting noncomparative value and impersonal value. I consider how a "hybrid" approach McMahan explores can fare

compared to the other accounts (Benatar, Harman-DeGrazia, variabilism) that I have examined so far. The hybrid approach features both individual-affecting noncomparative value in the role of cancelling out harms and impersonal reasons giving reasons for people to exist. I call this view the noncomparative/impersonal view for the sake of brevity and to avoid attributing it to McMahan. Due to shortcomings with the noncomparative/impersonal view that McMahan himself identifies, I ultimately favor either the DeGrazia-Harman weak reasons view or variabilism as stronger. However, McMahan's discussion raises some further criticisms of Benatar, and it is an interesting option that should be considered alongside these other accounts.

In his paper "Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist", McMahan begins by laying out some important definitions: individual-affecting value, noncomparative individual-affecting value, and impersonal value.[132] Individual-affecting value, whether negative or positive, refers to when something is worse for a particular individual. Individual-affecting value is comparative. As McMahan explains, where individual-affecting value is concerned, "if having a certain good is better for an individual, its absence would have been worse for that individual."[133] There is also, McMahan maintains, a way in which someone can be noncomparatively benefitted or harmed. This is noncomparative individual-affecting value:

> There are, however, some things that are good or bad for an individual in an essentially noncomparative way. For example, to be caused to exist with a life worth living seems to be good for the individual to whom it happens. There is no problem in identifying the subject of this good. Yet the alternative in which that individual would not have had that good—that is, the alternative in which she never exists— would not have been bad or worse for her, since nothing can be good or bad for someone who never exists. Similarly, to be caused to exist with

[132] Jeff McMahan, "Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist," in *Harming Future Persons: Ethics, Genetics and the Nonidentity Problem* ed. Melinda Roberts and David Wasserman (Springer, 2009), 50.
[133] Ibid.

> a life that is not worth living is bad for the individual who comes to exist but not worse for her.[134]

McMahan further explores the notion of noncomparative value in "Causing People to Exist and Saving People's Lives" where he argues that one can justify saying a person may benefit from coming into existence by appealing to noncomparative benefits.[135] And by taking a noncomparative view with respect to harms and benefits of coming into existence, the noncomparative/impersonal view would reject outright Benatar's claim that we can make sense of an individual being comparatively better off for not existing. As McMahan states above, on this view something cannot be comparatively good or bad for someone who never exists.

This means that in bringing someone into existence we couldn't say that we have made this person better or worse off, since things can go neither well nor poorly for someone who doesn't exist.[136] Yet, at the same time, McMahan thinks we can still make sense of it being good for a person to exist, even if we can't make sense of it being *better* that the person exist. We can even talk about a person who comes into existence being benefitted or harmed by this, McMahan thinks, because we can "claim that to cause a person to exist is *good* for that person when the intrinsically good elements of the person's life more than compensate for the intrinsically bad elements."[137] That is, we look at the good and bad in a life to see whether a person has been benefitted or harmed by existing, even as she hasn't been made comparatively better or worse off.

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[134] Ibid.
[135] Jeff McMahan, "Causing People to Exist and Saving People's Lives," *The Journal of Ethics* 17, Special Issue: The Benefits and Harms of Existence and Non-Existence (June 2013): 5-35.
[136] Ibid., 6.
[137] Ibid.

In considering individual-affecting noncomparative benefits and harms, we don't try to compare a person's existence with her non-existence. And so, with this view, we could argue that there is no point of comparison from which Benatar can say that people are better off not existing, since things can go neither well nor poorly for nonexistent people. At the same time, McMahan's view offers us a way to consider some lives, like those of miserable children where there is greater bad than good, to be an example of having been harmed by coming into existence (though not made worse off). If we just consider the lives of miserable children we can see that the good in them is far outweighed by the bad — it is not the sort of life that we would think someone should experience. It is not worse for them, but it is bad for them, since we are speaking of individual-affecting noncomparative value.

The other half of the noncomparative/impersonal view features impersonal value. As McMahan explains, "value is impersonal when it is neither good or bad nor better or worse *for* anyone."[138] Impersonal value is comparative, but not individual-affecting. On such a view, for anyone in the world who is suffering, this is bad with respect to individual-affecting value, but *also* bad impersonally. The presence of suffering in the world is bad, even independently of whether it is bad for anyone. Other impersonal values, like species diversity, could be good without being good for anyone.[139]

Taking a noncomparative view of the harm or benefit of coming into existence on an individual-affecting view, McMahan maintains that individual-affecting reasons are not at issue in coming into existence since if one had not existed we could not even make sense of one being worse off. There is no individual-affecting reason to bring someone into existence

[138] McMahan, "Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist," 50.
[139] Ibid.

or keep someone out of existence (nonexistent people can't be harmed or benefitted) even as there are noncomparative benefits that can cancel out harms experienced by existing people. Rather at issue in the reason-giving role, as offering reasons for bringing people into existence or keeping people out of existence, are only impersonal reasons:

> No one, of course, doubts that individual-affecting reasons can be relevant insofar as causing a person to exist can affect the well-being of others. But are there individual-affecting reasons deriving from a concern for the well-being of the person who might be caused to exist? Suppose that because one has a certain genetic abnormality, any child one might have would be miserable—that is, would have a life in which the bads would outweigh the goods. Most of us agree that there is a strong moral reason not to cause such an individual to exist. Some philosophers think this is an individual-affecting reason, one that does not derive from the effects the act would have on preexisting people. But this is a mistake. It is true, of course, that if one does cause such an individual to exist, there will then be someone for whom one's act was bad, though not worse. Yet at the time of one's choosing between acting and not acting, there is no one whose interests would be affected by one's choice. If one were to act on the reason not to cause an individual to exist, there would never be anyone for whom that would be better.[140]

Thus, on the noncomparative/impersonal view, there is not an individual-affecting reason to cause people to exist but an impersonal reason. When we factor in impersonal reasons, we actually do get reasons to cause people to exist of an impersonal kind. So, there is a way to say that people are benefitted noncomparatively by existing, not in that they have been made better off but that they have good lives if the intrinsically good elements outweigh the intrinsically bad elements. These cancelling strength reasons cannot be our reason for causing someone to exist since that person does not exist at the time of the choice.[141] So, McMahan argues, if we are thinking of reasons to cause people to exist, they can only be impersonal. On the noncomparative/impersonal view, there is a way to say that we ought to bring more people into existence, but it must be based on impersonal value.

[140] Ibid., 52.
[141] Ibid.

McMahan emphasizes a distinction between only cancelling out harms and providing reasons to cause people to exist to help explain the different roles played by individual-affecting noncomparative value and impersonal value.[142] Benefits and harms can play either a reason-giving role, in that they are a reason to bring someone into existence or keep someone out of existence. Or they can instead play a cancelling role, cancelling out bads in a life so that it can be said that the life is overall good for that person noncomparatively. On the noncomparative/impersonal view I have been exploring, individual-affecting noncomparative benefits have cancelling strength, they cancel out harms in a life to make it good but not better for the individual. And impersonal goods have reason-giving strength, they give a reason to bring people into existence.

In the course of his discussion, McMahan specifically confronts Benatar's view as expressed in the Asymmetry Argument and points out that it seems to imply a deeply implausible result. Consider two lives. The first life is the life of someone who lives only until the age of two and is in terrible pain. The second life is that of someone who lives to the age of eighty and has many more goods in their life than harms but still slightly more harm in life than the life of terrible pain lasting two years.[143] For Benatar, both lives were not worth starting because they contain some harm, harm that is comparatively bad, since the individual's existence is comparatively worse than the individual's nonexistence. But this is counterintuitive. Surely the long and healthy life, even as it contains slightly more harms than the life of two years, is better. McMahan thinks it makes no sense to talk about people being made worse off by existence, but once there are existing lives we can see that some

[142] Ibid., 53.
[143] McMahan, "Causing People to Exist and Saving People's Lives," 22-23.

were worth starting and some were not because of their overall balance of noncomparative goods and harms. And that lives can contain a greater balance of goods than harms (cancelling strength) can be said to be a noncomparative benefit to those who live them (but not making them better off). And the good in these lives generates an impersonal reason (reason-giving strength), as opposed to an individual-affecting reason, to bring lives into existence.

The noncomparative/impersonal view can allow us not just to block the Asymmetry Argument by being noncomparative at the individual-affecting level, but also allows us to be able to respond to the Quality-of-Life argument by emphasizing the noncomparative benefits in life as counting against the harms (cancelling strength only) and impersonal benefits as reasons to bring people into existence (reason-giving strength). On the noncomparative/impersonal view, the individual-affecting goods in a life count not as a reason to bring that person into existence compared to her nonexistence, but on reflection we can point to the goods as a way to make sense of how the individual's life was worth starting or not for its noncomparative benefits. And then there is also an impersonal benefit that counts in favor of bringing people into existence for the impersonal good that will result.

Consider again the miserable child. The noncomparative/impersonal view is not able to compare the miserable child's nonexistence with the miserable child's existence, since it is a noncomparative view at the individual-affecting level, and so does not give us a way to say that the miserable child should not be brought into existence because the child will be made worse off. However, we can say that the miserable child is a case where a life that came into existence would be one we should think was not worth starting because it contains more harms than goods and not because of a comparison with nonexistence. However, a problem

here is that individual-affecting reasons in having a child may outweigh noncomparative benefits to think a life is worth starting. Simply introducing noncomparative benefits does not help to say that it is wrong to bring the miserable child into existence, since noncomparative reasons can be held weaker than personal reasons.

Perhaps even more significantly for the noncomparative/impersonal view, as McMahan recognizes, by introducing impersonal benefits it faces an impersonal version of the repugnant conclusion, since if we can say that lives are worth starting for the impersonal good in them it seems like we are then obligated to bring about more of those lives rather than benefit existing people. He identifies a number of related shortcomings of the view:

> (1) The reason to cause happy people to exist can in certain cases be stronger than the reason to benefit existing people by giving them lesser goods. (2) The reason to cause happy people to exist can in certain cases be stronger than the reason to benefit existing people by enabling them to retain or to have goods they would otherwise lose or fail to obtain. (3) There is a moral presumption against the permissibility of abortion on the ground that it prevents the existence of a happy person. (4) There is some number of happy people such that one's moral reason to cause them to exist would be stronger than and, in a case of conflict, outweigh one's reason to save the life of an existing person. These claims, while perhaps not impossible to accept, are nevertheless very difficult to believe.[144]

Although an interesting hybrid of noncomparative and impersonal approaches, the noncomparative/impersonal view has a number of implausible implications. Even so, it may be more plausible than the counterintuitive claims of antinatalism. Whether it is or not, I have demonstrated that there are many options in responding to Benatar. As alternatives to Benatar's view we can appeal to the Harman and DeGrazia comparative weak reasons view, or to Roberts' variabilism, or to the noncomparative/impersonal view drawn from McMahan's work. Any of these views can counter Benatar's antinatalism, and so one need

[144] McMahan, "Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist," 67.

not necessarily decide which one is necessarily the more plausible or defensible than Benatar's view. So long as at least one of them is more plausible or defensible, antinatalism is defeated. As for myself, even as I think the Harman-DeGrazia weak reasons view is also promising, I think we should come down on side of variabilism. But readers may disagree and appeal to one of the other views, or still some other view not discussed here, to reject antinatalism.

I think variabilism makes the most sense because it has the strengths but not the weaknesses of the other views. It does not have the weakness of failing to deal with the miserable child, while having the strength of being able to answer Benatar by emphasizing the goods experienced by those who do come into existence, as well as avoid the repugnant conclusion and replaceability by rejecting reasons for bringing those into existence who would not otherwise exist. At this stage, not yet considering third parties or other conditions, on a variabilist response to Benatar, so long as the child actually does come to exist, and the expected goods in the child's life outweigh the expected harms, it is permissible for parents to procreate.

Despite differing in whether we should take a comparative or noncomparative individual-affecting view, and on when we can count losses and benefits, all three views end up with the Net Goods standard. All the views say that a life is permissible to start if the goods in the life outweigh the harms. That Harman and DeGrazia talk in a comparative way, emphasizing how the goods in life are reasons to bring someone into existence, that Roberts talks in the variabilist comparative way where so long as someone will exist anyway their losses and benefits matter, and that the noncomparative/impersonal view holds that there are no individual-affecting comparative reasons one way or another when it comes to

nonexistent people but there are impersonal reasons, doesn't matter when it comes to seeing that all of these approaches hold that a life is permissible to start if the goods in that life outweigh the harms. On Harman and DeGrazia's comparative view, Robert's variabilism, or the noncomparative/impersonal view drawn from McMahan, then, we can reject Benatar's antinatalism.

Hybridizing Personal Variabilism and Impersonal Weak Reasons

The foregoing discussion of McMahan's work and the previous discussion of variabilism and the Harman-DeGrazia view suggests another option which I will briefly explore. This is the option of combining the weak reasons view with the variabilist view. However, weak reasons and variabilism will each apply only to a certain domain. Taking inspiration from McMahan and the noncomparative/impersonal hybrid view, a different hybrid view that combined variabilism and the weak reasons approaches would hold that there are weak impersonal reasons (as the Harman-DeGrazia view suggests, but impersonal) while treating personal reasons in the way that variabilism suggests. That is, in general there are weak reasons to bring people into existence for the goods this will promote independent of how any individuals are directly affected by these goods (not strong enough to generate the repugnant conclusion), but when it comes to specific potential persons there is no individual-affecting reason to bring a person into existence but rather costs and benefits only count for specific persons who will come into existence. The advantage of such a view is that it can help counter the difficulties variabilism faces against the Quality-of-Life argument. For on variabilism, there are no reasons to bring people into existence, but if there is a great risk

of having a child whose life is full of suffering as Benatar describes in his Russian roulette argument, then this argument would count against having children. (Unless third party interests could justify bringing them into existence.) However, if there are weak impersonal reasons, then these are reasons to bring people into existence generally for the good this will result in independent of how it affects individuals, and these can counteract the reasons Benatar raises against bringing people into existence from the Quality-of-Life argument. This hybrid personal variabilism/impersonal weak reasons view can avoid Benatar's criticism of the weak reasons approach by not obligating us to bring specific individuals into existence and avoiding only having weak reasons not to have the miserable child as is variabilism's strength. At the same time, it can overcome the Quality-of-Life argument by pointing to impersonal reasons to bring beings into existence that can count against risks to particular individuals of having lives full of suffering.

Such a view may appear unprincipled and *ad hoc*. But not so if we consider the personal/impersonal distinction. Impersonal reasons are weak, they are of a different strength than individual-affecting reasons, and individual-affecting reasons are handled as variabilism handles them. Of course, for those who find this hybrid view less plausible than either the DeGrazia-Harman view or variabilism or the noncomparative/impersonal hybrid view, they should feel free to go with these other views against antinatalism. But I would urge that mere complexity should not scare us away from considering this hybrid option of weak impersonal reasons and individual-affecting variabilism alongside these simpler approaches as a *fourth* plausible way of rejecting antinatalism.

Conclusion

I have argued that there are four ways that we can reject Benatar's claim that having children is always wrong as stated in his original argument. We can reject the Asymmetry Argument, either by recognizing that only existing persons can be considered (Noncomparative/Impersonal Hybrid View from McMahan), or by saying that, speaking hypothetically, absent pleasure is bad for someone for whom it would be absent (Harman and DeGrazia's weak reasons comparative view), or by saying that, so long as the child will exist, both the losses and harms of the child count (variabilism) but they do not count so long as the child will not exist. There is also the hybrid personal variabilism and impersonal weak reasons view just considered. These possible moves, joined together with an understanding of just how counterintuitive a conclusion Benatar's is, how difficult it is to convincingly debunk our existing intuitions with his Pollyannaism-based evolutionary debunking argument as selectively as he would like, a Millian or ranked preference or higher quality goods understanding of different qualities of pleasures or desires or goods, and how difficult it is to arrive at an objective evaluation *sub specie aeternitatis*, make his case much less difficult to reject. We may at times be understandably overwhelmed emotionally at the terrible suffering in the world, and we may well be justified in making so personal a decision as whether to have children on that emotional basis, but Benatar's philosophical case presented in his book for the antinatalist conclusion fails to withstand critical scrutiny. We can reject Benatar's arguments for a moral restriction on all procreation and are left with the view that a life is worth starting so long as it is expected to contain more goods than harms (even as the different specific views handle this differently), the Net Goods View.

Still to be considered is Benatar's use of Seana Shiffrin's noncomparative view to argue for the antinatalist conclusion, more strongly developed in his later article, which will be considered next in Chapter 3. If Benatar can use Shiffrin's view to make his argument, then antinatalism can return, despite its defeat in this chapter based on his original arguments. And, in the discussion of Shiffrin's view in the next chapter, we must still consider whether this standard of Net Goods is still too permissive. Depending on our consideration of different cases, the Net Goods standard as arrived at via the different accounts of this chapter, while allowing us to reject antinatalism, still threatens to allow instances of procreation that we would think should not be thought to be morally permissible. I now turn to consider these matters, and so just how far beyond the Net Goods View we might need to go, in Chapter 3 with a look at Benatar's use of Seana Shiffrin's noncomparative account of harm to argue for antinatalism.

Chapter 3 – Benatar's Appeal to Shiffrin's Noncomparative Approach

Introduction

In the last chapter I argued against Benatar's Asymmetry argument and Quality-of-Life argument. However, in *Better Never to Have Been* and in "Still Better Never to Have Been: A Response to (More of) My Critics", Benatar also appeals to a different way to motivate antinatalism that comes from the work of Seana Shiffrin on wrongful life cases.[145] This Shiffrin-style motivation for antinatalism is also explored by DeGrazia in his book *Creation Ethics*.[146] In this chapter, I respond to this alternative way of motivating antinatalism based on Shiffrin's view. Unlike the views of DeGrazia and Harman and the variabilist view explored in the last chapter, and differing from the noncomparative/impersonal view, Shiffrin's account relies upon a noncomparative account of harm which holds that a person can be harmed without making that person worse off. There are a number of other accounts in the literature on the non-identity problem which hold in different ways that people can be harmed without being made worse off or can be wronged without being harmed. Although I only consider Shiffrin's noncomparative account of harm in detail here, where someone can be harmed by being brought into existence without having been made worse off, her account being among the most well developed and rigorous, the way I respond to it could likely be

[145] Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, 49 and "Still Better Never to Have Been," 131. Seana Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and The Significance of Harm," *Legal Theory* 5 (1999): 117-148.
[146] David DeGrazia, *Creation Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 150-159.

used to respond to other noncomparative approaches if employed to argue for antinatalism.[147]

Shiffrin argues that we are not permitted to inflict lesser harms on a person for the sake of benefitting her without her consent. But, as Shiffrin recognizes in her original article, this is our situation in the case of procreation.[148] Shiffrin has in mind specifically "wrongful life" cases, cases where it is argued that a person's existence is so flawed that it was wrong to bring that person into existence. However, Benatar extends this conclusion to include all lives based on how serious he believes the harms are in all lives.

Benatar argues that, based on his Quality-of-Life argument, he has demonstrated that there are serious harms to anyone brought into existence. The conclusion of the Quality-of-Life argument was rejected in the last chapter. Even so, the most interesting idea charitably formulated from that argument is the view that in every life there is a serious risk of terrible tragedy. If this version of Benatar's Quality-of-Life conclusion is granted to be the case for

[147] Others like Bonnie Steinbock or Frances Kamm emphasize that a child has been unfairly treated or wronged without having been made worse off when the child's life does not meet a "decent minimum" (Steinbock) or faces severe hardships (Kamm). There are also wronging without harming approaches to harm that might be used to argue for antinatalism. One such approach has it that beings have a right not to be brought into a flawed existence, as developed by David Velleman. For a discussion of these views, see Melinda Roberts, "The Nonidentity Problem." Applying these views to antinatalism, one could run an antinatalist argument that most lives are likely to involve a flawed existence (Velleman), not meet a "decent minimum" (Steinbock), or face severe hardships (Kamm), and therefore we should not risk procreating. Of course, none of these theorists are antinatalists, but Benatar could run his antinatalist argument on any of these kinds of accounts. In addition to disputing the argument directly, and so arguing that the risk of such lives is much lower than Benatar suggests as I did in the last chapter, in this chapter I develop a response to Shiffrin that could be used to challenge these other views if used for antinatalist arguments. It is an appeal to character education as part of a parent-child relationship to help children find meaning in their lives that can help them endure suffering and prevent their lives from being marred by tragedy (or, assuming the antinatalist contention that there is a high risk of having a flawed existence, prevent marring from conditions that would indicate a "flawed existence", failure to meet a decent minimum, or severe hardships). On the view I develop, the sorts of lives that are cases of wrongful life (as opposed to typically permissible procreation) are those lives where parents cannot provide the kind of relationship that helps children to endure suffering, such as conditions which mean a child will not live long enough to attain sufficient maturity to be a beneficiary of character education.

[148] Seana Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and The Significance of Harm."

the sake of argument, then Benatar can use Shiffrin's view of wrongful life to make his case for antinatalism. For then not just a few cases but every life would be an instance of a life brought into existence without obtaining consent and as the infliction of lesser harms for the conferral of greater benefits. As Benatar writes:

> The problem, Professor Shiffrin argues, is that… we are not permitted in the absence of a person's consent, to inflict harms on him in order to bestow a benefit. In creating people we certainly cannot obtain their consent. According to my quality-of-life argument… the harms of existence are serious ones. This makes their infliction on non-consenting beings for their purported benefit even more problematic than it otherwise would be.[149]

If Shiffrin is right that inflicting lesser harms without consent in order to bestow greater benefits is morally problematic, and if Benatar is right that all lives contain the level of harms Shiffrin focuses on in wrongful life cases, then it is morally problematic to bring any life into existence and we should accept antinatalism.[150] In order to deal with this challenge to procreation, in this chapter I critique Shiffrin's view and offer my own account of the obligations of procreation and parenthood drawing on her own discussion of the parent-child relationship requirement. I develop two different ways to answer this Benatar-Shiffrin antinatalist challenge; (i) by providing reasons to reject Shiffrin's account and (ii) providing reasons to reject Benatar's conclusion that it necessarily leads to antinatalism. If either (or both) of these two ways of responding succeed, then the challenge is defeated.

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[149] Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been," 132.

[150] Note that Shiffrin explicitly rejects a position like Benatar's and is arguing only for the claim that procreation in certain cases is morally problematic and so the imposer of procreation can be held responsible for harm: "I am not advancing the claim that procreation is all-things-considered wrong. It is consistent with these arguments to regard nonconsensual, burden-imposing actions as morally problematic but not always impermissible, or to regard procreation as a special case. All I mean to advance is the claim that because procreation involves a nonconsensual imposition of significant burdens, it is morally problematic and its imposer may justifiably be held responsible for its harmful results." See "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and The Significance of Harm," 139.

In tackling Shiffrin's view, I will first raise objections to her view in the following section on considerations internal to her account. Then, I will consider whether, even if we accept her view for the sake of argument, it is in any way superior to the approaches examined in the last chapter when applied to cases. I compare how her view handles two paradigmatic cases alongside the views of Harman-DeGrazia, variabilism, and the hybrid view of Chapter 2. Finally, I will argue that even if we were to accept Shiffrin's account of noncomparative harm and Benatar's assessment of the risk of suffering in life we should still not be antinatalists because there are resources that parents can offer their children through character education that can help them to face the suffering in life. I build on DeGrazia's discussion of the link between Shiffrin's view and antinatalism and offer my own alternative to his response to distinguishing "typical" permissible cases of procreation and wrongful life cases, what I call the resources for resilience view focused on character education.

Challenging Shiffrin's View: Internal Considerations

In her article "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm", Seana Shiffrin is concerned with cases of wrongful life. As she explains,

> A wrongful life suit is an unusual civil suit brought by a child (typically a congenitally disabled child) who seeks damages for burdens he suffers that result from his creation. Typically the child charges that he has been born into an unwanted or miserable life.[151]

These cases are commonly challenged on the grounds that if someone enjoys their life it is difficult to see how that person has been wronged by coming into existence and why she should be awarded damages, particularly since in the case of a genetic condition there is no

[151] Seana Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and The Significance of Harm," 117.

way the person could have existed without the genetic condition. As well, procreators are typically only held liable when procreation is the result of "negligence, recklessness, or maliciousness toward the risks of creating a significantly burdened child."[152] Voluntary procreative activity, Shiffrin notes, is widely considered to be a morally innocent act. In opposition to these points, Shiffrin aims to develop an approach that "would permit liability assessments for significant burdens associated with being created—even in cases in which the life is worth living and in which those responsible for creating did not have, nor should they have had, special knowledge that the child's life would feature unusual or substantial burdens."[153]

Shiffrin ultimately argues that procreation generally is morally problematic because it involves inflicting the harms of life on someone for the sake of life's greater benefits without consent. She proceeds as follows. She first examines different accounts of rescue cases and the understanding that it is permissible to inflict lesser harms for the sake of greater benefits without consent. She introduces the notion of a "pure benefit" which she defines as "those benefits that are just goods and which are not also removals or preventions of harm."[154] Then she argues that it is morally problematic to inflict lesser harms to bestow greater pure benefits without consent by appealing to a thought experiment with a character named Wealthy (discussed below). Shiffrin then argues against appeals to hypothetical consent, which might be thought to be at work in rescue cases. Shiffrin accepts that, in a life worth starting, there will have to be an expectation of greater benefits than harms. But she steps beyond this standard of the Net Goods View in thinking that there is still something

[152] Ibid., 118.
[153] Ibid., 119.
[154] Ibid., 124.

problematic going on in cases of procreation generally. She is concerned that, even if there are greater pure benefits in the life that is started, it is still morally problematic that the person in question was exposed to the lesser harms of life for the sake of these greater pure benefits without her consent. Shiffrin then argues that *all* parents owe their children reparations in the form of a parent-child relationship for having brought them into existence and inflicted lesser harms on them for the sake of pure benefits. She concludes by emphasizing that practically her view will not make a significant difference to standard cases of procreation, so long as parents are providing the supportive parent-child relationship they are commonly thought to need to provide, since then they are satisfying their obligations of reparation to the child they brought into existence.[155] She appeals to practical limitations to argue that courts can choose to hear only those cases as possible wrongful life cases where there are lives that endure disproportionately great burdens like chronic pain, significant disabilities, and life-threatening illnesses. Thus although she argues that all instances of procreation are morally problematic and all children are owed reparations in the form of the parent-child relationship, there will still be only a much narrower range of cases that courts can actually treat as cases of wrongful life.

In developing her position, Shiffrin begins by disputing the idea that in a rescue case where a person's limb is broken to save her life, no harm is done.[156] On the contrary she

[155] However, we might worry that once one is aware of Shiffrin's argument it would be strange to think it permissible to knowingly engage in procreation, an avoidable wrong act on her view, with a plan to make up for it through reparations. It is one thing to realize one has done a wrong act without knowing it and then think that one must make up for it. But perhaps many of us would not typically think that it is permissible to knowingly do an avoidable wrong act while planning to make reparations for it. Indeed, that seems to be part of what is strange about the case of Unlucky discussed below. For a discussion of these issues, see Mark Migotti, "Paying a price, facing a fine, counting the cost: The differences that make the difference," *Ratio Juris* 28 (2015): 372-391. My thanks to Scott Woodcock for this point.

[156] She attributes this idea to a possible interpretation of Joel Feinberg's work that she believes he himself probably does not hold.

argues that this is an instance of harm, defending a noncomparative view of harm that holds that something "can be harm even if, in some overall sense, the event makes the person better off."[157] In her view, something constitutes harm when it "involves the imposition of a state or condition that directly or indirectly obstructs, prevents, frustrates, or undoes an agent's cognizant interaction with her circumstances and her efforts to fashion a life within them that is distinctively and authentically hers—as more than merely that which must be watched, marked, endured or undergone."[158] Specifically, in rescue cases:

> The rescue benefits the saved person but delivers a harm to him as well. But, it is a distinct question what moral significance this harm has and whether there should be compensation for it. It seems right that the rescued person should not be compensated for this necessary, lesser injury [because] …In these circumstances, the harms these injuries represent do not have the same moral significance that other impositions of harm have.[159]

This is because in these cases appeal to the important notion of hypothetical consent seems reasonable "when a person is unavailable for consent, it can be justified both to inflict a lesser harm upon her to avert a greater harm, and to refrain from providing compensation or apologies for one's act."[160] But as Shiffrin sees it, wrongful life cases present a significant disanalogy to rescue cases that undermines the plausibility of appeals to hypothetical consent.

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[157] Seana Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and The Significance of Harm," 125.
[158] Ibid., 123-124. Note that Shiffrin does not believe that it is impossible to harm entities that lack cognizant interaction and the ability to fashion a life. She writes of the case of animals that "cats and dogs, appear to suffer pain and to have at least rudimentary beliefs, intentions, and desires. In some sense, they have wills that conflict with pain and broken limbs; having a will in the sense required by this account does not require being a full-blown, morally responsible agent with the capacity to form a life plan. But, because they have fewer capacities, animals may not be subject to certain harms (e.g., the frustration of long-term projects). Possibly, their harms are less morally significant than the harms suffered by beings with more sophisticated wills." See "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and The Significance of Harm," footnote 20.
[159] Ibid., 126.
[160] Ibid.

Shiffrin's argument for the disanalogy relies upon her notion of a "pure benefit". Her position is that talk of pure benefits refers to "those benefits that are just goods and which are not also removals from or preventions of harm."[161] Her position is that "there is a substantial asymmetry between the moral significance of harm delivered to avoid substantial, greater harms and harms delivered to bestow pure benefits."[162] She thinks that although it is permissible to inflict harm without consent in order to avoid greater harm, it is not permissible to inflict lesser harm to bestow pure benefits without consent, that is, benefits that do not remove or prevent harm. As Shiffrin explains:

> …it seems wrong to perform a procedure on an unconscious patient that will cause her harm but also redound to her greater, pure benefit. At the very least, it is much harder to justify. For example, it seems wrong to break an unconscious patient's arm even if necessary to endow her with valuable, physical benefits, such as supernormal memory, a useful store of encyclopedic knowledge, twenty IQ points worth of extra intellectual ability, or the ability to consume immoderate amounts of alcohol or fat without side effects. At the least, it would be much harder to justify than inflicting similar harm to avert a greater harm, such as death or significant disability.[163]

To further illustrate this point she offers a thought experiment. Suppose a character named Wealthy lives on an island. Wealthy decides to give some of his wealth to neighbors on a nearby island. These neighbors are well off, but they would experience pure benefits from receiving monetary wealth. Wealthy cannot go to the neighboring island due to historical tensions between the two islands and neither Wealthy nor anyone else he might enlist to help him can communicate with the island neighbors. Still, he wants to give to the other island, and so he crafts a hundred gold cubes worth $5 million each (and there is no alternative of paper currency). Taking his plane, he travels over the island and drops cubes

[161] Ibid., 124.
[162] Ibid., 126.
[163] Ibid., 127.

near people while trying to avoid hitting them, even as he knows there is a risk of doing so. Everyone is surprised and most people are delighted, but one person, Unlucky, is hit by a falling cube and his arm is broken. At the same time, if the cube had not hit him, it would have landed by someone else.[164]

Unlucky is injured but receives greater benefits from now having the gold. Despite the benefits of the gold being greater than the injury he sustains, Shiffrin argues we would find this case morally disturbing. For we usually only think it is acceptable to force someone to endure harms if we are doing so to avoid having even greater harms befall them. In rescue cases is intuitively acceptable to amputate an unconscious person's leg without her consent if this is what is necessary to remove her from some wreckage in which she is trapped in order to save her life. On Shiffrin's view, although the amputation harms the person who is being rescued, this is permissible, because a lesser harm is inflicted for the sake of avoiding greater harms.[165] Shiffrin contends that "Despite Unlucky's concession that he has been overall benefited, Unlucky's case is morally disturbing in a way the rescue case is not."[166] Given that procreation is an instance of exposing someone to harms to confer greater benefits like the Unlucky case, Shiffrin argues that parents are responsible for harms in a similar way in cases of procreation. She writes,

> Creating a person imposes significant burdens and harms on that child without the child's consent and without meeting the specifications of the relevant exceptions; most notably, such imposition is not necessary to avert the child from suffering a greater harm.[167]

[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid., 125.
[166] Ibid., 128.
[167] Ibid., 137.

Next, Shiffrin addresses hypothetical consent. In duty to rescue cases, she appeals to the fact that lesser harm is inflicted for the sake of avoiding greater harms. But in such cases a different view would hold that inflicting harms is permissible because these harms would be hypothetically consented to by the rescued person who suffers the harms. On a hypothetical consent approach, it is permissible to amputate the leg of the unconscious person to save that person's life because if that person were conscious and competent the person would agree that this is what ought to be done. Appeals to hypothetical consent are not appeals to actual consent. In the rescue case the actual consent of the unconscious person cannot be obtained. Instead, what is appealed to is what the person would consent to if able to do so and competent.

Shiffrin rejects appeals to hypothetical consent, in the specific rescue case, the case of Wealthy and Unlucky, and generally. She argues that even if it can be supposed that it is particularly likely that in rescue cases and in the case of Unlucky the victim of the harm would consent, it is not rationally required that the victim consent.[168] When it comes to general appeals to hypothetical consent, she objects that often a specific individual's reactions will be highly personal. Even as many people report being glad to have been born, some claim to regret being born. It is not likely, she argues, that in all cases of those who regret being born their reactions are unreasonable or irrational. Being glad of one's existence is complicated by the fact that the only escape is generally suicide. And, even if there is a high probability of hypothetical consent and consent after the fact, Shiffrin argues that this would

[168] Ibid., 132.

not remove the liability born by the imposer of harm if the beneficiaries really do experience serious burdens and complain about them.[169]

Thus Shiffrin believes that all cases of procreation are cases where parents are liable for imposing significant harms on a child without the child's consent and without avoiding greater harm. And this Shiffrin believes means that those who procreate "could reasonably bear some legal duties to compensate" their child.[170] Because parents already typically have relationships with their children that offer support both emotional and financial Shiffrin's conclusions would not necessarily lead to a drastic alteration in present day practices. Rather, her view offers a way to justify the requirement of the parent-child relationship.

The parent-child relationship, according to Shiffrin, "help[s] children cope with their burdens and permit children to confront, hold responsible, show gratitude toward, and receive comfort and instruction from those who have given them this burden-riddled mixed benefit."[171] Parent-child relationships that exhibit these characteristics allow parents to make up for having brought their child into existence without consent. Shiffrin contends that her view has the advantage of explaining why it is that we think that parents owe support to their children. As Shiffrin explains,

> If… we acknowledge that initiating parents have caused harm to their children or even violated their children's rights through creation, it becomes easier to explain the fairness of levying duties of support upon parents beyond the assumed enormous benefit that procreation bestowed and beyond the minima necessary to make life worth living.[172]

I think that Shiffrin has plausibly articulated that something more than the Net Goods View is needed, and that she comes close to offering what will be an important part of a

[169] Ibid., 133.
[170] Ibid., 140.
[171] Ibid., 140.
[172] Ibid.

plausible view in defending a requirement that a supportive parent-child relationship is needed to supplement the Net Goods View. I will defend the conclusion that there is a duty for parents to provide a supportive parent-child relationship like the one she described in the following sections. But I would suggest that the discussion of consent and the conferral of pure benefits that Shiffrin pursues is not the best way to theoretically motivate this additional condition of morally permissible procreation.

Many will likely be puzzled that parents should be considered to be doing something morally problematic in failing to obtain the consent of their children for the conferral of the pure benefit of life—it seems that a necessary condition of coming into existence, as far as we know and in a world such as ours, is that one does not exist prior to this to give consent. Can we really hold parents responsible for this seemingly unalterable setup, however curious it may be?

In response to Shiffrin's claim that it is impermissible to impose harms to confer pure benefits, it does seem odd to suppose that it is permissible to risk dropping a gold brick on Unlucky even as he will receive greater benefits from the gold. But perhaps the Wealthy case seems so strange because Unlucky is wandering along, minding his own business, and then is hit with a gold brick by some unconventional well-doer who is a complete stranger to him. If it is a condition of existence that we are exposed by our own parents to the harms of existence in order to get the goods of existence, then is it really impermissible?

Consider a case of pure benefit. Suppose that there is a wealthy older relative of a child who has attached strings to the child's inheritance. In order to receive her inheritance, the child must learn at least two foreign languages. Forcing a child to learn two foreign

languages does not remedy any existing harms or prevent future harms and so is a case of a pure benefit. Would forcing a child to do this be permissible?

Because Shiffrin identifies averting death or significant disability as grounds for acting to inflict harms without consent, and views other acts as much more difficult to justify, on her view the wealthy relative should not force the child to learn two foreign languages against her will in order to receive her inheritance. At first our intuitive reactions to this case might seem in line with what Shiffrin suggests. Should a wealthy relative really insist on this? Isn't this too demanding on the child? However, consider the benefit to the child when she is older, as well as the fact that language learning generally comes more easily to younger children than adults. And then consider that many parents do exactly this with their children, especially in multilingual households. Many parents do make their children learn 2 languages in addition to the child's native language, and this can be a great asset to the child as the child develops and later in life. The case illustrates that parents frequently have to make decisions for their children inflicting lesser harms for the sake of pure benefits without their consent when neither death nor significant disability is what is at stake, suggesting that Shiffrin's standards are too stringent.

Parents must make important decisions on behalf of their children all the time, and cannot help but do so, since children up until the point at which they are mature minors are incapable of making decisions for themselves. We do not let a young child choose whether or not to go to school, or whether or not to get a lifesaving procedure, for young children are not competent to make these sorts of decisions. Parents have to attempt to judge in their best interests in order to keep them alive. It is not that parents are deciding for a stranger, but rather they are deciding for an incompetent minor, who is also their own child. And it may

well be in the best interests of our incompetent child that she be conferred pure benefits as a result of a lesser harm, as in the case of learning two additional languages.

The very notion of a "pure benefit" can also be challenged. Consider the more outlandish possibilities that Shiffrin considers of being enhanced so as to be able to eat fatty foods in immoderate amounts or having enhanced memory. One can think of cases where these enhancements actually might protect one from harm. Say in a spell of poverty or due to food shortages during a pandemic one only has access to cheap food with poor nutrition value but one comes out of this spell in decent health, rather than doing permanent damage to one's body, thanks to a supposedly pure benefit. Or say that one's enhanced memory allows one to always remember to lock the house and never leave one's purse at a restaurant, or always remember license plates of hit and run drivers. Aren't these abilities then actually preventing or remedying harm? In the case I use of learning two foreign languages, perhaps the child finds herself backpacking across numerous borders in Eastern Europe (or wherever there are dense collections of borders and languages). She happens to know two languages in addition to her native language thanks to her grandmother who insisted she learn them. This ability helps her talk her way out of a tight spot with some irate border guards of two different nations when (being of unenhanced memory) she forgot the right papers and would otherwise end up in prison.

And if the defender of the notion of "pure benefit" appeals to abilities being beyond what is "normal", "supernormal" abilities, then this is open to problematic objections involving the notion of normality. A "normal" life expectancy 50 years ago is no longer normal, or even a normal life expectancy twenty years ago in some countries. If the notion of a "pure benefit" has to hinge on having "supernormal" abilities, then this bar will always be

shifting in addition to supposedly pure benefits turning out to be impure based on the circumstances. These challenges pose a problem for the very notion of a "pure" benefit.

On a more theoretical note, it is also important to point out that Shiffrin is assuming here a distinction between harming a person and withholding benefits from that person. Earlier, in the initial defense of Harman and DeGrazia's view, I considered the harm/benefit asymmetry. This asymmetry holds that it is more difficult to justify inflicting harms than it is to justify withholding benefits. We have stronger reasons to prevent harms than we do to benefit others. But it was noted that this asymmetry is controversial and not accepted by some moral philosophers. Shiffrin is assuming this distinction in her own discussion, and this is what allows her to say that it would be worse to risk actually hitting Unlucky with the gold brick (inflict harm) than it would be to not do so, and have it that Wealthy deprive Unlucky of the great benefits of having the gold (withholding benefit). Whereas someone who rejected this asymmetry might actually think that, if one is looking at the end-result distribution of harms and benefits, we actually ought to drop the gold brick near Unlucky. This is because doing so will in the end result in the most benefits conferred on Unlucky, there not being a morally significant difference between inflicting harms and withholding benefits.

No doubt this denial of the harm/benefit asymmetry seems bizarre to our common sense intuitions in the case of Unlucky and the gold brick — probably most of us would not risk hurting people in order to help them if they were complete strangers. But this may not be because we accept the harm/benefit asymmetry itself, but rather instead be because we accept constraints on harming for some derivative reason. Perhaps we accept constraints on harming because, in the long run, following constraints on harming tends to promote the

general welfare of that society. Such is the case in the rule consequentialist Brad Hooker's view. Hooker writes:

> Suppose Fabio physically harms Antonio but the benefit to Fabio is for some reason slightly larger than the harm to Antonio. In this case, maximizing act-consequentialism holds that Fabio was not wrong to injure Antonio. However, the consequences of widespread internalization of [a] rule permitting agents to physically harm others whenever they think this will produce a little greater aggregate good would be, on balance bad.[173]

Act utilitarians who reject the harm/benefit asymmetry not just as a nonderivative constraint on harming but as a derivative constraint on harming will reject Shiffrin's attempt to say that it is worse to inflict harms even when this will result in conferring greater benefits, since they do not recognize a morally significant distinction between the infliction of harms and the withholding of benefits. It is better, especially from the perspective of trying to generate an overlapping consensus independent of any one normative tradition, if we can avoid relying on controversial theoretical premises such as the Harm/benefit asymmetry in motivating our justification for going beyond the Net Goods View.

As we have seen Shiffrin's view is too narrow, as there are cases that are not cases of death or significant disability where parents must make decisions on behalf of their children that involve inflicting harms to confer pure benefits. Additionally, the very notion of a pure benefit and of supernormal abilities face serious challenges. And Shiffrin's view relies on the Harm/benefit asymmetry. Even with various challenges to the internal features of her account, what Shiffrin's discussion importantly emphasizes is the need for parents to support children they bring into existence, without necessarily relying on parents' failure to

[173] Brad Hooker, "Rule-consequentialism versus Act-consequentialism," *Politeia* 24 (2008): 75-85.

acquire their children's consent when inflicting harms for the sake of pure benefits to come into play to argue for this.

Challenging Shiffrin's View as the Best Account of Responsible Procreation

Shiffrin offers her account as best able to explain how to understand the conditions of responsible procreation. If, for the sake of argument, we set aside the doubts expressed in the previous section about objections to various features internal to her view, there is still the matter of how her view stands up against the accounts of responsible procreation explored in Chapter 2. To see how her view fares, consider two cases which are arguably instances of irresponsible procreation.

First, take the infamous case of the 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau, himself prone to didactic moralism, had many children out of wedlock only to abandon them at foundling hospitals. At the time, foundling hospitals were apparently rather horrifying places, with very high rates of infant mortality, suggesting that doing so was almost akin to a death sentence. Rousseau proceeded in his public life to advocate the importance of duty and loyalty to one's fellow countrymen, while all the while shirking his parental duties and positively endangering his offspring.

Second, consider an older man who fathers a child at an advanced age so that it is guaranteed that he will not live long enough to raise the child to the age of maturity. There are real cases of this among famous personalities such as the literary figure Saul Bellow, who fathered a child at age 84, and the actor Tony Randall, who fathered a child at 77 and another child at 78, and the Formula 1 executive Bernie Ecclestone who fathered his fourth child at

89. Is it acceptable to father children at such a late age knowing that one will not be there to provide a relationship for one's child as he or she ages?

Let us now consider how the Harman-DeGrazia view, variabilism, and Shiffrin's noncomparative account each handle these cases. On Shiffrin's view, in both the Rousseau case and the elderly father cases these are instances of irresponsible procreation because they exhibit a failure to discharge a duty of reparation for noncomparative harm. All parents, given that they inflict lesser harms of their children without their consent for greater pure benefits, owe such a duty of reparation. And since neither Rousseau nor Bellow, Randle, and Ecclestone provide a parent-child relationship they are in violation of the duty.

On the Harman-DeGrazia view, in the Rousseau case, benefits and harms to existing children of course matter, so one cannot harm one's children in the manner that Rousseau does once they are existing. Rousseau would have both weak reasons to have children with more goods in their lives than harms, and, since benefits and harms for existing children matter, he would have to provide for and would have to work to provide children with benefits if they did come into existence. In the elderly father cases, on the Harman-DeGrazia view there are only weak reasons to bring the child into existence, and these can be overridden by various concerns about (third-party) burdens that having children places on those who will have to care for the children after Randle and Bellow and Ecclestone are gone.

On variabilism, there is no reason for Rousseau to bring children into existence, but once they do in fact exist he has every obligation to ensure that benefits to be secured for them are secured and harms are avoided. Therefore what Rousseau does in abandoning his children is morally wrong. In the elderly father cases, on variabilism, although Randle, Bellow, and Ecclestone have strong reasons to provide benefits that can be secured for their

children, if they can do this despite not being there for their children, and since their children can only exist then, then this looks like a can't-do-better case and is permissible with respect to child-centered concerns. However, third party concerns can count against doing so, as with the Harman-DeGrazia view. The burdens placed on caregivers are third party reasons not to act as they do.

The noncomparative/impersonal view based on McMahan's work would say that there is no comparative reason for Rousseau to bring children into existence, but if the children will have more goods than bads in their lives then this is a noncomparative reason to believe that such a life is permissible to start and good for the person whose life it is. As well, impersonal benefits from bringing children into the world count too as reasons to have children which will bring about impersonal goods. An orphan at a foundling hospital is likely a case of the miserable child, but due to Rousseau's own actions, his failure to abide by the provision of costs and benefits to an existing person, and so what he does is wrong. In the Randle, Bellow, and Ecclestone cases, on the noncomparative/impersonal view there is an impersonal reason to have the child that counts in favor of having the child, given that the child will still have a life worth starting (a life good for the child noncomparatively, but not better for the child), despite the absence of the fathers.

The hybrid impersonal weak reasons and personal variabilism view would hold that although there are impersonal weak reasons to bring children into existence for the benefits they will experience in the case of specific persons there is no reason to bring someone into existence for the goods she will experience and no reason to count costs and benefits to her if she never comes into existence. In the Rousseau case, the individual-affecting costs and benefits to the specific existing child matter and are not being attended to by Rousseau, and

so what he does is wrong. In the Bellow, Randle, and Ecclestone cases there are weak impersonal reasons to bring people into existence but these can still be outweighed by third party concerns. At the same time, from the variabilist aspect, the case is also an instance of a can't-do-better case.

In light of these applications, I argue that we should go beyond Harman-DeGrazia, pure variabilism, the noncomparative/impersonal hybrid view, and the hybrid weak reasons and variabilism view, especially just in focusing on child-centered concerns and on cases like the elderly father cases. The Harman-DeGrazia weak reasons view and variabilism both involve third parties, and due to this can rule out the elderly father cases as impermissible, since they involve burdening existing people with children to take care of. It is, therefore, unlikely that these views would be practically all that different from either of these views plus the parent-child relationship requirement. However, the advantage of endorsing either of these views plus the parent-child relationship requirement is that it can deal with the elderly father cases strictly in terms of child-centered concerns. An additional advantage, I will argue, is that the way I construe the parent-child relationship requirement can help us to distinguish wrongful life cases from cases of permissible procreation.

Note that in different ways all of the accounts explored in Chapter 2 can handle these cases arguably just as well as Shiffrin's view (provided an appeal to third-party concerns). And if Shiffrin's view involves problematic internal difficulties as was argued in the last section and does not necessarily practically outperform any competing views when applied to specific cases, then it seems there is good reason to reject her view if it leads to the implausible conclusion of antinatalism, even as the parent-child relationship requirement, differently explained, is, I will argue, a plausible addition to Net Goods positions. Even if one

still accepts Shiffrin's view in its entirety, I argue in the next section that it need not entail antinatalism and that there is a better way to explain the parent-child relationship requirement.

Challenging the Move from Shiffrin's View to Antinatalism

In his book *Creation Ethics*, DeGrazia takes up Shiffrin's account and its implications for antinatalism in his discussion in Chapter 5 of the book, "Bearing Children in Wrongful Life Cases".[174] After discussing Benatar's case, DeGrazia examines the same possibility that Benatar explores, namely, that Shiffrin's case can be used to argue that all instances of procreation are morally wrong. DeGrazia develops a "Shiffrin-like" argument for this conclusion in order to respond to it and ultimately argue against it.[175] As DeGrazia sets up Shiffrin-style antinatalism, there are two key premises:

> P3. "Although it is often permissible to cause an unconsented harm to avert a greater harm, it is impermissible to cause an unconsented (nontrivial) harm to procure "pure benefits" — goods that do not involve the removal or prevention of greater harm" (as in the gold brick case with Wealthy and Unlucky).[176]
>
> P5. "To procreate is to cause unconsented (nontrivial) harm to procure pure benefits"[177]

DeGrazia draws the conclusion (for the sake of argument) that therefore procreation is impermissible. DeGrazia notes that although this is an incredible conclusion, it follows from seemingly plausible premises. However, he ultimately argues that the premises only seem plausible because of a conflation of two different sorts of cases.

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[174] David DeGrazia, *Creation Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 150-159.
[175] Ibid., 150.
[176] Ibid., 151.
[177] Ibid., 152.

DeGrazia distinguishes between cases of *imposing* non-compensibly severe non-comparative harm and cases of *exposing* to compensable noncomparative harm. Cases of imposing non-compensibly severe noncomparative harm are cases in which "the act of procreation is closely and predictably tied to the imposition of significant disadvantage".[178] The harm is severe enough that the benefits of life do not plausibly compensate for it when considered from the perspective of deciding to bring into existence a merely possible child. However, the benefits might be great enough to make life worth continuing once the child exists. Real life cases would include children with severe and painful conditions that lead to very early death like Tay-Sachs and type 2 Gaucher disease.

Cases of exposing to compensable non-comparative harm are standard cases of procreation wherein "procreation is not closely and predictably tied to the imposition of significant disadvantage".[179] Furthermore, "There is no harm closely associated with procreation in those circumstances, yet we know there will be some significant harm in that child's life."[180] As I noted above in response to Shiffrin, DeGrazia also notes that although it might sound quite bad to expose a child to harm, parents faultlessly expose their children to harm all the time in order to create opportunities for greater benefits:

> Parents who enroll their children in school expose them to any manner of possible harms: humiliation in class, despair at being dumped by friends, depression secondary to poor performance or social difficulties, emotional and physical bullying, minor physical harms during recess or gym class, sleep deprivation, illness contracted from other students, and so forth. Nor would it make much sense to say that the children consent to be so exposed, considering their immaturity during most of their primary and secondary school years.[181]

[178] Ibid., 153.
[179] Ibid., 153.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid.

With this distinction in place, DeGrazia argues that only restricted forms of P3 and P5 are true. These amount to something like the following:

> P3* It is impermissible to impose unconsented (nontrivial harm to procure "pure benefits") (unless perhaps it were the only way to achieve the benefits, and the benefits were great enough to compensate)
>
> P5* To procreate is to expose a child to unconsented (nontrivial) harm to procure pure benefits (which are in many cases great enough to compensate for the expected harms)

These modified versions of the premises do not support the antinatalist conclusion. However, a critic might wonder whether the distinction DeGrazia identifies is really a plausible dividing line between those lives wherein expected benefits are sufficient to compensate for expected harms so that parents are *ex ante* justified in bringing the child into existence, and lives wherein expected harms are too severe to be justified by expected compensating benefits. I propose a distinction that I think can do better at drawing the dividing line.

The distinction that I believe is relevant here is a distinction that will involve cases wherein parents can equip their children with the kind of character education that can prevent hardships from severely marring their lives by finding meaning in their lives and cases where this cannot be done. A life can be said to be severely marred where it contains severe suffering or is cut drastically short, and where this is not compensated for by the person discovering sufficient meaning in the suffering or premature death. A severely marred life would thus include lives like those children with Tay Sachs and Gaucher Disease type 2 cases. In these cases, children would be too young to find meaning in any relevant sense and would not find it in their suffering or deaths. But in cases of procreation aside from these, parents can provide their children with a character education that helps them find

meaning and endure hardship in life thus preventing the severe marring of their lives. The responsibilities of parents to give their children a character education to prevent hardships from severely marring their lives extends up until that point at which offspring become responsible for their own lives. If parents did reasonably equip children to meet hardships in life, then beyond the point of maturity (perhaps around the age of 18) parents would not be at fault for their offspring's failure to find meaning in their lives subsequently.[182]

Character education can serve as a kind of insurance against potential tragedies that may occur, the very sorts of tragedies Benatar points to in order to justify his Russian roulette argument against the permissibility of procreation. Benatar is adamant that we should not risk having children because their lives are likely to turn out to be a great deal worse than we suppose. But if children are raised with proper character education to face these difficult life circumstances then even in experiencing hardship they will have the resources to mitigate the impact of suffering, rendering the possibility of their lives turning into one not worth starting far less likely. If children are tossed into the world unprepared, they may well not be able to deal with difficult circumstances and find themselves eye-deep in suffering, such that we should not have chanced bringing them into the world. But if children can face hardship with resilience, then they will not have lives so filled with misery that Benatar can argue that their lives were not worth starting.

[182] What does my approach add compared to DeGrazia's? DeGrazia argues for the distinction between the two kinds of lives (imposing vs. exposing) by pointing to a list of basic needs that children have to fulfill to be considered only exposed to some significant harms rather than having impermissibly severe harm imposed upon them. Although interesting, this approach risks being *ad hoc* — why these goods (see *Creation Ethics*, 168) and does the exception that the list may be set aside when parents face external problems beyond their control render the list somewhat beside the point in many cases? By distinguishing between lives in which parents can expect to prevent marring through character education resources to prevent hardship we have a more principled standard for separating different kinds of cases. As well, variabilism can handle classic cases like Kavka's slave child case and other can't-expect-better non-identity cases.

This conclusion is borne out by empirical evidence. In a Harvard study conducted by the Center on the Developing Child, it was found that:

> …children who do well despite serious hardship have had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult. These relationships buffer children from developmental disruption and help them develop "resilience," or the set of skills needed to respond to adversity and thrive.[183]

Character education, supporting successful growth and development through resources for resilience, looks to be a practical necessity in a developing child's life. As suggested by the Harvard study, character education requires at least one committed parental relationship, supporting the view that a commitment to a consistent and ongoing parenting relationship is indeed a practical necessity for permissible procreation. Rather than being theoretically motivated by a duty of reparation, the parent-child relationship requirement is theoretically motivated as a practical necessity in permissible procreation and as able to deal with the distinction between cases of wrongful life and typical cases of permissible procreation.

In his arguments, Benatar emphasizes objective assessments of well-being, but the resources for resilience view can take into account how the individual approaches the objective harms in her life she must endure. As Elizabeth Barnes points out, there is interesting evidence to suggest that some people who suffer disabilities actually come to feel that they have benefitted from being disabled.[184] This presents a puzzle for certain views which would consider disability as an objectively bad thing for a person, since it turns out that, at least in some cases, persons feel they have benefitted from their disability, when

[183] National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper No. 13*, (2015), www.developingchild.harvard.edu.
[184] Elizabeth Barnes, "Disability and Adaptive Preference," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009): 6.

objective assessments would deem them clearly to have been made worse off.[185] Of course, individuals will react differently, and one can only imagine that it is never easy to be faced with a disability. But it looks like from such cases that we have to take into account not just an objective assessment of goods and harms in a life, but also how an individual is able to approach the harms she must endure. Character education can help agents to subjectively better endure objective harms, thus mitigating their effects in lives and preventing lives from being severely marred by tragedy.

Efforts to constructively define what character education entails can include a discussion of specific character-building experiences as well as taking cues from virtue theories. Support in this form may be as simple as ensuring that one's child is able to face appropriate challenges early in life and overcome them, hopefully learning to endure difficult tests and trials with some degree of determination and poise. This obligation of support can be satisfied in many different ways, but to clarify the point we can think of parents who fail to satisfy it, such as "helicopter parents", who are always hovering protectively over their children and never expose their children to the harms of the world.[186] In so doing, these parents leave their children unprepared to face them. We might imagine helicopter parents who refuse to get their child a pet because they don't want their child to experience the pet's death, for example, or in a host of other ways shelter their child. Despite such parents

[185] Adaptive preferences can be viewed negatively as a kind of self-deception and entangled with concerns of social justice. For example, perhaps a population has adapted to an authoritarian regime and so has no preference for democracy when it actually would be better for them, or at least preferred by them if they had a chance to experience it. See, for example, Ann Levey's paper on the gendered division of labor "Liberalism, adaptive preferences, and gender equality," *Hypatia* 20 (Autumn 2005): 127-143.

[186] Which is not to suggest that parents can't be engaged with their children to a considerable degree while not being overprotective. It is not that entirely hands-off parenting is the way to go, but that engaged parenting should not be overprotective. What I suggest here and in Chapters 4 and 5 will require parents to be highly involved with their child. I simply mean to use the term "helicopter parents" here to mean parents who are overprotective.

conceivably having met all the child's basic needs in terms of food, shelter, education, and so on, and even offering their child a kind of parent-child relationship, I would suggest we would not think that they have prepared their child well for the world. She will have a very hard time indeed trying to survive in the world without her parents, despite having had all her basic needs met and indeed having a great many goods in her life that other children could probably never count on. Our judgments in this case support the view that parents as a practical necessity ought to supply their children with opportunities to have experiences and learn about perspectives that could help them to endure hardship when it strikes.

As I say, this obligation might be satisfied in a number of ways. It can be satisfied by, for example, playing basketball or soccer (football) or cricket with other children in the neighborhood and engaging in other forms of play. Such activities help children to face challenges and overcome them and problem-solve while learning cooperation. All manner of activities can teach endurance, determination, sportsmanship, grace in defeat, and so on that they can then put to use throughout their lives in times of tragedy. Guidance in all sorts of everyday activities, such as negotiating social relationships with adults and other children, family and community members, and developing a great awareness of human emotional triggers and ways of coping with them, can help prepare children to face hardship in their lives.

Consider too helicopter parents who do not talk to their child about the dangers of life and the world, nor of various existential questions that many of us may ask about the purpose or meaning of life, and about the reasons for suffering. It can be helpful for parents to explore orienting ways of looking at the world with their children that can offer resources in times of hardship. A view that we offer our children for coming to terms with tragedy and

find meaning in suffering, so that it does not mar our lives, might take many forms. There are religious, existentialist, Epicurean, Stoic, Buddhist, and a host of other ways of approaching suffering from all manner of philosophies, religions, wisdom traditions, and worldviews.

These experiences and orienting views can have an important place as resources for resilience. The understanding of character education more generally can also be informed by virtue theory. It is now recognized that virtue theory has a place in many different normative traditions and can be and has been incorporated into all manner of approaches, in the moral philosophy of philosophers as diverse as Aristotle, Confucius, Aquinas, Hume, Kant, and Mill. And virtue theory offers important resources for the discussion of moral education.

As Randall Curren explains, "As interest in Aristotle has spread beyond the universities to the larger educational community, what has received the most attention is this idea that moral learning is properly concerned with developing virtues of character and requires supervised practice of the right kinds."[187] As virtue theorists of various backgrounds understand well, and as those in the philosophy of education are coming to see as well, parents can help to shape their children's character so that the child possesses the sort of traits that enable her to flourish in the sort of world we live in, one with suffering and hardship. The point, for virtue theorists, is to raise more of those who possess the virtues, those who can deal with other people and with challenges they face naturally and deftly, so that they will experience good lives.

[187] Randall Curren, "Cultivating the Intellectual and Moral Virtues," in *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education*, ed. David Carr and Jan Steutel, (London: Routledge, 1999), 70.

Thus, in addition to the requirements of Net Goods Views, such as Net Goods pure variabilism, I argue parents ought to make a concerted effort to offer their children sufficient resources for resilience as to have the reasonable expectation that they are prepared, as well as can reasonably be expected, to try to deal with tragedies they face in their own lives. This offers a way to draw the distinction between permissible cases of procreation and wrongful life cases better than DeGrazia's distinction and is well supported as a practical necessity in parenting children by empirical evidence. The addition of this requirement allows us to deal with the elderly father cases without appealing to third party concerns and while emphasizing the practical necessity of resources for resilience.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued in response to Shiffrin-style antinatalism that although Shiffrin plausibly identifies the need for a supportive parent-child relationship that goes beyond a purely Net Goods position, it makes little sense to rely on failing to obtain a child's consent in inflicting lesser harms to confer pure benefits to motivate it. In place of Shiffrin's account I offered my own view that parents owe a supportive parent-child relationship to children as a better alternative to DeGrazia's own response to a Shiffrin-style argument against all instances of procreation. Specifically, I characterized this relationship as including providing children with experiential and existential resources to avoid their lives being marred by tragedy. I justified requiring character education as a practical necessity of responsible procreation and as enabling a clearer distinction between cases of wrongful life and typical procreation.

Thus, at the conclusion of Part I, I can state the conditions of permissible procreation arrived at with respect to child centered concerns. First, on the Net Goods View as arrived at by variabilism, if a child is coming into existence then there are reasons to confer benefits to the child and avoid harms to the child and a life is worth starting so long as it contains more goods than harms. And, second, the child is owed a supportive parent-child relationship as a practical necessity of responsible procreation, with cases where this cannot be offered being non-typical cases (wrongful life cases) of procreation that are not permissible to carry out. I now turn to consider the conditions of permissible procreation with respect to third-party concerns in Part II.

Chapter 4 – Third Party Concerns and the Global Poor

Introduction

In Part I, I considered child-centered concerns. In Part II, I turn to consider third party concerns. Reflecting on third party concerns means examining the ways in which those other than a person brought into existence are affected by that person coming into existence. In this chapter, I consider how the global poor are affected by the choice of financially secure citizens of affluent nations to procreate. In Chapter 5, I consider how future generations are affected by procreation due to the impact it has on the environment.

I begin this chapter with an initial survey of various arguments regarding global poverty in order to consider the impact of a starting a life on the global poor. I first examine Peter Singer's famous treatment of the issue and the responses of notable critics. I then turn to Stuart Rachels' argument against procreation from opportunity cost in the context of the ethics of global poverty which builds on Singer's views. I present two possible options in response to the argument Rachels builds from Singer's view of our duties to aid.

What I call "Option 1" involves rejecting Singer's argument. Rejecting Singer's view enables one to reject Rachels' argument, which is based on it. I consider two ways of rejecting Singer's argument that I believe are more promising and plausible than those of Singer's other critics. I first consider Travis Timmerman's objection to Singer's argument, which seeks to challenge Singer's premises with a thought experiment about demandingness. I then

consider a second objection from strong value pluralists who would hold that having a child and giving to the global poor are incomparable goods. Theorists who embrace incomparability will hold that both having a child and giving to the global poor are good, but that we cannot reduce these goods to a further good, like pleasure, to see which course of action produces more good overall. Either Timmerman's case, or the one coming from the value pluralist, offers a way to reject Singer's view, and so Rachels' case against procreation. However, because a large number of people will either not share the intuition Timmerman relies on, or will reject incomparability, I also present what I call Option 2.

Option 2 involves accepting Singer's view of our duties to aid but denying that this must lead to Rachels' conclusion that procreation in an affluent nation is always wrong. I argue that children might be raised to be effective altruists so that they can offset the cost of their being raised in an affluent nation by donating to reliable aid agencies. Thus I argue that even accepting Singer's view, Rachels' arguments do not go through.

Finally in this chapter, I turn to the arguments of Daniel Friedrich and Tina Rulli that adoption is a morally preferable alternative to procreation. Initially accepting in my discussing of adoption the demanding Singer-Rachels view of our duties to aid, I argue that although adoption can be morally superior to procreation, this is not always the case because of the empirical realities of adoption. I bring the discussion of raising children to be effective altruists to bear as a possible alternative to the strategy of adopting instead of having a child of one's own as a way in order to do the most good.

Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"

Peter Singer's approach to global poverty, his argument that financially secure individuals in affluent nations ought to be donating more to reliable aid agencies, is now many decades old. He makes his case with what is now a classic thought experiment in philosophy, the drowning child pond case.

Singer asks you to imagine that you are walking by a shallow pond. You see a young toddler who is clearly struggling to stay above the water. There is no one else nearby who is willing to help, and it is clear that if you do not save the child, he will drown. Wading in is an easy and safe option, but you will ruin the shoes you purchased only a few days before, as well as getting your suit wet and muddy.[188] What should you do? Many of us would answer that we should save the child. But this then delivers Singer's conclusion about global poverty, for he can point to the fact that there are children dying on the other side of the world, and that, even if no one else is doing anything to save them, you still seem to have an obligation to save them, just as you do to save the drowning child. In an age of advanced communication and internet banking, there would seem to be no excuse for thinking that distance should be a morally significant factor in considering whether one should help. Singer summarizes the conclusion of his argument in a principle:

> …if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it. By "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance" I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent.[189]

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[188] This description of the case is paraphrased from an updated version found in Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save* (New York: Random House, 2009), 3.
[189] Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (Spring 1972): 229-243.

Stuart Rachels builds on Singer's position to deliver his own conclusion about the moral impermissibility of procreation.

Rachels' Famine Relief Argument Against Having Children

In a paper entitled "The Immorality of Having Children", Rachels develops an argument that stems from Peter Singer's "Famine Relief Argument", which he dubs the "Famine Relief Argument against Having Children".[190] Rachels notes that, unlike other arguments against having children which stem from pessimism, environmental impacts, or a lack of consent, his argument "appeals to the severe opportunity costs of parenting."[191] He begins by canvassing the reasons why people tend not to think too carefully about having children, citing, among other reasons, the widespread approval of begetting children in Western culture. (Though of course it is not as if Eastern culture does not approve of begetting children. Can one think of a flourishing culture that does not approve of begetting children?) But Rachels takes a radical view in opposition to our uncritical acceptance and even encouragement of procreation. He argues that "it is immoral to have a child, by which I mean *it is immoral to conceive and rear a child*" provided that one is financially secure and

[190] Stuart Rachels, "The Immorality of Having Children," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 3 (June 2014): 567-582.
[191] Ibid., 567.

living "in contemporary Western society".[192] He arrives at this view by considering the costs of raising a child compared to what might be done with the amount otherwise.

Rachels cites a figure of $227,000 USD as the cost of raising a middle-class child in the United States.[193] However, the cost should actually be considered even greater, Rachels argues, if we factor in the price of college tuition, assuming the child in question does indeed attend university.[194] Thus Rachels argues that the figure may be as high as $264,920 or even higher, though he works with the more conservative estimate for the purposes of his argument. The next step, once a sum is settled on, is to consider what this sum might accomplish if spent on something else. Employing a "causal/counterfactual interpretation" of doing good, Rachels argues that money spent by financially secure and affluent individuals on raising children should instead be spent on famine relief.[195] We should take care of children who already exist in poverty rather than devote hundreds of thousands of dollars to having our own.

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[192] Ibid., 570.

[193] Ibid. Rachels acknowledges that he is not accounting for opportunity costs in raising a child, but only for the dollar figure of the costs of caring for a child. One might suppose that if opportunity costs are factored in, the number would be much higher. To rebut Rachels' argument, all I need to show here is that it is not so implausible that a child could donate $227,001 USD (or whatever the figure) over the course of her life to reliable aid agencies. But if a defender of Rachels' view did want to include opportunity costs this would make the option of the child being a sound investment with an aim to help the global poor more difficult to defend. However, *some* number of people will need to form the next generation if there are to be affluent nations that can donate to the global poor, and it would not seem bad that someone do her bit to make sure the next generation contains some effective altruists, though accepting the Singer-Rachels view of demandingness she may only be able to justify "replacing" herself, and so may be limited to only having one child, or two, to replace herself as well an effective altruist partner. It should also be noted that the figure Rachels draws on here is only an estimate, and costs may vary considerably depending on differences among parents. As this is the figure Rachels accepts, it is the one I respond to in my argument, but one might well have doubts about how an accurate estimate can be arrived at that would reliably represent the spending habits of all parents in the first place.

[194] As well as opportunity costs highlighted the previous footnote.

[195] Ibid., 571.

Rachels admits that we do not often know the impact our money makes on large charities, but argues that this doesn't mean that giving to reliable aid agencies is wasted. However, many aid agencies actually do offer estimates of what funds will deliver if given to them. We are often not in the position of not knowing what our funds will do but rather can obtain an estimate from different aid agencies if we care to. This consideration would seem to make Rachels' argument even more powerful.

For example, as of writing, a calculator on the website of Peter Singer's organization, *The Life You Can Save*, calculates that a donation of $227,000 (as of June 2020) will save 65 lives if given to the Against Malaria Foundation, according to GiveWell, a group that evaluates the effectiveness of charities.[196] One might well dispute the accuracy of such a calculation or that it can truly account for all the variables involved. But that such calculators are available, and that one might explore in more detail the impact one's funds would have if donated to a reliable aid agency, further intensifies the comparison between raising one child and giving, as we can see that it pits the life of one child in the United States against the lives of 65 people elsewhere. And, even if such estimates are not available, and they are likely not going to be for long-term development projects, it does not seem that we could claim that not knowing exactly the impact our donation will have is sufficient reason not to donate, so long as the charity is vetted as reliable by multiple charity evaluators (such as Givewell, CharityNavigator, Charity Watch, and so forth.). It seems that defenders of the moral permissibility of procreation will have to find some way to justify their decision to have

[196] See "Charity Impact Calculator," thelifeyoucansave.org, https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/impact-calculator.

children rather than donate to the global poor, either by disputing Singer's position or determining some way to procreate justifiably while adhering to that position.

Rachels explicitly links his argument to Singer's original principle from Singer's famous article "Famine, Affluence, and Morality."[197] In that article, as discussed above, Singer makes the case that we should be giving a lot more to reliable aid agencies because of his classic thought experiment of saving a drowning child in a pond, and as a result of following what he argues is a plausible principle. As Rachels formulates Singer's principle, it appears as follows:

> If we can prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable or nearly comparable moral significance, then we ought, morally, to do it.[198]

As we saw, this principle, though seemingly very reasonable from the perspective of our commonsense moral intuitions, has very demanding implications. Even if we focus only on a weaker formulation of the principle, one that only uses the language that we must not sacrifice anything of "nearly comparable moral significance", we still seem to have to sacrifice all sorts of things, such as dinners at restaurants and evenings at the cinema or the opera, since much in our lives that we value is not nearly as morally significant as the value of another life. Only if we began to sacrifice things like the rent we pay to keep a roof over our head might we approach something of nearly comparable moral significance, since if we

[197] Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." Interestingly, Singer considers whether we may be obligated to give primarily to organizations that will work to reduce reproduction of the population of the global poor, though he does not consider whether the global wealthy should stop having children to give more.

[198] Rachels, "The Immorality of Having Children," 572. There is sometimes a slight variation in the wording of the principle from Singer's original 1972 article. I cite Rachels' wording here as it is what he employs in his argument.

were rendered homeless this might be to lose something of great moral significance to ourselves, namely shelter, which might be of nearly comparable moral significance to another person's life. Wherever the line is ultimately drawn, it would seem all of us ought to be giving far more, and sacrificing far more, than we presently do. Rachels notes that his own argument may be merely a specific instance of Singer's argument, applied to children. I think that is right. He views children, if not exactly as a luxury good, as on a par with other sorts of good things in our own lives that are not nearly of comparable moral significance as saving the life of another.

Rachels is certainly aware that his argument is controversial and will face opposition. He considers and answers a number of possible objections, not all of them, in my view, altogether successfully. One objection is that it is natural for people to have children. Considering a religious basis for the naturalness of having children, Rachels acknowledges that "If we were created in the image of a perfect God, then what's natural for us might always be good—indeed, might always be god-like."[199] He goes on to quickly deny that this is a possibility: "…as the world attests we have no such nature... we evolved by the morally blind forces of natural selection."[200] This is to move very quickly over an enormous swath of ground. Of course, a full engagement with all the complicated issues raised by the intersection of theism, evolution, and natural law theory is beyond the scope of a brief paper on applied ethics. But that nothing more is offered than brief assertion seems to undercut the argument. (David Benatar, for example, does relate his pessimism to theistic views.[201])

[199] Ibid., 575.
[200] Ibid.
[201] David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 221.

Even just considering Christianity and Islam and Hindu belief, at least 73 percent of the world's population or some 5.35 billion people hold theistic views.[202] Perhaps Rachels already knows his argument will be a nonstarter with theists, and only intends to speak to non-theists living in the West anyway. Whatever his reasons, he clearly fails to offer any compelling response to the theistic objection, since his response amounts to telling theists to give up their belief in favor of an evolutionary view that presumably leaves no room for evolution having been guided by God. His argument would be better served, I think, by pointing out that, even if procreation is natural and supported by God's commands through general scriptural injunction and the natural law, there is also scriptural support, in Christianity, for example, for the view that sometimes remaining childless and devoting one's life to service to God and to others is a very laudable thing to do. Saint Paul, to cite one case, encouraged remaining unmarried and childless: "I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I."[203]

As for the general appeal to the naturalness of having children independent of a religious justification, Rachels does note that just because something is natural does not mean that it is good or inevitable, citing the incidence of things like male aggression and sexual assault as morally wrong despite being natural and as things men can choose not to do.[204] This conclusion is certainly right — just because something is natural does not mean

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[202] See "The Global Religious Landscape", Pew Forum, accessed November 27, 2018, http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/. One might argue that these numbers do not account for people who are religiously affiliated but do not hold to a metaphysical belief in God. No doubt one could debate the exact figures, but the larger point is that a great deal of people do hold theistic views.

[203] 1 Cor. 7:8, KJV.

[204] Rachels, "The Immorality of Having Children," 575-576. It is worth noting that natural law thinkers do not think that whatever is natural is good either, as the view is often misrepresented by antireligious ethicists. "Natural" in natural law refers to a law "written on the human heart" and so knowable by human beings independent of exposure to a religious tradition or social convention. Natural law theories identify basic

that it is moral — and this is something practitioners of the world's major religions can agree with (indeed, on the Christian view, for example, the world is a fallen world and humans are sinful in their nature, which means our human nature is not necessarily good). And on wide reflective equilibrium (assuming one adopts the view), no moral judgment is unrevisable, so even the naturalness of having children must come under scrutiny.

Rachels also considers whether his view is generally too demanding, a criticism that has been leveled at Singer. Rachels denies that it is a "big sacrifice" to ask people to remain childless, acknowledging that although many people have a strong desire to have children happiness research does not suggest that being childless has much of an impact on happiness.[205] Assuming Rachels' faith in the happiness research on which he relies is justified, whether or not this view is demanding would seem to depend on whether or not Singer's view is seen as too demanding. Rachels also considers whether we might object that we could raise our children to care about the global poor and even give more than $227,000, but rejects this possibility as the "Wishful Thinking Objection" or the "Pass-the-Buck-and-Hope Objection." I will develop my own formulation of this objection to consider whether it can offer a successful response to Rachels' argument. Ultimately, I argue that prospective parents can reject Rachels' argument either by rejecting Singer's approach to global poverty or by planning to raise their children to do more good than otherwise would be done had they not had them.

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goods necessary for human survival and flourishing and see it as our duty to protect and promote these goods. They do not think that anything that seems to stem from our biological nature is good in any degree. See Harry Gensler, *Ethics and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 57-58 and 105-107.

[205] Rachels, "The Immorality of Having Children," 578. One might well question how much confidence we should have in the conclusions of this research, given that people who want children to begin with would seem to have their happiness affected by not having them.

Option 1: Reject Singer's Argument

Option 1 is to reject Singer's argument. I explore many of the classic options for responding to Singer before holding up two ways of challenging Singer's approach to the ethics of global poverty that I think are particularly promising. The first of these two challenges is a challenge to Singer's principle offered by Travis Timmerman. The second is a challenge from strong value pluralists who would argue that certain things of value, like donating to the global poor, and other things of value, like having and raising children, are incomparable. If any of the classic responses to Singer's argument are accepted, or if either of these two particular challenges are accepted, then Singer's argument is defeated and Rachels' argument is defeated along with it.

Classic Responses to Singer's Argument

Since its first appearance, Singer's argument has generated an enormous literature and many theorists have offered responses to this classic thought experiment. At one extreme is the position that all that is owed in terms of morality is the protection of "negative" rights, or a duty of nonmaleficence.[206] That is, all that the global poor can demand

[206] An even more extreme position would be straightforward egoism, which says each individual should only ever pursue her own self-interest. If there is no reward or benefit for saving the child, then the egoist should keep walking on such a view.

of us is that we do not interfere with them or harm them. Charitable contributions are laudable but supererogatory.[207]

This response will seem problematic for many. For it seems to say that it might be morally permissible simply not to save the drowning child. Someone who thinks our duty of beneficence is always optional might walk past the pond, and, explaining his behavior later, might say that it would have been very nice of him to save the child, but that he is not morally required to do so. All he is morally required to do is not to harm the child himself. But this implication of this sort of view will likely not sit well with many of us. Additionally, as a number of thinkers have noted, citizens of affluent nations may actually be responsible for at least some of the harm befalling the global poor, given their contributions to governments and corporate entities that have harmed poor populations around the world.[208]

An explicitly nonconsequentialist response emphasizes the distinction between imperfect and perfect duties and a distinction between a duty to rescue and general duty to aid in reply to Singer's argument.[209] Unlike perfect duties, imperfect duties are those which can be satisfied in different ways. Violetta Igneski argues that the duty to aid is an imperfect duty, since there are many different ways we might discharge our duty to help those in need,

[207] For example, instead of going to the opera, one could donate the price of the ticket to a reliable aid agency. This would be an example of a supererogatory act on the kind of view under discussion. It is optional, and laudable, but not morally obligatory that I forgo the opera to donate the funds instead. A related view is defended by Jan Narveson, who writes "If the fact that others are starving is not our fault, then we do not need to provide for them as a [an enforceable] duty of justice. To think otherwise is to suppose that we are, in effect, slaves to the badly off. And so we can in good conscience spend our money on the opera instead of on the poor. Even so, feeding the hungry and taking care of the miserable is a nice thing to do, and is morally recommended." See "We don't owe them a thing! A tough-minded but soft-hearted view of aid to the faraway needy," *The Monist* 86 (2003): 433.
[208] See, for example, Thomas Pogge, "Priorities of Global Justice," *Metaphilosophy* 32 (2001): 6-24.
[209] See Violetta Igneski, "Perfect and Imperfect Duties to Aid," *Social Theory and Practice* 32, no.3 (July 2006): 439-466. The response is also available to rule utilitarians.

whereas encountering the drowning child falls under the perfect duty to rescue.[210] We must rescue the drowning child, but we can help the needy by donating to a reliable aid agency or in some other way, such as volunteering our time to a local homeless shelter, donating blood, and so on. Of course, this approach must justify the view that rescue cases are different from general cases of our having a duty to aid those in need. Igneski argues that it is common to have the intuition that there is a difference between cases of rescue and cases of aiding the needy, and that this can be explained by the determinacy of the situation. If, from the point of view of the agent, the situation determines what the agent must do and when then this constitutes a perfect duty to rescue. A situation that is not so determinate then falls under imperfect duty. Igneski acknowledges that Peter Singer does not share the common intuition but disputes it. However, she contends that the intuition and the grounding she offers is defensible and legitimate.[211]

Others like Frances Kamm have argued that distance does matter morally.[212] But at least initially it seems difficult to imagine that it can. If I can press a button that will save the lives of 15 strangers on the other side of the world, or I can save 10 strangers right in front of me by pressing another button, what should I do, assuming I can only choose one of the buttons and know nothing about any of the individuals? It is understandable that we would not want to see those close to us come to harm for psychological reasons and that this would

[210] Ibid., 440.
[211] Igneski's argument likely does touch on a commonsense view, but I explore Timmerman and the incomparability objection below as more promising responses. I believe they are more promising because they don't rely on a specific normative tradition (nonconsequentialism) and don't require having to distinguish rescue cases from aid that would rescue distant needy people. If one accepts Igneski's argument, one could of course use it to dismiss Rachels' argument by rejecting Singer levels of demandingness.
[212] See Frances Kamm, "Famine Ethics: The Problem of Distance in Morality and Singer's Ethical Theory," in *Peter Singer and His Critics*, ed. D. Jamieson (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 269-332.

be more traumatic. But it seems like, so long as we know nothing about any of the victims, have no special obligations to any of them, and cannot save them all, we ought to choose the greater number, regardless of distance.

Kamm acknowledges that if it is just a matter of numbers and strangers then we may be obligated to save the distant greater number. She writes,

> "For example, if I can help more people at a distance and fewer who are near, this might be a reason to help the distant."[213]

What Kamm argues is that distance can be a factor, not that it is the only factor or that we must always help the near compared to the distant. She makes her case by appealing to a number of cases to try to tease out what is going on intuitively when we favor the near, as in the thought that we are obligated to rescue the drowning child in a way we are not obligated to donate. The discussion includes a case where one has arms long enough to reach to India and to save a drowning child there.[214] Kamm thinks it is important to consider the nearness or farness not just of the victim when compared to the agent, but also of the agent's means and the distance between ourselves and the threats that are impacting the victim.[215] She summarizes the upshot of her intricate analysis of many cases related to distance:

> My tentative conclusion is that the [problem of distance in morality] should be understood as whether we can justify our intuition that we have a greater responsibility to take care of what is going on in the area near us or near our efficacious means, whether this involves needy victims, threats, or means belonging to victims.[216]

[213] Ibid., 178.
[214] Ibid., 186.
[215] Ibid., 190.
[216] Ibid., 195.

Kamm offers an interesting alternative to Singer's view that distance only matters psychologically rather than morally. However, her option is of course controversial because it depends on an intricate analysis of many cases and one wonders to what extent most people would share her intuitions and find the distinctions she draws intuitive themselves. And Singer himself of course rejects the intuitive approach outright. He says in response to Kamm:

> Even though it has always seemed to me so evidently erroneous, the view that we must test our normative theories against our intuitions has continued to have many adherents, and Kamm is clearly one of them.[217]

Still others have challenged whether we must necessarily accept Singer's understanding of the demandingness of our duties to aid. Referring to Singer's principle quoted above, Karen Green writes:

> The phrase, 'it is in our power' admits two readings. On the one hand, "it is in the power of each of us individually" or "it is in the power of us as a unified group." What I mean by a unified group is a group capable of coordinated collective action. There are often situations in which something is within our power in the second sense, but not within our power in the first. It may be within our power (as a group) to shift the stone, but not within the power of any one of us to do so. Something similar is clearly the case with foreign aid. If the scope of "our" in Singer's article, is taken to be "members of the middle and upper classes of the OECD group of nations" or more generally "members of the richest quartile of the world's population" then it may well be that it is in our power to prevent people from starving to death, but it is not obviously the case that it is within the power of any one of us, individually,

[217] Ibid., 316. Of course, my own approach in this project is one that relies on forming an overlapping consensus based on shared intuitions. But given the specificity and controversial status of the many particular intuitions Kamm appeals to, I think it would be fruitful to look elsewhere for other ways forward in trying to build our overlapping consensus. That is why I consider Timmerman's case and the incomparability objection as two promising ways of rejecting Singer's argument before going on to explore what we would have to accept if we did accept Singer levels of demandingness. If one accepts Kamm's view, then this is another way to reject Singer levels of demandingness and so Rachels' argument against procreation.

> to prevent people from starving to death. Whether or not this is the case depends on how we read "prevent people from starving to death."[218]

Green makes an interesting case that our obligations to the global poor ought to be understood as of the kind that must be satisfied collectively. To suppose that each of us individually must give until we would give up something of comparable moral importance to a human life is to misunderstand that if we, the affluent in affluent nations, are all on the hook to help the global poor, then we all ought to be part of the solution together as a collective solution is required to a collective problem. Green's solution is to suggest that we think about the problem like strong swimmers deciding how to save people on Bondi beach:

> Many people are drowning, and at least a goodly number have a prima facie obligation to help them, but which one is any particular strong swimmer to save? In a situation like this, a pragmatic principle solves the decision problem. Each drowning person has an equal right to be saved; efficiency dictates that one saves the closest. If one person is equally close to two potential rescuers, they should co-ordinate their activities, one agreeing to save the closest, the other the next closest. Lifeguards divide their responsibility for saving people on the beach, thus turning a diffuse and unfulfillable duty into a particular and achievable one. Without a pragmatic tiebreaker, which divides their responsibility, their collective aim of saving as many of the drowning as possible, would not be achieved. Many of our intuitive moral judgements arise, I will argue, from the past adoption of systems that divide responsibility.[219]

Green argues that when many people are in need and as an individual one can't save them all a pragmatic principle comes into play that allows one to save some. This is the idea that each individual has a responsibility to save the closest person to them. Green recognizes that systems based on pragmatic tiebreakers can become outdated or abandoned. But she

[218] Karen Green, "Distance, Divided Responsibility, and Universalizability," *The Monist* 83 (July 1, 2003): 501-515.
[219] Ibid., 507.

believes this is not the case when it comes to things like prioritizing our own children. Green writes:

> …it has been deemed natural to care for one's own children… we can look on the family as providing a solution to a problem of collective responsibility. Adults are collectively obliged to look after the children of a society, the responsibility needs to be divided. Proximity of kinship is an obvious way of determining how the general obligation to care for some children can be transformed into a precise obligation to care for these children. It has the added advantage that moral responsibility follows causal responsibility, and that natural inclination tends to favour the care of one's own children.[220]

Green acknowledges that critics will object that many nations cannot take care of their own. She thus proposes a global tax that would redistribute from the rich to the poor, in the manner of taxation on the rich within nations for the purpose of redistributing wealth to the global poor. A system of divided responsibility, like a global redistributive taxation system, would ensure that everything did not fall on individuals as their lone responsibility.

However, a defender of Singer-level demandingness could reject this approach, or at least reject it as a solution with respect to the way things are now, based on a modified case of many children in the pond. We can imagine the same pond case, but this time there are 999 people in addition to me around the pond, and one thousand drowning children.[221] Walking past the pond, I jump in and save the one child I am obligated to save. But, supposing none of the other 999 people jump in — for we can suppose they are psychopaths or otherwise unmoved to do so — it does not seem like I am off the hook. The argument is that I would still have to save as many children as I can. Perhaps one day if there was a global

[220] Ibid.

[221] A similar case appears in Richard Arneson, "Moral Limits on Demands of Beneficence?," in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality, Affluence, and the Distant Needy* ed. by, Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 33-58. I owe my acquaintance with the case to a version presented by Howard Nye.

taxation system that successfully redistributed wealth, which may only be possible with some kind of international governing body, then this would be a way people could be held accountable for saving the global poor. But until that day arrives, we are still on the hook for doing as much as we individually can on Singer's view, just as we would be in the case of the 999 psychopaths and the 1,000 drowning children. The difficulties faced by these classic responses to Singer are indicative of how difficult it is to evade Singer's conclusion. I now turn to consider and develop two challenges I think are particularly promising.

Timmerman's Case

In a recent article, Travis Timmerman takes up the issues raised in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" again and offers a response to Singer.[222] I consider Timmerman's article because it presents an argument that is not based on controversial views about the moral significance of distance, or on normative theory-specific assumptions, and does not deny the widely accepted view that we do have an obligation to save the child in the drowning pond case. It is a notable recent challenge that takes on Singer's argument specifically, premise by premise, and from the perspective of commonsense intuitions, which fits well with the aim of this project at relying on commonsense appeals that can be shared across a wide variety of perspectives in developing an overlapping consensus.[223] His strategy

[222] Travis Timmerman, "Sometimes There is Nothing Wrong With Letting A Child Drown," *Analysis* 75 (2015): 204-212.

[223] Timmerman is himself a "commonsense consequentialist", that is an agent-relative consequentialist. Agent-relative consequentialism holds that we should assess good consequences not just from an impartial point of view but also the point of the view of the agent. On such a view, nonmoral considerations can sometimes outweigh moral ones that stem from the impartial perspective. However, Timmerman's argument appeals to commonsense intuitions and does not depend on his agent-relative consequentialism (though his argument would be rejected by impartial consequentialists).

is to argue that Singer has not presented a compelling case to accept his principle, formulated in Timmerman's discussion as follows:

> If it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so.[224]

Timmerman argues that when we consider what this principle commits us to doing over time, and not just in the one instance of the pond case, we may develop a different view than Singer argues for. Timmerman points out that the instance of saving a drowning child would be a very rare event, while giving to aid organizations would be like continually having to save drowning children. One instance of sacrificing one's shoes and clothes to save a child seems reasonable, but it is not perhaps so plausible that one must spend the rest of one's life making a comparable sacrifice repeatedly. Timmerman presents his case with a rival thought experiment that is farfetched and far more complicated.

In a case he calls Drowning Children, Timmerman imagines a person, Unlucky Lisa, who must every day run through a "vast space of land covered with hundreds of newly formed shallow ponds, each of which contains a small child who will drown unless someone pulls them to safety."[225] Unlucky Lisa must do this because she is trying to get to her bank, where every day hackers are draining $200 from her funds, every five minutes, for 24 hours a day. Her bank will not reimburse her as a result of some legal loophole. Once she gets to the bank, all the children that are left in ponds will drown. The problem facing Lisa is that she must decide how many children to save before she enters the bank, and it takes approximately five minutes to save one child. Every day more children fall into the ponds,

[224] Ibid., 204.
[225] Ibid., 209.

and Lisa also has to have time to go to work to earn money and to sleep and eat in addition to every day going to the bank to stop the hackers.

Of course, it can be difficult to even conceive of this scenario and difficult also to imagine whether one's moral intuitions can track such a farfetched case reliably. But we can also think of versions closer to real life. Timmerman himself offers a real-life example in a paper responding to a critic:

> If this doesn't already seem clear, consider the fact that this commonsense judgment is reflected in widely shared intuitions about the supererogatory nature of charity. With the exception of impartial consequentialists, few would think a Doctors Without Borders volunteer is acting wrongly if she visits her family for the holidays rather than doing additional charitable work.[226]

The upshot of these examples, Timmerman's larger point, is that Singer's principle would seem to say that Lisa must always save as many children as she can until she begins to sacrifice something of nearly comparable importance, such as the rent for her studio apartment, for example, and that she must continue to do this for the rest of her life. Timmerman argues that common sense morality would say that, at least on a single day over the rest of Lisa's life, she is entitled to stop the hackers in time to enjoy something that is not of nearly comparable importance, such as going to the theatre one last time. Then, she will devote the rest of her days to saving children. At least one trip to the theatre in a life filled with saving children seems to be plausibly morally permissible, thus, in Timmerman's view,

[226] Travis Timmerman, "Save (some of) the Children," *Philosophia* 46 (2018): 470.

rendering Singer's argument unsound.[227] He argues that this conclusion is also borne out by the real-life aid worker case.

Timmerman acknowledges that his argument will not convince already convinced impartial consequentialists. Rather, he means to suggest that Singer's argument, which is meant to show that common sense morality can lead to his very demanding view, is flawed, since common sense morality would not in fact endorse Singer's principle given what it entails in either Drowning Children or the case of the aid worker. Consequentialists like Singer will already think that our common sense moral intuitions are flawed and reject them, but then this is not what is at issue. What is at issue is whether common sense moral intuitions could lead us to Singer's principle, and Timmerman argues that they do not as a result of Singer's principle being applied to the case of Drowning Children. Those who do endorse common sense morality should not think that they must follow Singer here.

If we can follow what Timmerman is trying to do here, then we may have a way of rejecting Singer's principle. For, if we reject it when applied to the Drowning Children or aid worker cases, then we must reject it as obtaining otherwise. This would open things up for a view more in line with common sense morality. Such a view would hold that, in the rare instance of saving the drowning child, we are obligated to help. Moreover, we may still believe that we are obligated to routinely donate to reliable aid agencies. However, we will not be obligated so stringently as Singer's principle requires, and indeed, so long as we do save children in drowning child cases and routinely donate according to what we can

[227] For the formulation of the argument into precise premises see Timmerman, 204.

reasonably manage, we may well be entitled to embark on the potentially very fulfilling and rewarding existential project of having a child.

Our donations to the global poor would fall under general duties of charity. Many people do already frequently donate something to various aid agencies while also having children. Perhaps we could do more and go childless in order to donate the funds that would otherwise have been spent on raising a child to a reliable aid agency. But, without Singer's principle in effect, we are not morally obligated to do this. We will only be obligated to meet some lower, fuzzy and vague threshold in satisfaction of general charitable duties.[228] Voluntary childlessness coupled with donation of the funds that would have been spent on a child would be supererogatory, but not, contrary to Rachels' claim, obligatory.[229]

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[228] Though perhaps we might embrace one of the more defined thresholds laid out by Singer in *The Life You Can Save*, such as giving 5 percent of our income. Such a threshold is very precise, even if it would seem to be far less demanding than Singer's principle. Timmerman himself leaves things open as to just how much we are obligated to give. If one does opt for the 5 percent figure, perhaps even out of a consequentialist justification that requiring less of agents will lead to greater compliance overall, then this makes it even easier to justify having children, because then one only needs to give 5 percent of one's income rather than $227,001 dollars, or whatever the figure might be, and this will be easier to accomplish for most people. Personally, I would favor this more practical approach, but I don't depend on this option here because some act consequentialists will not accept that it really alters our personal obligations, and only see it as perhaps a PR strategy, whereas those familiar with what our duties really are know that we have to give far more.

[229] One difficulty with Timmerman's approach is that by changing the scenario we may still arrive at a demanding view of our duties to aid. For example, consider Peter Unger's case of Bob's Bugatti, a different case from Singer's Drowning Pond. Bob is out for a drive in his expensive classic Bugatti, so rare and expensive it is uninsurable, into which he has sunk all his life's savings. The Bugatti is Bob's retirement plan because its value will increase over time, making it an investment that he can one day sell in order to finance his retirement. Without it, he will have "a hard time just making ends meet for the remaining 15 to 20 years he can expect to live", see Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 35. Bob parks the Bugatti by a trolley track to investigate something he sees when an out of control trolley comes hurtling down the track. Bob sees that what he came to investigate is actually a switch, and that it controls whether the trolley will head down a track toward the Bugatti or down a different track. The switch currently sends the trolley away from his Bugatti, but he sees that there is a child trapped on the other track. In Unger's telling of the story, Bob doesn't flip the switch, and although the child is killed by the trolley, he enjoys his Bugatti for the rest of his comfortable retirement. Unger argues that everyone will think that Bob's actions here are monstrous and draws from this the conclusion that actually we ought to be giving up significant amounts of our earnings to saving the lives of the distant needy. This case is interesting, among other reasons, because unlike the drowning pond case it seems like our common sense intuitions tell us here that we should give up our life's savings even to save one life. Where Timmerman imagines in the Drowning Children case our having to decide how many children to save before we go to the bank to preserve the rest of

The Incomparability Objection

A different objection comes from those theorists who are strong value pluralists. In making his argument, Singer offers his pond case in an effort to appeal to commonsense moral intuitions. Yet he does not make any room for the special obligations we have to family and friends, or, perhaps, obligations to our own happiness. Generally speaking, there is room for loyalty to others in commonsense morality, as well as some time for oneself and the pursuit of one's central projects.[230] But the principle Singer offers only requires that we give until we begin to give up something of comparable value. So, it may be that certain things could justifiably be maintained in the face of his demanding principle, if they can be said to be valuable enough. We should not lose our own lives, for instance, in trying to save the lives of others, on Singer's principle. We would then be giving up something (our lives) of comparable importance to what we are trying to save (the lives of others). Singer's approach requires that we be able to make comparisons of values to determine what projects to pursue alongside donating to reliable aid agencies, which his principle obligates us to do, and which

our funds, in Unger's Bob's Bugatti case it seems like we are required to give up all of our savings just to save the life of one child, and it seems like this is actually what our common sense intuitions tell us. However, Timmerman could likely argue that that the Bob's Bugatti case is not comparable because it is a one-off incident, and not an ongoing demand, and an incident of sacrificing one's life's savings for a single child when saving a single child in reality tends not to be so expensive as to require one's life's savings. (Of course, really, on impartial consequentialism, it would seem one should let the child be hit and then donate the life's savings by selling the Bugatti and giving the proceeds to reliable aid agencies. But intuitively this is deeply wrong.) As well, Bob may be at least partially responsible for carelessly parking his Bugatti on the track while Lisa is not responsible for the children being in the ponds in Drowning Children. Another difficulty for Timmerman could be whether his case works in the case where others are not doing their fair share. See Robert Noggle, "Give till it hurts? Beneficence, imperfect duties, and a moderate response to the aid question," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 40 (Spring 2009): 1-16.

[230] For the classic treatment of maintaining one's projects in the face of demanding impartial concerns, see Bernard Williams on "integrity", "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism For and Against* ed. J.J.C. Smarte and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

to give up. But that comparisons of value can even be made has been disputed by strong pluralists.

Strong pluralists argue that values are radically incomparable. In the case of the two things of value Rachels wants to pit against one another, donation and child-rearing, these projects are very different. Each will require its own unique set of virtues that need to be cultivated and embodied. If the value of raising a child cannot be compared with the value of engaging in effective altruism, then there is no way for Rachels to make his argument. We cannot compare these two things and assign a dollar amount that leaves engaging in effective altruism the more valuable course of action because it helps more people.

Strong pluralist views would not get one off the hook, however. For it is not that, because donating cannot be shown to be of more value than childrearing we can avoid engaging in it. Rather, the incomparability objection would only state that because both are of value, we have reasons to do both, not just to donate at the expense of child rearing. Both are valuable, and we cannot determine that one is more valuable than the other, they are incomparable. So we will have reason to put effort into these and other values simultaneously to the extent possible.

A number of theorists have addressed claims like these.[231] The position will probably be particularly common among virtue theorists, who tend to recognize irresolvable conflicts in values in moral dilemmas where a virtuous agent must act but all courses of action

[231] See, for example, James Griffin, "Incommensurability: What's the Problem?," in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Elizabeth Anderson, "Practical Reason and Incommensurable Goods," in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

available to her will involve regret. A classic treatment of the issue comes from Bernard Williams. In his essay "Conflicts of Values", Williams argues that contrary to a common view there can be instances where an agent feels the pull of two obligations and neither can be said to outweigh the other:

> In another, and more drastic, kind of case, however, which might be called the 'tragic' kind, an agent can justifiably think that whatever he does will be wrong: that there are conflicting moral requirements, and that neither of them succeeds in overriding or outweighing the other. In this case, though it can actually emerge from deliberation that one of the courses of action is the one that, all things considered, one had better take, it is, and it remains, true that each of the courses of action is morally required, and at a level which means that, whatever he does, the agent will have reason to feel regret at the deepest level.[232]

Williams points to the existence of cases where two obligations conflict but there is no clear indication that one actually outweighs the other. There can be a value conflict where neither of the things in question is really more valuable than the other. This, it might be argued by strong pluralists, is just what is going on in the case where Rachels is asking us to compare giving to reliable aid agencies in satisfaction of Singer levels of demandingness and childrearing. We ought not to think that we must give up childrearing for charitable giving at a Singer level of demandingness. For both child rearing and giving are of value, the strong pluralist could argue, and it is not clear that we can say that giving is of more value than child rearing. Indeed, as Williams notes, the strongest pluralist argues there is not just conflict but that certain basic values cannot be translated into something like utility measurements to compare them:

> There is a further proposition which some of these will believe (among them, I believe, [Isaiah] Berlin): that there is no common currency in which these gains and losses of value can be computed, that values, or at least the most basic values, are not only plural but in a real sense incommensurable… the claim that values are incommensurable does say

[232] Bernard Williams, "Conflicts of Values," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 74.

> something true and important. In fact, it says more than one true and important thing. There are at least four different denials which the claim can be taken to involve; they are of increasing strength, so that accepting one later in the list involves accepting those earlier. 1. There is no one currency in terms of which each conflict of values can be resolved. 2. It is not true that for each conflict of values, there is some value, independent of any of the conflicting values, which can be appealed to in order to resolve that conflict. 3. It is not true that for each conflict of values, there is some value which can be appealed to (independent or not) in order rationally to resolve that conflict. 4. No conflict of values can ever rationally be resolved.[233]

Williams allows that conflicts of values can be resolved in cases where either the gains or the losses are disproportionately large, so he rejects the 4th claim. However, Williams denies that there is either a common currency or an independent value into which all conflicts can be translated to render them comparable. For the strong pluralist like Williams, the conflict between raising children and donating to reliable aid agencies may be a case where neither course of action outweighs the other in value and where there is no common currency or independent value into which these things can be translated to compare them and find one course better than the other. Williams, a "pluralist sceptic about Utopia", argues that it is overly optimistic to suppose we will have some grand insight into things that will allow us to resolve all conflicts of value, for the sceptic's "understanding of values as they are gives no hope that their present incoherences could be radically transcended without loss."[234] The strong pluralist could see loss precisely where Rachels sees gain, as child rearing would be lost in the overly optimistic and shortsighted overreach of a value monist, who would lose it to gain more for charitable donation.

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[233] Ibid., 77.

[234] Ibid., 80. However, Thomas Hurka has argued against the idea that strong pluralists are especially capable of accounting for moral regret, arguing that monism also allows for moral regret. See "Monism, pluralism, and rational regret," *Ethics* 106 (1996): 555-575.

Value monists and weak pluralists will object that Rachels has precisely managed to put a dollar figure on child-rearing and enabled a comparison in values. Value monists would argue that either we can think about child-rearing and effective altruism in terms of an independent value into which they can both be translated. Weak pluralists would maintain that we can still make comparisons as weak pluralists.

The point in raising the incomparability objection is not that strong pluralism can be demonstrated to be the superior and more defensible position. I am not endorsing strong pluralism here. Rather, the point is that reasonable people do hold this position. It is at the least reasonable to be a strong pluralist. And this makes Rachels' position controversial because he is relying on his readers being monists or weak pluralists who do allow for comparisons. His argument will not appeal to committed strong pluralists. They will reject it as overcoming a conflict in values only through unacceptable loss.

It is important to emphasize again that in rejecting Rachels' argument, strong pluralists would not say that we should quit donating to reliable aid agencies and only raise children instead. Rather, they would think that we have reason, to the extent possible, to both donate and raise children, and that agents may choose individually to act on these reasons as they see fit. What they reject is the notion that we should sacrifice raising children to be better donators. We have reasons to do both these things of value to the extent possible, and, as Williams notes of tragic cases, perhaps we ought to feel some sense of regret in a tragic conflict such as this one. Strong pluralists may feel a deep regret that there is a conflict of raising children and effective altruism. But they will still try to do both things to the best of their ability. They will not sacrifice one for the other. As we will see, the incomparability

objection will return in the discussion of the argument for adoption being superior to having a child of one's own.

Option 2: Raising Our Children to Do Enough Good (Expected Net Offset)

In line with the objection Rachels anticipates, we might argue that, even accepting Singer's stringent principle, we can still have children, because we can raise our children to give back to the world more than was invested in raising them. We can raise our children to become effective altruists, such that they gave back, over the course of their lives, over $227,000 (the figure Rachels accepts). Rachels acknowledges that it is possible that our child might become a great altruist, but she might also rebel against our efforts, or be born autistic, or simply, through some unfortunate circumstances, fail to do good in the world.[235] He does not think it likely that our child will become a "great humanitarian".

However, I argue that there is a rhetorical shift occurring here that, once clarified, might make Option 2 more plausible. Rachels continually refers to the great unlikelihood of a child becoming a "great humanitarian". But, whatever it takes to become a great humanitarian, all that it takes in this instance for a parent's procreation to have been morally permissible is that the child give back to the world a dollar more, say, than would have been given had the child not existed. Children do not have to become great humanitarians, if that means giving billions of dollars to aid agencies by establishing a foundation like Bill Gates. What children would have to do is give at least $227,001 dollars (or one more dollar than

[235] Rachels, "The Immorality of Having Children," 578. This list is Rachels' own. The example of Greta Thunberg suggests that people with autism can engage in very impactful activism.

whatever the figure happened to be) over the course of their lives. That amounts to $3,026 dollars for every year that the child is alive, assuming a lifespan of 75 years.[236] Although it may sound like a tall order to some, it is actually likely that a person born to financially secure procreators and raised with decent values could contribute this amount. And, if she did, this would be all that is required for her existence to have been more in line with promoting the good than her nonexistence. The expected net offset would still be enough to cover the resources involved in our having been raised in an affluent nation.[237]

It is also worth noting that one need not contribute solely through monetary donations, but might also volunteer, or engage in fundraising, or lobby for political action. These can also have an impact on the wellbeing of others without necessarily involving a dollar amount paid to an aid organization and require no great wealth but sacrifices in time. These other avenues of support can work all on their own or in tandem with traditional monetary contributions to enable someone to do a great deal of good, enough good to offset the resources put into raising her.

Rachels is of course correct to point out that it is highly unlikely that a child become a great humanitarian. At either end of the spectrum of probable life outcomes, it is unlikely that a child would be either a great humanitarian or an evil serial killer or dictator. But the child does not need to be a great humanitarian in order to offset the opportunity cost of having her. And having a child further from either extreme (great humanitarian or evil

[236] Or to take a different approach, sticking to the United States, median per capita income was $34,103 in 2019 according to the Census Bureau. If one divides $227,001 over one's working life of 40 years, and one plans to give back only during one's working years, one would have to give around 16% of $34,103 each year, around $5,600 per year. This is a big amount for someone making this figure to give but not nearly as impossible to do as Rachels' argument might suggest. See US Census, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/SEX255219.

[237] I owe the term "expected net offset" to Howard Nye.

dictator) is far more likely than having a child at either extreme. It is far more likely to have a moderately charitable child, or a moderately stingy child, than a child who will become a great humanitarian or evil dictator. And, although it is always possible that children will rebel against their parents' values, it is likely that values will influence a child and can make it reasonably quite probable that a child raised with decent values will contribute the necessary amount to offset her opportunity cost.

These considerations, taken together, seem to offer a moderate, middle-of-the-road approach that plausibly handles Rachels' concerns without leading to the radical, eyebrow-raising conclusion that Rachels attempts to argue for. And in the end it may be that more moderate approaches have a greater impact in the long run in getting through to people, rather than demanding that they go childless.

Despite Rachels' anticipation of such an objection, Option 2 seems to offer reasonable alternatives to going childless, even if we do accept the stringent standards of Singer's principle. With these two options on the table, we can plausibly reject Rachels' conclusion that going childless is necessary in order to procreate while addressing the plight of the global poor in a morally responsible way.

The Adoption Alternative

Some suggest that adoption may provide an alternative that is preferable to procreation at least when the option is available. Such a case is made by Daniel Friedrich and Tina Rulli. These authors are worth considering together because their approaches make the case for

adoption from complementary angles. While Friedrich makes the case for adoption by arguing that there are children in the world in need of parents, Rulli makes the case for adoption by arguing that having children increases the number of children in need in the world. While Friedrich focuses on existing needs, Rulli focuses on avoiding increasing needs.

Friedrich argues that the general duty that we have to assist people in need commits us to helping children without parental care, and that, as a result, there will be some people who have a moral duty to adopt instead of having their own biological children.[238] Friedrich acknowledges that some will object that this is to have too encompassing a view of our duty to assist.[239] He imagines that someone might object that, although it might be of great benefit and little cost to us to marry someone, morality does not obligate us to do it. Marriage is such an intimate decision, and so too, it seems, is having children. Friedrich explores the possibility that some "minimum or core-level agency is to be shielded from impersonal moral calculation."[240] That is, we might demand of people from the perspective of impersonal, impartial moral calculation that they rescue Singer's drowning child. But we could not demand that they do things like marry or adopt, things that seem to erode even their own minimal sense of agency. Friedrich counters that adoption would only be an erosion of minimal agency if it is indeed a "central concern" of the agent to have biological rather than adopted children.[241] He contends that, despite the prevailing preference for having a child of

[238] Daniel Friedrich, "A Duty to Adopt?," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 30 (2013): 25-39.
[239] Ibid., 26.
[240] Ibid.
[241] Ibid.

one's own, it does not seem to be "so central" that it would be objectionably overridden by a duty to adopt imputed to us by impersonal moral calculation.[242]

Friedrich also considers whether autonomy is at stake in requiring that an agent adopt.[243] He points out that any moral requirement that minimizes the options available to us seems to conflict with autonomy in some respect, and that therefore autonomy is unlikely to be able to block an obligation to adopt. Our obligation to save the drowning child, after all, severely limits our options (presumably to the one option of saving the child) yet this is not seen as an excuse for not saving the child. Friedrich then examines whether there might be a case to be made that requiring adoption would be problematic because it would seem to demand that we have feelings toward the adopted child, which we cannot compel ourselves to experience, and because intimate relationships ought to be based on "affection and mutual concern".[244] He replies that the moral requirement to adopt would be a duty to act, not to feel, and that intimate parental relationships, though more effective where there is genuine affection, are often asymmetrical for the early years of a child's life. (An infant does not reciprocate in a cycle of mutual concern, nor would we expect her to.) And, to clarify further still, the moral requirement to adopt only applies in Friedrich's view to those who have both the emotional and financial capacities to adopt, and in cases where adoption promises better care than institutions could provide.

Friedrich does acknowledge if it is among one's most central concerns to have a biological child, and this desire is an informed desire, then its non-satisfaction could lead to

[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid., 27.

a reduction in the well-being of the agent.[245] But he believes that often desires to have a child of one's own are based on false beliefs, such as that adopted children are more difficult to raise. As to the costs of adoption, Friedrich notes that international adoptions are indeed expensive (ranging from $15,000 to $40,000 USD), but argues that parenting in general is expensive, and that those not prepared to devote considerable resources to their children should probably not have any at all.[246] (However, Friedrich seems to overlook that the adoption costs are on top of typical parenting costs.) These considerations clearly narrow significantly the range of people to whom Friedrich expects the duty to adopt will actually apply.[247]

Rulli argues that adoption is preferable to having a child of one's own.[248] She argues that adoption meets a child's crucial need for a family, in contrast to procreation which creates additional needs that must be met.[249] Although she acknowledges the morally

[245] Ibid., 28.
[246] Ibid., 32.
[247] At the conclusion of his discussion, Friedrich considers three final objections related to the earlier discussion of our duties to aid and to the number of children in need of adoption. These are that duties to assist are to be satisfied collectively, that they fall under our imperfect duties, and an empirical challenge that there actually are just not that many children to be adopted. As for collective satisfaction Friedrich argues that, even granting that the duty to assist children without parental care is fundamentally collective, there is still an individual duty since it is only individuals that can adopt such children. He thinks that parental care is sufficiently superior to institutional care of these children as to warrant a duty to adopt. He counters those who would see a duty to adopt as among our imperfect duties by responding that, because the duty applies to only those who already want children, it cannot be said that they might satisfy their imperfect duties to assist in some other way. They already intend to have children, and so have a duty to adopt a child rather than have a biological child (unless it is a central goal of theirs to have a biologically related child). Friedrich grants that, on some estimates of international organizations, there are not that many children who can be adopted, but distinguishes this from children who need to be adopted. Perhaps, at present, many children are not adoptable through international adoption agencies, but this in his view simply means that many children who could greatly benefit from adoption have not been identified or registered by the relevant authorities.
[248] Tina Rulli, "The Unique Value of Adoption," in *Family-Making: Contemporary Ethical Challenges* ed. Francoise Baylis and Carolyn McLeod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 109-126.
[249] Rulli notes that someone might dispute this by challenging that procreating also benefits someone, namely, the person brought into existence, and that indeed R.M. Hare did argue that coming into existence can be seen as a benefit. This matter arose in our discussion of child-centered concerns. If one did take this option, then adoption would not be seen as uniquely conferring benefits to a child, because procreation would also be an instance of conferring benefits on someone. In her discussion, Rulli counters that although coming

admirable sacrifice of those who undergo pregnancy to bring a life into existence, she points out that this process, however admirable, is less like saving a life than adoption, and more like creating a life. Rulli acknowledges that adoption is not always a matter of life and death but argues that it is still of critical importance that a child receive the support of parental care.

In considering the empirical realities of adoption, Rulli, like Friedrich, seeks to address claims that it is a mistake to suppose that there really are many children around the world in need of adoption. She acknowledges that there are obstacles to adoption, frequently due to national governments, which reduce opportunities to provide homes for children in need of adoption.[250] However, in the end she argues that, whatever the numbers are, surely at the moment it can be agreed that there are indeed children in need of adoption, and more children in need of adoption than there are prospective parents for them. Thus the need is still present, even given various difficulties and concerns that have justifiably arisen. Rulli also argues that adoption offers a "morally noble opportunity" to extend benefits to a stranger that are usually reserved for one's relations, and that adoptions can actually have a "transformative power" over "adoptive parents' conception of family and self."[251] Typically many people have valued having their own biological children, but Rulli actually thinks we can grant that this is to be valued while also seeing a reason to value adoption. If there is

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into existence is a necessary condition to enjoy other goods in life, coming into existence by itself is not itself a benefit. What matters is whether other goods are supplied. It is parenting a child that is the important benefit that can be supplied, and it is this view that allows Rulli to argue that creating a life also creates the need for parenting, while adopting a child meets an existing need for parenting. To take one of the accounts defended earlier, on the variabilist view we can say that there is no reason for a child to be brought into existence, but that, once existing, the goods the child could experience do matter. On variabilism, there is reason to save existing people, but no reason to create new people.

[250] Rulli, "The Unique Value of Adoption," 118. Rulli offers a careful extended discussion of the nature and origin of these obstacles in reply to an article by Graf but these issues fall outside the scope of this project.

[251] Ibid., 109.

indeed a value in extending the benefits of parenting to one's biological children, then this seems to make it all the more noble an opportunity to be able to provide such benefits for a stranger. She argues this is a unique value of adoption.[252]

Assessing the Case for Adoption

I now turn to consider the merits of these cases in favor of adoption over procreation. Friedrich argues that at least some of us are obligated to adopt rather than have our own biological children, since for at least some of us the concern to have a biological child will not be so central as to be objectionably overridden by a duty to adopt imputed to us by impartial moral calculation. In reply to Friedrich, I agree that adoption does indeed seem a way in which one can fulfill the duty to aid, but it is of course only one among many ways to render aid. Because our duties to aid can be discharged in other ways, which I will argue may be more effective than adoption, only some, perhaps those already inclined to find adoption to be right for their lives, would be obligated to adopt.

At the same time, Rulli argues that unlike adoption, where one offers a family to a child who did not have one and so benefits her, procreation is an instance of creating a child in need of a family, and so creating additional needs that need to be met. The different

[252] Rulli does consider that some adoptive agencies have seen an altruistic motivation as the wrong sort of motivation for adopting a child. This seems to be either because a rescuing mentality does not reflect the necessary dedication needed for becoming a parent or because there is a fear that parents who adopt from altruistic motives will expect a great deal of gratitude from their children. However, we should indeed only consider prospective parents who are serious, Rulli counters, and we should not think that the "rescue relationship" should inform the parental relationship. She argues further that though an adoption may begin based on impartial, rescuing grounds, a parental relationship can grow into one based on properly partial grounds.

accounts covered in Chapter 2 will approach these issues differently. I will begin by considering variabilism as it will be the most favorable for Rulli's view that there is no reason to bring potential children into existence as compared with helping existing children before working through the other views.

As the preceding discussion of variabilism indicates, creating a new life is not like saving an existing life on variabilism, so long as we acknowledge that we can only be talking about life-saving, life-or-death adoptions here, which may be far rarer than the defenders of adoption as superior to procreation imply.[253] There is no reason to bring a child into existence on variabilism, and so the needs of the existent count in a way the needs of the nonexistent (those who never come to exist) do not.

Still, even on variabilism, as the previous discussion has suggested, one can also save lives by donating instead of adopting, and one might have biological children while raising them to donate more to reliable aid agencies than would have been donated had they not been born (accepting for the sake of argument the Singer-Rachels view of the demandingness of our obligations). On the view I have been developing on variabilism, there is reason to save an existing life and no reason to bring a life into existence, but one can save these existing lives through other ways than adopting, and indeed donating to reliable aid agencies may be a far more effective means of saving lives than trying for rare life-or-death life-saving adoptions. Non-life-or-death adoptions would only enhance the welfare of a child who would

[253] By life-or-death adoption I mean literally an adoption where, if the adoption had not occurred, the child would die. Recall that variabilism is the view that the moral status of persons matters, but the moral significance of their losses and gains is variable. In a world where a person will come into existence, costs and benefits to that person count. But in a world where a person never comes into existence, neither costs nor benefits count. If a person is going to come into existence, then parents have reasons to bring about benefits for her and reduce costs.

otherwise be less well off, while donating to reliable aid agencies the sums required for an expensive international adoption would genuinely save lives. In assessing the case for adoption compared to donation and procreation in more detail, it helps to recall what is at issue in applying variabilism and to consider that there are vastly different kinds of adoptions.

For example, at one extreme, one might adopt a child and rescue her from so dire a situation that one saves the child's life (what I have been calling life-or-death life-saving adoptions). At another extreme, one might adopt a child who otherwise would have had a life of more goods than harms in a foster care system or by guardians, and perhaps received some if not all of the sorts of supports that we expect parents to provide from foster parents, guardians, and social workers. Bringing a child from a low-income nation to a high-income nation will likely mean that once the child is adopted and brought to the high-income nation, typical costs of child-rearing in such nations will begin to apply. Even if one has saved a life by adopting in a life-or-death life-saving adoption, one manages only to save one life, and to commit to that life considerable financial resources by bringing the child to a high-income nation.

The discussion of these issues plays out in specific ways on variabilism. On variabilism, the important aspects when comparing adoption to procreation are: (1) the effect of adoption on the well-being of the adopted child (how much better off they are if you adopt them vs. leave them unadopted), and (2) the effect of the adoption on third parties (which reflects such things as the extent to which one's parenting makes the child more likely

to be a more effective altruist than they would have been in proportion to the resource cost of raising them, etc.).

Both 1 and 2 must be compared to (3) the effect of having a new child on third parties (since the child doesn't exist in the status quo where she isn't created and thus the fact that she would exist and have more well-being if created is not a morally relevant benefit. This similarly reflects the extent to which one's parenting makes the procreated child likely to be an effective altruist, in relation to the resource costs of raising her, etc.).

Thus, to be more precise, adoption is superior, precisely as good, or inferior to procreation if the increase in expected well-being to the potential adopted child combined with the increase in the expected well-being of others from your adopting the child is higher, equal to, or less than the increase in the expected well-being of others from your procreating a new child.

For example, if the child is relatively mature, one does not have much chance of making a large difference in the extent to which the child is an effective altruist, and the child won't be horribly off or die if one doesn't adopt her, and one could have a good chance of making a new procreated child an effective altruist, that might be a better option.

On the other hand, if the child is relatively young, and she might not grow up in a very good environment if you do not adopt her, one can be expected to make a reasonably large difference in her well-being and one could make an almost comparable impact on the extent to which she will probably become an effective altruist as having a new child is likely to make her (the new child) an effective altruist. In such a case, the gain in well-being to the adopted child plus the expected gain in well-being to third parties from adoption could be greater

than the gain in well-being to third parties from your instead having a new child, in which case adoption would be better.

So even on variabilism, which is the most favorable position for the defenders of the adoption view that is on the table here (Benatar's antinatalism having been rejected), the argument for the moral preferability of adoption can be rejected. And other accounts like the Harman-DeGrazia weak personal reasons account and the hybrid personal variabilism and impersonal weak reasons accounts will be even more favorable to the defender of procreation as permissible compared to adoption. On the Harman-DeGrazia weak personal reasons account, there are weak reasons to bring someone into existence for the benefit she will experience. And so there are weak personal reasons to benefit potential people that weigh on the side of procreation being morally permissible compared to adoption. And on the personal variabilism/weak impersonal reasons hybrid view, although there are no personal reasons to have a child, as on variabilism, there are impersonal reasons. That is, one ought to bring children into the world for the impersonal value this will produce, even as the reasons for doing so are weaker than benefitting existing children. These views give some weight to procreation for either personal or impersonal weak reasons, and so make procreation even more viable than on the variabilist view when compared to the adoption argument.

Despite the limitations of international adoption when compared with donation, when compared to procreation it is conceivable that life-saving adoptions are, at first glance, morally superior to procreation, even if they may still bring about less overall good than donating the sum it would take to raise the child in a high-income nation to a reliable aid

agency. However, genuinely life-or-death life-saving international adoptions are likely quite rare. And, as discussed above, parents can offset the opportunity cost of having a child by attempting to raise their child to do more good than otherwise would be done had she not been born. Of course, one can also adopt and raise that child as an effective altruist, especially if the child is young enough to be influenced. But this may not always be possible depending on the age of the child. This suggests that although adoption is one way to discharge our duties to aid, it is not the only way, and one might be an effective altruist and raise children of one's own to be effective altruists, raising these children to do more good than would have been done had they never been born instead of adopting in many cases.[254]

As well, things will break down along different conceptions of demandingness. Impartial consequentialists accepting Singer-Rachels levels of demandingness will probably tend to give aid. Rejecting this level of demandingness, others, like the strong pluralist who wants the transformative experience of adoption, will tend to adopt. Until this point, my discussion of adoption has proceeded under the assumption that we have fairly stringent duties to aid, but I have also explored whether some may want to reject such strong duties to aid as Singer and Rachels endorse, and as it appears Friedrich does as well. If we were to reject Singer's principle, as Timmerman argues we should, or on any of the other ways of doing so such as strong pluralism (or Igneski's discussion of imperfect duties or Kamm's discussion of the moral relevance of distance), then we would still have duties to aid of some strength, but they would not be so strong as to compel us to always give up luxury spending

[254] If one is a pluralist who happens to relish the transformative experience of a non-life-saving adoption, on this perspective it makes sense to adopt a child *and* try to raise the child as an effective altruist. But this would make it more difficult to meet obligations for charitable giving than having a child of one's own.

or generally trivial spending in order to do something of greater moral importance. And if we can even indulge in luxury spending at times rather than do something of moral importance, then we can presumably raise a biological child instead of adopting, even as we would seem to still have some obligation to donate to reliable aid agencies, but not nearly as great an obligation as if we had to entirely offset the cost of raising a biological child by raising her to be an effective altruist. (The child would have whatever duties we have herself on Timmerman's view or other views that reject Singer-level demandingness, but we would not be obligated to raise her as an effective altruist, just to raise her so that she would discharge whatever duties we all do have.) Thus rejecting the sort of demandingness in our duties to aid advocated by Singer also makes Friedrich's case much less strong, as adopting becomes a way some people might aid, but those who aid by donating some amount (not to the level of offsetting) would still be fulfilling their duties to aid.

These considerations seem to weaken Friedrich's case. Adoption is a viable way to discharge duties to aid, but one can still have biological children and offset the cost of raising them by raising them to be effective altruists, and if one rejects the level of demandingness endorsed by Singer and Rachels it seems one could discharge one's more limited duties to aid in ways other than adopting a child, which would presumably go above and beyond these duties, and are supererogatory.

Friedrich does address those like Igneski who argue that adopting a child would fall under one's imperfect duties. He argues that those who already want children are the only people who have a duty to adopt, and that unless having a biological child is a central concern of theirs, they ought to adopt. But as I have suggested, one could do more good by donating

to a reliable aid agency, or one could even do something like set up a fund for supporting international adoptions, and so it seems like duties to aid generally could be discharged either by adopting a child or by donating, and only in some cases, when an adopted child is young enough, could one possibly do both. Friedrich argues that since he has in mind those who already plan to have children, one could not argue that by adopting they fail to do other things with their resources that might help.[255] But this does not seem to consider the possibility of raising effective altruists discussed here that might bring about far more good than an adoption in terms of saving children's lives. It seems like instead of adopting, parents might donate the funds to a reliable aid agency, meaning that adopting would indeed take resources they would otherwise have given to save many children's lives. It therefore does not seem that we can say that the only way those who want to be parents could discharge their duties to aid is through adoption. Adoption always seems sub-optimal compared to donating to a reliable aid agency or setting up a fund to cover international adoption if one really is thinking about doing the most good (motivated by the impartial calculation), suggesting that potential parents should not even adopt instead of procreate, but rather donate or set up a fund instead of adopt.

However, I would argue that we should reject this idea that we must only ever donate. It is reasonable to think that there are different ways we can fulfill our duties to aid, since otherwise we would seem to have to forfeit even adoption as a way to discharge our duties to aid. If we do not allow that there are different ways to fulfill our duties to aid, even considering parents who already want children, then it seems we may be led to think that

[255] Daniel Friedrich, "A Duty to Adopt?," 33.

we can only ever donate. If proponents of adoption want to resist this conclusion, I would suggest that we understand adoption as falling under imperfect duties, in that there is more than one way to discharge obligations to aid.

If our duties to aid are weaker than Singer, Rachels, or Friedrich suggest, if, for example, we side with Timmerman (or Igneski), then it seems that although it might be a very good thing to adopt a child, or to donate such a large sum as would go into the raising of an adopted child, we are not morally obligated to give this much. We do not always have to give up all trivial spending for things of moral importance on the Timmerman view, even as our duties to aid will still require us to give something to others. For those already inclined to adopt it may be fairly easy to discharge their duties to aid by adopting, but those who are inclined toward having their own biological children could discharge their duties to aid in other ways.

When Rulli argues that adoption is a morally noble opportunity, she seems correct, though I do not know that it is morally less noble than donating an equivalent sum as would be spent on the adopted child or perhaps even than endeavoring to raise an effective altruist. Certainly, there is a difference between writing checks over the years and investing the sort of constant care and attention and devotion involved in parenting biological or adopted children. But is there an analogous difference between devoting oneself continually to one's work life so as to make enough money as to save many lives or devoting oneself to caring for an adopted child? In the end, as far as the impartial calculation is concerned, it would seem that to save many lives is better than to care for a single child even as one is saving that child's life, though it is rare that adoptions will do this. Still, I would not argue that therefore we

must be obligated to donate rather than adopt, any more than I would argue that we must adopt rather than offset through raising effective altruists to donate. I would contend that these are all permissible different ways of discharging our duties to aid, however strong we think they ultimately are.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began with a look at the discussion of our duties to aid and the global poor and considered Singer's classic case in the ethics of global poverty along with classic response to it. I then considered the arguments of Stuart Rachels against procreation in favor of donating the money that would be spent on raising a child to a reliable aid agency instead. I found that two options anticipated by Rachels might be developed to respond to his argument and to defend the moral permissibility of having children in affluent nations. One option attacks Singer's principle directly, arguing with Travis Timmerman that it is unsupported by common sense morality after reflection on the Drowning Children case and the aid worker case, or offering the incomparability objection from strong pluralists. A second option is to grant Singer's and Rachels' view of our duties to aid, but to consider that a child may indeed plausibly manage to pay out what would be her expected net offset to reliable aid agencies. On either option, we can take seriously the considerations that lead us to question our uncritical stance on procreation in light of the plight of the global poor without concluding that the only way to address these concerns is by going childless. Finally, I reviewed the arguments of Daniel Friedrich and Tina Rulli that present adoption as a morally preferable option to having a child of one's own and responded that adoption is one

way to discharge our duties to aid but not the only way, and, viewed impartially, not even the best way. In the next chapter, I will take up third party concerns and the environment.

Chapter 5 – Third Parties and the Environment

Introduction

In this chapter, I will consider third party effects and the environment. In the last chapter, I examined how having children is related to our obligations to the global poor. But having children doesn't just have the potential to take up resources that could be given to the global poor. Having children with environmentally destructive lifestyles can degrade natural resources that are owed to the next generation based on obligations of distributive justice. I will consider how we can make sense of intergenerational distributive justice and the environment with a look at a Rawls-inspired approach, leading to an understanding that we violate the requirements of distributive justice by depriving the next generation of a fair turn with a functioning biosphere. I will then consider how we can raise children in a low carbon fashion to procreate while meeting the requirements of distributive justice.

Having children can also directly inflict harm on others, including perhaps disproportionately affecting the global poor, through the negative effects it causes that ripple into the future, having an impact on future generations of people.[256] The harm it can inflict is on future generations who will have to face the effects of climate change caused by the carbon emissions and other environmentally destructive activities of children who are born

[256] Climate change also greatly affects nonhuman sentient life on the planet. It is plausible that we have duties to nonhuman sentient life. However, the extensive treatment such issues would deserve is beyond the scope of this project and cannot be dealt with here.

in affluent nations with lifestyles detrimental to the environment. There are thus concerns both of distributive justice and of direct harm to third parties when it comes to procreation and the environment.

To meaningfully discuss harming future generations, I first discuss a number of theoretical issues in order to confront problems that arise in thinking about harm to merely possible people. A major concern, raised in Derek Parfit's societal level version of the non-identity problem, the "Depletion Case", is that our actions in the present generation change what future generation will come into existence, including actions taken for the sake of some future generation. We thus need some way to make sense of how we can be trying to avert harm to future generations if our actions end up creating a different generation than the one that would have existed otherwise. If a generation can only exist if we keep polluting, how could we owe it to them not to pollute? I will consider how each of the positions discussed in Chapter 2 can deal with this problem. The Harman-DeGrazia weak reasons view, Melinda Roberts' variabilism and her position on the "non-identity fallacy", and the hybrid personal variabilism/impersonal weak reasons view each offer a way to respond to Parfit's Depletion Case.

If we can be said to harm future generations, then the next question is whether procreating now, especially in affluent nations with high-emitting lifestyles, will cause harm to them. John Nolt, Seth Wynes and Kimberly Nicholas, and Christopher Morgan-Knapp and Charles Goodman all emphasize ways in which increasing emissions, which can occur through adding to the population, can be linked to harm to future people. In Nolt's work, the addition of another person to an affluent high-emitting nation is estimated to cause the death

of one to two future people. Thus there are serious considerations that must be taken into account in understanding whether in procreating we may be harming future generations because of the emissions that will be produced by the person we create and other environmentally destructive behaviors that person might engage in.

In tackling these issues, I begin by considering issues of environmental and intergenerational distributive justice and how responsible procreation can meet the requirements of distributive justice. I then consider issues of direct harm to future generations with a discussion of Parfit's societal level non-identity problem and how the Harman-DeGrazia view, Melinda Roberts' variabilism, and the hybrid variabilism/weak impersonal reasons view each offer ways of tackling the problem. Following this, I consider arguments that could be made against procreation from the research of John Nolt and Morgan-Knapp and Goodman on the harmful effects of carbon emissions and based on our duty of nonmaleficence. I formulate ways of responding to these arguments that permit us to procreate, albeit in an environmentally responsible manner.

Future Generations and Intergenerational Justice

As Allen Habib notes, one common way of understanding how a generation can wrong its descendants is in terms of distributive justice, drawing on John Rawls' discussion in the 1970s.[257] Rawls suggested that each generation must pass on to future generations sufficient

[257] Allen Habib, "Sharing the Earth: Sustainability and the Currency of Inter-Generational Environmental Justice," *Environmental Values* 22 (December 2013): 751-764.

capital in order to preserve the just institutions that are needed for a just society. Environmental ethicists have adapted the view, as Habib explains:

> Every generation is equally entitled to a fair share of the bounty of the natural environment. But since generations precede each other in time, it is the duty of earlier generations to ensure that later generations receive their fair share. Acting sustainably is the way of meeting this duty, since sustainable practices are those that (ideally) preserve the environment for the future. And thus environmental sustainability is a demand of inter-generational distributive justice.[258]

This is a prominent view among environmental ethicists and offers a way to understand what we owe to future generations. An important question remains as to how to characterize the "fair share of the bounty of the natural environment". Habib advocates an approach that holds the environment itself is to be distributed, rather than its value as might be understood in terms of utility, capital, or human flourishing. He recognizes that we need to be clear about how much of the environment needs to be shared with future generations and sustained for our descendants, and proposes we be guided by a distinction between sharing something by sharing its parts or sharing it in turns.

One can share a pie by dividing it up and distributing its parts, whereas a bicycle is shared by taking turns. Habib believes that outstanding difficulties can be resolved by emphasizing that the environment is shared by turns rather than parts. This is the mistaken assumption he identifies as common to those who would understand the environment's value in terms of utility, capital, or human flourishing. Attempts to translate the value of nature into some kind of measurable currency involve valuing different parts of the natural world and the ecosystem services they provide and lead to difficulty in determining how these parts should be weighed against one another. But taking a view of nature itself as

[258] Ibid., 752.

shared by turns avoids these problems. Habib argues that we don't owe future generations all of the parts of nature. Rather, we owe future generations an environment that meets "minimum standards of acceptability of the *shape* or condition" it ought to be in.[259] Each generation is owed a fair turn with the environment. Habib acknowledges that what constitutes a fair turn is complicated, but I will set aside further issues here and take up this idea of passing on a functioning ecosystems.[260] The idea is that we must pass on the nonhuman natural world as a whole in a state such that it functions adequately for the next generation, or at least as well as it does for us. Habib's approach has distinct advantages over trying to settle on a metric for measuring different parts of nature and their value and trying to weigh them. It is not particular things we are to preserve but functioning ecosystems. With Habib's account on the table, there is a clear way to make sense of how present generations can violate their duties to future generations through the degradation of the environment, failing to pass on functioning ecosystems, and how this is an issue of distributive justice.

The Case Against Procreation from Intergenerational Distributive Justice

With respect to having children, the worry is that doing so violates our obligations of distributive justice. If our having children creates more people with high emitting lifestyles, and this leads to the destruction of the biosphere as a whole, we will fail to pass

[259] Ibid., 760.

[260] As Habib notes, if we were passing on a house, what might matter most is that it still function as a house. A fair turn would avoid putting a hole in its roof. But Habib points out that there is more than function at work when it comes to nature. What about a rose bush in the yard of the house, shouldn't this be passed on? And yet saying that this ought to be done is not about enabling the function of anything. Due to this consideration, Habib argues for a notion of flourishing rather than limited to function. Habib suggests flourishing can be understood variously, as involving ecological health, wilderness or wildness, or integrity or autonomy. However, for my purposes here, I will restrict my use of his account to this view based on functionality.

on a functioning biosphere as is required on Habib's account. This forms a *prima facie* case against procreation based on concerns of intergenerational distributive justice, if having children does destroy the biosphere, and there is evidence to suggest that it does. For example, John Nolt claims that "the average American is responsible, through his/her greenhouse gas emissions, for the suffering and/or deaths of one or two future people."[261] If this is so then we might suppose that the addition of an average American, through having a child, will cause the deaths of an additional one or two future people. A family of 5 would find itself with 5 to 10 more deaths on its hands, rather than the 2 to 4 of a childless couple. Nolt concludes that high emitting lifestyles have a seriously destructive impact on the biosphere, given the estimates of how this will cause environmental destruction and will harm future people. Having children in a high emitting nation with high emitting lifestyles is *prima facie* at odds with avoiding significant temperature increase that would undermine the biosphere we are obligated to pass on. As to the specifics of our obligations to avoid undermining the biosphere through emissions, the "2018 IPPC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C" states:

> Future climate-related risks depend on the rate, peak and duration of warming. In the aggregate, they are larger if global warming exceeds 1.5°C before returning to that level by 2100 than if global warming gradually stabilizes at 1.5°C, especially if the peak temperature is high (e.g., about 2°C) (*high confidence*). Some impacts may be long-lasting or irreversible, such as the loss of some ecosystems (*high confidence*).[262]

Irreversible loss of ecosystems would constitute the destruction of the biosphere, violating the requirements of distributive justice by failing to pass on a functioning ecosystem. In

[261] Nolt, "How Harmful Are the Average American's Greenhouse Gas Emissions?," *Ethics, Policy & Environment* 14 (2011): 3-10.
[262] Myles R. Allen *et al.*, "Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5 C: Summary for Policymakers," *IPCC*, accessed October 31, 2020, https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/.

order to avoid this, potential procreators must abide by IPPC estimates of a just carbon budget. The report notes:

> In model pathways with no or limited overshoot of 1.5°C, global net anthropogenic CO2 emissions decline by about 45% from 2010 levels by 2030… reaching net zero around 2050 (2045–2055 interquartile range). For limiting global warming to below 2°C 12 CO2 emissions are projected to decline by about 25% by 2030 in most pathways (10–30% interquartile range) and reach net zero around 2070... Non-CO2 emissions in pathways that limit global warming to 1.5°C show deep reductions that are similar to those in pathways limiting warming to 2°C. (high confidence)…[263]

In order to meet the requirements of the formula to avoid overshoot of 1.5°C, every potential procreator needs to reduce her emissions by 45% from 2010 levels in order to bring it about that future generations have a fair turn with ecological systems with the potential to meet their needs as well as these systems met our needs. The second formula, for limiting global warming to below 2°C, is less demanding, requiring a reduction in admissions to 25%. In 2010, for high income countries, median per capita GHG emissions were 13 tCO2eq/cap/yr.[264] Calculating 45% of 13 gives us the figure of 5.8 tons to avoid overshoot of 1.5°C. The less demanding formula to avoid overshoot of 2°C would give a figure of 9.75. Another source, The Nature Conservancy's carbon footprint calculator, states:

> The average carbon footprint for a person in the United States is 16 tons, one of the highest rates in the world. Globally, the average is closer to 4 tons. To have the best chance of avoiding a 2°C rise in global temperatures, the average global carbon footprint per year needs to drop under 2 tons by 2050.[265]

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[263] Ibid.
[264] Ottmar Edenhofer *et al.*, "Technical Summary," in *Climate Change 2014: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* ed. Edenhofer *et al*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 46.
[265] "Calculate Your Carbon Footprint", *The Nature Conservancy*, accessed October 31, 2020, https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/carbon-footprint-calculator/.

According to IPCC sources, the least we would have to do is reduce to 9.75 tons per capita per year in order to avoid overshooting 2°C. However, the more demanding IPCC formula and The Nature Conservancy calculator require more than this, at 5.8 tons and 2 tons respectively. What then is the acceptable budget within which one must stay even as one has children as a procreator in a high-income nation?

I would argue that the responsible procreator is best off using more precise calculators like that of The Nature Conservancy and determining a more precise figure based on various lifestyle factors than simply calculating using the median per capita figure from high income countries. But if we are looking for a general figure, I suggest we should take the 2 ton figure as the just annual carbon budget because critics of procreation on environmental grounds may well take the more stringent figure. Indeed, Seth Wynes and Kimberly Nicholas cite a figure very close to this (2.1 tons) as the acceptable annual carbon budget in their article which suggests not having children is an effective way to reduce emissions.[266] Arguably this budget will for many people still permit having at least one child, meaning that one can procreate even in a high income nation in an environmentally responsible manner, although it will take serious work to bring emissions down from current per capita averages to stay within the acceptable budget to avoid violating the requirements of distributive justice. If there is a good argument to be made for accepting a higher figure, then the burden on potential procreators is even less. But taking the most stringent figure, close to the figure which Wynes and Nicholas support, and recognizing that this still leaves room for having at

[266] See Seth Wynes and Kimberly Nicholas, "The Climate Mitigation Gap: Education and Government Recommendations Miss the Most Effective Individual Actions," *Environmental Research Letters*, July 12, 2017, iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/aa7541, 1.

least one child, allows us to defeat a blanket prohibition on procreation on environmental grounds. There are all sorts of ways we can reduce our carbon emissions within the budget, such as no longer driving a car, going vegan, growing our own vegetables and herbs, and many others, and many families are already adopting such practices.[267] As I will note again later, some children may also through environmental activism be particularly able to allow parents to live within this budget by inspiring others to do more to reduce their carbon footprint to live within it. And, of course, just as children need not become great humanitarians, children need not become great environmentalists in order to have given back slightly more good in environmental terms than would have been produced had their parents not had them. Thus, the *prima facie* case against procreation from distributive justice only forecloses environmentally irresponsible procreation, not procreation within this budget which will permit the passing on of a fair share, a functioning biosphere, to the next generation, which is at least possible with some serious adjustments to lifestyle.

Environmentally Mediated Harm and the Non-Identity Problem

In addition to concerns of distributive justice, there is also the matter of our directly harming future generations through having children. Out of a duty of nonmaleficence, we have an obligation not to harm future generations that is independent of our duties with respect to distributive justice to pass on functioning ecosystems.[268] However, before

[267] For examples of families already living as low carbon a life as they can, see "Could you live a low carbon life?", *The Guardian*, May 4, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/may/04/carbon-cutting-zero-emissions-eco-warriors-damaged-world.

[268] Even if we do pass on functioning ecosystems, there are still other ways in which our emissions and more generally environmentally destructive activities could directly harm future generations. The destruction of arable topsoil can cause harm by reducing future food production even if this leaves nonhuman natural ecosystems still functioning. Destruction of arable topsoil can be caused by the use of chemical fertilizers,

considering the case that we are harming future generations through our behavior with respect to the environment, there are serious questions about how to make sense of harming future generations generally. In addition to his formulation of the non-Identity problem discussed in Chapter 1, Derek Parfit also formulated an understanding of how our decisions about future generations actually alter which generations will come into existence in the context of the problem.[269] The problem was also formulated by Thomas Schwartz.[270] For example, if a government institutes a policy change this will have a considerable impact on how people live their lives as they have to comply with new regulations or make their lives fit around changes that have been made. Any changes that can have an impact on an entire society, and have some effect on people's lives, will actually change minute details of their lives, in how they respond to the policy and the changes that result. At the same time, for an individual to be born, a sperm and egg must meet at precisely the right moment. If a policy is implemented that changes the daily lives of many people, it would seem that this will alter who they meet and when, as well as when they reproduce.

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which can be supported by particular individuals even if inadvertently if they purchase produce grown using these fertilizers. See Oliver Milman, "Earth has lost a third of arable land in past 40 years, scientists say", *The Guardian*, December 2, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/dec/02/arable-land-soil-food-security-shortage. Many other environmental issues are not nearly as measurable as carbon emissions. We often lack adequate information to understand how various causes, such as local government policies or the impact of colonialism might factor in to environmental destruction. This might cause some to wonder if it would be more responsible for a potential parent to simply avoid procreation until more information becomes available about how her procreating would play into these complex webs of causes behind environmental destruction. And governments may simply not take environmental action, leave it entirely up to the individual to take action. There is certainly a lot to be said for a cautious examination of the available information. But eventually one must act on the reasonably expected probabilities available to one, whether one decides for or against having a child based on environmental concerns. One would not want to be overly cautious, and not have a child, when it turns out later that one could have done so in an environmentally responsible manner and now the chance to do so has passed and one's life plans are irrevocably shaped by this overly cautious approach. Such a missed opportunity would be incredibly consequential for someone who wants to have a child. A reasonable degree of caution is warranted.

[269] See Chapter 16, Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

[270] Thomas Schwartz, "Welfare judgments and future generations," *Theory and Decision* 11 (1979): 181-94.

Thus, Parfit notes, a policy implemented for the sake of future generations such as, say, a policy designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, could actually have a ripple effect in a society and change just who the members of those future generations would be. This seems a bit self-defeating. After all, if we say that we are implementing a policy for the sake of future generations, we tend to think that we are talking about a certain stable, identifiable group of people who one day will definitely come into existence. It is those people we have in mind when we consider who will be harmed by greenhouse gas emissions and other environmentally destructive activities. If future generations do not somehow exist in some set and identifiable manner prior to our policy decisions meant to save them, then our efforts would be for nothing.

There has been much discussion of Parfit's societal version of the non-identity problem.[271] The approach I will take here is to apply all of the stances discussed earlier in Part I, the Harman-DeGrazia weak reasons view, Melinda Roberts' variabilism, and the hybrid personal variabilism and impersonal weak reasons view to the depletion case.[272]

The Harman-DeGrazia weak reasons view holds that there are reasons to bring people into existence for the benefits they will experience. However, they are weak and overridable by reasons to benefit or not harm existing people and the demandingness of

[271] See, for example, David Wasserman, "Harms to Future People and Procreative Intentions," in *Harming Future Persons* ed. Melinda Roberts and David Wasserman, (Springer 2009), 265-285. See also Thomas Schwartz, "Obligations to Posterity," in *Obligations to Future Generations* ed. R.I. Sikora and Brian Barry (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1978), 3-13, John Broome, *Counting the Cost of Global Warming*, (Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 1992), 34-35, and Alan Carter, "Can We Harm Future People?," *Environmental Values* 10, no. 4 (November 2001), 429-454.

[272] Recall that variabilism is the position which states that so long as a person will come into existence costs and benefits count for her. However, in worlds where she will never come into existence, costs and benefits do not count for her. The costs and benefits a person might receive do not provide a reason for bringing her into existence. But, if she will exist, any costs and benefits to her count and must be considered.

pregnancy and childrearing. Generally speaking, harms and benefits to the nonexistent count, but they count less than those to existing people. In the depletion case, the problem is that instituting a policy can change the generation that comes into existence, so that the pollution generation can only exist alongside the pollution. On the Harman-DeGrazia there are reasons to bring the pollution generation into existence for the benefits they will experience (even with the pollution they have net good and so lives worth living) even though they will live alongside the pollution. Because they have lives worth living with net good, and there are reasons to bring them into existence to experience benefits, and because the only way they can exist is alongside the pollution, the Harman-DeGrazia view runs into the depletion case as a serious problem. If our reason in passing the policy was to avoid harm to future generations, but the pollution generation is not harmed by the pollution because they still have lives worth living and can only exist then, we don't have a reason not to pollute. (Though we couldn't pollute to the point that the pollution generation no longer had lives worth living.)

One way to challenge the Depletion Case is raised by Alan Carter's article "Can We Harm Future People?".[273] Carter argues that if several presently existing people all decide to pollute, then it is correct to say that a different generation will come into existence in the future. But, Carter, argues, if we consider the actions of each person individually, while holding the actions of others constant, the result is not the same. Carter illustrates this with a thought experiment involving three adults, Andrea, Clara, and Ben, and their three potential children, Yolanda, Xerksis, and Zak. Carter writes,

[273] Alan Carter, "Can We Harm Future People?," *Environmental Values* 10 (2001): 429-454.

> …Andrea and Clara choose to continue their environmentally destructive activities, but Ben chooses to desist from his. The result is that Yolanda is never born, but Xerksis and Zak are. Their existence in the distant future within this fourth possible world… is dependent upon the environmentally destructive activities of Andrea and Clara, but not upon those of Ben. Moreover, within this possible world… Xerksis and Zak are better off than they are in the actual world… and this is because Ben chose in its near future… to desist from his environmentally destructive activities.[274]

Carter argues that if we understand our actions individually rather than collectively, then although by choosing not to pollute I might make it so that someone doesn't come into existence, other people will still come to exist regardless of my action who would have existed otherwise. This is because not everyone will choose not to pollute. And these people can be harmed or benefited by my action. As Carter explains,

> Although it appears that we (construed as a collectivity comprising all presently existing persons) are responsible, because of our destructive actions, for the existence of all distant future people, and consequently, that we (construed as such a collectivity) might, perhaps, be thought to be incapable of harming them, there can be no doubt that we, individually, are not responsible through every one of our destructive actions for every future person' s existence, and it therefore seems to be the case that we can harm even the most distant of future generations.[275]

If we apply Carter's ideas to the Harman-DeGrazia view, then we can say that it is better to not pollute now as an individual, since although due to my actions some people will not come into existence other people will come into existence regardless of my actions and these people will be better off if I don't pollute. This is because not everyone will cease to pollute. Some people, despite the change in my actions, will come into existence, and there are stronger reasons to avoid harming existing people than to bring into existence

[274] Ibid., 442.
[275] Ibid., 444.

nonexistent people for the benefits they would experience. The harm/benefit asymmetry would have me avoid harming through pollution those who will come to exist even if it meant failing to benefit those who never came into existence. The Harman-DeGrazia view incorporating these ideas from Carter fares better in that on the view we could now say that individually we ought not to pollute since our actions can harm some future persons even if they do keep others out of existence.

However, as we get further and further into the future there is likely less reason to believe that the same people will come into existence. It may be the case that if I change my behavior now, and no one else does, most of the same people will come into existence. But suppose we are instead talking about a small percentage of people in a particular country, such as Canada, who change their behavior, such as giving up all forms of motorized transportation, including public transportation. As a result of this, as time goes on, the change in their behavior could affect more and more people, and cause more and more people not to come into existence who would have otherwise come into existence. So it is not necessarily clear that Carter's argument will work if we extend it far into the future. This is a reason to prefer the other accounts to the Harman-DeGrazia view supplemented with Carter's argument.

As for variabilism, in her detailed treatment of the depletion case, Roberts goes so far as to refer to the non-identity problem as the non-identity fallacy, as I first discussed in Chapter 2.[276] This is because, if we consider the matter further as we did with various non-identity cases in Chapter 2, it does not in fact necessarily follow that if an environmental

[276] See Melinda Roberts, "The Non-Identity Fallacy: Harm, Probability and Another Look at Parfit's Depletion Example," 274.

policy is enacted the generation that would exist had it not been enacted can never come into existence. It is logically possible that exactly the same gametes could unite at exactly the same times as they would have otherwise, it is just stupendously improbable. But this means that it is not true that members of the "pollution generation" can *only* exist if we continue to pollute. It is at least logically possible that they could come into existence even if the environmental policy is passed.

There are important differences in the identity-fixing character of the prenatal cases considered earlier in Chapter 2 and cases like Depletion. Only in the case of the individual non-identity problem involving someone with a genetic disorder (yet still more good than harm in her life, a "can't-do-better" case) can it be that the person can only come into existence alongside her debilitating condition. Only in this sort of case is no harm done apart from possibly the burden placed on society (third-party effects). But in the pollution case or in the sold into slavery case ("can't-expect-better" cases), these are instances where it is at least logically possible that the same people might come into existence without the harm and so there is reason to think that we ought to pass the environmental policy and not enslave our offspring. It makes sense to talk of the harm that will result to the people or persons who come into existence in these cases because they might exist — it is at least logically possible — without the harm. As noted in Chapter 2, Roberts points out that instead of conceiving and selling their child into slavery, a couple might have instead gone to a hotel room at exactly the same time as they would have been conceiving in the "timeline" where they sell their child into slavery and conceived exactly the same child. In the pollution case, passing the environmental policy could be done and at exactly all the same times the same people might conceive children. As Roberts explains:

> After all, there is nothing in natural law or the acts of other agents that bars the couple who produce the child as a slave from producing the very same child as a non-slave – or that bars agents from implementing conservation over depletion in a way that improves the plights of at least some members of the future generation who exist and suffer under depletion.[277]

Roberts explains the point while talking about a possible person she calls "Jaime" and what happens to him on the depletion and conservation possibilities:

> The very spatial-temporal-mechanical features that agents are in a position to grasp, at the critical time prior to performance, in their yet-to-be-performed act of depletion can likewise be replicated in a conservation alternative. But that means that any boost to Jaime's chances of coming into existence that is achieved by depletion can equally well be achieved under the 'best' of the agents' conservation alternatives – that is, under those conservation alternatives that have the various spatial-temporal-mechanical features that the agents are in a position to grasp in their own yet-to-be-performed act of depletion. Jaime's chances of coming into existence, under depletion, are very low, as we have already seen, in any case. What we now see is that, to the extent that depletion boosts Jaime's chances of coming into existence somewhat, the agents after all have a way of not depleting that will boost Jaime's chances of coming into existence at least to that same extent.[278]

In the slave case, the parents could conceive at the same time as they would have in the timeline where they sell the child into slavery. In the depletion case, the conservation policy could be passed and yet children be conceived at the same time as they would have been conceived otherwise. As Roberts notes of Jaime, agents could set things up so that Jaime has just as much chance of coming into existence in the depletion case as the conservation case.

The hybrid personal variabilism and impersonal weak reasons view could handle the case as pure variabilism does by rejecting the necessity of generational non-identity. There is also the matter of impersonal weak reasons to bring people into existence on the hybrid view. This notion could help because it allows us to go beyond person-affecting

[277] Ibid., 278.
[278] Ibid., 302.

considerations to think about the pollution generation when compared with another generation. If we are introducing impersonal value, then we can say that it is better to have a generation without pollution than the pollution generation, even if it makes no individual person better off. For example, even if we talk in terms of the pollution generation being no worse off for the existence of pollution and the suffering it causes them, the suffering it causes, considered apart from its effects on the pollution generation, is itself suffering in the world. It is bad, and from the perspective of impersonal value it is preferable to have a world in which this impersonal bad doesn't exist, even if it is not bad for the pollution generation in the sense of making them worse off. We might also think of impersonal aesthetic value. For example, suppose pollution from a mining operation much further south turns the sky an ugly shade of green-brown vomit in an uninhabited part of Siberia. Even as it has made no one worse off (let's say that the wildlife don't notice and it doesn't interfere with their flourishing) it has lessened the impersonal aesthetic value of the world. The generation without pollution is better, less marred and ugly, from the perspective of impersonal aesthetic value. Impersonal approaches to the depletion case have been avoided because they are associated with the impersonal total approach and the repugnant conclusion.[279] But if, as on the hybrid view, the impersonal reasons are weak, then the repugnant conclusion can be avoided while still appealing to impersonal considerations as a second layer, on top of personal variabilism, that can also deal with the depletion case. Thus, after considering each of the three views, we have seen that each presents a plausible way of dealing with the depletion case, even as I argue that variabilism and the hybrid view are more defensible.

[279] Carter, "Can We Harm Future Generations?," 431-432.

The Environmental Case Against Procreation from Nonmaleficence

With these ideas in place, the concern arises that, in addition to our other practices, our procreative practices may also be having a harmful impact on future generations through environmentally mediated harm.[280] Such an argument can be made from the work of Nolt, already mentioned above, using his attempts to estimate the harm done by the average American.[281] As noted above, Nolt claims that the average American's greenhouse gas emissions cause the suffering or deaths of one or two future people, with the addition of an average American, through having a child, causing the deaths of an additional one or two future people. The family of 5 would find itself with 5 to 10 more deaths on its hands, rather than the 2 to 4 of a childless couple. Other studies also suggest that having children increases emissions considerably. Seth Wynes and Kimberly Nicholas suggest that not having a child in the developed world can save, per year, 58.6 tons of CO_2 equivalent.[282] They suggest that this is much more impactful than not using a car, which saves 2.4 tons annually. Such considerations form a serious *prima facie* environmental case against having children based on environmentally mediated harm.

However, in response to the argument against procreation from environmental distributive justice, I have already argued in this chapter that we should be living within a

[280] Others have argued in a different way that we ought not to have children because having children is akin to overconsumption. I focus on an argument based on harm to future generations here. See Corey MacIver, "Procreation or Appropriation?," in *Permissible Progeny?: The Morality of Procreation and Parenting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Thomas Young also earlier argued that overconsumption and procreation are morally equivalent. See Thomas Young, "Overconsumption and Procreation: Are They Morally Equivalent?," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2001): 183–92.

[281] As helpfully noted by Tina Rulli, "The Ethics of Procreation and Adoption," *Philosophy Compass* 11 (2016): 308.

[282] Wynes and Nicholas, "The Climate Mitigation Gap: Education and Government Recommendations Miss the Most Effective Individual Actions."

carbon budget of, construed most stringently, 2 tons per year. The just carbon budget requirement for potential procreators construed most stringently already deals with Nolt's worries because he is basing his calculation on emissions of 23 tons per person per year, and the budget proposed here is 2 tons.[283] The same can be said about Wynes and Nicholas' figure, since 2 tons is already very restrictive as an annual budget, whereas they are emphasizing avoiding having a typically emitting child can avoid 58.6 tons, and they actually cite exactly 2.1 tons as the ideal budget.[284]

The impact of carbon emissions can also be considered in a different way. In their paper "Consequentialism, Climate Harm and Individual Obligations" Christopher Morgan-Knapp and Charles Goodman argue that the carbon emissions even from one Sunday drive in a car (as opposed to, say, a Sunday walk) are harmful and wrong.[285] They argue for this conclusion against those who would say that the impact of carbon emissions from one Sunday drive can't possibly make much difference in the long run, given that, even if one doesn't drive, someone else will. Morgan-Knapp and Goodman argue that there is a way we can make sense of how one's actions will make a difference, by understanding the implications of chaos theory, we can see that one's actions, even on a miniscule level, do make

[283] Nolt, "How Harmful Are the Average American's Greenhouse Gas Emissions?," 5. Nolt might respond that "even if emissions are reduced to low levels fairly quickly—that is, even under the most optimistic of scenarios—billions of people may ultimately be harmed by them" (p. 9). Although this statement lacks the specifics to gauge if it is meant to apply even to an annual budget of 2 tons, Nolt might argue that even 2 tons as an annual budget, implemented immediately, can cause harm. If this point is pressed, then I think we can appeal to the good that a child can do on coming into existence for the environment that can ultimately compensate for this harm, as I will discuss below. Even if her existing causes some harm, a child that produces slightly more good environmentally speaking than would have been had if she had not existed offers an existence that is still a net good environmentally speaking.

[284] Wynes and Nicholas, "The Climate Mitigation Gap: Education and Government Recommendations Miss the Most Effective Individual Actions," 1.

[285] Christopher Morgan-Knapp and Charles Goodman, "Consequentialism, Climate Harm and Individual Obligations," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 18 (2015): 177-190.

a difference.[286] They anticipate the objection that even a Sunday walk might cause some catastrophic climate event, though they point out that a butterfly's flapping its wings doesn't so much cause a tornado in Texas (according to the old adage of chaos theory) but rather just changes when events occur. But they think things are different with a Sunday drive, because a Sunday drive actually causes more carbon dioxide to be emitted in the air, and this does change "the level of energy in the atmosphere" making things "skewed towards worse outcomes."[287] They argue that catastrophic weather events "kick in" after a certain amount of emissions are put into the atmosphere, pushing over a climate threshold in a way similar to pushing over a market threshold.

The moral impact of pushing over market thresholds has been explored previously by Shelly Kagan.[288] Kagan uses a "toy" example where if someone orders a chicken and the grocery store will place an order for more chickens once a 25th chicken is purchased, any purchase of a chicken risks going over the threshold or pushing someone else over and causing another order. Kagan acknowledges that, in the real world, orders are much less sensitive to individual purchasing decisions but still maintains that even if it is the 10,000th chicken that is necessary to cause an order of 10,000 more chickens to be purchased, the great harm that this involves, and the risk of causing it, still makes one's purchasing decisions morally impactful. As when one buys a crucial factory farmed chicken so that a tipping point is reached and another order is placed for more chickens, your Sunday drive, or your

[286] Chaos theory is a mathematical theory that emphasizes deterministic patterns in complex chaotic systems. The butterfly effect is a principle of chaos theory which holds that small changes can have enormous impacts, such as a butterfly in China flapping its wings and causing a hurricane in Texas.
[287] Ibid., 185.
[288] Shelly Kagan, "Do I Make a Difference?," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39 (2011): 105-141.

decision to have a child, might be what pushes carbon emissions over the threshold, enabling extreme weather that has harmful effects on human beings, to kick in.

Having a child could be what crosses an emissions threshold, leading to enough emissions to cause catastrophic weather events to kick in that otherwise would not have. It might also lead to other harmful environmental impacts like water depletion and arable topsoil depletion. It is reasonable to worry, then, that this is another way in which having children is akin to, and perhaps far worse in terms of emissions than, taking a Sunday drive. For the introduction of another emitter would seem to greatly increase emissions, and because of this increase, the parent of the emitting child might be guilty of pushing over an emissions threshold and causing a deadly weather event.

If we are already abiding by the 2 ton carbon budget argued for in response to the argument against procreation from environmental distributive justice, then arguably this addresses the concerns raised by Morgan-Knapp and Goodman about gratuitous emissions. For they are arguing that there is a good moral reason to voluntarily reduce our gratuitous emissions activities, like Sunday drives, and are not arguing that we ought to forgo all emissions. On the just carbon budget mentioned above, essential activities of a low carbon lifestyle that amounts to at most 2 tons per year would not be problematic on this view because the adoption of a just carbon budget would already be indicative of considerable voluntary reduction of emissions.

Assessing the Environmental Case Against Procreation from Nonmaleficence

Although arguments developed from the work of Nolt, Wynes and Nicholas, and Morgan-Knapp and Goodman and an understanding of environmentally mediated harm raise serious concerns, as we have seen these concerns are answered by the adoption of a 2 ton carbon budget as defended in response to the argument against procreation from environmental distributive justice. In addition to the difference this budget makes, in response to these arguments from environmentally mediated harm it also helps to recall the discussion of Chapter 4 about the likelihood of one's child giving back enough so that her existence promotes more good overall than had she not existed. A similar case can be made when it comes to having a child with respect to third-party environmental concerns. I will argue that it is plausible that a child could give back more good in environmental terms than would have been generated had she not existed. That is to say, she would be a good investment, so to speak, in terms of promoting the good where the environment and environmentally mediated harm is concerned. In order to defend these claims, I turn now to consider various ways in which parents and children might try to reduce the environmental impact of the children and what it would take to procreate in a morally responsible way with respect to environmentally mediated harm.

One way to reduce one's child's emissions in early life is to raise one's child while meeting the 2 ton annual carbon budget. As noted above, many people and families are already attempting to live as carbon neutrally as possible suggesting that this is not an

inconceivable thing to be able to do.[289] Far better, it would seem, to have two low carbon (under the 2 ton annual budget) children than to have one typically emitting child (58.6 tons), or to lead an extravagant childless lifestyle, wherein one emits more than if one had procreated and had typically emitting children (58.6 tons). However, even having a child and raising that child as low carbon as possible still seems to leave one's having a child producing more emissions than would have been produced had one not had children and lived an environmentally responsible lifestyle.

Another way to mitigate environmental harms while having children is to teach children to lower their carbon emissions and properly care for the environment to instill in them a commitment to carry on environmentally friendly lifestyles into adulthood. We can raise children to avoid flying as much as possible, and avoid Sunday driving as much as possible, as well as encouraging them to reduce their emissions in other ways, by buying carbon offsets, walking or biking and using clean energies, or reducing or eliminating their consumption of animal products.[290] Environmentally focused education could be very helpful in pursuing this strategy of habituating people in the virtues of stewardship and sustainability. This is born out by a study by Nancy Wells and Kristi Lekies which suggests that "childhood participation in "wild" nature such as hiking or playing in the woods, camping, and hunting or fishing, as well as participation with "domesticated" nature such as picking flowers or produce, planting trees or seeds, and caring for plants in childhood have

[289] As noted earlier, for examples of families already living about as close to carbon neutral as they can, see "Could you live a low carbon life?", *The Guardian*, May 4, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/may/04/carbon-cutting-zero-emissions-eco-warriors-damaged-world.
[290] For a way of assessing an individual's carbon footprint, see, for example, the Nature Conservancy's carbon footprint calculator, https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/carbon-footprint-calculator/?redirect=https-301.

a positive relationship to adult environmental attitudes."[291] Another study by Judith Chen-Hsuan Cheng and Martha C. Monroe suggests that "Children's connection to nature, their previous experience in nature, their perceived family value toward nature, and their perceived control positively influenced their interest in performing environmentally friendly behaviors."[292] Yet, even considering all this, it still seems that a child's existence, even a child raised as low carbon as possible and instilled with environmentally conscious values so that she leads an as low carbon a life as possible, will still lead to more emissions than if one had not had a child if she only carries on a low-impact lifestyle herself.

However, we need to also factor in the impact that a child raised with environmentally conscious values can have on the emissions and environmentally destructive activities of others. If the child is raised as close to carbon neutral as possible and instilled with environmentally conscious values *and* also helps at least one other person reduce their carbon emissions and live more sustainably than they would otherwise have done, so that the levels of carbon emissions are reduced overall by her existence, more than they would be had she not existed, then her existence is actually better than her nonexistence from the perspective of third-party environmental concerns. We can also think of a child's contribution to the reduction of environmentally destructive practices generally, and how these contributions can mean that one can have children and, because of their positive contributions, avoid direct harm to future generations through reduced carbon emissions.

[291] Nancy M. Wells and Kristi S. Lekies, "Nature and the Life Course: Pathways from Childhood Nature Experiences to Adult Environmentalism," *Children, Youth and Environments* 16, no. 1 (2006), 1.
[292] Judith Chen-Hsuan Cheng and Martha C. Monroe, "Connection to Nature: Children's Affective Attitude Toward Nature," *Environment and Behavior* 44, no. 1 (2012), 31.

As with raising a child to become an effective altruist who gives more to the global poor than would have been given had she not existed, there is a legitimate concern about the likelihood of a child managing to reduce emissions sufficiently to avoid any direct harm to future generations. However, as some families are already trying to get as close to carbon neutral as possible, and as even just spreading an awareness of these practices and working for climate change legislation can make a big difference, it is likely that an environmentally conscious child could live within the 2 ton carbon budget and help at least one other person to do so to make up for emissions throughout her life, so that she reduced more carbon than would be reduced by her not existing. There is the rare chance that a child could rebel against her environmentalist upbringing and become a super polluter (or just an average polluter). On the other hand, there is also a small chance she could become a great environmentalist. But it's more likely that she would manage to lead a sufficiently low emitting lifestyle within the just carbon budget having had an upbringing that instills environmentally conscious values.

If a child does more good than would have existed without her she has met the bar. Much as we saw in Chapter 4 with respect to global poverty, even on the most demanding conception, it is possible that the child could do more good for the environment than would be done if she had not existed. She could be a good investment, so to speak, and pay off more than was put into the world by her existence in terms of carbon emissions and other environmental impacts of bringing her into existence. And she doesn't have to become a great environmentalist to do it, but only to do more good, environmentally speaking, than would have been done had she not existed.

One way to illustrate this is to think about the impact that can be made on the behavior of others by an environmentally conscious child, perhaps the most famous example being the young climate activist Greta Thunberg, even as there is no need to do nearly as much as Thunberg to meet the bar of doing more good than otherwise would have been done had you not existed. There are a great many people in high-emitting nations who deny climate change altogether or show little interest in leading greener lifestyles. There is thus much work that an environmentally conscious child could do in assisting the effort to further the public understanding of climate change and persuade people to lower their emissions through activist efforts like school strikes and climate marches. Should she be able to do this, and being part of environmental campaigns is becoming more common even at very young ages, then she could bring about a net good for the world environmentally speaking compared to the good produced had she not existed, even as she doesn't have to become a prominent climate activist like Greta Thunberg to accomplish this.[293] All she has to do is to produce slightly more good for the environment in terms of emissions reductions and other environmental benefits than would have occurred if she had not existed.

Although the environmental case for antinatalism from nonmaleficence I built up here stems from Nolt, Wynes and Nicholas', and Morgan-Knapp and Goodman's work, other thinkers have recently linked a duty not to procreate or to limit family size and environmental destruction. For example, Travis Rieder and Trevor Hedberg argue not that all procreation should cease, but that people ought to limit family size in line with an

[293] Leah Asmelash, "Greta Thunberg isn't alone. Meet some other young activists who are leading the environmentalist fight", *CNN*, September 29, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/28/world/youth-environment-activists-greta-thunberg-trnd/index.html.

obligation to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.[294] Another example comes from the level of popular activism. Blythe Pepino founded the organization BirthStrike in 2018 to encourage people not to have children because of an impending "ecological Armageddon" she foresees as resulting from climate change, forgoing parenthood and encouraging others to do this even as she says she would have preferred to have a child herself.[295]

Yet these views are challenged by a study that argues that although population control measures may benefit generations in the distant future, they are not a "quick fix" for our problems now. Corey Bradshaw and Barry Brook argue that "even one-child policies imposed worldwide and catastrophic mortality events would still likely result in 5–10 billion people by 2100."[296] They point out that because of the inertia of the increasing global population the number of humans on the planet cannot be readily halted or altered this century. Environmentally motivated antinatalist reactions may, on one level, be intuitive, but, as the study by Bradshaw and Brook suggests, it is far from clear whether population reduction measures could actually make much of a difference in this century compared with other courses of action like ending animal agriculture. Other environmentalists such as Meghan Kallman have also emphasized that population isn't necessarily the problem, as I argue, stating that "It's not actually about the number of people… it's how those people consume."[297]

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[294] See Travis Rieder, *Toward a Small Family Ethic: How Overpopulation and Climate Change Are Affecting the Morality of Procreation* (Springer, 2016). See also Trevor Hedberg, "The Duty to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions and the Limits of Permissible Procreation," *Essays in Philosophy* 20 (2019): 1-24.
[295] See Stephanie Bailey, "BirthStrike: The people refusing to have kids because of 'the ecological crisis'", *CNN*, June 26, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/05/health/birthstrike-climate-change-scn-intl/index.html.
[296] Corey J.A. Bradshaw and Barry W. Brook, "Human population reduction is not a quick fix for environmental problems," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 111, no. 46 (2014): 16610-16615.
[297] Ibid.

Still, one might argue, isn't one way to reduce carbon emissions to reduce family size? Yes, it certainly is. If one plans on raising two children in a carbon-intensive way, then it would be true that deciding instead to only have one child would be a way to reduce carbon emissions. But if we start out planning to raise two children in a low carbon way within the 2 ton budget, and plan to raise them to do even just slightly more good than otherwise would be done if they did not exist, then subsequently deciding to have only one of those children would actually do less for the environment. The goal should be to raise whatever children we have as low carbon as we can, and to pass on sufficient natural resources or (at most) to do more good than would have been done had they not existed.

As well, we might suppose that the sort of families who are focused on raising children to be environmentally responsible are not necessarily the sort of families we want to stop reproducing altogether. We need environmentally responsible people in the next generation to continue the effort to lead humanity toward an environmentally responsible way of living. I submit it is a legitimate worry that the most ethically-minded potential parents might forgo parenthood, particularly in light of the studies cited above on how environmental values can be passed on to children through early childhood education and in light of the reaction of ethically-minded people such as Pepino who have decided to forgo parenthood. This could be a potential loss when the environmentally conscious values they would pass on to children (to the extent that one can succeed in passing on one's values) would be far better to have from the standpoint of combatting climate change overall now and for generations to come.

Even as this is so, there will likely be limits on just how many children one can have, even if we stipulate that all of one's children are raised to live very low carbon lives. Suppose someone living in a radical environmentalist and luddite commune "off the grid" plans to have ten children, all carbon neutral and all avoiding environmentally destructive activities. If this can be stipulated, then perhaps the environmental concerns disappear, but it may be difficult to instill environmental values in so many children at once, and one also has to think of the need to donate to the distant needy as well. Perhaps instead of investing resources in having so many children one could have donated these resources to the global poor instead, and it may be difficult to raise so many children at once to embody the values of effective altruism. These obligations will constrain how many children one can feasibly have, not because there is anything inherently wrong with having large amounts of children if environmental concerns are met, but because of duties to the global poor and practical limitations in providing environmentalist character education.

Of course, instead of having children, one could always simply promote environmental values by educating other people's children and through activism influence adults. Presumably one could do as much or more good doing this than raising children of one's own and instilling in them environmentally conscious values. But these are not mutually exclusive options either. It may be that even as parenting is time consuming, one can still devote considerable time to environmental awareness and activism and parent, and this is a way to have a child in an environmentally responsible manner if one chooses to do so. One can also adopt children and work to raise them with environmental values. Some might be concerned about international adoptions bringing children from low-emitting

nations to high emitting ones, but we have already seen that one must raise any children one has below the carbon threshold point, and this would apply to adopted children as well.

A final concern about this approach to justifying procreation in light of environmental concerns and concerns about the global poor is that it might instrumentalize children. If we saw children only as good investments where the environment or the global poor are concerned, then it might seem like we are simply using them to achieve various ends. Of course, child-centered conditions would not permit only having a child for the promotion of the overall good that would result, because such instrumentalization would not be part of a proper parent-child relationship. Further, just because the environmental and global poverty focused conditions of permissible procreation are in place to specify responsible procreation does not mean that we should think that the only point of having children is to better the environment or the global poor. These are justifications of procreation from an impartial perspective, not personal reasons to have children. And, finally, instilling environmentally conscious values and concern for the global poor arguably benefits children themselves by instilling in them morally admirable dispositions that benefit them. Thus, even setting aside these other responses to the problem of instrumentalization, environmental and effective altruist character education can be seen as a benefit for children themselves. And, in facing the impending dangerous effects of climate change, it is an instrumental benefit to the child herself that her behaviors could help to mitigate climate harms that would be a danger to her.

Although there is a respectable *prima facie* case that can be made against having children for environmental reasons, under further examination we see that there are ways

to procreate in an environmentally responsible manner. Our primary focus should be on our children being able to do more good environmentally speaking than would have been done had they not existed.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I considered how we can account for concerns of distributive justice and direct harm to future generations. I explored how we can understand what we owe to future generations in terms of natural resources by examining Alan Habib's discussion of a general Rawlsian approach to environmental issues and intergenerational distributive justice, defending the possibility of responsible procreation on a carbon budget that satisfies our obligation to pass on a flourishing biosphere. I then considered the case against procreation from nonmaleficence, first responding to Parfit's depletion case with the major accounts considered in Chapter 2, Harman-DeGrazia, Melinda Roberts' variabilism, and the hybrid personal variabilism/weak impersonal reasons view. I argued against the *prima facie* environmental case against procreation from nonmaleficence developed from the work of Nolt and Morgan-Knapp and Goodman. I pointed out that environmental considerations that count against procreation can be answered with a view that holds that children raised with environmentally conscious values can do even just slightly more good environmentally speaking than would have been done had they not existed.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have examined many serious child-centered and third-party concerns that present a strong *prima facie* case against procreation by financially secure citizens of affluent nations. In critically examining these arguments and exploring possible alternate approaches, I have shown that although the arguments against procreation can be formidable at first, a further exploration of the literature of different areas from population and creation ethics to the ethics of global poverty to environmental ethics reveals other plausible and defensible positions that avoid the antinatalist conclusion while taking seriously the concerns that theoretically motivated it in the first place. Although any one of us might feel unsure or concerned about having children, and quite understandably base so personal a decision as whether or not to have children on this feeling, the much more ambitious arguments of antinatalists that procreation on the part of financially stable citizens of affluent nations is always morally wrong are answerable. Responsible procreation is not impossible, but rather procreation is permissible provided the three broad conditions are met. First, that there is a reasonable expectation of greater goods than harms in the life of the child. This includes an understanding that there are reasons to benefit existing people and reasons not to harm existing people. Second, that there is a reasonable expectation of a parent-child relationship that provides resources for resilience. And, third, that, at most, there is a the reasonable expectation that the child can give back more good than otherwise would have been in the world had she not existed with respect to both global poverty and the environment.

Formulating a position on the conditions of permissible procreation as this project has done is only the beginning. Once we understand that procreation is not morally impermissible, and yet there are a number of conditions that apply to ensure morally responsible and permissible procreation among financially secure citizens of affluent nations, we can turn our attention to how we might ensure that ever more parents can meet these conditions. Our focus on the abstract ethical debate then shifts to understand what we might do to encourage more education and specifically discussion of the ethics of procreation. The goal should be, for those who want to be parents, to help children come into the world with a good chance at having the quality of life and the parental support they need to live well and help make the world a better place.

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