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CHAPTER 2

Procreative Ethics and the Problem of Evil

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Many people see the evil and suffering in our world as important if not decisive evidence against the claim that a loving God created our world and yet these same people typically see no real moral problem with human procreation. This chapter argues that these attitudes are in tension. More accurately, although it might turn out that the facts of evil and suffering threaten theism without also threatening human procreation, it would take philosophical work to show that this is the case. In the meantime we are left with two basic options—at least those of us who take the evidential problem of evil seriously.¹ First, we can grant the tension and revise our beliefs about the severity of the problem of evil in order to make procreation more justifiable. Second, we can grant the tension and acknowledge that human procreation raises important ethical problems. Although both possibilities are worthy of consideration, I will primarily explore the latter possibility in this chapter. My goal, to clarify, will not be to argue that procreation is in fact impermissible on account of the problem of evil, but to motivate the idea that procreation may be in need of a systematic justification. Whatever one makes of my particular aims, however, I hope it becomes clear that thinking about procreative ethics and the problem of evil in tandem is fruitful because it unveils important connections between the two areas and reveals new challenges for each side.

THE CONTEXT

According to a recent survey,² the vast majority of professional philosophers self-identify as nontheists—more than 85% self-identify as atheists, agnostics, or something other than theists. If you ask these philosophers why they are nonbelievers or lean toward nonbelief, one response you're likely to get is that the problem of evil justifies their stances, at least in part. It is not just nonbelievers who take the problem of evil seriously, though. Many believers do as well. Indeed, another survey suggests that atheists, agnostics, and theists agree that the argument from evil represents the single strongest argument for disbelief.³ Of course, there are various versions of the argument from evil (logical, evidential, local, global, etc.) and various lines of response to those different arguments (the free will defense, the soul-making defense, and skeptical theism, etc). The relevant surveys naturally do not track these various distinctions. But it is interesting that although we survey people about their general views concerning the problem of evil, no one feels the need to survey philosophers about whether human procreation is permissible. This is almost certainly because almost all philosophers, like almost all people more generally, think that procreation raises no real problems, at least in the vast majority of cases. Actually, most philosophers along with most people think that procreation is obviously justified, and as a result fail to really reflect on the matter.

Now, as one might expect, the situation is slightly different among the experts in procreative ethics. Here the question of whether bringing persons into existence is permissible has recently begun to be taken very seriously. On the one hand, there are the anti-natalists. These thinkers, though they remain in the clear minority,⁴ have argued that procreation is rarely if ever justified, given certain facts about harm, risk, and consent, and given certain empirical facts about how we overestimate the quality of our lives. On the other hand, there are the pro-natalists. These thinkers, though they do not normally seek to explain why procreation is justified, occasionally try to answer anti-natalist challenges.⁵ In addition to pro-natalism and anti-natalism there is a third, and almost entirely neglected, option that I have elsewhere called procreative skepticism.⁶ According to this view we should be uncertain or agnostic about the moral status of procreation, at least in many cases. Such a view is worth mentioning because it is weaker (and intrinsically more plausible)⁷ than anti-natalism, and because it might have similar practical consequences to anti-natalism.

If you look to the literature in procreative ethics, then, you might be inclined to think that we are already in need of a more robust justification

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of procreation. My task will be to argue that this need is confirmed if common ways of reasoning about God and evil are thought to be on track.

HOW THESE PROBLEMS DO AND DO NOT RELATE

In response to my thesis, some might claim that the problem of evil and the problem of procreation are too different to really speak to one another. After all, goes the thought, the problem of evil is supposed to be an argument against the existence of God, but nobody is arguing that human parents do not exist. This claim misconstrues the connection we are exploring, however. Our question is not whether the problems of evil and procreation have an identical logical structure or conclusion. Our question is rather whether certain features of these problems, or ways of reasoning about them, speak to one another.

For instance, if we had notably different attitudes about evil and optimism when reasoning about the problem of evil than we do when reasoning about human procreation, consistency would force us to revise our views in at least one of these two domains. Similarly, if we drew on notably different evidence when evaluating people's well-being, depending on which problem we are working on, this would be significant and could reveal the presence of a bias. Unfortunately, however, few philosophers have appreciated these possibilities, which shall soon be developed in detail.⁸

This is not to say that every version of the problem of evil, if endorsed, will generate problems for human procreation. For instance, according to the classic version of the problem of evil—the logical version—any amount of evil logically entails the non-existence of an all-perfect God. On this view, often attributed to J. L. Mackie,⁹ the bare existence of evil establishes atheism; it wouldn't matter if the world were fantastic overall. More precisely, this argument states that the following claims are logically inconsistent: (1) God is omnipotent (that is, all powerful), (2) God is omniscient (that is, all knowing), (3) God is omnibenevolent (that is, all loving), (4) Evil exists.¹⁰ If such an argument were successful, goes the thought, then the problem of evil and the problem of procreation would reasonably be thought to be entirely independent. For it does not seem, on the face of it, that the bare existence of evil poses a moral problem for human procreation.

There are problems with endorsing this version of the argument to escape the tension that I am exploring, however. Most notably, the logical problem of evil has largely fallen out of fashion among philosophers of

religion. Indeed, according to one common narrative,¹¹ most writers now acknowledge that it is very hard to show that God and evil are in logical tension and prefer instead to see the evil and suffering we observe as providing *evidence* against God's existence. In light of the evidential or probabilistic turn in philosophy of religion, it seems unwise to appeal to the logical problem of evil to escape problems about human procreation.

Another complication for the above escape route concerns recent developments in axiology. Some moral philosophers deny that the bare existence of evil lacks procreative significance. David Benatar, for instance, argues that even a single harm in a human life, if notable, would render starting that life impermissible. I am referring here to Benatar's asymmetry argument against human procreation.¹² According to this argument, existence in our world can never really be in anyone's interest in light of the following four claims that Benatar thinks most people implicitly accept: (1) the presence of pain is bad, (2) the presence of pleasure is good, (3) the absence of pain is good, even where no one exists to appreciate its absence, and (4) the absence of pleasure is not bad unless some existing person is deprived. Though rarely encountered by philosophers of religion, Benatar's argument supports an idea that could seriously alter discussions of theism and evil: namely that unpopulated worlds are always preferable to populated worlds that include some evil. (To clarify, I do not endorse the asymmetry argument.¹³ My claim is merely that those who wish to draw upon the logical argument from evil to escape the problems raised here ought to at least engage Benatar's argument.)

Of course, it remains possible that other arguments from evil besides the logical versions have nothing to say to procreation—perhaps local evidential arguments from seemingly isolated and gratuitous natural evils, such as a fawn burning in a forest fire, are a good example. It would be a basic misunderstanding to think this undermines my thesis, however. For leaving aside problems with local arguments from evil,¹⁴ our question is not whether all arguments from evil must always have procreative significance. Our question is whether some of the most widely held and most forceful versions do. This is hardly a trivial possibility. It would be very interesting if some of the most common and forceful arguments from evil implicated people's beliefs about procreation.

HOW GOOD IS THE WORLD?

Global Arguments From Evil

So what are these widely discussed versions of the problem of evil? Like many, I suspect that the best and most discussed arguments from evil are

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global and evidential in nature; they concern how much evil there is and whether this evidence notably disconfirms, or perhaps even falsifies, theism. Indeed, it is precisely because there is so much horrible evil around the world that these global evidential arguments from evil are thought to have evidential traction. Consider, for instance, the following remarks from Alvin Plantinga:

Our world contains an appalling amount and variety both of suffering and of evil. . . . I'm thinking of suffering as encompassing any kind of pain or discomfort: pain or discomfort that results from disease or injury, or oppression, or overwork, or old age, but also disappointment with oneself or with one's lot in life (or that of people close to one), the pain of loneliness, isolation, betrayal, unrequited love; and there is also suffering that results from awareness of others' suffering. . . .¹⁵

Consider, too, the following words from Michael Peterson:

Something is dreadfully wrong with our world. An earthquake kills hundreds in Peru. A pancreatic cancer patient suffers prolonged, excruciating pain and dies. A pit bull attacks a two-year-old child, angrily ripping his flesh and killing him. Countless multitudes suffer the ravages of war in Somalia. A crazed cult leader pushes eighty-five people to their deaths in Waco, Texas. Millions starve and die in North Korea as famine ravages the land. Horrible things of all kinds happen in our world—and that has been the story since the dawn of civilization.¹⁶

The above authors, being theists, do not think that evil defeats theism. Their claims do, however, suggest that extremely bad things happen very frequently and appear to raise a question about the basic goodness of the world. In saying this, I do not mean to deny that the authors of these passages are themselves optimistic—perhaps they are and perhaps their religious outlook helps them.¹⁷ The claim is only that their words may tell a different story. And the story is that, at least in the absence of some kind of redemption or way of dealing with all of this evil, our world is not obviously good and can sometimes even look bad.

Further evidence of this worry shows up in the works of many non-theists as well. According to Paul Draper, for instance, the fact that so many sentient beings never flourish because they suffer for much or even “most or all of their lives” is much more likely on metaphysical naturalism than on theism.¹⁸ Draper realizes that there is also cooperation in the world and that some sentient beings get lucky.¹⁹ But he claims that “countless living

organisms”, including many human beings, still fail to live good lives. Philip Kitcher draws on similar data to issue a direct challenge to the divine. He states, “had the Creator consulted me at the Creation, I think I could have given him some useful advice.”²⁰ Kitcher of course does not literally believe that there exists a creator for him to advise. But his claim about natural evil remains relevant to our discussion all the same. For Kitcher seems to imply that even limited and minimally decent beings like ourselves, never mind a perfect Anselmian creator, would not design this world with all of its competition, suffering, disease, and death. The worry generated by such a claim should be apparent. We bring people into the very same world, with the very same patterns of suffering, all of the time.²¹ Rarely do we ask whether this makes us less than minimally decent creators.

Other examples could be cited as well. For instance, Ken Taylor mentions that ‘of the roughly 106 billion human beings who have so far lived on the earth it seems fair to estimate that an extraordinary percentage have lived in circumstances of considerable material, political, and/or spiritual deprivation.’²² Taylor adds that even the ‘providential theist’ cannot rule out that ‘many more millennia of moral darkness do not still await us.’²³ In addition, Julian Savulescu, now a philosopher, describes how his firsthand experiences as a physician helped to undermine his former faith.

I saw for the first time the reality of death and suffering. I did some hard jobs like Haematology and Oncology, and Intensive Care. I saw completely innocent ordinary young people die agonizing deaths, their skin peeling from their body as they were narcotised to death. I saw horrible burns and amputated limbs from utterly meaningless accidents. I saw people screaming as they died and others silent with terror. . . . While there is a voluminous theological literature spanning millennia on the problem of suffering, and great writers like Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy propose solutions, the idea that there was any value or meaning in suffering and death evaporated for me. What I saw and heard just killed a belief in God for me, for no special philosophical reason. This was a phase of existential senselessness. I bought a safe car, went surfing and skiing a lot and decided to do philosophy. . . . That was my response to the value of suffering.²⁴

To be sure, Savulescu also acknowledges experiential moments of “exquisite beauty” and points to his children as his greatest joy in life. I can appreciate that. But it rather helps to make my point: the reader is left with the sense that he is more optimistic when describing his children than when talking about theism.

In light of these claims, a question facing many philosophers is this: are we notably more pessimistic about the basic goodness of the world when

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reasoning about the problem of evil than we are when reasoning about human procreation? I think the answer is yes. And although I haven't done detailed empirical analysis, I can give my impressions. I can also make predictions. For instance, I'd be willing to bet that those who write on global evidential arguments from evil, including those who claim that evil defeats theism, do not have many less children on average than other academics. I also bet that they are no less likely to celebrate the birth of a child than others.

Even if you disagree with me about the empirical issues, however, there remains a normative question worth asking. Should the kinds of pessimistic claims we are talking about, claims which regularly show up in debates about the problem of evil, be more consistently factored into our thoughts and claims about the morality of human procreation? You do not have to be an anti-natalist to raise this question. After all, the passages we have been considering seem to show that suffering is extremely pervasive.

Perhaps some philosophers will wish to resist an overly gloomy interpretation of their claims. Hopefully the present discussion, whatever else it accomplishes, will encourage more philosophers to become clearer on what they mean to imply about the world's overall value or about the value or meaning of the average life. In some cases little clarification is required, however. This is because some authors are explicit about the relationship between evil and optimism. Most notably, Marilyn McCord Adams acknowledges that horrendous evils "challenge a believer's faith." But she adds that evil represents a problem for everyone, including nonbelievers. She states,

The world is riddled with what I have called horrendous evils. They're not a rare thing. And it's easy to become a participant in them. And thousands, millions of people, are participating in them now even as we speak. And so what I want to say to people who don't believe in God is this: if you're optimistic and idealistic, if you think life is worth living and you have high purposes in your life, this is not a rational posture unless you think that there is some superhuman power who is capable of making good on the many and various horrors that human beings perpetuate everyday on one another, and which could befall you tomorrow, even in the next half hour.²⁵

Adams intends to set up a pragmatic argument for belief in God, a so-called argument from the conditions of optimism.²⁶ I will not address this argument here. For present purposes, Adams' more basic claims about whether optimism is rational in the absence of faith are my target.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR HUMAN PROCREATION

Adams' claims are highly relevant to procreative ethics since, although the point seems to escape her notice, they arguably commit her to two forms of anti-natalism. The first form of anti-natalism arises if we endorse a widely held view about what justifies procreation. According to Jeff McMahan, "What makes procreation morally permissible in most cases is the reasonable expectation that the bads in a possible person's life will be outweighed, and significantly outweighed, by the goods."²⁷ When combined with McMahan's claims about what justifies procreation, Adams' claim that secular persons cannot justify an optimistic outlook suggests that secular persons should not procreate, at least if they are informed of their predicament.

Perhaps Adams will respond by rejecting McMahan's claim that reasonable expectation about how one's child will fare (expected utility) as opposed to her actual future (actual utility) are what matter to procreative decision-making. Perhaps she will further remind the reader that, given her theological framework, everyone will fare well, at least in the long run. Indeed, since Adams believes that there will be a final victory over evil, culminating in the salvation of all persons, she may think that procreation is always objectively safe.

I think that this theistic defense of pro-natalism, which makes use of universal salvation and consequentialism, would be an interesting move. I am surprised that no one has made it. But such a move is also risky. Recall that Adams admits that evil poses a problem for the believer and could objectively undermine theism. Such an admission is risky now since it introduces a second form of anti-natalism. In particular, if Adams is wrong about God's existence and right about the world's present value, then her claims would seem to imply that nobody should, objectively speaking, procreate.²⁸

The most obvious way to generate a problem for procreation, then, is to explicitly claim that the world risks being bad or to claim that optimism is irrational, at least if theism is false. But there are other, less explicit ways to generate a problem for procreation. Some authors might implicitly communicate that the world is bad or extremely mixed, whether or not God exists. Others might implicitly communicate that the world's value, or at least the value of many lives, is ambiguous, neither clearly good nor clearly bad. Any of these claims should trouble us, since if it is anything short of clear that the average life is quite good it might also seem clear (given McMahan's claim) that informed persons, at least, are not well positioned to start the average life.

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In my experience, few seem to notice that their claims about God and evil have procreative significance. Of the authors discussed so far, only Julian Savulescu comes close to being an exception, which is perhaps unsurprising since he works in procreative ethics. In another article, co-written with Guy Kahane, he states: “parents are exposing children to risks of suffering, hardship and frustration simply by bringing them into existence. If procreative choices were constrained in this way, there could be strong presumptive reasons to abstain from procreation altogether.”²⁹ Savulescu never explains why procreative choices aren’t so constrained, but his earlier claims about God and evil make this silence puzzling. After all, if God’s creative choices are constrained by suffering, why doesn’t something similar apply to human parents? If God ought to create beings that suffer less than us, or not create at all, why doesn’t something similar apply to us?³⁰

I will soon explore some possible answers to these questions and why they fail. In the meantime, we seem to be left with the following problem. The premises of many evidential arguments from evil, if endorsed, may challenge the existence of a perfect God or even a minimally decent creator. But these premises equally appear to challenge the value of many human lives and by extension many acts of human procreation. If we convey, whether explicitly or implicitly, that the world risks being bad or far less than good—which is really the most convincing version of the argument from evil—then we make procreation risky in general. If we communicate, less strongly, that the value of many but not nearly all lives is negative or ambiguous, we still raise important local challenges to procreation, according to which many shouldn’t procreate.

This last claim about local procreative worries reveals something important about the nature of our challenge. In particular, it would be inadequate to respond to my claims by pointing out that defenders of arguments from evil are themselves typically well positioned to procreate, given their privileged place in society. Even if such a claim were beyond dispute, it would be highly significant if the arguments of many philosophers of religion implied that very many people should not create.

OBJECTION 1: GOD AND HUMANS ARE DIFFERENT

The most obvious objection to my claims is that there are serious differences between humans and the divine, differences that generate asymmetrical moral responsibilities in the context of creation. In particular, a perfect God, it might be argued, could easily create far better off creatures than us and could easily improve our environments. By contrast, we humans do

not have nearly as much control over the kinds of being we create or the amount of natural evil there is. This means that we should be held to a much less demanding creation ethic than God, given our limitations.

I think that this objection, which points to differences between God and humans, is not ultimately helpful to the pro-natalist defender of global arguments from evil. For one thing, even if we grant that a theistic God, being perfect, can be held to a higher creative standard than we limited human beings, it hardly follows that human procreation is problem-free. For it may be that no truly loving being, whether human or divine, would create persons who suffer or who seriously risk suffering in the ways outlined earlier. Pointing out that a powerful God could eliminate more suffering than us, in other words, won't get us off the hook if there is a serious problem with anyone's placing sentient creatures in a world like this one. In fact, if the world risks being bad, or if its value is ambiguous, it doesn't really matter if God could have easily created a far better world than this one. Procreation will still raise serious moral problems for us.

There is another problem with the current objection. Showing that a perfect God would have a more difficult time justifying creating than we limited beings do, in some respects, is not tantamount to showing that a perfect God would have a more difficult time justifying creation than we do in all respects. In fact, when it comes to the decision to make persons, it may be that we humans have the larger justificatory burden, all things considered. For instance, a perfectly powerful God could plausibly defeat any horrible evil that arises in the lives of our children in ways that we humans, left to our own devices, could not hope to. Most notably, a perfectly powerful God could radically extend our natural life span, say in the hereafter, ensuring that present evils are radically overcome, even to the point that they no longer seem significant. By contrast, we limited human beings lack the resources to defeat horrendous evil or to offer our children maximal levels of well-being. This fact alone would arguably make God better positioned to place persons in *this* world than humans, or at least humans who deny the existence of God.

It is not just that we lack the power to make good on horrendous evils should they arise in our child's life, however. It is also that we cannot foresee whether these (or less severe but still serious) evils will arise in the first place and cannot always see how they might be justified, should they arise. Put another way, an all-knowing God might be aware of moral justifications for creating persons who suffer that we finite beings lack, assuming there are such justifications.

What all of this means is that our lack of power and knowledge can work against us when it comes to creation ethics. In other words, pointing to

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differences between divine and human attributes to escape the problem we are raising can easily backfire. It can show that we should not create at all, or at least that we should create beings who experience less harm than we do.³¹

OBJECTION 2: BEING IS INHERENTLY GOOD

Another possible objection to my claims is axiological. Benatar, recall, draws on axiological claims to argue that coming into existence is always a net harm, at least in this world. This strikes many people as way too strong. But some philosophers of religion I have spoken with have appeared to endorse a comparably strong claim: namely that existence is always a net benefit. Now such a claim might be interesting if based on Marilyn Adams' universalist outlook, described earlier. But the philosophers I have in mind did not base their claims about the goodness of existence on the universality of salvation. They rather based them on the Medieval doctrine, according to which being is inherently good and is indeed to be identified with goodness.

Perhaps these philosophers misspoke. And no doubt there are different interpretations of the doctrine in question, some of which might be extremely sophisticated. But if the 'being is goodness' doctrine is literally interpreted such that coming to existence is always a net good—and a net good for a conscious agent no matter what happens in this life or the next—then I find it highly dubious. I am not exactly sure how to argue for this judgment. I suspect that almost no one would agree that an existence that was literally full of misery, with no hope of relief, is good for an agent all things considered. In fact many people would commit suicide under less harsh conditions, which testifies to their beliefs on these matters. I suppose I am largely assuming with most moral philosophers that a life could fail to be worth living, if it goes badly enough. For those who share this assumption, the present objection will not provide a good basis for severing the connection between procreative ethics and the problem of evil.

OBJECTION 3: THERE CAN BE OPTIMISTIC ARGUMENTS FROM EVIL

Perhaps a better response to the current tension would be for philosophers to simply tone down their pessimistic claims when reasoning about religion in order to make it easier to justify human procreation. Here it might be said that many arguments from evil, whether on account of emotion or rhetoric or both, overstate how bad the world is. It might be added

that once we factor in all of our evidence, including our evidence for life's many goods, and once we correct for our focusing illusions, things look pretty darn decent overall. According to this view, if a divine creator does exist, our response to this fact (pace Kitcher and others) should be not one of complaint about suffering and evil, but one of great thanks and acknowledgement of the gift of life. In addition, on this view, if there is a global normative challenge for theism, it will not be that the world risks being bad or that its value is unclear. It will rather go something like this:

1. The world is very good all things considered, well worth celebrating, but it could be even better and indeed far better.
2. If there were a perfect God, premise 1 would be false. That is, if there were a perfect God, the world would likely not be such that it could be radically improved upon. (This is because a perfect God would likely not satisfice or at least would likely not satisfice very much in creating or sustaining the world)
3. Therefore a perfect God likely doesn't exist.

The anti-satisficing argument acknowledges that human life is generally quite good and yet still manages to raise an evidential problem for theism. That said, the anti-satisficing approach raises difficult questions of its own (questions that should lead anyone to think twice before abandoning standard global arguments for the present one to get out of the pickle).

For instance, how good would a world, or a life, have to be before it is worthy of creation? Does the anti-satisficing approach imply that there shouldn't be any squirrels, if theism is true, since these creatures cannot enjoy maximal levels of well-being? Or does it merely imply that squirrels should be as happy as possible relative to their natures? What are the cut-off points for "good enough"? I, for one, am not sure what to say about these matters. That few philosophers nowadays think that there is a best possible world, or a best possible life, can make it difficult to simply opt for a maximizing view, moreover.³²

Perhaps, contrary to first appearance, these questions can be answered. But even if they can, another problem emerges. The more we stress how good the world is, in order to save optimism and procreation, the less plausible, in general, evidential arguments from evil will become. To put the point another way, evidential challenges from evil carry notably less force under more optimistic assumptions than under more pessimistic ones. This is because pessimistic arguments from evil can easily, and almost always do, incorporate the thought that a perfect God could create a better world than this one. Pessimistic arguments from evil will just add that

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this is only half the story; the other half is that the world has not just some, but many, terrible features; features that leave many in depression and despair. It is the evidence of these evils, and the thought that sadness might often overcome gladness, that gives the argument from evil much of its normative flavor and force.

In fact, it is a little bit misleading to imply that evidential arguments from evil should be equally concerned with maximizing good as they are with minimizing evil. This is because our reasons against causing or allowing suffering, as many moral philosophers have noted, are stronger than our reasons for causing or allowing benefits. For instance, it seems more important to prevent a happy person from experiencing something terrible (like becoming paralyzed in a car accident) than it is to ensure that that same person experiences even more happiness (like winning a lottery). Turning to creation ethics, a similar asymmetry appears to hold. It seems more important to prevent a miserable person from existing than it is to cause an abnormally happy person to exist.³³ These claims about the relative priority of preventing suffering, though interesting in their own right, further confirm optimistic arguments from evil have less force than pessimistic ones.

Now theists will presumably welcome the idea of a weakened challenge from evil—and if procreation is literally on the line, then non-theists and even anti-theists might as well. But there is another question about whether this anti-satisficing option is even available anyhow. It is one thing, after all, to *want* to become more optimistic in response to a quandary. It is quite another thing to literally show that one's optimism is justified in the face of evil. This is not to say that I am not optimistic about the world or about the lives of future people. It is rather to say that optimism about the world hasn't exactly been established and that establishing its reasonability, as I have argued elsewhere, could be rather hard.³⁴

Suppose, however, that we were up to the task. That is, suppose that a fairly optimistic outlook could literally be shown not just to be of prudential interest, but uniquely reasonable. Would this be sufficient to show that procreation is problem-free? Is a life that is reasonably expected to be quite good, all things considered, a life that we are automatically justified in starting?

IS GOODNESS ENOUGH TO JUSTIFY CREATION? SOME KANTIAN COMPLEXITIES

In this last part of the chapter, I will explain why answering these questions affirmatively is trickier than many realize. Many, after all, agree

with Kant that there are important deontic constraints on obtaining good outcomes. This explains, in part, Kant's claim in his 1791 essay "On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy" that there is no successful theodicy or known explanation "of the highest wisdom of the creator against the charge which reason brings against it for whatever is counterproductive in this world."³⁵ As Derk Pereboom points out, Kant's endorsement of the Categorical Imperative, and in particular the formula of humanity, leaves him with little tolerance for greater-good theodicies, which attempt to justify evils in our world in light of the greater goods they make possible.³⁶

Part of the worry here stems from interpersonal aggregation or trade-offs between different persons (for instance, killing one person to save two others). Eleonore Stump does justice to this worry when she argues that a perfectly loving and powerful divine creator would cause or permit undeserved, involuntary human suffering only if such suffering produces a net "benefit for the sufferer" and if the benefit couldn't be gotten except through the suffering.³⁷ Interestingly, some philosophers of religion find Stump's constraint too strong, even when applied to a perfect being.³⁸ But even more interestingly, some moral philosophers would find it too weak, even when applied to human beings. Most notably, Seana Shiffrin, a contemporary Kantian, worries about intrapersonal aggregation or trade-offs within a single life (for instance, harming someone in order to benefit that same person).³⁹ Shiffrin's views imply that even when all of Stump's conditions are satisfied, some benefits should not be bestowed on persons.

Let us call this the problem of impermissible benefits. To see the problem it is helpful to consider an example. Suppose, for instance, that the only way to get college money for your daughter is to break her arm while she is ten years old. We might question whether breaking your daughter's arm is permissible in this case even if all of Stump's conditions are satisfied. That is, even if the act benefits the child more than it harms her, and even if the harm is required to get the benefit, the act might still seem wrong and even disturbing. In fact, even if the child later comes to be glad about your decision, that decision still might seem questionable.

This is not to say that every benefit that is mixed with severe suffering is impermissible. To borrow an example from Shiffrin, if you have to break an unconscious person's arm in order to save his life, then in the absence of reasons to think he wouldn't consent to your actions, saving the life seems justified and perhaps obligatory. This is because you do not merely improve an agent's well-being in such a case. You further save her from suffering a far greater harm or loss. But Shiffrin's point is that creation is

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not like this. If you fail to create someone, nothing bad happens to her and none of her interests are set back. This explains why even the most optimistic people don't feel bad for not creating even more happy people than they do. It also explains why creation is not analogous to the rescue case. For unlike the rescue case, the creation case amounts to bestowing a pure benefit: it involves harming someone in order to benefit them as opposed to harming them in order to prevent them from experiencing an even greater harm.

If there is a general lesson here, it is this. Even if it is often permissible to harm a nonconsenting person in order to prevent her from suffering an even greater harm, it is not in general permissible to harm a nonconsenting person to secure a pure benefit.⁴⁰ Such an asymmetrical view explains why it would be wrong to break your child's arm to get her funds for college (or if you prefer, to get her a new sports car) but it would not be wrong to break her arm to save her life. But such a view also implies that creating is more questionable, in some respects, than breaking your child's arm to secure her college funds. This is because although there is a clear sense in which an already-existing child is made worse off if she doesn't get a good education, there is no clear sense in which a possible person is made worse off if she never exists to begin with. In a word, if we go with Shiffrin's normative outlook, then procreation raises real moral concerns, *pace* Jeff McMahan, even where a future life is reasonably expected to be good overall.⁴¹

I confess that Shiffrin's reasoning can seem somewhat plausible, particularly when one doesn't see where it leads. In fact, a related Kantian worry, made explicit by Elizabeth Harman, is whether "some harms are such that that nothing could justify them."⁴² Hopefully, for the sake of procreation, there aren't any such harms; or hopefully if there are, no one actually suffers them. Even if these absolutist worries can be set aside, though, it's difficult to deny Shiffrin's claim that a typical life contains severe harms.⁴³ We still need to ask whether causing (or allowing) all of this harm is permissible.

To be sure, not everyone likes this way of putting the problem since not everyone thinks that we can benefit or harm in creating. In particular, the non-identity problem and related problems have led some ethicists to abandon talk of procreative harm.⁴⁴ A chief worry here concerns whether acts that make no one worse off can be wrong; it can seem strange to say that you harm somebody by giving her a life that is, on balance, worthwhile, particularly where the only alternative for that person was never existing.⁴⁵ Some, in response to these worries, defend a noncomparative account of harm, according to which you need not make someone worse

off in order to harm her.⁴⁶ Others claim that we can speak of harms within a life without saying that a life as a whole is harmful. We need not resolve these normative disputes here, however, for we can use different language to communicate Shiffrin's basic worry about creation ethics.

Consider, for instance, David Velleman's explanation for why procreation is morally equivocal.⁴⁷ As Velleman sees it, the problem with procreation is not that it involves harming anyone; the problem is that it involves tossing persons, without their consent, into a risky "predicament", where the "stakes are high, both for good and for ill."⁴⁸ Since failure, and not just opportunity, comes easily, and since serious burdens and suffering befall even the best lives, Velleman appears to agree with Shiffrin that "being brought into existence is at best a mixed blessing" and that "those who confer it are not entitled to walk away congratulating themselves on a job well done."⁴⁹

Perhaps the best response to the problem is not to refrain from creating but to help one's child to flourish by giving her as good an upbringing as is feasible. This is Velleman's suggestion. The reader, however, is still left with the impression that there is a problem with creation.

CONCLUSION: EVIL ASYMMETRY

By way of conclusion, all of the previous arguments lead me to find the following asymmetrical principle puzzling.

EVIL ASYMMETRY: The amount and kinds of suffering we see provide strong, and many will say decisive, evidence against the very idea that our world is the product of divine creation. But this same suffering does not have any real bearing on the general morality of human procreation whatever.

Though implicitly held by many philosophers, I find it difficult to motivate EVIL ASYMMETRY. This is not to say that no good justifications of EVIL ASYMMETRY could ever be developed, only that some of the most obvious candidates fail. In particular, if we're too pessimistic about the human condition then problems for procreation emerge. By contrast, if we're too optimistic, then standard global arguments from evil become less plausible.

This does raise the possibility that defenders of EVIL ASYMMETRY might seek to construct a middle position, somewhere in between optimism and pessimism. But the question is whether this is really a safe place to be. In particular, a mediocre world where lives are highly mixed might be thought to pose problems for procreation. In fact, until the problem of

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impermissible benefits can be resolved, then even under somewhat more optimistic assumptions, some will doubt that creation is problem-free.

To be sure, there may be other responses to EVIL ASYMMETRY that I have failed to consider. But there also may be other reasons for endorsing EVIL ASYMMETRY that warrant exploration. For instance, I have not even mentioned that the people we create are very likely, not just to themselves suffer, but also to cause others to suffer. The harm we cause to others (discussed by David Benatar in Chapter 1) might reveal further connections between procreative ethics and the problem of evil: can anyone justify creating persons who will not only suffer but who will also almost certainly cause, and we might add allow, other sentient beings to suffer in fairly severe ways?

These are interesting questions. Instead of exploring them here, though, let me conclude by simply reminding the reader of my goal in raising these issues. My goal is not Benatar's goal. I am not trying to convince people that pessimism and anti-natalism are the correct ways to go, nor am trying to make ultimate pronouncements about the problem of evil or whether a loving God exists. My goal has rather been to encourage more people to see a tension in their own beliefs about these matters, and to be motivated by the tension to develop a systematic defense of procreation. There needn't be anything incoherent about these goals. Just as many philosophers of religion take the problem of evil seriously without abandoning their religious outlooks, something similar might apply to pro-natalists. Pro-natalists might take the problem of procreation seriously and be motivated to address it. More generally, all of us who have interests in ethics and philosophy of religion might put our heads together to try to better defend human procreation. Along the way we might make some interesting discoveries about the argument from evil.⁵⁰

NOTES

1. I realize that some will deny that any version of the problem of evil is worrisome to begin with and so will not face the tension I am highlighting. But this chapter is not written with such persons in mind, who are at any rate in the clear minority in philosophy. It is rather written for those who feel the problem of evil in their bones.
2. David Bourget and David Chalmers, "What do Philosophers Believe?" *Philosophical Studies*, no. 3 (2014): 465–500.-
3. Though they can disagree about how much force the argument has. Helen De Cruz, "Preliminary Results of My Survey on Natural Theological Arguments," Academia.edu, https://www.academia.edu/1438058/Results_of_my_survey_on_natural_theological_arguments (August 7, 2014).

4. Most notably there is David Benatar. David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006).
5. Elizabeth Harman, "Critical Study of David Benatar. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*," *Noûs* 43, no. 4 (2009): 776–785; Ben Bradley, "Benatar and the Logic of Betterness," *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* (2010): 1–5.
6. Jason Marsh, "Creating and Raising Humans: Essays on the Morality of Procreation and Parenting," PhD dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 2012. Here I seek to explain and ultimately weaken the case for procreative skepticism. I also argue for a view I call "qualified pro-natalism." See also my "Quality of Life Assessments, Cognitive Reliability, and Procreative Responsibility," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. 89, no.2 (2014): 436–466.
7. It is in general easier to show that we lack knowledge that some claim is true (like the claim that the external world exists) than it is to establish the falsity of that same claim. My explanation of this claim is as follows. Since knowledge is factive (i.e. requires true belief) any argument that P is false will also amount to an argument that we lack knowledge that P. By contrast, not nearly all arguments for the claim that we lack knowledge that P will also be arguments that P is false. This claim about the many ways that knowledge can fail explains why Benatar's metaphysical approach is harder than a more skeptical epistemological approach.
8. Robert Adams is one of the exceptions. He argues that common complaints about evil could commit us to morally regretting our own existence and the existence of our loved ones. Robert Adams, "Existence, Self-interest, and the Problem of Evil," *Noûs* 13 (1979): 53–65. Adams also argues that our views about the ethics of divine creation might be connected to certain controversial views about genetic selection. Robert Adams, "Must God Create the Best?" *Philosophical Review* 81, no. 3 (1982): 317–332.
9. John Leslie Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64, no. 254 (1955): 200–212.
10. More accurately, these claims, when combined with common assumptions about the nature of omnipotence, the nature of love, and the badness of evil, are supposed to generate an explicit contradiction between God and evil, rendering God's existence impossible.
11. Daniel Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). Trent Dougherty, "Recent Work on the Problem of Evil." *Analysis* 71, no. 3 (2011): 560–573
12. See David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, 38.
13. I will mention one overlooked consequence of Benatar's view that seems to me very difficult to endorse. Imagine three worlds. In world A everyone experiences only pleasure, but they live for only 20 years. In world B everyone experiences infinite pleasure in heaven, but only after a very serious needle prick on earth (suppose this one harm will help them to better appreciate infinite bliss). In world C there are no sentient creatures at all, only space and rocks. Benatar's asymmetry argument implies that A and C are tied in value *and* that B is the least preferable option. This latter claim, that even a God who promises infinite bliss to all should not create if there is one harm along the way, seems especially difficult to accept.
14. See Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 95–112.

15. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: University of Oxford Press, 2000), 372.
16. Michael Peterson, *God and Evil: An Introduction to the Issues* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 9.
17. Alvin Plantinga, for instance, is clearly optimistic and tells me that the best worlds on his view require suffering, incarnation, and atonement. He seems to be presupposing a consequentialist normative framework.
18. Paul Draper, "Natural Selection and the Problem of Evil," in *God or Blind Nature? Philosophers Debate the Evidence*, ed. Paul Draper (The Secular Web, 2007–2008), http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/paul_draper/evil.html
19. Draper is also himself a very cheery fellow and no doubt one of the lucky ones.
20. Philip Kitcher, "The Many-Sided Conflict Between Science and Religion," in *The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. W. E. Mann (Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 268.
21. True, humans can do more than non-human animals to minimize suffering, but we should not overestimate our abilities here. As I write this chapter, thousands of people have just died by natural disaster in the Philippines and many are still missing. Also, recall the Savulescu passage about the limits of medical care.
22. Kenneth Taylor, "Without the Net of Providence: Atheism and the Human Adventure" in *Philosophers without Gods: An Anthology of Original Essays*, ed. Louise Antony (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 150.
23. *Ibid.*, 150.
24. Julian Savulescu, "Three Stages of Disbelief," in *50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Still Atheists*, ed. Blackford & Schüklenk (Malden:Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 169–170.
25. This passage comes from an interview entitled, "Marilyn McCord Adams on Evil," accessed August 7, 2014. <http://philosophybites.com/2009/07/marilyn-mccord-adams-on-evil.html>
26. For more details on Adams' argument, see her "God Because of Evil: A Pragmatic Argument from Evil for Belief in God," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 160–173.
27. Jeff McMahan, "Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist," in *Harming Future Persons: Ethics, Genetics and the Nonidentity Problem*, ed. Melinda A. Roberts and David T. Wasserman (Springer, 2009), 61.
28. I am assuming here, with most moral philosophers, that objective moral values and obligations do not require the truth of theism.
29. Julian Savulescu and Guy Kahane, "The Moral Obligation to Create Children with the Best Chance of the Best Life," *Bioethics* 23, no. 5 (2009): 282.
30. To be fair, Savulescu, although he fails to discuss anti-natalism, does not think that anything goes in human procreation; unlike many philosophers, he thinks that prospective parents have strong moral reasons to create the best-off children they can.
31. Caspar Hare agrees that even minimally decent and minimally rational agents can have serious moral obligations to create better off, as opposed to worse off, beings. See *The Limits of Kindness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
32. Then again, some may wish to defend the Leibnizian idea that there is a best possible world or a best possible best life. After all, presumably God's life is the best life, given theism, and perhaps it could be argued that a world with only perfect beings would be the best world.

33. See Jeff McMahan, "Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist."
34. "Quality of Life Assessments, Cognitive Reliability, and Procreative Responsibility," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. doi: 10.1111/phpr.12114
35. Cited in Derk Pereboom, "Kant on God, Evil, and Teleology," *Faith and Philosophy* 13, no. 4 (1996): 508.
36. Ibid.
37. Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 2, vol. 4 (1985): 411. Although Stump seems most concerned with the question of whether allowing evil is permissible, she also discusses how natural evil could be good for people, which looks more like a case of doing than allowing. Of course, not everyone thinks there is a significant moral difference between doing and allowing.
38. T. J. Mawson, "Theodical Individualism." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 3, no. 1 (2011):139–159.
39. Seana Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm," *Legal Theory*, 5 (1999): 117–148. In contrast to Stump, Shiffrin's moral outlook stems not from the nature of divine love, but from the nature of duty.
40. This is not to say that Shiffrin is a full out anti-nalist, though she comes close to such a position. She states: "I am not advancing the claim that procreation is all-things-considered wrong. It is consistent with these arguments to regard nonconsensual, burden-imposing actions as morally problematic but not always impermissible, or to regard procreation as a special case. All I mean to advance is the claim that because procreation involves a nonconsensual imposition of significant burdens, it is morally problematic and its imposer may justifiably be held responsible for its harmful results." (Ibid., 139). Benatar, by contrast, clearly thinks that procreation is always objectively wrong.
41. There are other possible standards of procreative responsibility too. According to the zero-line view, for instance, all that it takes to justify starting a life is the expectation that this life will be worthwhile or even barely worthwhile. Many procreative ethicists seem to reject the zero-line view.
42. Elizabeth Harman, "Can We Harm and Benefit in Creating?" *Philosophical Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2006):102.
43. In Shiffrin's words, "Even though procreators may benefit their progeny by creating them, they also impose substantial burdens on them. By being caused to exist as persons, children are forced to assume moral agency, to face various demanding and sometimes wrenching moral questions, and to discharge taxing moral duties. They must endure the fairly substantial amount of pain, suffering, difficulty, significant disappointment, distress, and significant loss that occur within the typical life. They must face and undergo the fear and harm of death. Finally, they must bear the results of imposed risks that their lives may go terribly wrong in a variety of ways." Seana Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm," 136–137.
44. Derek Parfit. *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).
45. The teen parent case, often discussed in procreative ethics, is a good example of this. After all, had the parents waited until they were older to have a child, a non-identical child would have existed instead. Of course, we want to say that the parents wrong the original child in some sense, if she has a bad start in life, not just that there has been impersonal wrongdoing, thus the problem.
46. Elizabeth Harman, "Can We Harm and Benefit In Creating?" *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 89–113.

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47. David Velleman, "II. The Gift of Life." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36 (2008): 245–266.
48. *Ibid.*, 251.
49. *Ibid.*, 246.
50. Thanks to David Benatar, Andrew Botterell, Samantha Brennan, Dan Groll, Sarah Hannan, Meena Krishnamurthy, Micah Lott, Colin Macleod, Jon Marsh, T. J. Mawson, Carolyn McLeod, Matthew Clayton, Alvin Plantinga, Alexander Pruss, Seana Shiffrin, Anthony Skelton, Adam Smith, Eleonore Stump, Charles Taliaferro, John Thorp, David Velleman, Richard Vernon, and Daniel Weinstock for helpful discussion. The views discussed here do not implicitly or explicitly represent official positions of any institution that I am affiliated with.

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