

ARTICLE

## Exit Duty Generator

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### Abstract

This article presents a revised version of negative utilitarianism. Previous versions have relied on a hedonistic theory of value and stated that suffering should be minimized. The traditional rebuttal is that the doctrine in this form morally requires us to end all sentient life. To avoid this, a need-based theory of value is introduced. The frustration of the needs not to suffer and not to have one's autonomy dwarfed should, *prima facie*, be decreased. When decreasing the need frustration of some would increase the need frustration of others, the case is deferred and a fuller ethical analysis is conducted. The author's perceptions on murder, extinction, the right to die, antinatalism, veganism, and abortion are used to reach a reflective equilibrium. The new theory is then applied to consumerism, material growth, and power relations. The main finding is that the burden of proof should be on those who promote the *status quo*.

**Keywords:** antinatalism; anticapitalism; sentiocentrism; voluntary human extinction; utilitarianism

Negative utilitarianism is a moral theory that requires us either to minimize or to reduce ill-being.<sup>1</sup> Ill-being can be defined in different ways. The original definition equates it with pain and suffering,<sup>2</sup> whereas more recent accounts have associated it with preference dissatisfaction.<sup>3</sup> The notable gap in contemporary discussion is that *need frustration* has not been given the chance that it may deserve.<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, I will outline a theory of strict need-based negative utilitarianism and consider its implications concerning the right to live, the voluntary and involuntary extinction of humankind and other species, the right to die, antinatalism, veganism, terminations of pregnancy, and making the human and nonhuman lot better.

The presentation of the theory is deductive, but I will, as the narrative unfolds, test it against my own intuitions in the key cases to find a personal, positional equilibrium. Most of the cases are controversial and prone to stir debate. My overarching point, however, is that once I have navigated through the conceptual challenges, making adjustments as I go, the resulting view will be more palatable than previous formulations of negative utilitarianism and provide a good tool for the analysis of some current political practices that are now taken for granted.

I will use, as a point of comparison, the theory of strict sentience-based negative utilitarianism. The qualifier “strict”—which will be implied from here on—means that the doctrines do not assign moral relevance to positive values. I will argue that an axiology (theory of value) based on two fundamental needs—to *avoid suffering* and to *rule oneself*—together with a deferral clause for conflict situations produces intuitively more acceptable solutions than the one based only on suffering and its straightforward minimization.

The *deferral clause* will move my theory outside the standard scope of classical utilitarianism. It will introduce a deontological (rule- as opposed to outcome-oriented) side constraint and go against the idea of always maximizing value (or in this case always minimizing disvalue). I will not let that deter

me. Historically, “theological utilitarianism” and currently “utilitarianism with side constraints” show that the name can be used of views that do not fit the standard mold.<sup>5,6,7</sup>

### Sentience, Autonomy, and the Right to Live as a Demarcation Line

Negative utilitarianism requires us to minimize or to reduce suffering or need frustration equally among all those who can feel pain and anguish or encounter need frustration. The implications of the theory differ, however, according to the axiology that is chosen.

If the axiology is based on only suffering, it is, by definition, sentiocentric. It applies to all sentient beings similarly and with the same weight. Species and other nonsentience-related group memberships are morally irrelevant.

If the axiology is based on need frustration, it is only partly sentiocentric. All sentient beings have an equal need to avoid suffering, and suffering should be minimized or reduced regardless of species and other nonsentience-related group memberships. When it comes to other needs, however, there can be morally relevant differences between groups and how they should be treated. In the interest of conceptual economy, I will consider just one such additional need.

Most human beings (and maybe other living beings) are autonomous agents. As such, they have a fundamental need to conduct their lives according to their own will or reason. The frustration of this need is, I posit, as bad as, and independent of, the need not to suffer.

This addition has an important corollary. When we abide by it, we are not usually allowed to end agents’ lives against their will or reason even if this would minimize suffering. If continued existence is the individual’s autonomous choice, the individual has a need-based *prima facie* right to live. Sentiocentrism does not grant agents such a direct entitlement.<sup>8</sup> Many deontological (rule- as opposed to outcome-oriented) moral theories do but on different grounds.<sup>9</sup>

### From Fundamental Need Frustration to Duties

The emergence of duties from fundamental need frustration in conflict-responsive negative utilitarianism can be summarized in a list of consecutive questions (Q), answers (A), and verdicts (V). Explanations follow after the list.

Q 1.	Does X increase or perpetuate the frustration of A’s fundamental needs?
A 1 a.	No.
V 1 a.	No duties incurred.
A 1 b.	Yes.
V 1 b.	Proceed to Q 2.
Q 2.	Is A an autonomous agent?
A 2 a.	No.
V 2 a.	Proceed to Q 4.
A 2 b.	Yes.
V 2 b.	Proceed to Q 3.
Q 3.	Does A accept X?
A 3 a.	Yes.
V 3 a.	No duties incurred.

A 3 b.	No.
V 3 b.	Proceed to Q 4.
Q 4.	Can A avert or remove X without involving others?
A 4 a.	Yes.
V 4 a.	No duties incurred.
A 4 b.	No.
V 4 b.	Others have an <i>in rem</i> , <i>prima facie</i> duty to avert or remove X.
Q 5.	Does the absence of X increase or perpetuate the frustration of the fundamental needs of others?
A 5 a.	No.
V 5 a.	Others have an <i>in rem</i> , affirmed duty to avert or remove X.
A 5 b.	Yes.
V 5 b.	Case deferred. Further considerations determine the duties, if any.

Question 1 and its subsequent answers and verdicts focus attention on fundamental needs and only them. The socially constructed and psychologically manipulated want to have a new smartphone every other year, to cite an example, does not count as a morally relevant need and does not deserve positive ethical attention. Pain, anguish, and dwarfed autonomy do.

Question 2 reminds us that A can be an autonomous agent—and in more ways than one. Self-rule in the sense associated with human individuals is one possibility, but others include that a group of people share a will, or that the self-directiveness of human and other animals is instinctive rather than deliberative. Accordingly, assent and dissent can take many forms.

Question 3 prompts us to take a closer look at these forms. In the human-individual case, autonomous agents can, if they will, accept X and the ensuing need frustration. In that case, no direct duties can be assigned to anyone. In the other cases, and in the absence of evidence, it is safest to assume that A has *not* chosen the fundamental need frustration promoted by X.

Question 4 and its responses postulate the responsibility of individuals and groups for avoiding need frustration themselves if they can and the duty of others to help them if they cannot. In the latter case, the initial duties are *in rem* (someone has the duty, but we do not know who) and *prima facie* (the verdict can be reversed in further consideration).

Question 5 concludes the purely negative utilitarian part of the analysis. If conflicts of fundamental needs are *not* involved, the duties stand and the remaining task is to find out who has them. If conflicts of such need *are* involved, the case must be deferred and decided based on additional considerations. These include logic, common sense, and proportionality.

Figure 1 presents the decisionmaking procedure schematically (FNF stands for fundamental need frustration).

Further details come to light when types of fundamental need frustrations are considered.

### Voluntary and Involuntary Human Extinction

One major implication of negative utilitarianism is that humankind would be wise to aim at the self-extinction of the species. It is the only known way to break the chain of sentience and to end suffering and frustration. As long as the decision to go extinct is voluntary and shared by all, both sentiocentric and need-based axiologies support the choice but with a notable difference. If pain and anguish are seen as the only intrinsic (negative) values, as they are in sentiocentrism, the self-exit is a moral duty. This has been seen as the basis of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against negative utilitarianism.<sup>10</sup> Any theory that

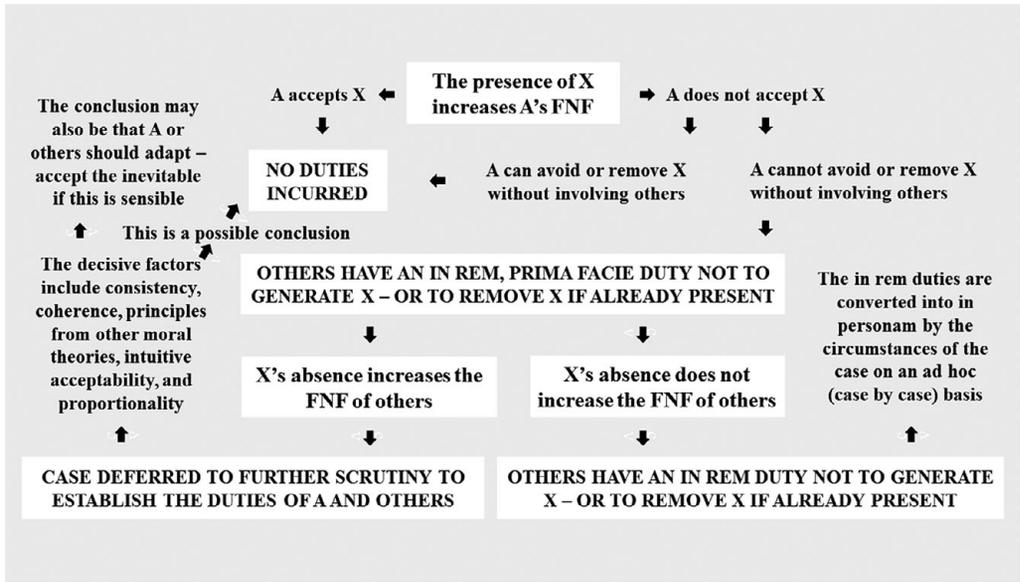


Figure 1. From fundamental need frustration to conflict-responsive negative utilitarian duties.

produces such a counterintuitive conclusion must be flawed. My model survives the challenge by including autonomy among its central values. The idea is as follows.

Continued existence (X) perpetuates and, as time goes by, increases humankind’s (A) fundamental need frustration. The longer people stay around and the more of them there are, the more pain, anguish, and dwarfed autonomy there is.<sup>11</sup> If humankind wants to fight this and unanimously and voluntarily decides to go extinct, it can only accomplish this by its own choices. Barring divine or extraterrestrial intervention, there is no one else who could help. Some ethical theories state that in cases like this, agents have self-regarding moral duties to further their own interests. In my model, seeking benefits for oneself is seen as prudential. The analysis ends here, and the verdict (V 4 a) is that no moral duties are incurred. Voluntary human extinction would be rational, but it is not the kind of collective duty that has, in the eyes of the theory’s critics, supported the rejection of negative utilitarianism. Autonomy prevents the one-to-one conversion of prudential advice into moral requirements.

Sentio-centric and need-based views diverge even more when it comes to *involuntary* human extinction. The exclusive concentration on pain and anguish sidelines autonomy to an instrumental and nondecisive role.<sup>12</sup> According to sentio-centrism, someone with the proper means could have a duty to end the life of the species.<sup>13</sup> If a person could, by pushing a Big Red Button, make humankind instantly disappear, the person would have a moral obligation to do so. Within my need-based version, the situation is different.

The analysis using my procedure is short. Continued existence (X) may well promote humankind’s (A) fundamental need frustration, but the species can collectively and autonomously accept this. Ill-being continues on a voluntary basis, and the verdict (V 3 a) again is that no duties are incurred. The Big Red Button does not enter the picture at all because its potential pusher is not involved in the autonomous decisionmaking of a humankind that has chosen to continue its existence. If there are dissenters, they can be allowed to end their own lives but not the lives of those who want to survive.

### The Right to Live and the Right to Die

Individual human beings are *prima facie* entitled to continue or end their existence as they wish.<sup>14</sup> Conflict-responsive need-based negative utilitarianism does not acknowledge natural rights, but both entitlements are embedded in the theory by the postulation of autonomy’s intrinsic value. The *prima*

*facie* caveat is required because the survival as well as the demise of an individual can have a connection with the fundamental need frustration of others, and this may change the verdict.

In my duty generator, the decision paths are symmetrical. The fundamental need frustration is caused either by the untimely death (X) or the continued survival (X) of individuals who do not accept their looming fate (A). If they can help themselves—reduce their risk taking or commit suicide—no positive duties to others are incurred.<sup>15</sup> If they cannot, someone should lend them a hand provided that this does *not* cause fundamental need frustration to others. Attention can be turned to the questions of who and how.

If fundamental need frustration *is* caused to others by preventing or removing X, however, the analysis must be continued beyond negative utilitarianism. For instance, scarce medical resources can force us to decide who gets lifesaving treatment, and A is then reduced to one of many candidates. A person's *prima facie* right to live as such is not in question, but the choice between individuals requires separate examination and justification. The autonomy-related frustration is the same for all involved and fails to provide a criterion for distinguishing between them.

The right to die can also have its limitations, depending on the fundamental need frustration that respecting it would cause. An example elucidates the matter. Many of the stockbrokers who jumped to their death from skyscrapers during the Wall Street Crash of 1929 left their families unsupported and destitute. They did not, according to my account, have an unquestioned right to die. Due to the conflicting fundamental need frustration, their cases should have been deferred to closer scrutiny. Even their autonomy did not give them the decisive vote because self-rule can be legitimately restricted when its exercise threatens to harm innocent third parties.

### Antinatalism

One way to end suffering and frustration is suggested by antinatalism.<sup>16:17,18-19:20:21,22,23:24:25:26</sup> According to it, human beings have a right, and possibly a duty, *not* to have children. Its opposite is pronatalism, which states that people have a right, and possibly a duty, *to* have children. Insofar as both views recognize the principle of reproductive autonomy, they share the middle (“right”) area.<sup>27</sup>

The right *not* to have children is easy to derive in my model. Having children (X) would frustrate the fundamental need satisfaction of those who have autonomously decided not to reproduce (A). If they do not accept the frustration, they may be able to avoid progeny by their own choices, and they are rationally obliged to do so. Others in this case have a moral duty not to interfere coercively with their choices. The decision not to have children can go against familial wishes and communal expectations, but these are not sufficient reasons for violating A's autonomy.

The right *to* have children is *not* supported by my negative utilitarianism. Despite initial structural convergence, the cases are different. The analysis proceeds as follows: Not having children (X) would frustrate the fundamental need satisfaction of those who have autonomously decided to reproduce (A). If they do not accept the frustration, they may be able to have progeny by their own choices, and it would be rational for them to do so. If they cannot, others have a *prima facie* duty to help. So far, so good, but the similarity with abstinence ends here. This is because the possible future children are among those whose fundamental need frustration will increase (or to be more precise, come into being) if the right is recognized. Their involvement makes the would-be parents' claim, in want of a better word, bold.

If potential parents have a right to reproduce, then some not-yet-existing individuals have a duty to be born. To be born, however, means to be brought into an existence that contains fundamental need frustration. It can also contain happiness, but positive values do not count in strict negative utilitarian moralities. Parents would be entitled to reproduce at the expense of their children's pain, anguish, and dwarfed autonomy.<sup>28</sup>

Other moral theories interpret the situation differently. Sentio-centric negative utilitarians confirm the duty *not* to have children simply because reproduction perpetuates human suffering. Pronatalists defend reproduction on more traditional grounds. My conflict-responsive negative utilitarianism offers a middle way. Since the reproducers' claim is so bold, approaching bizarre, they do have a strong *prima*

*facie* duty *not* to have children. Due to the clash of fundamental need frustrations, however, the final judgment is deferred and can only be made after further scrutiny and assessment.

These findings concerning antinatalist and pronatalist views are consistent with the conclusions that I reached in the cases of voluntary and involuntary human self-extinction. Everyone willing, the antinatalist route would eventually end suffering and frustration. Pronatalists unwilling, the discussion—and suffering and frustration—continues.

### Involuntary Sentient Extinction and Veganism

A case that further partly separates my view from sentiocentric negative utilitarianism is the fate of sentient nonhuman animals. If suffering and its straightforward minimization were the only measure, we should not only strive for humankind's self-extinction, but also for the involuntary extinction of the rest of sentient life. As long as beings capable of suffering and anguish exist, suffering and anguish keep accumulating, and ending the presence of such beings is the only way out. My view does not embrace the idea of killing all sentient life, though, because autonomy, as I have suggested, can take more forms than the human consent model.

Human beings have a need-based right to live if they so choose. They also have a need-based right to die if that is their considered decision. Cultural evolution has made it possible for humans to will either one or the other. Nonhuman animals do not make similar, culturally directed choices, but they do tend to avoid death and life-threatening situations. It does not seem preposterous to assume that their instincts, emotions, and thinking are usually geared toward survival.

I am not sure what to deduce from this observation. Erring on the side of precaution, however, I think that we should recognize the possibility of an autonomous will to survive in our decisionmaking for other species. Their members do have a need to avert pain and anguish, as well, and this generates for us a duty not to cause them that kind of ill-being. What they cause each other without human interference, however, may not be a matter for humans to meddle in, especially not by making them extinct.

A safer strategy is proposed by veganism—the philosophy of stopping the commodification of nonhuman animals and practice of not making use of them or exploiting their subjugation.<sup>29</sup> Humankind does *not* need meat, dairy products, furs, or anything else involving factory farming and other forms of industrial animal production. Nonhuman animals, on the other hand, *do* need decent living conditions with no human-induced pain, anguish, and dwarfed autonomy. The case bears a resemblance to having children, not least because it involves producing more nonhuman progeny to satisfy human preferences. The verdict generated by my model reflects this. We all have a powerful *prima facie* duty to subscribe to the vegan way of thinking and acting, or something similar. Even if we postulated an initial autonomy-based need to eat meat or consume dairy products, the ensuing obligation of nonhuman sacrifice on the altar of our dining table would make the case weak. Reading my model literally, the decision may have to be deferred, but the burden of proof is firmly on those who wish to continue the instrumental use of our fellow sentient beings. Dietary preferences do not provide a justification for the practice.

### The Termination of Pregnancies

An issue that separates my view from some forms of antinatalism, although not necessarily from alternative takes on negative utilitarianism, is the question of terminating pregnancies at the woman's will. Let me start by running the case through my duty generator.

Pregnancy and childbirth (X) imply several fundamental need frustrations, including health hazards, a violation of autonomy, and the pain and anguish of having a child against one's own will. The pregnant woman (A) can accept these, and no case-specific duties are incurred (V 3 a). The more general *prima facie* obligation *not* to reproduce—derived in the context of antinatalism—is in force, but since it is deferred (V 5 b), my negative utilitarianism as such does not imply an absolute prohibition of carrying the pregnancy to term.

If A does *not* accept the frustrations, however, others have a *prima facie* duty to help her in terminating the pregnancy (V 4 b). Usually, A cannot do this safely all on her own; hence, someone's assistance is needed. Furthermore, since the termination does not frustrate anyone else's fundamental needs, the duty is confirmed (V 5 a). We can move on to determine who should help and how. Everyone has a duty not to interfere with the woman's choice and some have, mostly on professional grounds, further obligations.<sup>30</sup>

There are, however, deontological antinatalists who disagree with this conclusion. They take their lead from the Kantian principle of humanity:

So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.<sup>31</sup>

Since human embryos and fetuses are, by definition, human, A's claim for termination clashes with their humanity in the same way as, in my analysis, potential parents' claim for reproduction clashes with the need frustration of their possible future children. Unborn human life is used merely as a means to the ends of the pregnant woman.<sup>32</sup>

The argument does not present a direct threat to my negative utilitarianism. Within my axiology, embryos and fetuses do not have the autonomy-based human need to live. In the relevant sense, then, there is no one there and this particular fundamental need cannot be frustrated.<sup>33</sup> As soon as the embryos and fetuses are sentient, we should avoid inflicting pain on them, but they do not yet have an independent human right to live.

An indirect challenge would be possible, but this can be rejected by making a further specification. The challenge is that, as living beings, embryos and fetuses could have an instinctive rather than a deliberative drive to continue their existence. In my analysis of nonhuman extinction, I suggested that all sentient beings can have such a drive. Should it be attributed to human embryos and fetuses, too?

I think that the extension is unwarranted because the cases are different in an important way. The nonhumans to whom I apply the idea are self-sustained and self-directing, and these are both qualities that embryos and fetuses of any species lack. They are both also qualities that support my original hesitation in the case of sentient nonhuman animals. Who are we to make life-and-death decisions for beings who, on their own, seem to have their own life and course? Embryos and fetuses do not have these and can, I believe, be safely excluded.

### A Comparison of the Views

The questions of voluntary and involuntary exit for human and sentient beings, the right to live and the right to die, the right to reproduce and the duty *not* to reproduce, veganism, and the permissibility of abortion provide the main test cases for negative utilitarianism in the eyes of its rivals. Before continuing to the more constructive recommendations offered by my theory, let me summarize the results so far. [Table 1](#) compares the main findings of sentiocentric negative utilitarianism, my model, and what, in my experience, is the liberal public opinion on these focal matters. The division of views follows naturally responses to natalism.

Sentiocentric negative utilitarianism clashes irrevocably with liberal pronatalism on all counts par the right to die, veganism, and the right to terminate pregnancies. In these three cases out of nine, many liberals can agree with negative utilitarian conclusions, if not the reasoning behind them. In the remaining six instances, it is impossible to see how a consensus could be reached. Sentiocentrism is simply too lackadaisical in the matter of protecting human life. This is why negative utilitarianism is such an unpopular theory even among those who see themselves as permissive or progressive.

Conflict-responsive need-based negative utilitarianism fares, I argue, considerably better. In addition to the right to die, veganism, and the right to terminate pregnancies, it agrees, or almost agrees, with liberal pronatalism on the involuntary extinction of humankind and other sentient species (including the Big Red Button), and the right to live. The remaining sore points are the voluntary extinction of

**Table 1.** Antinatalist and Pronatalist Responses to Contested Points in Negative Utilitarianism

Antinatal or pronatal▼	Voluntary human exit	Involuntary human exit	Human right to live	Human right to die	Right to reproduce	Duty not to reproduce	Forced nonhuman exit	Veganism	Right to abortion
Sentiocentric	Yes—moral	Yes—moral	Not always	Yes—moral	No—immoral	Yes—moral	Yes—moral	Yes—moral	Yes—moral
Need-based	Yes—rational	No—moral	Autonomous	Autonomous	Prima facie no	Prima facie yes	No—iffy	Yes—moral	Yes—moral
Liberal pronatal	Surely not?	Surely not!	Absolutely	Maybe yes	Surely yes	Surely not	Surely not	Autonomous	Maybe yes

humankind and the right *to* and the duty *not* to reproduce. Even in those, however, there are ways of making amends and finding common ground.

When it comes to the right *to* and the duty *not* to have children, my view suggests unconventional solutions but avoids making absolute judgments. My considerations recommend that children should not be had, but the question, as far as pure theory goes, is left unresolved and subjected to further scrutiny. Opponents are free to offer their own views on these matters, and the decisions will inevitably be compromises between the extremes. Like all utilitarian theories, mine is radical: Its default value is that traditional thinking must be challenged. This should not present problems to those who hail progress in some shape or form.

My case for the voluntary extinction of humankind should be even more palatable to a liberal audience. I only submit that if *all* humans together agree to end the existence of the species, they are entitled to do so. As long as there are those who object, nothing will be done. I am not pushing the Big Red Button without their consent, nor am I recommending it to anyone else. I may go on about the desirability of putting an end to human suffering and frustration, “remonstrating with” people, or “reasoning with” them, or “persuading” them, or “entreating” them, “but not ... compelling” them, or “visiting [them] with any evil in case [they] do otherwise,” as John Stuart Mill famously phrased the liberal dogma.<sup>34</sup>

### Summing Up the Theory

I have now, as promised in the introduction, navigated through the conceptual challenges presented to my theory, making adjustments when they have been due. Before I move on to sketch other applications, it is time to sum up the conceptual findings.

Conflict-responsive need-based negative utilitarianism posits that there are two fundamental needs that should not be frustrated by moral decisions: the need not to suffer (experience pain or anguish) and the need not to have one’s autonomy (deliberative or instinctive self-direction) dwarfed. Autonomy takes different forms in human and sentient nonhuman individuals and groups.

The theory further posits that if a choice increases the fundamental need frustration of some while decreasing the fundamental need frustration of others, the case must be deferred. The straightforward measurement and comparison of need satisfaction and need frustration favored by classical utilitarianism is probably not practicable even with one value (suffering), and it is patently unfeasible with two (suffering *and* autonomy).

The deferral should be followed by an independent ethical inquiry into the logic and acceptability of different alternatives. This inquiry should be as inclusive as possible and it should take into account all reasonable philosophical and moral lines of thought. I have not specified the nature of these further considerations here, because they fall outside the scope of my theory as such.<sup>35,36,37,38</sup> In two cases, I have partly tried to preempt the requirement of deferral, though.

Through human life plans, autonomy can be indirectly in play whenever our preferences are left dissatisfied. It can be argued that if we do not get something that we badly want or desire, our self-direction will receive a blow that cannot be shrugged off as a mere negation of a whim. Although this is conceptually true, I have tried to show, in the cases of the alleged right to reproduce and the duty to assume vegan practices, that the clashing claims can be seriously unbalanced from the start. The parental, culturally determined urge to reproduce and the antivegan, culturally determined insistence on commodifying nonhuman animals pale in comparison with the opposing claims. These claims are based on the future individuals’ need not to be forced into an existence of frustration, and the sentient beings’ need not to suffer. True to my theory, however, I have conceded that the cases must be deferred.

With these adjustments and caveats, conflict-responsive need-based negative utilitarianism matches my own intuitions in the key cases that I have examined. In addition, if I am correct in my analysis of the contents of Table 1, the theory is closer to the intuitions of liberal pronatalists than the more standard, sentiocentric formulation of negative utilitarianism. This settled, let me now proceed to the main political repercussions of my theory. They are anticonsumerism, anticapitalism, and anarchism.

### Against Consumerism

The current human lifestyle, especially in the Global North, is based on the ever-increasing consumption of goods and services. This practice and tendency has been criticized by political thinkers of the various post-Kantian and neo-Aristotelian schools that constitute the movement named Continental Philosophy.<sup>39</sup> Utilitarianism, due to its original association with classical liberalism and the so-called free market, does not have a reputation of being anticonsumerist. In its positive formulation, aiming at “the greatest happiness of the greatest number,” it seems to encourage not only more happiness-inducing consumption, but also more happiness-craving consumers.<sup>40</sup> In its new disguise of conflict-responsive need-based negative utilitarianism, however, it takes a different turn.

The consumerist way of life has its undeniable perks for those who like it and can afford it. Although the needs to have new technological gadgets, Internet entertainment, inexpensive home delivery, out-of-season fruit and vegetables, and personal trainers are created by the market for the market, any shortage of them can frustrate those who have learned to rely on their availability. This is why the analysis of the case must, in my model, start from these invented urges.

Restricting and regulating market transactions (X) frustrates the acquired needs of consumers (A) by preventing them from achieving what they are used to having. I will concede, for the argument’s sake, that this can dwarf their autonomy on some level. The consumers can, as enlightened and responsible traders or law-abiding and upright citizens, accept this limitation on their self-rule, and no duties are incurred (V 3 a). Or they can refuse to accept it and try to fight the restrictions and regulations by themselves. No duties to others would be incurred (V 4 a), and the story would end here. Consumers have not, however, traditionally taken to the barricades to defend their lifestyle. Instead, they have claimed that governments are dutybound to keep the restrictions and limitations at bay (V 4 b).

The nature of the claim merits scrutiny. When consumers demand public support to maintain their way of life, three other parties are, at least in our current world, harmed. Nonhuman animals are commodified,<sup>41,42</sup> workers in low-income jobs and countries are exploited,<sup>43</sup> and the natural environment is damaged.<sup>44</sup> The commodification and exploitation will directly frustrate the fundamental needs of factory animals and workers, and environmental decay will indirectly frustrate everybody’s, including the consumers’, needs (A 5 b). The case is, then, similar to antiveganism and the alleged right to reproduce. My model may dictate that the decision has to be deferred and analyzed separately, but the *prima facie* duty (or even right) of governments to support consumerism like they currently do is weak and the *prima facie* entitlement of commodified animals and exploited workers to have their claims heard strong. As for the environment, we all seem to have a prudential obligation to stop its degradation.

### Against the Ideology of Perpetual Material Growth

The matter of consumerism can also be approached from the viewpoint of production. Capitalist economies, be they run by business corporations or nation states, rely on the expectation of continued material growth. The theory is that increased production accumulates profits that are fed back into the system as investments. Businesses expand, more and more people are employed, competition drives salaries up and prices down, and nations and individuals flourish. Classical liberalism joins hands with classical (positive) utilitarianism. Any intervention in the economy’s working would, according to this narrative, be detrimental.<sup>45</sup>

In practice, our planetary resources are limited, and both political leaders and captains of industry are grudgingly beginning to admit this. Climate change and biodiversity loss affect localities, communities, and societies, and the current fossil economies continue to contribute to these environmental crises. Burning coal, oil, and gas does not guarantee sustainable living conditions to the ballooning human population in the decades to come.<sup>46</sup> The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issues regular warnings, and the United Nations (UN) ostensibly tries to address the concerns.<sup>47,48</sup> Unfortunately, the affluent countries that have the power to determine UN policy offer solutions that fail to tackle the core problem, growth itself.

Seen from the viewpoint of the UN power states, the analysis in my model proceeds as follows: Environmental decay and rising carbon dioxide levels (X) threaten the prosperity of countries in the Global North (A) and the continued wealth and health of their citizens (A). Up until 1987, the affluent nations and their inhabitants more or less accepted the situation (A 3 a), and no duties were incurred (V 3 a). The Brundtland Commission's report in 1987 finally brought to light, on the UN level, the undesirability of the threat (A 3 b).<sup>49</sup> The obvious next step would have been to recognize the prudential duty of the Global North to rethink its consumerist lifestyle and fight the depletion of Earth's limited natural resources by downgrading unnecessary production (V 4 a). Instead, the finger was pointed at the Global South.

The Brundtland Commission proposed that economic, social, and ecological matters can all be solved by *sustainable development*, in the Commission's words, "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>50</sup> This famous adage is open to diverse interpretations. Idealistically, the reading is that the Commission aimed at the equal need satisfaction of all people in all parts of the world now and in the foreseeable future. Realistically, all the actions of the UN since 1987 have confirmed a different aim. The primary goal is to make sure that the standard of living in the Global North remains on its current level, whereas the economic development of the Global South is moderated by the need to spare limited planetary resources. Even in less affluent countries, the most essential needs for survival are met, but these countries cannot be allowed to make a fossil-based economic leap. This would accelerate climate change and environmental degradation and make the planet inhabitable for "our" (Global North) children and their children.<sup>51,52</sup>

In terms of my model, the UN power nations are suggesting that less affluent nations and their citizens have a duty to curb their development and hopes of raising their standards of living (V 4 b) to secure the consumerist lifestyle of their more affluent peers. Due to the prevailing global imbalance of well-being and ill-being, this prolongs the fundamental need frustration of the South (A 5 b). Once again, although my theory indicates deferral (V 5 b) and further ethical analysis, the *prima facie* case against the affluent countries is strong.

These considerations have two potent justice-related *prima facie* corollaries. First, uneven economic development does not solve global problems related to social equality and ecological concerns. The UN sustainable development strategy should be abandoned and a new approach devised. Second, worldwide material growth has become impossible. The ideology of continued growth should be given up and a new way forward sought. These are not easy tasks, but they are vital.

### Against Hegemonies

One way to start the change would be a rehauling of the power structures. Current democracies are better than autocratic dictatorships insofar as they allow the replacement of their leaders by new ones from time to time. Economic agents, however, remain in power over electoral cycles, and their influence in global decisions far outweighs that of citizen-chosen politicians. As both groups continue to promote consumerism and material growth, they contribute to the persisting social and environmental crises and frustrate, directly and indirectly, the fundamental needs of human and nonhuman animals alike. And as both power groups have tried to monopolize the truth to the best of their ability—"Contemporary liberal democracy and capitalism are irreplaceable"—no decisive changes are possible without rethinking and reshaping the entire political system. This is an aim anarchism has had for quite a while, also on utilitarian grounds.<sup>53,54</sup>

Let me call the parties of the conflict tentatively and for the purposes of an analysis in my model "the world" (recipients) and "the system" (decisionmakers). The situation is more complex than this dichotomy suggests, as many agents in the former are also agents in the latter, and I will unpack the concepts as the story proceeds.

Social inequality and environmental decay brought on and perpetuated by consumerism and continued material growth (X) frustrate the fundamental needs of the world (A). If the world refuses

to accept this (far from obvious) and does not see itself as a responsible and competent force of change (far from obvious), the claim can be made that the system has a *prima facie* duty to rein in consumerism and material growth (V 4 b). Since, however, doing this would frustrate the system's self-direction and impede the realization of its economic and political interests, the case has to be deferred (V 5 b). It would be tempting to say that the imbalance of the claims preweighs the final verdict to the benefit of the world, like in the other key cases. But this is where the duplicate roles of many of the players complicate the matter.

The world, according to my tentative definition, consists of moral patients and moral agents.<sup>55</sup> Commodified nonhuman animals and many exploited workers are patients or mere recipients without any or much power to alter things. Many worker-consumers are, however, agents who could by their own decisions affect changes. The fact that they do not reveals that they are obedient servants and self-observed beneficiaries of the system. As long as they have, or they think they have, more than their chains to lose, they will force a more status-quo-friendly investigation and verdict.

### Need Frustration Trolley and the Shift of the Burden of Proof

The situation between the system (affluent people, especially in affluent countries) and the world (not-so-affluent people, especially in not-so-affluent countries, factory animals, and the natural environment) can be illustrated by a trolley metaphor, which will also help me to pinpoint my main conclusion.

You are a crew member of a trolley. On the tracks, there are people and nonhuman animals at regular intervals. The trolley hits them all and maims them. It is so heavy that the collisions do not slow it down. On the contrary, it is continuously accelerating. Some philosophers said a long time ago that if the acceleration stops, the trolley will explode. The leadership holds on to this belief, although no empirical evidence has ever been presented. Due to the speed, people keep falling off the trolley, injuring themselves. The crew meeting is coming up, and you have a choice to make. Do you vote for the further acceleration of the trolley or a reconsideration of what the philosophers said?

The point of this example is to show that the burden of proof has for a long time been at the wrong end of the discussion on social equality and environmental decay. Those who champion consumerism and unceasing material growth have ignored all critical voices claiming that their own beliefs are the unquestioned truth. This being the case, those challenging the truth have been expected to present evidence to the contrary and to provide better alternatives. In the absence of such evidence and alternatives, the systemic hegemony has prevailed.

The trolley example and all my foregoing considerations in the particular cases suggest another, opposite approach. The undeniable truth that consumerism and perpetual growth have reached their social, ethical, and planetary boundaries requires evidence and alternatives from the system, not from its critics. Antinatalists, vegans, critics of overconsumption, anticapitalists, and anarchists already have, as my analyses have demonstrated, a strong *prima facie* claim against the current practices. The burden of proof rests with those who, based on eighteenth-century philosophical ideas and their own interests,<sup>56</sup> demand further acceleration. It is up to them to produce credible evidence that the capitalist economy can be reshaped to tackle the prevailing social and environmental challenges. Failing that, conflict-responsive, need-based negative utilitarianism urges us all, the system included, to concentrate our efforts on finding viable alternatives to pronatalism, commodification, exploitation, consumerism, and continued material growth.

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8. Proponents of sentiocentrism can recognize an *indirect* right to live. If killing some people would cause many or all other people considerable pain or anguish, it should be avoided.
9. I echo here Jeremy Bentham who famously described any so-called natural rights “nonsense upon stilts.” Schofield P. Jeremy Bentham’s “Nonsense upon Stilts.” *Utilitas* 2003;15:1–26. doi:10.1017/S0953820800003745.
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11. There can be more happiness and flourishing, as well, but from the viewpoint of strict negative utilitarianism, this is irrelevant. Critics of the theory have been keen to point out that this goes against all our intuitions. Surely, we should assess our actions in the light of its good as well as its bad consequences. Since I have simply posited the negative starting point, I do not defend the exclusion in detail. If I did, I could point out that taking into account the positive consequences can take two forms. First, we should prioritize the happiness of some people (or sentient beings) over the suffering of others. This seems to me callous. Second, we should recognize that people (and other sentient beings) need the presence of well-being as well as the absence of ill-being to flourish. To this, I would say that the removal of ill-being can pave the way to well-being. It is almost a conceptual truth. The moral urgency, as all negative utilitarians have stressed, is still in the avoidance and removal of ill-being.
12. Proponents of sentiocentrism can recognize an *indirect* right to autonomy. If dwarfing people’s self-rule causes them pain or anguish, it should be avoided.
13. This is not self-evident, though, as fulfilling the duty can be doomed to fail, in which case the net suffering would be greater. A utilitarian knowing the odds would not choose this option.
14. I am simply stating my own view here. This is in accordance with my intuitions and with my theory.
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