

Towards an ethics of pronatalism in South Korea (and beyond)

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ABSTRACT

East Asian countries such as South Korea have recently made headlines for experimenting with different methods to incentivise people to have (more) children, in a bid to reverse declining birth rates. Many such incentives—child benefits, cash bonuses, dating events, and so on—appear morally innocuous at first glance. I will demonstrate in this analysis, however, that they amount to stopgap measures which reveal fundamental shortcomings with the way various nation states are approaching the so-called ‘problem’ of fertility decline.

BACKGROUND

The total fertility rate (TFR) around much of the globe^[1] is nowadays well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman,¹ with East Asian countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong leading the pack.² Reasons given for this downward trend include effective contraception,³ the education of women,⁴ environmental and biological factors related to subfertility,⁵ rising housing prices,⁶ other costs associated with having and raising children,⁷ marriage market mismatches,⁸ loneliness,⁹ and so on.

Most ‘low-fertility’ countries view declining birth rates as an existential threat, because it implies ‘there will be fewer economically active people to fund health and welfare systems’.¹⁰ In response to this so-called ‘problem’ of fertility decline, many nation states have turned to pronatalism—a term which we might associate with ‘social bias toward having children’,¹¹ or perhaps more forcefully with ‘cultural and institutional forces that compel reproduction’.¹² Pronatalism is endorsed as a strategy which might help to ‘replace’ the working demographic and to combat the anticipated negative economic effects of population decline.¹³ More broadly, pronatalism might be viewed as a matter of ‘national defence’.¹⁴

Given that South Korea recently broke its own record for the world’s lowest fertility rate for the fourth year in a row, with a TFR which currently stands at just 0.72,¹⁵ I will focus on South Korea as the obvious case of a nation-state vying to get its citizens to procreate. South Korea has spent \$270 billion in the past 16 years to promote childbirth, and ideas for pronatalist incentives to date have included baby bonuses,¹⁶ cash rewards,¹⁷ exemption from mandatory military service¹⁸ and

even state-sponsored dating events.¹⁹ Superficially, these heterogeneous incentivising measures don’t seem all that morally objectionable, though a question that will loom large in the background for the foreseeable future is the extent to which they actually *work*, and at what cost.

For the purposes of this analysis, I will proceed by assuming a charitable viewpoint of the pronatalist policies in question. First, I will assume that the *justification* for pronatalist incentives—for example, anxieties about the negative effects of low fertility—are well-founded. Second, I will assume that the pronatalist interventions under analysis *are* reasonably effective or at least hold genuine potential to boost birth rates, to bracket for now the issue of doubt over the efficacy of pronatalist policies. Finally, I will assume that the pronatalist policies under analysis are *not* particularly coercive. Something like child benefits plausibly fall under the non-coercive category; forced birth, on the other hand, obviously does not. I will therefore bracket the issue of coercive policies like the restriction of abortion rights, which has already been rightly flagged as morally objectionable.²⁰ We might call pronatalism *benign* in case such conditions obtain. What I wish to examine herein, then, are the moral limitations of pronatalist policies even when they are well-justified, reasonably effective and made consistent with liberal ideals like individual autonomy.

In my view, there are several fundamental features that can be identified as consistently objectionable about these policies. First, they neglect to consider the normative social landscape against which the uptake of pronatalist policies occurs—especially conditions that constitute social injustices. Second, pronatalist logics also *reinforce* unduly paternalistic, if not outright oppressive, social norms. Third, they fail to appreciate the humanity of persons by instrumentalising their potential fertility in problematic ways. I elaborate on these issues below, demonstrating that even benign versions of pronatalism can contain fundamental shortcomings which warrant continued moral scepticism of such policies. I hope that my insights, overall, will help catalyse further discussion about how countries like South Korea might move towards a more robust *ethics* of pronatalism.

Neglect of systematic social injustices

My first objection to pronatalism has to do with the latter’s neglect of the broader social and normative landscape against which individual decision-making about procreation takes place. To make a medical analogy: we might say that benign renditions of pronatalism like incentivising measures engage only with something akin to *symptom management*,

¹Africa and Oceania are the only regions with a TFR above the ‘replacement’ level.



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rather than uncovering the *aetiology* of low fertility. This captures the criticism that pronatalist states are mistakenly concentrating their efforts on shifting *individual* preferences, motivations and attitudes (ie, symptom management) as the primary solution for low fertility, rather than recognising that the nuances of one's relational, social and economic environment (ie, aetiology) holistically interact with and inform individual choices (and may even *restrict* them). While I am personally hesitant here to use such medicalising language for the issue of procreation, I do so in order to illustrate the crude ways that pronatalist practices in countries like South Korea has worked like a band-aid, rather than a sustainable treatment or 'cure'.

In other words, the problem-targeting by the state is often localised to nudge individual behaviour on singular issues, and in so doing fails to put together a more complete puzzle as to why seemingly family-friendly methods to boost birth rates simply don't work. To be clear, this is not to say that countries in general shouldn't *try*—no matter how imperfectly—to address the issues and barriers that people who already want to have (more) children face. I take no issue, in principle, with proposals like increased child allowances, more generous parental leaves and other 'family-friendly' benefits. Indeed, many Nordic countries have been declared 'successful' for their ability to '[combine] high levels of maternal employment with high average fertility among working women',²¹ using precisely this 'family-friendly' model, although the Nordics are not at replacement level for TFR either. But 'family-friendly' policies obviously do not exist in a social vacuum, and so we must without exception always take account of the nation-specific background context—especially with regard to inequalities and other social injustices—against which citizens of 'reproductive age' weigh up pronatalist incentives.

For example, increased child benefits in the face of ongoing gender inequalities, both at home and in the workplace, may not be enticing to women who can still expect to be penalised professionally and overburdened by domestic duties in patriarchal cultures like South Korea.²² Women already face steep gendered inequalities in the workplace—South Korea has the highest gender wage gap in the OECD at 31%²³—but once they have children, these inequalities are only exacerbated by cultural expectations for women to become full-time mothers, rather than for them to return to work. In fact, increased participation of women in the labour force has already been weaponised against them by the current South Korean government, which has framed women's careerism and feminism as culpable for the societal erosion of family values and low birth rates.²⁴

Against this sociocultural context, even low-stakes interventions like state-sponsored dating events are entirely misguided: it treats fertility like a volitional issue, as if what is needed is to convince people, especially women, that they should simply *value* marriage and children more. But positioning marriage and childbirth as desirable in the abstract is a redundant bargain, as this does not by itself provide guidance on how women might resolve practical motherhood dilemmas, like balancing maternal responsibilities with professional life. So it is unlikely that such interventions will budge the group (eg, women) that the state likely perceives as warranting the intervention in the first place. As presented herein, pronatalism fails to fully acknowledge the reality that the reasons for why marriage and birth rates are down cannot be disentangled from the variegated social and relational concerns that institute real barriers for people—both men and women—in the context of procreative decision-making.

An underexplored aspect here is that despite ways that public blame has primarily castigated women's rather than men's

preferencesⁱⁱ, it is not obvious that men are more eager for marriage or children in this patriarchal context. In East Asian countries, 'expectations of a clear gender division of labor within marriage remain strong'.²⁵ However, it may be difficult to reconcile these gendered norms with the current social obstacles people are facing in reality. Men experiencing economic precarity especially may not feel up to the task of navigating financial uncertainty alongside traditional expectations to become the primary provider for a family—even if they would otherwise wish to settle down and have children. The fertility intentions and prospects of women can thus be affected just as much by men's decisions to delay marriage and childbearing under conditions of economic insecurity, as their own. Moreover, it appears that some South Korean men with experience of parental leave come to realise upon being thrust into an intense caregiving role for the first time that they 'had no idea looking after a child was this hard'.²⁶ Paradoxically, then, going on paternity leave could have the effect of attenuating, rather than strengthening, men's desires to have any more children—at least in social settings where public provisions for childcare are lacking, and where men tend to already be overworked.²⁶ In turn, South Korean women's fertility intentions are likely to be shaped by men's support (or lack thereof) with childcare and household chores.^{27 28} So even a regime like paternity leave—which on the surface seems like a perfectly reasonable tool to encourage childbearing while intuitively combating gender-asymmetric caregiving norms—may not quite have the desired effect, due to these background tensions.

This shows us that simplistic pronatalist interventions are unlikely to be nuanced enough to fully address the dynamic and divisive social complexities which underlie the experiences of men and women of 'reproductive' age. The social challenges and injustices which make it difficult for citizens to imagine child-birth and childrearing as a feasible and desirable life path, are not to be underestimated in pronatalist calculations. Of course, we should further recognise that some of the reasons for why people are not having children may not be congruous with individual willingness at all, but due to factors beyond their control, such as changes in sexual and reproductive health caused by environmental pollutants. It is surely a step in the right direction to make assisted reproductive technologies (ART) available for those who require assistance with reproduction in this context, as this might help recover unrealised fertility to some extent.²⁹ But even here it is important to recognise that in practice, uptake of ART by interested groups can be limited by powerful cultural scripts. For instance, extramarital births are rare in South Korea due to heteronormative family norms which temporally order marriage and childbearing.⁷ This may stigmatise ART access (and general family support) for citizens who deviate from this arrangement, like unmarried couples, single women, or lesbian aspiring mothers.

Without investigating the systematic and structural social struggles which underlie people's procreative motivations and choices, pronatalism will only operate as a stopgap measure which fails to confront the *root* causes of declining birth rates. If times are so desperate for the pronatalist, it is all the more important for those setting the pronatalist agenda to simultaneously address social, structural and environmental patterns which influence birth rates, rather than to treat fertility as a

ⁱⁱIt should be noted here that for the purposes of my article I am limiting my discussion to cis/hetero-normative 'men' and 'women', to reflect the groups referenced in the literature I cite.

surface issue only (eg, individual incentives taken out of their social context).

Reinforcement of oppressive or paternalistic social norms

An interrelated problem which arises out of the *neglect* of background social conditions within which procreative decision-making takes place, is the *reinforcement* of social injustices. I do not deny that multiple parties—including aspiring parents, children and the state—can plausibly benefit from reproduction and support for family-making. Nevertheless, promoting childbirth through pronatalism can come at the ethical cost of burdening groups who are already under immense pressure to procreate by default. This includes women perceived as being of childbearing age, or any other citizens of reproductive age who are seen to deviate from child-making aspirations.

It has been, and will continue to be, primarily women who bear the embodied costs of pregnancy, motherhood, care and upkeep of the goods of family life in general. In the South Korean context, which is influenced by Confucian philosophies, patrilineal family-making norms augment a rather demanding—and also restrictive—role for women. As wives, they are traditionally expected to be obedient and subordinate to their husbands (and their parents-in-law); at the same time, they are expected to exemplify their homemaking and childrearing responsibilities.³⁰ Thus, the social pressure placed on women to abide by this feminine destiny is, historically, deep-seated in the cultural imagination.

This glaring fact is often missing entirely from pronatalist logics. It is clear that by not questioning or acknowledging the potential wrongs of gender-based ideologies normalised in the sociocultural environment, pronatalism can serve to prop up problematic traditions as the gold standard for women's life trajectories. As Laura Purdy points out, 'pronatalism would not necessarily push women to be children's primary caregivers, but misogyny guarantees that it does so; geneticism, a strong preference for genetically-related children also reinforces pronatalism, along with belief in a so-called maternal instinct'.¹¹ The project of pronatalism, even if not *explicitly* intended to endorse the (mis)treatment or oppression of women, can conveniently act as an enabler or vehicle for ideological frameworks which unduly frame women as defined by adherence to wifely and maternal duties.

Thus, endorsement of pronatalism without critical attention to its connections and intersections with restrictive gender roles is morally wanting. Something that should be given greater weight in discussions about reasonable pronatalist incentives is the fact that its 'success' greatly depends on the willingness of women's bodies and labour. Being blind to the agency and interests of the women who stand to be most impacted by child-making would not only be unethical but also uninformed with respect to the factors which contribute to the hesitations women face around the decision to procreate. Even for those women already willing to undertake childbearing efforts, much more could be done in general by the state to counteract the ill effects or vulnerabilities generated by this unique dependency, and to reassure women of their agency and livelihood against everything they are traditionally expected to endure. This could take the form of better advocacy and funding to mitigate intimate partner violence, obstetric violence, maternal mental health issues, domestic inequalities and other issues that have repercussions for mothers and women in general. Efforts to de-polarise and de-stigmatise public dialogue around feminist issues could also be a conciliatory step to ensure that women—as agents heavily implicated by state-level decision making about birth increase strategies—are

being heard, represented and supported in the making of pronatalist designs, rather than merely subjected to the latter. It is thus ironic and unfortunate that feminism and women's independence have chiefly been *blamed* for the issue of low birth rates, rather than viewed as the key to *improving* the ethical prospects of pronatalism in gender-divisive cultures like South Korea.

Besides specifically *feminist* concerns about whose bodies must actually bear the brunt of pronatalist values, there is also the fact that all kinds of people—not just women—are simply not interested in settling down and having children. People who choose to be 'childfree' is a growing trend around the world.³¹ Yet it remains the case that societies are organised in such ways that, 'by fiction and by fiat, parenthood is the 'natural' condition, and to live one's life as a family member is the natural desideratum'.³² Reinforcing pronatalist values naturally pathologises people who choose to go against the social script of marriage and babies, as is evidenced in the fact that singledom tends to be associated with loneliness, and in that child-free couples are stigmatised as selfish, materialistic persons with unfulfilling lives.^{33 34} In pronatalist contexts, we can see why the concept of being *joyfully* unpartnered or child-free may be ill-tolerated or taken as inconceivable altogether. Far from successfully advancing any pronatalist cause, however, this pathologisation of people without children discourages further understanding and investigation into the various reasons people may have for not having children.

Ideally, a tolerant and liberal society should present family-making as just one of many possible life paths from which free individuals may choose of their own volition. After all, family-making is plausibly a volitional *right*, rather than a duty³⁵—otherwise the *freedom* people have to choose to procreate (or not) would not be possible. In a world where people have the right to choose to have families, it should be perfectly acceptable to see that some people might opt to have biogenetic offspring, some might engage in other forms of parenthood (eg, foster parenting), and still others may choose not to have children at all. In principle, those who have acceptable life plans other than reproduction should be treated on equal footing as those who plan to bear children, since this is a matter of individual choice. But state-sponsored pronatalism is obviously not neutral about what people should want or do—by attempting to incentivise greater childbearing with promises of financial rewards and other apparent benefits, it is overtly paternalistic (at best) in its insistence that citizens should choose to reproduce. The alleged 'need' for pronatalism, and commonplace condemnations of individual deviance from pronatalist norms, betrays an insecurity or suspicion that the supposedly natural right and desire to procreate may not be so universal after all.

What the observations above make apparent, in my view, is that pronatalism is not a self-evident or universal value. Rather, pronatalist schemes are rationalised by the uncritical leveraging of traditional gender norms, as well as positive biases about the benefits of child-making over and above other life values and pathways. In so doing, pronatalism upholds the status quo. Presenting the 'choice' of having (more) children as the best possible option for all adults of reproductive age unfortunately marginalises those who might not see the appeal or feasibility of that choice—be that women who would like to have children (under better conditions), single people who don't want them, childfree couples, and so forth.

The undue instrumentalisation of persons

The final problem with pronatalist incentives I want to highlight is the fact that they fail to appreciate people *as* persons.

Pronatalism essentially reduces people down to their potential fertility and productivity, as necessary vessels of (re)production. This is already evident in public obsession over TFR figures and the alleged threshold that should be reached in order to sufficiently ‘replace’ the working population. What is implicitly prioritised in pronatalism is the instrumentalisation of people’s ‘vital’ and ‘active’ years, and ensuring that people are engaged in (re)production. It is especially telling that, despite the world population being at an all-time high, a growing ‘ageing population’ is considered functionally redundant: the fact that elderly populations are increasing across the globe is inconvenient to the pronatalist precisely because they are a combination of costly and undeployable in the relevant senses. While raising the retirement age has been discussed as a potential strategy to mitigate the anticipated effects of demographic changes to the economy, it is an unpopular one.³⁶

Yet the logics of pronatalism in the context of fertility decline are not as commonsense as they may seem initially. The commonsense objective of pronatalism is to secure a certain economic output (ie, growth) on the basis of a specific demographic makeup—namely, by ensuring that enough babies are born every year. This simply *assumes* that every person who comes into existence will fulfil their part in putting their fertility and productivity to maximal use. While this narrative may be perfectly acceptable to the garden-variety capitalist, it homogenises the landscape of human persons as equal units of productivity, without accounting for those who may not be able-bodied enough, fertile enough, or even motivated enough, to relevantly ‘contribute’ to society. That is, pronatalism does not fully appreciate the potential complexity and *unruliness* of free citizens and thereby fails to resonate with those who might struggle, or be hesitant, to (re)produce in all the normative ways. This flattening down of human persons as mere units of (re)production can constitute part of the way that, as elaborated in the previous section, pronatalism imposes and reinforces restrictive norms on people without appreciating why they might wish to act otherwise.

The instrumentalising and homogenising logic of pronatalism also fails to be sensitive to the fact that people of reproductive age *right now* are already refusing to reproduce conditions they don’t find acceptable, especially in the context of anthropogenic climate change³⁷ and other social issues which are justifiably shifting preferences about procreation. The formation of ‘birth strike’ and ‘marriage strike’ movements in South Korea are illustrative of this issue: they speak to the plight of women who should be able to reproduce and may even have wanted to reproduce in different conditions, but are actively choosing to go on ‘strike’ under conditions that fail to dignify the deep-seated social problems they face.³⁸ Taking such factors into account, it becomes possible to reframe and rehumanise the ‘problem’ of fertility decline as one that is, at its core, about the resistance of the citizenry to (re)produce, rather than a crisis about fewer babies being born relative to some hypothetical ideal number. Thus far, pronatalist states have missed the opportunity to recognise and take more seriously, in the here and now, the heterogeneous abilities and preferences of persons *as* persons.

Overall, it seems plausible here to say that treating people as persons *first*, rather than primarily as mere units of (re)production, would be a necessary ameliorative step for any ethics of pronatalism. To even begin to understand why persons of reproductive potential may resist the pronatalist script or be ambivalent to it, we cannot take trajectories of their (re)production for granted, or idealise a number of children as the final goal on the supposition that this alone will resolve the challenges of

nationwide demographic transition. Instead, we must prioritise the attendant attitudes, beliefs, emotions and experiences that constitute one’s humanity. How do citizens come to trust, or distrust, population strategies endorsed by their state? What are the social conditions under which individuals would find the prospect of having children acceptable? What are the primary deterrents of individual fertility intentions at this moment in history? Answering such inquiries, of course, will require further qualitative exploration—be that inside or outside of academia—to shed light on the developing decision-making trends in human reproduction and bring first-personal perspectives into purview.

CONCLUSION

It’s no secret that countries with low birth rates like South Korea deploy pronatalist policies in desperation for its citizens to marry and have children. Whether the pronatalist strategies deployed in question are successful—both in the practical sense and in terms of their *ethics*—remains to be seen. In this analysis, I have demonstrated that even if we view pronatalism through a charitable lens, the kinds of interventions and policies it would issue may not be morally benign after all. The ethical problem is not so much that non-coercive incentivising methods are objectionable in and of themselves. Rather, the problem is that pronatalist incentives act as stopgap strategies which obscure several serious social issues. They tend to neglect the role of background social injustice in low fertility, reinforce objectionable social norms and unduly instrumentalise persons as units of potential fertility. Although my analysis focused on South Korea, the arguments I have levelled against seemingly benign pronatalist policies apply to other countries which deploy pronatalism in similar ways.

In order to move towards a more robust ethics of pronatalism, institutions wielding pronatalist logics and powers must answer for the aforementioned problems. This is of course easier said than done. Yet it does not seem so unreasonable, in the face of ongoing hesitancy from the populace, to suggest improving the ethics of pronatalism as a way to ensure that policy suggestions receive more positive uptake by the citizens they target. As mentioned in the body of this analysis, nation-states might make a start by allocating the necessary resources to tackle major social barriers to procreation, improving the representation of and respect for would-be gestators and leveraging the first-personal viewpoints and values of agents categorised as potentially ‘reproductive’ citizens in the here and now. I believe that improving the ethics of pronatalism is possible, if not easy, though I did not offer comprehensive solutions in this brief paper than the suggestions I have already made above. I hope that my discussion will encourage others to similarly engage in reflections and ideas on what it might mean for pronatalist policies to be compatible with ethics.

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