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One Child: Do We Have a Right to Have More? By Sarah Conly. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 1-248. Hard \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-19-020343-6.

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It is no secret that Earth is on the brink of an environmental crisis. At this point in the 21st century, we are familiar with the problems: climate change, biodiversity loss, and generally unsustainable patterns of consumption. Yet explicit discussion of how the rising human population contributes to these environmental problems or whether we morally ought to do something to curb population growth is relatively rare, despite the significance of these problems and the crucial role that population growth plays in exacerbating them.

In *One Child*, Sarah Conly joins several other authors (e.g., McKibben 1998, Cafaro and Crist 2012, Overall 2012, Rieder 2016) in explicitly addressing the morality of procreation in light of how rising human population contributes to the various environmental problems we currently face. Conly's conclusions are bold: she argues not only that we presently have no right to have more than one child but also that the government can permissibly enforce laws designed

to limit the extent to which people procreate. In this respect, Conly's position on the permissibility of government intervention differs from Overall (2012) and McKibben (1998), who argue that we morally ought to limit our reproduction but do *not* defend the claim that government intervention would be justified.

*One Child* consists of seven chapters. The opening chapter contains an overview of the environmental problems we face and discussion of the ways in which rising population contributes to them. As one would expect, this chapter serves to set the stage for the rest of the book.

Conly defends the claim that we have no right to unlimited procreation in chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 2, starting from the claim that rights claims are based on fundamental interests, she argues that we have no fundamental interest in having children that cannot be met by merely having one child. She claims that our right to procreate might be based on an interest in having biological offspring, an interest in having a family, or an interest in "being treated as just as worthy as others to reproduce and have a family" (p. 39). The fact that we need something to live a decent life might grant a right to that thing, but "even if producing a child is essential (for some people), you don't need multiple children for that" (p. 19). In chapter 3, she argues that our general right to control the use of our own body cannot ground a right to unlimited procreation, whether that right be understood as a right to control our own property (pp. 67-71), a right to maintain our autonomy (pp. 71-90), or a right to maintain equal standing with other members of society (pp. 90-92).

After defending the view that we have no right to unlimited procreation, Conly turns to the issue of whether government sanctions are a permissible means of limiting procreation. In chapter 4, she argues that these sanctions "can be morally justified, if they are done right" and

“that they can be done right” (p.103). She moves toward this position gradually, starting with a discussion of how appropriate education can significantly influence people’s procreative preferences (pp. 106-110) and then discussing various incentives and disincentives that could motivate individuals to have fewer children, placing particular emphasis on the importance of making access to contraception easier (pp. 112-118). She notes, however, that proper education and a system of incentives and disincentives may not be enough to change our behavior, and under certain circumstances, she thinks governmental sanctions can be justifiable. She stresses the role that laws play in altering our preferences of what is morally permissible (pp. 127-128): even if we believe we can escape punishment for breaking a law, the knowledge that our society has codified a law prohibiting our behavior can nevertheless motivate us not to break it. Thus, Conly views the difference between a law and a disincentive as in part symbolic: they may in practice cause the same amount of harm to an individual, but only breaking a law carries a connotation that one has done something wrong. So what sanctions does she consider permissible? Near the end of the chapter, she suggests that fines would be an appropriate punishment and that they would be “likely” to get sufficient compliance “if the fines are high enough” (p. 136).

Conly devotes chapter 5 to treating objections to her proposed duty to reduce human population. The first objection is that we do not know with certainty that environmental degradation will really bring great catastrophe to future people. Conly responds by noting not only that some of the harmful effects (e.g., of climate change) are already occurring but also that we have compelling evidence that the long-term effects of unchecked population growth will be devastating. She then considers the objection that we cannot have duties to future people because future people do not have rights. In response, she points out that rights do not exhaust our moral

obligations and then argues that under various circumstances it is possible to violate future people's rights by depriving them of the conditions needed to exercise their rights, even if the actions that cause these deprivations occur before these future people exist. The last objection that Conly considers, known commonly as the non-identity problem, is the claim that "we don't harm anyone by overpopulating when we create a really disagreeable overpopulated future environment because we don't harm anyone when we do that" (p. 161). We don't harm them because their identities are dependent on the past actions that created the overpopulated environment; had we acted differently, different people would have been born. Conly argues that this objection fails because overpopulation scenarios are not exactly parallel to non-identity cases, because extreme overpopulation will likely make many people's lives not worth living (i.e., worse than not being born), and because the objection relies on an incorrect description of how we deliberate about better and worse lives. Conly then closes the chapter by discussing why we do not care more about the rising human population.

In chapter 6, Conly explores some practical concerns about her position – reservations readers might have even if they found her position plausible at the theoretical level. Regarding concerns about how slowing population growth might slow economic growth, Conly argues that economic growth cannot continue perpetually and that economic growth often fails to make us happier anyway. When considering whether a one-child policy will increase sex selection toward boys, Conly expresses skepticism about whether a one-child policy will automatically yield this result and also claims that the root of the problem is a social preference for boys. She also argues that cultures will not disappear just because their members have fewer children: they may change gradually over time, but that is inevitable for any culture. Finally, Conly disputes the objection that children will be worse off without siblings, focusing especially on how the pressures placed

on China's only children were in large part a result of socio-cultural factors that were independent of their status as only children.

In the final chapter, Conly considers when we should start making efforts to limit procreation. She thinks it is clear that some efforts must be made now but is less certain regarding when we might move to implement legislation to prohibit procreation. The chapter also features some discussion of the ways in which the value of nature might influence the policy decisions we make.

There is much to praise about *One Child*. Although the view expressed in the book is unlikely to be popular, the arguments Conly presents in its favor are strong, and the topic is undoubtedly one that deserves greater philosophical treatment than it has received. It is not possible to recap all the insightful points made in the book, but some struck me as particularly noteworthy. For example, Conly rightly notes that we are generally not willing to cut back on our consumption but that many people can be incentivized to voluntarily reduce their number of children (p. 17). This critical bit of information is often overlooked by those who propose that reducing consumption can solve the environmental crises on the horizon. Conly also does a commendable job of highlighting the different ways in which population policies could be effective without resorting to extreme and morally worrying measures such as forced abortions or sterilizations. Not all "coercive" population policies must have these features, despite the common association that people make between these practices and the more general discussion of overpopulation.

Despite its strengths, *One Child* does have a few shortcomings. First, the section on the value of nature (pp. 221-227) is a strange inclusion given the larger context of the book. Conly adopts a solely anthropocentric perspective until this point; thus, this non-anthropocentric

digression feels out of place. It also lacks the argumentative rigor that generally characterizes the book's other chapters. Second, although I find Conly's reasoning in chapter 5 persuasive, the objections under consideration – particularly the non-identity problem – have been discussed and refuted at great length in many other venues. I am not sure these issues warrant 30 pages of discussion. While these are relatively minor quibbles, there is a larger concern worth highlighting.

One very serious objection to the implementation of a global one-child policy is that it may be racist in its practical application, even if it appears equitable in the abstract. The nations with the highest fertility rates are those that will be most affected; these are generally African countries (though a few others are scattered across other parts of the developing world). In contrast, the countries that will be least affected are those with the lowest fertility rates; these countries are generally developed nations in Europe and North America. Thus, a one-child policy would appear to have extremely large impacts on African populations and relatively small impacts on Caucasian populations. Perhaps more disturbing than the racial inequality in the effective impact is the potential message such a policy could send – a message that African populations are in need of greater control and regulation than those of other, whiter nations. These concerns are significant, and their omission from the book is a noteworthy weakness.

Even taking these shortcomings into account, *One Child* is likely the best philosophical treatment of overpopulation written thus far in the 21st century. Anyone interested in how environmental crises can affect the ethics of procreation ought to read it. Nevertheless, the largely anthropocentric approach of the book and the unexplored aspects of policy implementation reveal areas in which further work on this topic is needed.

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