

# Population and Having Children Now

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to state the obvious - the commonsense, rational approach to child-producing. We have no general obligation to promote either the “general happiness” or the equalization of this and that. We have children if we want them, if their life prospects are decent - and if we can afford them, which is a considerable part of their life prospects being OK - and provided that in doing so we do not inflict injury on others. It’s extremely difficult to do this latter, but affording them, in rich countries, is another matter. With that qualification, by and large people should just go ahead and have (or not have) children - as many as they think they want and can handle - as it suits them.



Over many years I wrote several times about population. In my first paper on the subject “Utilitarianism and New Generations” (1967a) I was interested in exploring utilitarianism, or so I thought. My main point was that utilitarianism did not commit one to making happy people, but only to making people happy. Something like that continued to be the theme in two subsequent papers (Narveson, 1973; 1978). Meanwhile, Derek Parfit came along, with his interesting questions about what happens in cases of nonidentity—where the children are not the same people that would have existed if some other decision had been made or policy imposed (Parfit, 1983). So I feel motivated to rejoin the issue, in the wake of having, several decades ago now, abandoned my original proclivity toward utilitarianism. All these matters need restating and reinvestigating.

So let’s start where I left off. Should we say that in having children, you *benefit them* (if they are happy), and possibly you *damage* or *wrong* them (if they are miserable)? My original “insight” (if that’s what it was) remains unchanged: No. You don’t

*confer* life on someone when you bring them into existence, because there isn't any "one" upon which to confer "life." People's lives aren't something else, superadded on top of "them." By the time they are born, there's no "conferring" left to do, and prior to then, there is no one on whom to "confer" anything.

A different issue would be that of, say, abortion, where there is a "something"—viz., an embryo or fetus—and abortion would, of course, destroy the life of that thing, the only question then being whether what you thereby take the life of is a morally countable person—a morally human person and thus a possessor of rights including the right not to be killed. We aren't discussing that topic in this inquiry, however: we are addressing, simply, procreation. Whether you count as "procreating" when you produce an embryo that is not carried to term is separate from the present issue, which is, merely, why and whether you ought to procreate at all, whatever we decide procreation precisely consists of.

In procreating, people aim—if they aim—to bring new people into existence. To be sure, they may not "aim"—they may well conceive unintentionally, or contrary to their intentions. But our question is philosophical: what are good reasons to have children, and what are good reasons not to, whatever may have actuated some particular couple at a given time? In particular, we want to know whether, if children we would have would be happy (or whatever our favored terms are: would thrive, flourish, do well) *and* we can know this, then *that* is, as it stands, a good reason to have them.

Regarding that question: Contrary, perhaps, to what I have been (perhaps mis) understood to say in those earlier papers, the correct answer is: of course! The existence of people leading good lives is (normally) a good thing. So far, so good. But now: is it a good thing because of what it does *to* those people—as would be the case with a benefit conferred on some already-existing person, such as a victim of disaster in some faraway place? No, and for the same root reason: there is no *person* upon whom life is conferred when we have children. If anything can be said to be such that creating a life means "conferring" something on *it*, it would have to be some such thing as a bit of germ plasm. And surely no one thinks we have moral duties toward those things, as such. Our duties, always and by definition, are to *people*; any sort of obligation to any sort of things other than people must be indirect, a consequence of some commitment to some person(s) or other. (Moreover, we will take it here that all duties are to *other* people, apart from duties "to" oneself that derive from commitments made or duties held towards others.) Having good people is, simply, a good: it

is also, usually, a “public” good—we’ll say more about this below. And by definition, the goodness of the life thus produced is a good *to its possessor*. It may be a good for others too, of course—or perhaps the reverse. But our question here is whether the fact that people are brought into existence and lead happy lives is, in and of itself, to be regarded as good, and thus as a reason, so far as it goes, for so bringing them. And that’s the question I’m answering in the affirmative.

Of course, the birth of a child with good prospects is a direct benefit to its parents, assuming they have normal feelings for their family, and similarly to any other well-wishers relevant to the case. Moreover, it is also, with any luck, a benefit to humanity at large. One hardly needs to enumerate. It isn’t just that the child might be exceptionally talented and make audiences, or colleagues, happy to see its good performances or to read its important results etc. But perfectly ordinary people of no special talents are also a good to many people around them—again, with any luck. (I specifically include people born in what are by world standards very (economically) poor circumstances. Only those who, for instance, become diseased early on, or who otherwise do exceptionally badly, should be regarded as tragedies. And even they have often contributed to the pleasure and general benefit of many people meanwhile. Whatever the grown child does economically is also a benefit, to all those who use his or her products.

In saying this, I do *not* mean to re-embrace utilitarianism. Our question is: why should the goodness of good lives matter to *us*? That is an important question, not to be sloughed off. There are just two sorts of answers. (1) If we are, say, its parents or simply benevolent persons, they “just do” matter to us—we, those of us falling under such descriptions, *like it* that there are happy people out there (and of course, this will, alas, not always be so; there are those who want to abandon their newborns, and many who wish they had not become pregnant in the first place); and (2) much more importantly so far as social philosophy is concerned, more good people are a benefit to the other people in the social environment, local or global, into which they are born, whatever anyone’s personal attitudes may be. If this latter were not so, then there would be room for concern, and possibly for imposing constraints. But that it generally is so, at very least since a couple of centuries ago, is, I believe, clear—even

though many philosophers and others seem to have persuaded themselves, despite all evidence, that it is not so.<sup>1</sup> Again, we will address this further below.

There has been a radical challenge to the claim that producing people with good lives is of value, sufficient to justify bringing them into existence. David Benatar (2008) argues that it is always better that a person not exist. The basis of this counter-intuitive view is that harms can be avoided by nonexistence—which is true enough, of course. Benatar insists, “Those who never exist cannot be deprived. However, by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms that could not have befallen one had one not come into existence.” Also true. But so what? If the good outweighs the bad in a life, why isn’t that good enough? It is true that we ought not to harm others. But bringing people into existence who will, no doubt, be sometimes harmed, is not *harming them* in the sense in which that is a morally wrong thing to do. It is creating something that becomes a person, who can and very likely on occasion will be harmed. But you (the parents) *didn’t do it*. (Not normally, that is. When foreseeably a baby would be born with some horrible disease which will also kill it soon, the case is different.) Moreover, in normal interpersonal cases, it is quite possible for harms to be outweighed by benefits, as when the dentist’s infliction of pain leads to well-functioning teeth, which in turn affords nutritional and culinary benefits that, in the view of the patron of the dentist, well justifies that modest infliction. Late in life, too, we often experience great pain and enormous inconvenience, but still prefer life to death. Why wouldn’t Benatar think it worthwhile to give people that choice? I don’t see a good answer to that.

To return to our main issue: the question now is whether the fact that one could relieve the suffering of others by not having children of our own, as perhaps sometimes is the case, implies that we ought not to have those children. Does it follow, especially, from the fact (when it is a fact) that we could devote resources to the improvement of conditions for presently-suffering people, and specifically the resources that we will otherwise devote to our hypothetical happy child once born, that we therefore *ought not* to have our own children instead? Might this be on argued the ground, say, that alleviating misery is more important than increasing the goodness of good lives?

To this last that I also want to say No. Specifically, I want to advance the view,

1. An instructive example: Paul and Anne Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (1968)—a book whose refutation at the hands of reality was well under way at the very time it was written, and overwhelmingly reiterated since.

which I take to be common sense, that people are entitled to have children so long as the effect of having those children is not to *impose* significant costs, harms, disbenefits, on other people<sup>2</sup>. It can pass that test, however, without thereby improving the lot of suffering people, wherever they may be, whom we might perhaps have otherwise been able to benefit if we so chose. Producing our own children does not (normally) harm others, though it conceivably might leave them worse off than if one instead had devoted resources to benefiting them. But that is not the same as harming them. This, then, is an outright rejection of utilitarianism, and certainly of “prioritarianism,” a view that has had considerable prominence of recent times<sup>3</sup> and to which I was myself partial in my earlier years (see Narveson, 1967b).

Is this changed when we take into account the interests of the person produced? If, as I have asserted, we cannot be said to harm someone by bringing him or her “into existence,” then have we no responsibility to produce people whose lives will be better rather than worse? Once born, of course, we have massive obligations to the child, who is extremely vulnerable in early years, and whose later character is so substantially influenced by what is done to that child in earlier years. As Weinberg has it, having children is “hazardous”: the potential for producing severely damaged, deprived, or otherwise miserable children is real (Weinberg, 2016). But prior to their birth, can anticipation of bad results yield a block against child production?

Here again, I come down on the No side, and for the same reason. When you produce a child, there is creation *ex nihilo*! That is: a person somehow emerges from the protoplasm resulting from the combination of sperm and egg (or, from the very late-term foetus—again, to distance ourselves from the dispute about the proper stage of organic development to identify with the onset of genuine personhood.) Prior to the act by which those got together, there was no such person. But the notions of harm and benefit only apply to persons. A is better or worse off at  $t_2$  than A at  $t_1$ . But if there is *no* person at  $t_1$ , we have lost our comparator. We—parents, onlookers, philosophers, and so on—can make judgments as to the level of well-being enjoyed by this person, or suffered by it. But so can the new person himself. We can try also to compare how he is with how others are, or with the different individual we might

2. “Other people” being actual, identifiable persons or groups of such—not “possible people,” simply as such. Possibly some of those persons are in the future, to be sure—questions about that are discussed in the body of this paper.

3. E.g., the popular philosopher Peter Singer, whose many articles to this effect simply fail to square with the beliefs, especially as implied by their actions, of ordinary people.

have conceived instead, if the luck of the draw, or planning, or impinging circumstances, had been better.

Now: *some* individuals so produced will prove very costly to maintain in life, or in any condition that its parents, or others, would like to see it in. And about this we can certainly moralize. The view here is that, fundamentally, these costs are to be borne *by the parent(s)*—that’s the measure of the “hazards” Weinberg intends. If there is no way to internalize those costs, then those parents have acted wrongly or at least irresponsibly. The rest of us had no obligation to bear those costs and if we do anyway, that’s nice of us—but it is *not* a duty (normally) so to bear them.

Your experience of parenthood may well be better had you produced one of the other possible persons than the one you actually did. If so, that’s a reason to think ahead, insofar as possible, and to have children you know you can afford and that you are sure you can love and rear in joy. (And the parental love you bestow on that child will pay dividends for her or him in later life, too.)

I previously said that my position is an outright rejection of utilitarianism, and also of “prioritarianism.” But actually, it may not entail such a rejection, unless those views are interpreted in a certain way. To see this, we now need to make a distinction.

## TWO DEPARTMENTS OF MORALITY

Morals generally consists of a set of directives: rules, apothegms, principles of action (and attributions of “virtue” or “vice,” say.) They are not the directives of anyone in particular, and certainly not someone “in authority”—there are no moral “authorities.” Nor are they the deliverances of some privileged group. Notionally, they are the directives issued by just anybody and everybody—hopefully, the latter, and unanimously. Lack of unanimity presents a problem, perhaps soluble. But we’ll go no further at the moment (we’ll be back to it.<sup>4</sup>)

Now, some of these directives are of the general drift, “it would be a good thing if you were to do X” or “it would be virtuous to do X”, or perhaps “you get points for doing X!”; while others are of the drift, “if you don’t do x, we [“society,” possibly via agents acting supposedly on its behalf] will inflict certain losses or injuries on you.” That is to say, some—the latter sort of—moral directives are meant to be *enforceable*

4. My general views on the foundations and nature of morals are expanded in *This is Ethical Theory* (2009)



by punishments, while others—the first sort—are meant not to be such, but rather, *reinforceable*, as we should more mildly put it, by, roughly speaking, praise or blame and their ilk. There's a difference of tone, true—but also a difference of real consequence to the actors in question. They had, we might put it, better sit up and listen if the punishable sort are in question; the first sort, on the other hand, they could perhaps ignore, though they *shouldn't*, of course. Broadly, it's a difference of stick and carrot, both wielded, notionally, on behalf of some society in particular, or (better) of mankind at large.

So the question about population is this: When do we get to intervene to prevent people *from* having children, or alternatively, perhaps to compel them *to* have them? On what ground, if any, do we get to threaten ill consequences to those who prefer some other option than what is being proposed by the theorist or the moralist in question? To this, I think, there is a good answer, and it is the same as when any other sort of illfare-imposing actions are in question: We would get to do so if your having, or not having, the children in question would *work ill for some persons*. Not, however, for some fancied future possible persons, but for actual persons, alive, breathing, and acting *now* (or at any rate in their lifetimes.)

On the other hand, we do *not* get to do so just because the future progeny whose production or nonproduction is being contemplated by the agents being addressed, would be happy or not. And that isn't just because somehow this pattern of reproductive activity does not accord with some calculated best state of mankind in future. If, of course, the person in question likes that calculated idea and wants to conform his behavior to it, no problem. But that's trivial. What isn't trivial is when someone does *not* like the idea and wants to have her or his own children, or not, for her or his own reasons. As, I would think, somewhere around 99% of mankind do.

Why do they (we) have children? Because our (would-be grand-) parents *really* want us to have them; because we just love the idea of having children around, or love children themselves; because we want to continue our particular DNA type; because we hope they will help support us in old age; because we didn't know of contraception technology, or the one we usually use failed on this occasion; because we think the community needs more people of the type we expect our children would be; or..... and so on. Now, the question posed by philosophers of the at-least-partially utilitarian stripe is: shouldn't we be using our resources to help out the suffering, or the less-fortunate, or the oppressed, etc., among us first? There are two possible lines of response to this.

One is: No. It's tough that they are in such bad shape, but it's not my fault that they are, and my interest in having my *own* children outweighs any interest I have in helping out those people. (As it might not. I might be highly sympathetic to those people. But the point is, I might not be—and I daresay most people most of the time are not, or at least, certainly not enough to defer or renounce the having of their own children instead. Or, as may be, the building of that summer cottage they always wanted.)

Another is: well, maybe I “should”; but, frankly, to us (my partner and I, say) having our own children is *more important*. More important to us, that is. But then, *we are* “us” in this case, and because we are, our values are determinative of the matter, so long as we do not actively clash with actual others thereby. Our values are what move us to do what we do—*not* the values of some or a lot of actual or possible or other persons, future or present.

Let us now imagine that the persons contemplating reproduction (which, very likely, they don't—but, as mentioned above, we are asking what there is to say for given behavior whether or not the agent of that behavior actually says it or not) are members of a marginal group. They live perhaps by hunting and gathering, or marginal farming, and they are more than ordinarily subject to debilitating diseases, and so on. That is to say, let's consider these questions as posed by the very persons figuring in Parfit's “repugnant conclusion”—people living the kind of lives we (we philosophers, perhaps, or we ordinary people) would hope and prefer that nobody would have to live. We may conjecture that those people aren't about to stop having children just because they'll be poor. Why, then, should other people who are better off stop having them in order to perhaps enable some of those poorer people to be less poor?

#### ALLEGED “RESOURCE SCARCITIES”

At this juncture, to be sure, we will bump up against familiar objections concerning resources. What, it will be asked, if there just isn't enough to go around? One cause of war, no doubt, is competition over resources—real or, by far mostly, imagined. The Nazis claimed that they needed “lebensraum” and would have to get it from the Slavic peoples to their east. Whether any such claims were ever true in history is probably an interesting question, but it is certain that they are not true anymore and were not true in Hitler's time. The many billions of us on earth now are all able



to live far better lives than our remote ancestors because of the developed productive powers of humankind. Scarcity of the general kind posited by Malthus simply isn't on any more, if it ever was.<sup>5</sup> And, further, production is stimulated primarily by the prospect of improved income from exchange by the producers. That certainly includes exchange with the erstwhile indigent, such as the Chinese, many hundreds of millions of whom have advanced from severe poverty to relative affluence in the recent past because of their government's change in the direction of relatively liberal economic policies, including extensive trade with much of the rest of the world.

So the premises required for positing a necessary trade-off between better-off and worse-off are, at least in the current and foreseeable era, false. It is still true that in individual cases, people *can* choose between devoting their resources to their own children, or to relieving poverty—just as they can choose between that and supporting the opera. And as a matter of fact, their choices, all over the world, have overwhelmingly supported smaller families, though not for the philosophical reasons pressed by so many, but simply in contemplation of their own economic circumstances. But do the rest of us have any right to insist that they do the one rather than the other? No. The lives of the meanest among us are still *their* lives, and *not* ours, or some institution's. When it comes to insisting, we may indeed insist on decent behavior—normally a readily meetable standard. But beyond that, we must deal with them as with anyone else: by negotiation, with a view to advancing mutual interests. And it may not be in the *mutual* interests of some wealthy person here and those of some impoverished person over there that the former should help out the latter.

There has, especially of recent times, arisen a view that it is actually quite easy for us to impose “harms” on future generations, and one version of that sort of view even claims that we can do so simply by having children, either just at all, or at any rate with exceptions that have to meet quite stringent conditions<sup>6</sup>. This general view strikes me, and most people, I would think, as more than slightly incredible on the face of it—and upon deeper inspection, too. Still, it or something like it is popular, and deserves some attention.

Of course, the main driver of this idea has always been that the more there are of us, the now-people, then the less resources there will be for *them*, the yet-to-exist people. It is perhaps more difficult to get this thoroughly exploded and incoherent idea out of people's heads than any other misunderstanding about the world around

5. Among many books on these matters, see for instance Ridley (2010) or Bailey (2015)

6. See, for instance, Daniel Benatar (2008)

us. The true situation is just the opposite. Resources are not fixed: they are created, by us, and the more of us there are working away at it the more there will be—not the less. If we suddenly reverted to the world as it was, say, 40,000 years ago, the gross mass of the world around us would be the same, or maybe a bit greater. There'd be a lot more oil down there somewhere—oil that nobody had any idea how to use; and a bit more iron; etc. Now: would you think yourself much richer if you were one of the few projected into that world? You'd be deprived of ready energy, cars, nice houses, and on and on and on, and life would be pretty much “nasty, brutish, and short.”

Those who say this seem also to be very cavalier about technology. They look to what they think to be the “perils” of global warming, and suppose that less people would mean less CO<sub>2</sub> in the environment, whereas more people means more. But apart from the specifics of all this—the still-debated reasoning behind predictions of very substantial climate change<sup>7</sup>, for example—two things are extremely clear. First, that the methods by which we are attempting to reduce the incidence of greenhouse gases are hugely, indeed fabulously inefficient, and consequently incredibly expensive—with the expense falling squarely on the backs and pockets of the poor. No rational person would propose to “save” him or herself from a supposed danger by methods such as that. We would not, individually, pay a hundred thousand dollars a year to get our garbage picked up with 1% cleaner methods. But politicians are wonderful at talking us into paying that and more for “environmental” controls that do far less and cost far more.

Any major perils predicted—seriously higher sea levels, say, such as to endanger large cities—are going to come about, if at all, quite a long way down the road, so far as I can see. Even on this there is disagreement, to be sure. The minimum “road” seems to be several decades, though (see Nuccitelli, 2015, pp155-6) for perhaps the most extreme current view). In the meantime, very smart people are working away at ideas to deal with this, if indeed it threatens. Some of those, as time goes by, will be far, far better than anything we are doing now. What's our hurry?

As a salient example, many countries and provinces (such as my own, Ontario) are investing heavily in “clean” electric production via wind turbines and solar arrays. But both of those have a perfectly obvious, and for the near past and predictable future, overwhelming problem: they only work when the sun shines (at most half the

7. The “climate change” literature is now immense, of course. For critics of the “received” view, see for example Alan Moran (2015). Defending the “received” view, see for example the characteristically titled *Climatology versus Pseudoscience* by Dana Nuccitelli (2015). Reading the two in tandem is strongly recommended.

time) or the wind blows (more like a quarter). So what to do during those inevitable very frequent lulls? The only feasible answer at present is to revert to the very kind of production that “clean” was supposed to avoid, of course. And so we pay for massive overcapitalization in this industry, with electricity at twice the price it could be<sup>8</sup>. And who pays that? We, the ordinary people, do. The poor, of course, are the chief sufferers. The main beneficiaries are these who supply the equipment and the technical support.

The general point is that insofar as arguments for population restriction appeal to a supposed conflict of interest between current people and future people, those arguments are empirically questionable, at the least. But we can go farther. For even if one *knew* that one’s having a child might disenable some identifiable future person from having one, or as happy a one, it would *still* be this actual present person’s right to have her own child instead. And this time, the reason goes back to the original “insight”: that possible future other person doesn’t exist, and so we can’t be said to owe *it* anything at all. When the time comes, after all, the would-be parents of that possible child have, as we always have had, the option not to have it instead, in view of current circumstances.

Compare this with the case where your child and that of Ms. Smith are to emerge simultaneously from those respective wombs, and that there’s a medicine needed to enable successful birth—but, unfortunately, not enough for both of you. What then? Various resolutions might be possible: Ms. Smith *ordered* the medicine and you did not; you offered her \$100,000 if you could have it and she not, and she accepted, etc. Instead, though, let’s suppose that there is indeed a straight conflict. In that case, certainly, a throw of the dice or the equivalent is called for, and neither has prior claim. Whereas if our child would be born on Wednesday and hers on Saturday following, then we *got there first*. Or, one of us had insurance giving that person first claim on the needed medicine. But the very rarity of such cases is what points up the general

8. We can’t get too involved in technicalia here, but readers should be aware that the “costless” “green” electrical generation technologies have the intrinsic disadvantage that the sun shines at most half the time, and the wind blows with sufficient strength (but not too much) about 26% of the time. So where do we get the needed electricity for serious grids feeding busy cities and the like, during that very large down-time? The only current really feasible answer is: from non-green sources such as gas or coal. This means that heavy utilization of the “green” technologies entails duplicate capitalization of everything and enormous supply problems. In my home Province of Ontario, which has gone in heavily for these new sources of electricity, the result has been a more than doubling of electricity prices for consumers over the past several years, and heavy deficits for the government. One result is that there is either no gain at all, or virtually no gain, in the very purpose for which these are built, namely to reduce net CO<sub>2</sub> admissions. Enthusiasts for such technologies, many of whom have profited enormously from the heavy subsidization of these industries by government, certainly ought to have thought of these problems before. For a thorough technical analysis, see Etherington (2006).

moral, which is that each person does his or her best to promote her interests, letting the chips fall where they may—and *rightly so*. A supposedly philosophical interest in the welfare of future generations evaporates in the face of reality, which is *this* person having *her* child, which she very much wants.

Perhaps it will be envisaged that there might be a sort of bargain with the current parents-to-be, or grandparents-to-be, or nth generation to-be, of the “future generations” in question, which obligates us to have less or no children, etc. And of course, there might. But again, there might not. Why would present persons really desirous of having families engage in any such bargain?

Let’s remember that a majority of present potential parents have *elected* to have few or no children, as is their right. But our question is, what about the others who would like to have larger families, and who can afford it? There is, I suggest, no excuse for thinking that these people may be *required* to curtail their desires in that regard. Only when a real and concrete hurt can be expected to be imposed on currently known persons would there be any case for that. And that is possible—but there is nothing inevitable about it, and indeed, it is very typically not so.

The general conclusion, then, is that philosophical attempts to justify impositions on aspiring parents are seriously flawed. Common sense recommends that we pay little attention to the scenarios they want to invoke to that end. Human life can and should continue, where desired, so long as it doesn’t outrightly conflict with the lives of others.

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