



What You're Rejecting When You're Expecting

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Received: 7 December 2021 / Accepted: 20 November 2022
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Abstract I defend two *collapsing* or *reductionist* arguments against weak pro-natalism (WPN), the view that procreation is generally merely permissible. In particular, I argue that WPN collapses into strong pro-natalism (SPN), the view that procreation is generally obligatory. Because SPN conflicts with the dominant view that procreation is never obligatory, demonstrating that WPN collapses into or entails SPN establishes epistemic parity (at least as concerns reproductive liberty) between WPN and anti-natalism (AN), the view that procreation is always impermissible. First, I distinguish between two moral goods: the good of procreation itself and the good of procreative potential. Second, I contend that the average moral agent is obligated to assist needy children via adoption, fostering, or other financial or interpersonal support. Third, I present the first collapsing argument: if an agent's justification for not assisting needy children is preservation of their resources (financial or interpersonal) for their *actual* future offspring, that justification is preserved *only if* they eventually and actually procreate. Thus, their eventual procreation is morally obligatory and SPN follows. Fourth, I present the second collapsing argument, which assumes procreative potential as the relevant good: if an agent's

justification for not assisting needy children is preservation of their resources for their *potential* future offspring, that justification holds only if (a) the objective or subjective valuation of the opportunity is of the relevant type and valence to justify not assisting needy children and (b) the agent sincerely values the opportunity. Fifth, I argue that (a) is unsatisfied and that while (b) is satisfied in most cases, it entails that most agents are *obligated* to desire or be behaviourally disposed to pursue procreation for themselves (i.e., SPN). Thus, I conclude that both actual procreation and procreative potential are either insufficient justifications for not assisting needy children or that they entail obligatory pro-reproductive attitudes or behaviours.

Keywords Anti-natalism · Pro-natalism · Reproductive freedom · Duty to procreate · Duty to rescue

Introduction

Anti-natalism (hereafter, "AN") is the view that procreation is generally morally impermissible (Benatar 2013). Unsurprisingly, AN is the minority view among bioethicists. While there are a number of objections to AN, perhaps the most significant objection is the autonomy objection (Hereth [forthcoming](#)).

According to the autonomy objection, each person's strong pro tanto right to reproductive autonomy

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implies a general permission to procreate. Thus, AN's claim that procreation is generally impermissible is incompatible with the right to reproductive autonomy. Although a fistful of philosophers have tried to rescue AN from the autonomy objection (Goöbens 2021; Conly 2016; Benatar 2015; Epstein and Zosmer 2015), I offer a novel approach to defusing it. One way to salvage AN from the autonomy objection is to motivate rejection of reproductive autonomy or demonstrate serious limits to the right. Another way is to show that the autonomy objection cuts equally against *pro-natalism*, the view that procreation is generally morally permissible. I'll pursue the latter strategy.

I defend a *collapsing* or *reductionist* argument against weak pro-natalism (WPN), the view that procreation is generally merely permissible. In particular, I argue that WPN collapses into strong pro-natalism (SPN), the view that procreation is generally obligatory. Because SPN conflicts with the dominant view that procreation is never obligatory, demonstrating that WPN collapses into or entails SPN establishes epistemic parity (at least as concerns reproductive liberty) between WPN and AN, the view that procreation is always impermissible.

First, I distinguish between two moral goods: the good of procreation itself and the good of procreative potential. Second, I contend that the average moral agent is obligated to assist needy children via adoption, fostering, or other financial or interpersonal support. There are many children whose basic daily needs go unmet. Children all over the globe suffer from malnourishment and lack of clean drinking water and lack access to education and adequate healthcare. They are in abusive homes or no homes at all. They are unloved or insufficiently loved. To make matters worse, many or perhaps most of their deaths are also preventable. What's worse, it seems that given extreme resource discrepancies between developed and non-developed nations, these problems could be addressed (at least in theory) by more affluent prospective caregivers alongside state intervention. According to UNESCO's World Inequality Database on Education (2022), there are roughly 258 million children worldwide who remain unschooled. According to SOS Children's Villages (2022), there are roughly 69 million children worldwide who suffer from malnutrition. And according to UNICEF (2022), while children account for only about a third of the global population, they make up about half of those

living in extreme poverty. There are plenty of children whose needs are clearly going unmet. Here, my approach takes its cue from an argument considered (and ultimately rejected) by Travis Rieder (2015) that persons ought to adopt rather than procreate, which if successful would justify a contingent variant of AN. However, my argument does not rely on the thesis that adoption is morally obligatory (Rulli 2016a and 2016b; Friedrich 2013).

Third, I present the first collapsing argument: if an agent's justification for not assisting needy children is preservation of their resources (financial or interpersonal) for their *actual* future offspring, that justification is preserved *only if* they eventually and actually procreate. Thus, their eventual procreation is morally obligatory and SPN follows. Fourth, I present the second collapsing argument, which assumes procreative potential as the relevant good: if an agent's justification for not assisting needy children is preservation of their resources for their *potential* future offspring, that justification holds only if (a) the objective or subjective valuation of the opportunity is of the relevant type and valence to justify not assisting needy children and (b) the agent sincerely values the opportunity. Fifth, I argue that (a) is unsatisfied and that while (b) is satisfied in most cases, it entails that most agents are *obligated* to desire or be behaviourally disposed to pursue procreation for themselves (i.e., SPN). Thus, I conclude that both actual procreation and procreative potential are either insufficient justifications for not assisting needy children or that they entail obligatory pro-reproductive attitudes or behaviours.

Why Procreation Isn't Obligatory

Among pro-natalists, the consensus is that procreation is morally permitted but not morally required (Browne 2017; Meyers 2016; Epstein and Zosmer 2015; Buller and Bauer 2011). That is, the overwhelming majority of pro-natalists endorse WPN, the position that, in general, procreation is merely morally permissible.

Below, I address why most pro-natalists endorse WPN. Before considering that, however, I'll outline the two competitors to WPN: SPN, the position that, in general, procreation is morally obligatory, and AN,

the position that, in general, procreation is morally impermissible.¹

Catholics traditionally accept SPN for married persons, teaching that “each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life” (Paul VI 1968, II.11). Liberals in procreation ethics strongly oppose both SPN and AN and universally affirm WPN (Cavaliere 2020). But why? In an essay devoted to reconsidering SPN, Anca Gheaus writes of its opposition:

[T]hese claims do not sit well with a liberal view that respects individuals’ autonomy. Societies worldwide are committed to individuals’ freedom to decide whether or not to have children, and how many. This freedom is protected by legal rights encoded in widely endorsed—if not always binding—international conventions. Not only is there no legal duty to have children, but philosophers discussing the matter generally believe that there is no such enforceable duty either. (Gheaus 2015, 88)

Gheaus ultimately defends a *collective* obligation to procreate “to avoid great harm to a potential last generation of childless people” (2015, 87), thus endorsing a variant of SPN (Smilansky 1995). Another pro-natalist, David Wasserman, remarks,

[M]ost of us do not believe that the prospect of a good or even great life gives fertile couples or other potential child makers an obligation or strong moral reasons to have children. (2015, 135)

Indeed, Wasserman endorses the stronger claim that procreation “is never a requirement” (2015, 135). Similarly, Christine Overall claims that “people’s rights to control their reproductive functions mitigate against any supposed duty or obligation to reproduce in any way” (2012, 76). Travis Rieder, in a paper critiquing Tina Rulli’s pro-adoption anti-natalist view, contends that “the radical intimacy involved in forming a family tends to block the application of duty or

obligation” (2014, 304), thus entailing the falsity of SPN (cf. De Wispelaere and Weinstock 2014).

The strong consensus against SPN implies that an argument against pro-natalism of the form *if WPN is true then SPN is true* would carry considerable weight. Further, it should have special purchase among pro-natalists who reject AN on the grounds that AN severely restricts procreative autonomy. In the next two sections, I defend two such arguments.

The First Collapsing Argument: Procreation as the Good

Let’s begin with my reconstruction of Peter Singer’s infamous case from “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (1972, 231):

Drowning. Child is drowning in a shallow pond. Child will die unless you jump into the water and save them. You can jump into the pond and save them at no cost to yourself.

Most everyone accepts Singer’s conclusion that you are *morally obligated* to save Child. In general, this reflects the widespread view that rescuing others from serious harm is pro tanto obligatory. Accepting an obligation of easy rescue, moreover, does not commit us to the stronger conclusion that *all* rescues are morally obligatory. For example, consider a variant of Singer’s case:

Pregnant. Child is drowning in a shallow pond and will die unless you jump into the water and save them. However, you are pregnant and the strain of attempting to rescue Child will cause your fetus to die. On that basis, you let Child drown.

Unlike in Singer’s case, there *is* some cost to you in *Pregnant*: your unborn child, a hefty cost to bear. Let’s stipulate that not assisting Child is morally justified as it would prevent the great good of actual procreation.²

¹ This construal of AN allows that procreation is *possibly* permissible—that is, in some possible world. But for the AN, that world needs to be radically dissimilar from ours to render procreation permissible.

² Here, I assume that procreation involves more than *conception* and in particular that procreation is a conception-to-birth affair. Thus, I assume that miscarriages are *unsuccessful attempts* at procreation.

As an empirical matter, plenty of adults reason in this way. They don't adopt, foster, or provide financial or interpersonal assistance to needy children because their plan is to conserve their resources for their own biological children. Moreover, their actions make sense: adoption is expensive, people can afford only so many spare rooms, and so on. In short, the nest egg can be only so big and encompass so many children.

Now let's add one further fact: you never have biological children of your own, choosing instead to abort your fetus. You *could* have them; there's no infertility, lack of opportunity, or medical risk associated with continued gestation. Rather, you just *don't* have them. Your actions in that case seem deeply wrong. Letting Child drown to preserve your fertility *and then procreating* is one thing. But letting them drown *and then never procreating* seems wrong. The reason why is simple enough: if it's *the good of procreation* that secures the justification for not assisting Child in *Pregnant*, then the absence of actual procreation entails the absence of the relevant, justification-securing good. Thus, the justification is undermined.

The only permissible way forward is to procreate. Thus, non-procreation is impermissible. Thus, procreation is obligatory.³ Thus, if the relevant good is procreation, WPN collapses into SPN. Here's the formal argument:

The First Collapsing Argument

1. If the good of actual procreation justifies you in not assisting needy children, then that good must eventually exist lest the justification be undermined.
2. If that good must eventually exist lest the justification be undermined, then you must eventually procreate lest the justification be undermined.
3. Therefore, if the good of actual procreation justifies you in not assisting needy children, then you must eventually procreate lest the justification be undermined.
4. If you must eventually procreate lest the justification be undermined, your eventual procreation is (pro tanto) morally obligatory (i.e., SPN is true).
5. Therefore, if the good of actual procreation justifies you in not assisting needy children, then your eventual procreation is (pro tanto) morally obligatory (i.e., SPN is true).

Bear in mind that the antecedent of premise 1 is itself innocuous for WPN and its defenders. But actual procreation is, well, *actual*. Conception *must* occur. In cases like *Pregnant*, then, the justification is partially retroactive, as it's the temporally subsequent conception that serves as the justifying good. So, if you leave Child to die in *Pregnant*, you acquire a *moral obligation* to use the opportunity you preserved—i.e., to procreate. That conclusion contradicts the consensus view that procreation isn't morally obligatory.

Before moving on, let's consider precisely *how many* persons are under the sort of obligation described in *Pregnant*. The purpose of reviewing these statistics is to rebut the objection that there's nothing implausible about supposing that procreation is *sometimes* obligatory (as Anca Ghaus argues), provided it is only *rarely* obligatory. By showing that most Americans are (or would be, assuming the above argumentation) obligated to procreate, I demonstrate frequency and thus rebut the objection.

In 2019, births in the United States declined by 1 per cent, with 58.3 births per 1,000 women aged 15–44 (Martin et al. 2020). Still, most people reproduce, with Pew Research Center showing a total fertility rate of 1.73 children per 1 woman across their lifetimes (Livingston 2019). By contrast, only 2 per cent of Americans have adopted a child, with nearly 108,000 children awaiting adoption and over half a million in foster care, according to Adoption Network (2021). These statistics might tempt the inference that since most Americans procreate, most Americans discharge their obligation to needy children detailed in the duty to rescue needy children. We are happy to grant this inference for argument's sake. However, it does nothing to undermine our argument. The fact that most Americans meet their obligation to needy children presupposes the very obligation everyone rejects, namely, an obligation to procreate. The vast majority of Americans—nearly 98 per cent of them, according to Adoption Network—don't adopt. The

³ This allows for the possibility that procreation is merely pro tanto obligatory (and not all-things-considered obligatory) in these cases. However, even a pro tanto obligation to procreate is sufficient for the truth of SPN.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Administration for Children and Families reports that, as of 2019, nearly 424,000 children were in foster care (2020, 1). There are limited data on the number of foster *parents*, but let's assume there are two foster parents for each foster child: $424,000 \times 2 = 848,000$ foster parents. That's a mere 0.33 per cent of the 2019 total American *adult* population of 255 million.

These are imperfect measures of the extent to which American adults provide much-needed aid to children. However, they are evidence of minimal or insufficient involvement. The duty of rescue does not require adoption or foster care, though there will be some cases in which those are the only ways to help specific needy children. Instead, the duty of rescue requires us to *help needy children*, an obligation whose satisfaction can take a variety of forms: adoption, fostering, providing affordable or free childcare, caring for your siblings' children, donating to Oxfam, becoming a pre-K or K–12 teacher, working for adoption or foster agencies, resuscitating infants (Rieder 2017), and so on. Efforts like these prevent a range of harms from the urgently important (e.g., malnutrition, inadequate housing, substance abuse, and suicide) to the eventually important (e.g., lacking a loving family or a sense of belonging, thinking no one cares, sibling reunification, and future economic and employment opportunities).

The empirical evidence strongly suggests that most Americans stockpile their resources, skills, and time for their own future biological children. The National Philanthropic Trust's "Charitable Giving Statistics" for 2017 estimate that only 30 per cent of U.S. adults volunteered financially or otherwise to *some* philanthropic cause (National Philanthropic Trust 2020). Furthermore, these data are restricted to the United States, thus excluding billions of adults whose efforts to aid children are similarly stagnant. So, it is not the rare American who is obligated to procreate but rather the *overwhelming majority* of Americans—and, indeed, adults worldwide.

As motivation for the other major premise, (4), consider the more general underlying moral phenomenon. What is that moral phenomenon? It is the simple principle that if you are pro tanto obligated to prevent evil E (Frowe 2018), but all-things-considered permitted *not* to prevent E in order to preserve a good G of importance to you, then you are pro tanto obligated to preserve G. Otherwise, you allow E to befall

the world for no good reason and thereby fail to discharge your obligation to prevent E from occurring *sans* good reason. For a more concrete picture, consider the case of *Fence*.

Fence. A trolley is headed toward one innocent person. Onlooker can prevent trolley from killing that person only if he hops over a fence. However, Onlooker is on the phone with his distant, dying grandmother and prefers not to miss her final moments. As the trolley nears the person, Onlooker becomes bored conversing with his dying grandmother. Thirty seconds later, he hangs up the phone as the trolley hits and kills the person on the tracks.

Onlooker's choice to hang up the phone is impermissible. It is impermissible because, by hanging up the phone, Onlooker destroys (rather than preserves) the good whose preservation justified him in allowing a person to die. He thereby undermines the very justification that grounded his permission, thereby reinstating his initial pro tanto obligation to rescue the innocent person trapped on the trolley tracks and thereby failing to discharge that obligation. The same is true of persons who choose to procreate rather than assist needy children and then later decide *not* to procreate: they destroy a good whose existence was necessary for them to avoid wrongdoing.

The Second Collapsing Argument: Procreative Potential as the Good

In the *Pregnant* case above, your pregnancy will be terminated if you attempt to rescue Child. The good that purportedly justifies not saving Child is *actual procreation*, the conception and bringing to term of a foetus. But there's another good in the neighbourhood, *procreative potential*, that also matters, as the following case illustrates:

Wannabe. Child is drowning in a pond and will die unless you wade into the water to save them. However, the pond's water is runoff from a nearby chemical plant that causes infertility. If you save Child, you will become infertile. You reason, "If I save Child, I will never have biological children of my own—a significant cost

to me. I want to preserve that possibility.” On that basis, you leave Child to die.

Anecdotally, most people report that they regard saving Child in *Wannabe* as morally supererogatory, not obligatory. As a gesture of full disclosure, I have previously regarded my own procreative potential as a good worth preserving: prior to undergoing chemotherapy for testicular cancer, which tends to impact fertility (Meistrich 2013), I opted to cryopreserve several vials of semen in the event I became infertile and later desired to procreate.

My suspicion, confirmed by numerous anecdotal reports, is that it is the good of procreative potential, of fertility, that explains why most people don’t assist needy children in ways that consume resources and effectively “relocate” the nest egg from their own biological offspring to someone else’s offspring. As discussed in the previous section, adoption is emotionally taxing and expensive in the extreme. Caring for a child, whether an adopted child or a foster child, requires considerable financial resources—in the United States, approximately \$13,000 each year per child (Lino 2020). While less expensive, providing partial financial support for others’ children also detracts from financial resources people might otherwise use or save to provide for their *own* biological children.

What does it mean to *value* one’s procreative potential? When we value an opportunity for ourselves, what conceptual connection does that bear to our desires and behaviours? Here are two independent, compatible theses:

DESIRE THESIS:

Necessarily, if you value opportunity X for yourself, then you have a prima facie desire (or an undefeated desire) to pursue X for yourself.

BEHAVIOUR THESIS:

Necessarily, if you value opportunity X for yourself, then you are prima facie disposed to engage in X-pursuing behaviours.

According to the desire thesis, what it means to value an opportunity for yourself is to *desire* it for yourself. However, this desire need not be an all-things-considered desire, such that no other desire undermines or overwhelms it. Rather, a prima facie

desire—that is, a desire that X be actualized for you, other things being equal—is all that’s needed. Alternatively, your desire must be *undefeated*, that is, not (currently) undermined or overwhelmed. According to the behaviour thesis, what it means to value an opportunity for yourself is to *be behaviourally disposed* to pursue it for yourself. Again, the disposition is merely prima facie; you need not *actually* take advantage of opportunity X to have valued it. But it makes little intuitive sense to say you value opportunity X for yourself yet lack even a prima facie disposition to pursue it for yourself.

For my part, I find *both* theses quite plausible.⁴ If you value opportunity X for yourself, it’s counterintuitive to say you neither prima facie desire X for yourself nor are prima facie disposed to pursue X for yourself. Indeed, when people claim they neither value nor are inclined to take advantage of a given opportunity for themselves, we typically infer they don’t value that opportunity. In any case, for the following argument to work, it’s sufficient that one of these theses be true. If both are true, that only strengthens the argument. Here, then, is the argument:

The Second Collapsing Argument

1. If the good of your procreative potential justifies you in not assisting needy children, then you are obligated to sincerely value the good of your procreative potential.
2. If you are obligated to sincerely value the good of your procreative potential, then you are obligated either (a) to have or create a prima facie desire (or undefeatedly desire) to actualize your procreative potential or (b) to be prima facie disposed to engage in procreation-pursuing behaviours.
3. An obligation to have or create a prima facie desire (or undefeatedly desire) to actualize your procreative potential, or to be prima facie disposed to engage in procreation-pursuing behaviours, is uniquely compatible with SPN.

⁴ An anonymous reviewer suggests a third possibility: the intention thesis: Necessarily, if you value opportunity X for yourself, then you prima facie *intend* to engage in X-pursuing behaviours. This is an interesting suggestion, one that (if true) makes the behavioural element clear in precisely the way that the *Second Collapsing Argument* needs. For now, I leave it to readers to decide whether the intention thesis fares better than the desire thesis or the behaviour thesis.

4. Therefore, if the good of your procreative potential justifies you in not assisting needy children, then SPN is true.

The first premise requires only that persons who invoke (or would invoke, if asked) their procreative potential as a justifying good be *sincere* in this implicit valuation. That is, they must sincerely value their own procreative potential. Otherwise, they are insincere, in which case their refusal to save Child is impermissible.

The argument's second premise teases out the conceptual connections between valuing X for yourself and your desires and behaviours. Condition (a), the desire thesis, claims that an obligation to sincerely value your procreative potential entails an obligation to have or create a *prima facie* desire (or undefeatedly desire) your procreative potential. The latter isn't a new or distinct obligation, but an obligation *conceptually entailed by* the obligation to sincerely value your procreative potential. Condition (b), the behaviour thesis, claims that an obligation to sincerely value your procreative potential entails (again, conceptually) an obligation to be *prima facie* disposed to engage in procreation-pursuing behaviours. As further evidence for the truth of premise (2), consider that the desire thesis commits us to believing

If you sincerely value X, then you prima facie desire (or undefeatedly desire) X,

and this conditional entails the further conditional that

If you are obligated to sincerely value X, then you are obligated to prima facie desire (undefeatedly desire) X.

The properties of conceptual entailments are themselves entailed. Thus, if X conceptually entails Y, then any property of X is a property of Y. Thus, if *being morally obligated* is a property of X and X conceptually entails Y, then *being morally obligated* is a property of Y. Viewed from a different angle, the fact that you are obligated to sincerely value your own procreative potential *means* you are obligated to desire or act in ways that actualize your procreative potential. I am therefore *not* conflating conceptual necessity with deontic necessity; rather, I am assuming the much more modest thesis that if X is

deontically required and X conceptually entails Y, then Y is also deontically required.

Notice this premise does not strictly require a duty to create a new desire to procreate, as some regard desires as beyond agents' control. Rather, premise (2) requires a disjunction: either that the agent in fact already desire procreation at the time they value their creative potential (which is necessary to make valuing their procreative potential *sincere*) or that they cause themselves to desire to actualize their procreative potential. While I am sympathetic to the view that agents *can* be obligated to desire things (e.g., Liao 2006 argues that parents are obligated to love their children, where loving your children involves affective components; cf. Flowerree 2017 and Basu 2019 on the obligation to hold certain beliefs), sharing my sympathy is unnecessary to accept premise (2).

There are two ways to defend the third premise of the Second Collapsing Argument. At issue is the premise's claim that an obligation to desire or act towards one's procreative potential entails SPN. First, one might defend an argument like the following:

The First Argument for Premise 3

1. If you desire procreation for yourself, or if you are *prima facie* disposed to engage in procreative behaviours, then (other things being equal) you will procreate.
2. Therefore, if you are obligated to desire procreation for yourself, or if you are obligated to be *prima facie* disposed to engage in procreative behaviours, then (other things being equal) you are obligated to procreate.
3. If you are (other things being equal) obligated to procreate, then SPN is true.
4. Therefore, if you desire procreation for yourself, or if you are obligated to be *prima facie* disposed to engage in procreative behaviours, then SPN is true.

What this argument does in very short order is make an explicit connection between desires/dispositions and outcomes. If you *want* to procreate, or if you are *disposed* to procreate, then the natural, unimpeded outcome of those states is one in which you *do* procreate. So, an obligation to enter those states is effectively an obligation to set yourself on a track to procreation.

Premise (1) correctly identifies desires as motivational states: if you desire X, then you are *prima facie motivated* to X (Smithies and Weiss 2019; Schroeder 2015). Necessarily, unimpeded motivational states result in achieving the intended result. So, desiring procreation *ceteris paribus* entails procreation. The same holds for behavioural dispositions. For example, conditional intentions to X are widely viewed as dispositions to X, and it's implausible to view intentions to X as *not* resulting (*ceteris paribus*) in X-ing (Ferreiro 2009).

The truly controversial move occurs in subconclusion (2). One might object that even if you're obligated to desire or be disposed to pursue procreation, the fact that sincerity is required *only at the time of action* implies that you can later reverse your preference and, with it, your moral obligation. In that case, it seems implausible to suppose that a mere reversal of preference could eliminate your obligation to procreate. However, there's another way to interpret subconclusion (2), namely, as asserting that an obligation to desire procreation or be disposed to pursue it is, in effect, an obligation to procreate insofar as desiring procreation or being disposed to pursue procreation have procreation as their *ceteris paribus* outcomes. Said differently, if you are obligated to desire procreation, then you are obligated to possess mental states whose natural (i.e., *prima facie* or *ceteris paribus*) outcome is procreation. Thus, (2) might be rewritten to read like this:

- 2*. Therefore, if you are obligated to desire procreation for yourself, or if you are obligated to be *prima facie* disposed to engage in procreative behaviours, then you are obligated to develop or maintain desires or behaviours whose natural (i.e., *ceteris paribus*) outcomes are procreation.

Yet such an obligation is, as premise (3) claims, incompatible both with AN and WPN. There is little daylight between an obligation to procreate and an obligation to maintain or adopt desires or behaviours whose natural outcome is procreation. Thus, the implied conclusion is the truth of SPN, just as premise (3) of the Second Collapsing Argument claims.

A second way to defend premise (3) of the Second Collapsing Argument is to show that an obligation *to desire* procreation, or an obligation *to be disposed*

toward procreating, is itself uniquely compatible with SPN. The following argument does precisely that:

The Second Argument for Premise 3

1. The right to reproductive autonomy entails persons are not obligated to (a) procreate, (b) dedicate their resources to procreation, or (c) view procreation as a positive or desirable thing for themselves.
2. Persons obligated to desire procreation for themselves or obligated to be *prima facie* disposed to engage in procreative behaviours are obligated to dedicate their affective, cognitive, and other resources to procreation (i.e., (b)) and view procreation as a positive or desirable thing for themselves (i.e., (c)).
3. Therefore, persons obligated to desire procreation for themselves or obligated to be *prima facie* disposed to engage in procreative behaviours lack a right to reproductive autonomy.

Among the resources to which persons are entitled are their affective and cognitive resources. For instance, in her discussion of the wrongness of racial fetishes, Robin Zheng indicts “yellow fever”—a sexual preference for Asians—as an “additional psychological burden” on Asians and particularly Asian women. Says Zheng,

I take Asian/American women's testimony as my starting point for two reasons: first, the additional psychological burden generated by having to cope with yellow fever *constitute* [sic] a form of racial disadvantage in and of itself, and second, the nature of these burdens is an *indicator* of the negative social meanings expressed by the existence of yellow fever. An overwhelmingly common response from Asian/American women in both popular media and social scientific literature is one of being forced to negotiate constant doubt and suspicion. (Zheng 2016, 407)

The result is that “people of color must expend valuable psychic and emotional resources on negotiating the problem of constant doubt” (2016, 409), which is unjust. Zheng's observation that cognitive and affective resources are resources to which persons have a right strikes me as fundamentally correct. It

certainly seems entailed by the right to reproductive autonomy. Thus, an obligation to desire procreation or to be *prima facie* disposed to engage in procreative behaviours is incompatible with a right to reproductive autonomy. Just as you cannot be obligated to procreate, so also you cannot be obligated to *want* to procreate or *be disposed* to procreate.

How This Changes the Debate

Most people, including most bioethicists, think AN is too restrictive. Under dominant liberal approaches, AN is false because it violates reproductive autonomy. How would it do that? Two general answers are often provided: (a) by undermining a moral permission to reproduce or (b) by justifying coercive measures to prevent reproduction. Let's consider each in turn, beginning with (a).

It's obvious that AN undermines a moral permission to reproduce. However, equally bad (if not worse) is undermining a moral permission *not* to reproduce. SPN does just that. So, the acceptance of (a) as the measure of a plausible theory of ethical reproduction undermines SPN in addition to AN. If, as I have argued, WPN collapses into SPN, then (a) is hardly the bludgeoning tool it once was against AN. On, then, to option (b).

First, we should note that neither SPN nor AN *simpliciter* justifies coercively preventing reproduction. David Benatar (2013, 102–113), for example, denies it, although he has recently offered a partial defence of it (2020). Still, some such as Sarah Conly (2016) support state-based coercive measures to limit procreative autonomy and we can grant some credence to the worry that authoritarian states like China could again curtail reproductive liberties. Second, defenders of SPN might try to regain their advantage over AN by appealing to the “right to do wrong.” The existence of such a right could allow SPN's advocates to claim that while not procreating is wrong, third parties are forbidden from forcing you to act rightly. Judith Jarvis Thomson (1971, 59–64) famously invoked the right to do wrong to defend abortion rights, and Andrew I. Cohen (2014) has more recently claimed that famine relief is obligatory but unenforceable. But this right can just as easily be embraced by AN. Thus, SPN cannot regain its advantage in this way.

The irony that *pro-natalism* undermines reproductive autonomy should not go understated, as reproductive autonomy is the principal objection to AN. Thus, if pro-natalism is equally violative of reproductive autonomy, the comparative case against AN is substantially weakened and the debate has significantly shifted. I am unsure what it would mean to view procreative autonomy as a non-comparative (or intrinsic) problem for AN, but one possibility is that it provides reason to reject AN but no reason to accept SPN in its place. That much seems right but its import is unclear: If AN, SPN, and WPN exhaust the possible views of permissible procreation, and if undermining reproductive autonomy is a feature of all three, then reproductive autonomy is largely if not wholly *irrelevant* to debates over which view is true.

Objections and Replies

In this section, I anticipate a number of potential objections to the paper's main argument and argue none succeeds. Each objection is stated and followed by a reply.

Objection 1: Obligatory procreation is more plausible than wrongful procreation because the latter entails widespread culpability whereas the former does not.

AN entails only that procreators acted impermissibly, not that they were culpable. Further, as most humans are (nonculpably) unaware of the truth of AN, most procreation is nonculpable.

Objection 2: There is no minimal duty of rescue, including for needy children.

This undermines WPN's intuitive status, as a minimal duty of rescue is widely endorsed (MacKay and Rulli 2017; Douglas 2016). It entails the absence of even a pro tanto obligation to rescue drowning children if we could do so at no cost to ourselves, which is wholly implausible.

Objection 3: The duty to rescue distant, needy children is subsumed under a larger duty to act beneficently or altruistically, which can be satisfied without helping distant, needy children (e.g., donating money or time to environmental causes).

First, donating money or time to environmental causes *are* forms of assisting distant, needy children insofar as those children have a moral interest in climate compatible with human existence and flourishing. Second, the token example of environmental causes set aside, children are a special group entitled to priority consideration by beneficent or altruistic actors. For example, children have (*ceteris paribus*) stronger claims than adults as they have had fewer lifetime opportunities for overall health, as so-called “fair innings” distributive principles maintain (Davies 2016). Additionally, children tend to be more vulnerable and more defenceless than adults (Lazar 2015), further entitling them to priority protection.

Objection 4: The duty to assist needy children entails a form of effective altruism, but effective altruism is false.

Effective altruism is the view that each person ought to maximize the good they do (MacAskill 2017). Not surprisingly, this view is principally endorsed by consequentialists like Peter Singer (2015) and critiqued by non-consequentialists (Gabriel 2017; McMahan 2016). Whether or not effective altruism is true, the duty to assist needy children doesn't entail it. A principal critique of effective altruism, like the consequentialism that often undergirds it, is excessively demanding, but a duty of assistance allows for justified abstention in the face of significant life projects. Thus, unlike effective altruism, the duty of assistance does not require that you forgo your career and instead become an effective altruist or ascetic.

Objection 5: If needy children did not exist, procreation would not be obligatory, and thus AN is not confirmed by the argument.

First, needy children do exist, so (given this paper's central argument) procreation is generally obligatory for those who choose to procreate rather than assist needy children. Second, even the moral possibility of obligatory procreation (which the objection concedes) is sufficient to falsify WPN. Indeed, this is why Wasserman claims procreation “is never a requirement” (2015, 135) and why Overall denies “any supposed duty or obligation to reproduce in any way” (2012, 76).

Objection 6: The argument only requires that we refrain from procreation until we have dis-

charged our obligation to existing children. Thus, the argument doesn't entail AN.

This misunderstands the argument. The central problem for WPN isn't that procreation is *temporarily* impermissible, but rather that it was *ever obligatory*—or, worse still, *generally* morally obligatory for prospective procreators. It's the inclusion of obligatory procreation, not wrongful procreation, that threatens WPN.

Objection 7: The conclusion that procreation can be obligatory is plausible in some cases, such as when a partnership would not have been formed without a promise of procreation.

Unlike lesser-evil obligations, promises are not always enforceable and thus largely preclude the possibility of an obligation to procreate nonconsensually. First, it is widely acknowledged that fulfilling promises ceases to be obligatory when doing so requires the promise-maker to face unreasonable burdens (Hurd 2017; Kolodny and Wallace 2003). An unwanted pregnancy is an unreasonable burden, and it's doubtful a hypothetical partner would be *obligated* to procreate if they could eliminate the obligation by simply ceasing to desire it.⁵ Second, this objection fails to rescue WPN, which requires (contrary to my argument's conclusion) that procreation be *generally* permissible, as opposed to permissible only in promissory cases.

Objection 8: Because the obligation to procreate is conditional—i.e., either assist needy children or procreate—it is only a trivial threat to procreative autonomy.

Contrary to the objection, a conditional obligation of this sort does pose a serious threat to procreative autonomy, as most people neither adopt, nor foster, nor financially support needy children. Rather, they opt to procreate, effectively deciding to use their resources on the new, biological child and *not* to assist. They are, therefore, obligated to procreate. Second, as more and more opportunities to assist are foregone, the obligation to procreate becomes

⁵ Alternatively, they can be morally excused (but still obligated). However, if moral excuse is sufficient to square SPN with a robust account of procreative autonomy, then the same holds for AN.

proportionally *weightier*. That is, if obligation X with valence +5 requires me either to assist needy children or procreate, then if I decide not to assist needy children, I have a +5-strength obligation to procreate. Over time, this adds up, resulting in a serious limitation to procreative autonomy.

Conclusion

The consensus among pro-natalists is that procreation is morally permissible but not obligatory. Thus, they accept what I call weak pro-natalism (WPN) while rejecting strong pro-natalism (SPN), the view that procreation is generally morally obligatory. Of course, if procreation is obligatory, it is also permissible. (But not *merely* permissible.) Additionally, pro-natalists of all stripes reject anti-natalism (AN), the view that procreation is generally morally prohibited.

This essay has endeavoured to push pro-natalists into an uncomfortable position: if they accept the autonomy objection as evidence against AN, they must also accept it as evidence against SPN and (if WPN collapses into SPN) WPN. But then there is epistemic parity between AN and WPN relative to the autonomy objection. In brief, pro-natalists who accept a mix of empirical facts (i.e., that needy children exist and can be helped by any minimally responsible prospective parent) and moral principles (i.e., that there's a duty to help needy children) can justify allocating their resources to procreation rather than caring for needy children but at the cost of procreation becoming *obligatory*. To evade the problem, pro-natalists cannot appeal to the right to do wrong or unenforceable obligations without undermining the autonomy objection to AN and SPN. Nor can pro-natalists claim that the obligation to procreate wouldn't exist provided that eligible prospective parents never procreate, as that effectively concedes SPN and conflates an obligation's *existing* with it being *satisfied*. Indeed, even if no needy children existed, it remains counterfactually true that the existence of such children would, for persons choosing to procreate rather than care for needy children, render their procreation obligatory.

In summary, then, WPN is unstable. To be a pro-natalist, one must concede—as Catholics have historically done—that procreation is generally obligatory, thus endorsing SPN. In my view, AN is far more

palatable than SPN, but I lack space to argue that here. Suffice it to say, if WPN collapses into SPN, then AN and WPN are on equal footing relative to the autonomy objection. For the pro-natalist, then, the appeal of the autonomy objection may prove to be a double-edged sword.

Acknowledgements My thanks to Jason Hanna and the audience at the 2020 Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, two anonymous reviewers from this journal, and Anthony Ferrucci for discussion.

Declarations

Ethical Approval Blake Hereth is the sole author of the entire paper.

Conflict of Interest The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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