

BETTER NOT TO HAVE CHILDREN

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Most people take it for granted that it's morally permissible to have children. They may raise questions about the number of children it's responsible to have or whether it's permissible to reproduce when there's a strong risk of serious disability. But in general, having children is considered a good thing to do, something that's morally permissible in most cases (perhaps even obligatory).

In this article we provide a number of reasons for thinking that it is both wrong and unwise to procreate.

I. Bad for Others

Humans are the most destructive creatures on the planet. We cause vast numbers of animal deaths (both directly and indirectly). We destroy habitats. We damage the environment. We are currently heating up the world's climate in a way that is likely to be detrimental to countless numbers of animals (ourselves included). And we have the means, nuclear weapons, to destroy everything at the push of a button. We came perilously close to pushing that button on one occasion (the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962).

The best way to stop the destruction is to remove the destructive force; to remove humans by refraining from procreation. In short, the colossal amount of harm caused by humans gives us a moral reason to boycott the human species.

It might be objected that measures can be taken to limit the harm humans cause to other animals and the environment by, say, recycling more and ceasing to kill animals for food. We should be focusing our efforts on changing our

destructive behaviour rather than giving up on having children altogether.

We should certainly make efforts to curb our destructive behaviour. But even supposing we have sufficient control over ourselves to make such changes (itself doubtful), we have very limited control over how future generations will behave.

To procreate is to take an unjustifiable gamble that future generations will behave responsibly (more responsibly than us). Given the rather pathetic, late-in-the-day changes humans have managed so far it is unlikely that future generations will do any better. There's a good chance they'll do worse. (There's no evidence we're aware of that humans are becoming more morally responsive).

We should do our best to limit the impact we have, but we should also stop creating more humans. Human beings are dangerous things; too dangerous.

It might be objected that by this logic we should not only stop procreating; we should start killing existing humans. But this does not follow. It is one thing to forego starting a life. It is quite another to end one already in existence. Humans who already exist have moral status; they have rights. To end a human life is (under normal circumstances) wrong and will violate that human's rights. Failing to start a life does not violate anyone's rights. Only those who exist, did exist, or will exist, can have rights. Those who do not, have never, and will never exist have no moral status, no rights to be violated.

What about suicide? We wouldn't be violating anyone's rights by committing suicide (it is plausible to claim). Shouldn't we at least do that?

We don't think so. There is a limit on the moral demand for altruism. How best to defend such a limit is no easy matter and we leave it open here. But most recognise that self-sacrifice is beyond any plausible limit there may be.

However, the requirement to cease production of new humans is not over-demanding. It is easy to forego procreation. Of course, many will dispute this, arguing that to

forego procreation and child rearing is to miss out on a major source of human happiness and thus is a very great sacrifice. We will address this concern in section IV, where we show that the evidence suggests that procreation is actually surprisingly bad for you. In the meantime we will consider another, common objection.

II. Bad for the Species?

The objection goes that if we all forego procreating then the human species will come to an end and that is a bad thing.

Bad for whom? Not for other animals or the environment. It would be very *good* for them. Bad for humans? Well, the human species is not itself a human. It is not owed any moral obligations. It does not have any rights and it does not have a welfare. The end of the human species need not be counter to the interests of any individual human, or violate any individual human's rights.

Perhaps some will object to our brisk dismissal of the idea that a species has value in itself (aside from the value of its individual members). But even if we allow that species do have value in themselves there are still strong reasons for thinking the end of the human species would be a good thing overall.

The world is currently undergoing the Holocene extinction event. It's the fastest mass extinction event in earth's known history. And it's accelerating. In the last fifty years the rate of extinction has soared. It's now estimated that between one hundred and forty thousand and two million species become extinct every century. That's between four and fifty-four a day. The scientific consensus is that it's largely down to humans. We're the cause. If one thinks that species in themselves have value, and if one is serious about preserving species, then the demise of the human species looks as if it should be welcomed.

It might be suggested that the end of the human species would be a bad thing because a lot of currently existing humans have a brute preference for it to continue. Such preferences would be frustrated and this is bad.

First, if the human species becomes extinct then by definition the bearers of those preferences will no longer exist. Some might consider this cancels the preferences or seriously reduces their clout.

Second, any human preference for the continuation of the species has to compete with vast numbers of other animals' interest in our non-continuation. It is unlikely that these human preferences could win out (by any reasonable estimation the numbers of sentient non-human creatures with morally important interests vastly outnumbers the human population).

Third, not all preferences count alike. Many philosophers accept that *selfish* or *unreasonable* preferences don't count (or count less). The preference that the human species continue despite the incredible harm such continuation will do to other species is an unreasonable preference that should either not count at all, or count for very little.

III. Bad for the Child

It might be argued that having a child confers a benefit on that child; they get to exist.

But, it is questionable whether existence is, in general, a benefit to the exister: it may be more of a burden than a boon. Granted, if you ask them, most people will say their lives are worth living (in fact, most people will say their lives are going better than most people's!). But there are powerful psychological factors at play here. Our self-assessments of well-being are known to be heavily biased towards the positive.

The philosopher David Benatar (*Better Never to Have Been* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 71.) has argued that a sober assessment of the gains and losses in

an average life could well yield a negative result overall (especially when you add in all the minor but regular negative mental states associated with hunger, thirst, bowel and bladder distension, tiredness, stress, thermal discomfort, itchiness etc.) (Benatar, p. 71).

Even if benefits outweigh burdens within a life, there's no escaping the fact we die. Most agree that our own deaths harm us greatly (not the Epicureans). They end our lives – lives that we have become invested in, that we'd very much like to continue. These sorts of considerations make it uncomfortably plausible that it may be better never to have lived at all, than to have lived and died.

But even if life is beneficial overall, it doesn't follow that it was permissible to subject someone to it. Children often, resentfully, point out to their parents that 'they didn't choose to be born'. They have a point. Ordinarily it is wrong to subject someone to something; ordinarily we must gain someone's consent before doing something that will significantly affect them. To subject someone to a life is to significantly affect them without their prior consent.

Some might object that procreative acts do not affect those they bring into existence. Someone who has been brought into existence didn't exist previously and so cannot have been made better or worse off and so was not affected. But anyone who takes such a view is going to have to judge that someone whose life is clearly not going to be worth living (someone whose life will be characterised by constant, chronic pain) has not been negatively affected by being subjected to an existence. We think this is highly counter-intuitive. Furthermore, if you can't be negatively affected by being brought into existence, you can't be positively affected either. Existence cannot be a benefit for the existent.

It might be pointed out that we *cannot* gain someone's consent to exist; we cannot gain their consent before they exist and by the time they exist it's too late. But the fact that we cannot gain their consent does not mean that we are free to do without it. Suppose you wish to torture

someone against their will, you cannot seek your victim's consent – the torture would not then be against their will. It would be absurd to argue that for this reason we are permitted to torture people against their will. Similarly, the fact that prospective parents cannot get the consent of those they plan to bring into existence doesn't magically mean it's OK. Quite the opposite – if you can't get the consent of the person you're going to significantly affect by your action, then the default position is that you don't do whatever it is that's going to affect them.

There are exceptions. Pushing someone out of the way of a falling piano is morally right even if no prior consent can be given (if, for instance, there isn't time). But in this kind of case you are preventing someone from coming to great harm. To procreate – to subject someone to a life – does not prevent them coming to harm. Not being created cannot harm them because they don't exist.

Perhaps it will be objected that if life is an overall benefit then subjecting someone to such a life is not wrong. But there's an interesting asymmetry between preventing someone coming to harm, and benefiting someone. Intuitively, it is far more important to prevent causing and/or allowing harm to befall others than it is to positively benefit others. Benefiting someone without their prior consent requires greater justification than preventing them being harmed. (For instance, if we know you'll really enjoy the experience induced by a certain recreational drug – but we know you'll refuse to take the drug of your own volition – it is not permissible for us to pop it in your tea behind your back.)

Benefiting someone without their consent can probably only be justified when the benefit is considerable. And this could well be because unless we benefit the person, their life will go less well. Someone will miss out.

Note, in the case of non-procreation the non-exister does not 'miss out'. If we do not procreate the non-existent do not have lives that go less well than they otherwise would.

But even if we are wrong and it turns out that most lives record a high net benefit and there's nothing wrong in *subjecting* someone to existence, the fact remains that procreating harms the interests of other currently existing and future existing animals and the environment.

To procreate because one believes life is a benefit to those who are subjected to it is to take a very real gamble. First, one gambles that life really is an overall benefit to the individual living it. Second, it is *someone else* who will be harmed if your gamble doesn't pay off – someone whose consent you do not have. Third, one ignores the harms that procreation does to others.

And note: if you don't gamble, if you don't procreate, then you haven't harmed the non-existent. The person you didn't bring into existence hasn't been *deprived* of anything. They don't, didn't, and never will exist.

IV. Bad for You

Even if one has no concern for other animals, the environment, or the child one intends to create and focuses only on oneself, having children is most likely a bad idea.

Most people assume that having children is a rewarding exercise, even a necessary ingredient of a complete and happy life. But a cold hard look at the facts suggests otherwise.

Children rarely make a net contribution to a parent's (self-assessed) levels of happiness (and remember, people tend to *overestimate* their happiness levels). In anonymous surveys, most parents report regretting having children. Seventy percent of people would not have had children if they knew what it would be like (Ann Landers' Advice Column, '70% of Parents Say Kids Not Worth It', syndicated US newspapers, 1975). Only five percent of men and a third of women said having children improved their happiness levels (Kate Stanley, Laura Edwards, 'The Lever Faberge Family Report 2003: Choosing Happiness?' Becky

Hatch/Institute of Public Policy Research – 1,500 couples surveyed).

Studies have shown that while people's happiness goes up when they are expecting a baby it sharply declines once the child is born. And the evidence is, the more children you have the more unhappy you are likely to be (Professor Daniel Gilbert at the Happiness and its Causes conference 8–9 May 2008). Happiness levels only start going back up after the last child leaves home (Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (London: Harper Press, 2006), p. 221).

Some might think that after a lifetime of offspring-induced unhappiness you can at least look forward to an old age where your children care for you. But in the West the number who care full-time for their elderly parents is comparatively small. Not having children is probably a much better pension plan. When they reach old age '[t]he childless are more financially secure and in better health [than parents]' (J. Rempel, 'Childless Elderly: What Are They Missing?', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 47 (1985), p. 343.).

None of this makes child creation and rearing sound like a recipe for flourishing. It sounds like a major obstacle to a happy life, at least in the majority of cases.

V. Better Not to Have children

Our case is hard to accept. The opposite view – that procreating and child-rearing are valuable and rewarding, a major component of a fully flourishing human life – is deeply rooted and receives constant promotion.

But we have provided a number of reasons why procreation might be wrong and shown why some common objections are misguided. It is bad for animals and the environment. Existence may not be the benefit many take it to be. It may be wrong to subject someone to existence without first gaining their consent, especially given that failing to procreate does not deprive the non-existent of

anything. Finally, becoming a parent and rearing children is unlikely to bring happiness. It seems to us, then, that it is better not to have children.

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