



Procreation is Immoral on Environmental Grounds

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Abstract

Some argue that procreation is immoral due to its negative environmental impact. Since living an “eco-gluttonous” lifestyle of excessive resource consumption is wrong in virtue of the fact that it increases greenhouse gas emissions and environmental impact, then bringing another human being into existence must also be wrong, for exactly this same reason. I support this position. It has recently been the subject of criticism, however, primarily on the grounds that such a position (1) is guilty of “double-counting” environmental impacts, and (2) that it over-generalizes to condemn other clearly permissible behaviors, such as saving lives, or certain instances of adoption and immigration. Here, I will defend the environmental argument against procreation from these criticisms. I will do this, first, under the assumption that our individual consumption and emissions cause significant harm. I will then address the problem of causal impotence, and argue that, even if our individual contributions to environmental problems ultimately make no difference to the amount of harm that occurs, procreation is still immoral for many, if not most, of those living in the developed world.

Keywords Procreation · Climate Change · Individual Responsibility · Collective Action

1 The Environmental Argument Against Procreation

Most agree that it is morally wrong to be what we might call an “eco-glutton”, purposely living an unnecessarily extravagant lifestyle, partaking in luxuries which have a tremendous negative impact on the environment. This is a very plausible claim. It is plausible that we have a moral duty to refrain, for instance, from driving gas-guzzling

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SUV's, or excessive air travel, meat consumption, water usage, and so on. For, such behaviors contribute to climate change and environmental destruction—which ultimately causes significant harm to others. I endorse this position, and have argued for it elsewhere (Vance 2017, 2023). Here, I will defend a further claim: If there is (as I believe) a duty to minimize our resource consumption and greenhouse gas emissions by refraining from the sorts of behaviors just listed, then there is also a duty to refrain from having children.

The view that procreation is immoral on environmental grounds is not new. It has been defended elsewhere.¹ For example, Young (2001) argues for it by drawing an analogy between two couples: First, there are the eco-gluttonous Greens, who consume 2.5 times more resources than the average American. (So, whereas an average American couple in their late twenties would produce about 100 years' worth of average American consumption over the remainder of their lives, the Greens will produce about 250 years' worth.) The typical environmentalist will agree that the Greens' behavior is clearly immoral. But now compare this eco-gluttonous couple with the Grays, an average-consuming couple who decide to have two (also average-consuming) children. By bringing two additional human beings into existence, the Grays *also* ultimately cause about 250 years' worth of average American consumption (roughly 50 years for each parent, and 75 for each child). Young's claim is that, if we condemn the eco-gluttonous Greens on the grounds that they deliberately do something that causes 250 years' worth of consumption, then we must also condemn the procreating Grays, since they do the same. We might express this argument as follows:

1. What the Greens do (namely, produce 250 years' worth of greenhouse gas emissions and consumption via "eco-gluttony") is immoral.
2. But, what the Grays do (namely produce 250 years' worth of emissions and consumption via procreation) is morally equivalent to what the Greens do.
3. Therefore, procreation is immoral.

Here, I will defend this line of reasoning. In Sect. 2, I will review two existing objections to it, and then survey and refine the standard answers that have been given. In Sects. 3–4, I will present two relatively *new* objections—namely, that the argument above is guilty of "double-counting" and that it proves far too much—and then offer my own responses. In all of those Sects. (2–4), I will defend the environmental argument against procreation under the assumption that our individual consumption and emissions *cause a significant amount of harm*. However, in Sect. 5, I will consider

¹ See, e.g., Young (2001), Overall (2012), MacIver (2015), Conly (2016), Rieder (2016), Hedberg (2020), and Burkett (2021). Note that not all of these authors believe that procreation is *absolutely* immoral, but they do all agree that we have *some* duty to limit the number of children that we bring into existence. Respectively, their views are that *most* individuals in developed or high-consumption nations have a duty to have a maximum of: zero children (Young), one child per person (Overall), some limited, but non-explicitly stated number of children (MacIver), one child per couple (Conly), two children per couple, but perhaps one or zero (Rieder), zero or one child per person, depending on the individual (Hedberg), and zero children (Burkett). I should also note Elizabeth Cripps here as someone who has *endorsed* the view, without offering a formal *defense* of it, stating in an interview, "I think there's a duty to take seriously the environmental impact of having children when deciding family size. This often means having fewer biological children than you would have done—i.e., for many of us, stopping at one or two." (Niker 2020).

the possibility that we are each individually *causally impotent* with respect to climate change, such that our individual choices do *not* cause any harm. There, I will argue that procreation is *still* immoral, even if it ultimately makes no difference to the total amount of harm that occurs. In the final Sect. (6), I will conclude that—at least for many, if not most people in the developed world—procreation is immoral on environmental grounds.

2 Two Familiar Objections

(1) *The Right to Procreate.* Perhaps the most common criticism of the environmental argument against procreation comes by way of an appeal to a *basic human right to procreate*. A family of average-emitters who increases their total consumption by bringing children into existence is merely exercising one of their basic moral rights, it is said. Yet, we cannot say the same for so-called “eco-gluttons”, as there is not plausibly a basic human right to overconsume, or engage in eco-gluttonous behavior. Thus, procreation is morally justified, even if eco-gluttony is not, because it is our *right*.

Reply. The standard reply is to point out that rights are not absolute, but are, rather, limited in instances where exercising them would cause harm.² For example, a right to free speech does not entail that it is morally permissible to shout ‘Fire!’ in a crowded arena. A right to practice one’s religion does not entail the permissibility of ritualistic human sacrifice, even if one’s religion demands it, et cetera. As the saying goes, *My right to swing my fist ends where your nose begins*. That said, surely the right to procreate (if there even is one) is limited in this same way.

For example, imagine you were aware that, were you to conceive a child and bring it to term, your child would do nothing but suffer in horrible agony for several years and then die. Surely it would be immoral to go ahead and bring it into existence anyway. “But it was my *right to procreate!*” would be no justification; no excuse. Or consider the following scenario:

Life on Mars You are one of five scientists establishing the first base on Mars. Due to some complications, your team is now stranded with a limited supply of food, with the next re-supply shuttle over two years away. (The launch window for missions from Earth to Mars opens only every 26 months.) If you ration very carefully, you will have just enough food for the five of you to survive (barely) until the rescue shuttle arrives. Nevertheless, you and a crewmate decide to conceive a child and bring it to term.

Surely it is immoral to bring a sixth person into existence in this scenario, when you know that doing so will lead to significant harm—perhaps even costing one of your crewmates their life. Surely an appeal to the claim that you were just “exercising your basic human right to procreate” would not morally justify your actions in this case.

² See, e.g., Young (2001: Sect. 2.C), Overall (2012: ch. 2), Conly (2016: chs. 2 & 3), and Rieder (2016: Sect. 4.3).

Right? If that is correct, then the so-called “right to procreate” is limited in at least some instances. In the two examples just given, it is limited because procreating will *cause harm*.³ But, the same seems presently true of procreating in the *actual* world—at least, procreation by those in high-consuming, industrialized nations. For instance, John Broome writes, “it can be estimated very roughly that your lifetime emissions will wipe out more than six months of healthy human life” (Broome, 2012: 74). Meanwhile, John Nolt estimates that “the average American causes through his/her greenhouse gas emissions the serious suffering and/or deaths of two future people” (Nolt, 2011: 9).⁴

Clearly, estimates of *how much* harm each of us causes with our consumption vary wildly. Nevertheless, it is widely believed that, in today’s world wracked by climate change, widespread pollution, extinction, and environmental destruction, every individual that we bring into existence (especially in high-consumption nations such as the United States) results in *some significant amount* of harm to others.⁵ Due to decades (or centuries) of unchecked growth and consumption, we have gotten ourselves into a situation similar to that of the team on Mars—only it is our *carbon sink* rather than our food supply that will need to be rationed, if we are to survive and avoid the most significant harms. For this reason, our ‘right to procreate’ is now limited in the same way as theirs is.

What is more, any ‘right to procreate’, if such a thing exists, is likely grounded in some more basic right, such as a right to the pursuit of happiness or a decent life, or to the fulfillment of our interests; the right to property, to the autonomous control of our actions, or to live our lives however we choose.⁶ But, in that case, my opponent’s appeal to a ‘right to procreate’ is really just an appeal to one of these more basic rights, such that the position underpinning their present objection is *actually* this: A tremendous increase in greenhouse gas emissions and environmental impact is morally justified just so long as it fulfils the emitters’ interests, or makes them happy, or if the emitter is simply making use of their own property, or acting autonomously, or living their lives as they wish. But, then, if exercising one of *these* rights were enough to justify tremendous increases in consumption, then not only would procreation be permitted, but *eco-gluttony* as well! For, eco-gluttons too are merely pursuing happiness, or the fulfillment of their interests, making use of their own property, and exercising their autonomy. In short, an appeal to the right to procreate fails, not only because such a right is limited, and does not extend to instances where exercising it

³ Some might question whether bringing a suffering child into existence truly *harms* them—e.g., if ‘harming’ means ‘making them worse off than they otherwise would have been’, and if existence is incomparable with non-existence. I disagree, but even so: Surely we should all agree that, if one knowingly brings into existence a child who is certain to do nothing but suffer immensely and then die, then they have still done something very, very bad, and seriously immoral.

⁴ Reaffirmed in Nolt (2013: 118). Note also: These estimates are based solely on individual greenhouse gas emissions, but keep in mind that our consumption also contributes to habitat loss, water shortage, particulate pollutants, and so on.

⁵ Reminder: Here in Sects. 2–4, I am presently defending the argument against procreation under the assumption that our individual contributions to climate change *do* cause harm. In Sect. 5, I will address the problem of causal impotence, and argue that procreation is still immoral even if our individual actions *do not* cause any harm.

⁶ Most of these are discussed in Conly (2016), Chs. 2 and 3.

would cause harm to others, but also because, if such a right *did* justify the tremendous increase in harmful emissions associated with procreation, then it would also justify those associated with eco-gluttony.

(2) *Happiness and the Good Life*. Another objection appeals not to rights, but to *well-being*. Many insist that having children is essential to their happiness, or to their ability to live a good or decent life. Meanwhile, eco-gluttonous behavior is not required for happiness, or a good life. For this reason, procreation is morally justified (despite the fact that it increases consumption and greenhouse gas emissions), while eco-gluttony is not. Simply put, giving up procreation would be *too costly*.

Reply. In its weaker form, the objection here seems to be as follows: There is an empirical claim, that parenting results in far more total happiness than eco-gluttony, coupled with a moral claim, that this increase in happiness justifies the increase in total consumption. This will not do. For starters, the empirical claim is likely false in some cases. Very likely, some parents do *not* derive significant happiness from their choice.⁷ Meanwhile, some eco-gluttons *do*. In these instances, my opponent's present moral claim would entail that it is actually the *eco-gluttons* who are acting permissibly, while the procreators are acting immorally (since only the eco-gluttons are producing enough happiness to justify their consumption)! This is, I will assume, exactly the opposite conclusion that my opponent would wish to draw. Presumably, they would insist that procreation is permissible, while eco-gluttony is not, *even when* eco-gluttons are happy, and parents are not. So, this version of the objection fails.

Now, in its stronger form, the objection seems to be that parenting is actually *required* in order to be happy, or live a decent life; and surely we are morally permitted to cause a significant increase in emissions and environmental impact if this is *essential* to a happy or decent life. (Meanwhile, eco-gluttony is *not* required in order to live a good or happy life, and so cannot be justified on these same grounds.) In reply, I should like to point out (following Daniel Burkett) that the requirements for a good life are determined either subjectively or objectively. If *subjectively*, then the present objection would justify not only parenting, but eco-gluttony too, in at least some instances. For, in this case, "anything will go. Perhaps one individual will decide that, for her, a nightly joyguzzle [joyride in a gas-guzzling SUV] is essential to a decent life. Perhaps, for another, it is a weekly return flight to the other side of the world" (Burkett, 2021: 799). On the other hand, if my opponent is claiming that it is *objectively* true that having children is required in order to live a good life, then *this* claim entails that childless people cannot live good lives (which is clearly false). So, this version of the objection fails too.

If bringing about a tremendous increase in emissions causes a significant amount of harm, then it is easy to see that the underlying reasoning behind the present objection (in either form) is fundamentally flawed. For, while it *is* plausible that we are not morally obligated to make large sacrifices to our own happiness or well-being

⁷ In fact, some research indicates that most parents are actually made *worse off*, overall, by becoming parents. For a discussion of this claim, see Conly (2016: 42–44) and Hedberg (2019: 96–97). Though, I should note that I share the reservations of those two authors, regarding this research. For, it is quite possible—and I am willing to concede that this is likely the case—that even if there *is* a temporary decrease in well-being for many or most parents, this may frequently be offset by later increases in happiness, or even by an increase in one's general sense of *meaning* or *purpose* in life.

in order to secure *benefits* for others, it *is not* plausible that there is no obligation to make large sacrifices in order to avoid *harming* others. (For example, I am under no obligation to sell my car to ensure that a stranger receives a really nice birthday present, but I *am* obligated to steer it into a tree, totaling my car in order to avoid *running them over*.)⁸ So, if by procreating we really do *cause harm* (e.g., by exacerbating climate change), then it simply won't do to claim that the harm we are doing to others is absolved by the fact that what we are doing is making us really happy, or is essential to our happiness. Giving up happiness is costly to be sure. But when we must *harm* others in order to secure it—even cause others to suffer and die—then forfeiture of our own happiness is a cost we must pay.

But let us imagine that harming others *was* justified whenever done in the pursuit of what is necessary to live a decent life (a claim I do not accept). Even so, if having children *were* essential to a good or happy life (another claim that I do not accept) procreation *still* would not automatically be justified. For, presumably, harming others in the pursuit of essential goods would only be justified so long as there were *no alternative means of securing the essential goods without producing the harm*. But of course, it *is* possible to have children, and experience all of the goods of parenthood and parental love *without* causing harm—i.e., *without* bringing new people into existence and increasing global consumption and emissions—namely, via adoption.^{9,10} (Obviously, adoption is not a viable alternative for *everyone*—e.g., due to how costly the adoption process can be—but, *many* certainly have access to this alternative.) Thus, in order to justify biological procreation specifically, my opponent would need to argue not merely that *parenting* is essential to the good life, but rather that *passing on one's genes* or *parenting a genetically-related child* is essential to the good life. These latter claims seem wildly implausible.¹¹ In short, if our individual consumption

⁸ Assume an equivalence here. Imagine that the birthday gift is worth \$50,000, while running the person over would cause an injury which the victim would assign that same value to (say, a crushed leg).

⁹ This claim is restricted to adoption from *within* one's home country (or from a nation with similar per capita emissions). Adopting a child from a nation with low consumption and per capita emissions and then bringing them to a nation with high emissions *would* cause a significant increase in harmful environmental impact. I address this in Sect. 4.

¹⁰ Some may disagree. For example, Ferracioli (2018) argues that procreation generates several particular goods which adoption does not, such that procreation is still justified, despite the moral reasons in favor of preferring adoption (including environmental reasons). For a rebuttal, see Sect. 2 of Schpall (2023). Interestingly, even Ferracioli admits (in footnote 4) that we *might* be obligated, for environmental reasons, to have no more than *one* biological child.

¹¹ Some other candidates might be *experiencing pregnancy*, or *childbirth*, or *breastfeeding*. Perhaps my opponent could claim that these experiences are essential to a good life. Yet this too seems implausible. For starters, once again, my opponent would need to specify whether these essentials of a good life are determined *subjectively* (in which case, eco-gluttony could also be justified) or *objectively* (in which case, it would follow that only fertile females are capable of having good lives). (See Rulli 2016: 312 for additional objections.) Furthermore, even if it *were* true that one or more of these very specific experiences were essential to a good life, it is worth noting that achieving these goods would typically require no more than *one* biologically-related child *per couple* (see Conly 2016: ch. 2), or in some instances, perhaps one biological child *per person*—for example, within same-sex couples, where it is impossible for both partners to contribute to a single child's genetic make-up; or, for those who wish to parent without a partner at all; etc. (For further discussion, see Overall 2012: ch. 9.)

and emissions cause harm, then an appeal to the happiness and well-being associated with parenting will not justify procreation.

3 The Double-Counting Objection

Here is a more recent criticism: Consider once again, the Grays—an average-consuming American couple who decide to have two biological children (who, we should assume, also turn out to be average consumers). According to the environmental argument against procreation, the Grays have acted wrongly by freely choosing to do something that causes a significant increase in the total amount of resource consumption and greenhouse gas emissions in the world. (They have increased that total by precisely two lifetimes' worth of consumption.) Simply put, the Grays—the adult parents—are responsible for their children's emissions. But, wait: Surely the two children are *also* each responsible for their own emissions. "But, that's double-counting!" my opponent says. "And double-counting is bad." That is the objection.

One version of this worry originates not in the work of moral philosophers, but in a paper by Paul Murtaugh and Michael Schlax (Murtaugh and Schlax, 2009), who calculated that, on average, having one child adds 9,411 tons of CO₂ to the parent's "carbon legacy". They, like their philosopher counterparts, repeatedly state that each parent is "responsible for" the emissions of their offspring. Yet, whereas philosophers have argued that parents are *morally responsible* for their children's emissions, Murtaugh and Schlax seem to suggest only that they are *causally responsible* for them.¹² Each of these two claims gives rise to a distinct worry. If both the parents and their children are *causally* responsible for the same quantities of CO₂ being released into the atmosphere, then one might worry that we are *double-counting actual quantities of CO₂* (by including them in multiple people's carbon footprints). For example, Pinkert and Sticker suggest that the environmental argument against procreation absurdly:

implies that [a child's] parents' procreative choices use up a certain part of the atmosphere's absorption capacity, and that [the child's] consumption use up the same part *again*. But the same part of a resource can't be used *up* twice. (Pinkert and Sticker, 2021: 301, emphasis in original)

On the other hand, if both parents and children are *morally* responsible for the same emissions, then we might worry that *moral responsibility is now over-determined* (since multiple people would be morally guilty of one and the same wrongdoing). For example, Crist (2020) criticizes that:

¹² If indeed they have any genuine sense of responsibility in mind at all. For, at one point, they say only that each ancestor is "responsible" (in scare quotes) for the emissions of their descendants, stating that their goal is to "obtain an estimate of the total carbon emissions for which the ancestor is 'responsible'." (Murtaugh and Schlax, 2009: 19) On the other hand, they also write, "Here we estimate the extra emissions of fossil carbon dioxide that an average individual *causes* when he or she chooses to have children." (Murtaugh and Schlax, 2009: 14, emphasis mine).

the maths don't even work. The total share of moral responsibility is overdetermined, because for any given generation, 'every preceding generation is 100 per cent responsible for that generation's emissions.' You are 100 per cent at fault for every subsequent generation's emissions, but so is every subsequent generation; so why, come to think of it, shouldn't you just blame your own parents [for your own emissions], who are also 100 per cent at fault, for choosing to have you in the first place?

Burkett combines these two worries, stating that there is "a concern that some carbon costs will be counted twice—since my parents become morally responsible for my personal carbon emissions—emissions for which I am already morally responsible" (Burkett, 2021: 796).¹³ I will now examine both versions of the double-counting objection in turn.

Reply. First, regarding the double-counting of CO₂ emissions: Obviously there is an actual, finite, total quantity of CO₂ released into the Earth's atmosphere each year, and the sum of all the individual quantities of CO₂ released annually around the world must be identical to this total. As John Broome puts it, "The total of emissions attributed to each person should be equal to the total actually emitted" (Broome, 2016: 163). So, clearly we must not say that, if a child personally releases *these* specific CO₂ molecules into the atmosphere over the course of her life, then her parents *also* personally release *those same* CO₂ molecules into the atmosphere. That really *would* be double-counting, and it would be absurd to think of quantities of carbon emissions in this way.

Now, one might suspect that attributing *causal* responsibility both to parents and their children for the children's emissions commits us to double-counting in this way. But, I contend, to say that a child *causes* some particular quantity of emissions *and* that the child's parent's *also cause* those same emissions does *not* entail that we have counted those emissions twice. For, there can be multiple causes of one and the same effect. For example, consider a scenario where some oily rags are left near some exposed wire, which spark and then ignite the rags. Both the presence of the oily rags *and* the sparking of the faulty wiring caused the resulting house fire. Still, it does not follow that there were two fires. Or consider a traffic collision between two drivers at an intersection—one running a red light, and the other who is texting. *Both* drivers caused the collision. Yet, it does not follow from this that there were two collisions.¹⁴

¹³ Note that Burkett actually *agrees* that it is immoral to procreate on environmental grounds. Still, he goes out of his way to avoid double-counting. Ultimately, he follows MacIver's proposal (MacIver, 2015: 115–117), attributing responsibility for each biological child's *essential* emissions to her parents, and her *non-essential* emissions to herself.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that at least one popular analysis of causation entails that there are multiple causes of the same effect in these cases. Take for example, the counterfactual account (Lewis 1973). On that proposal, C causes E iff, had C not occurred, then E would not have occurred either. (Assume that C and E are distinct, actual events.) This account entails that *both* the placement of the oily rags *and* the sparking of the faulty wire were causes of the house fire because, had either failed to occur, the fire would also have failed to occur. Similarly, *both* drivers caused the collision because, had the first not run the red light, or had the second not been texting, then (we'll assume) the collision would not have occurred. (I understand that Lewis's analysis is subject to many counter-examples. Still, it suitably illustrates the point I am making here.)

Similarly, even though it is true that a parent (by virtue of choosing to procreate) causes an additional quantity of CO₂ to be emitted, *and* that their child (by virtue of actually emitting it) *also* causes that same quantity of CO₂ to be emitted, it does not follow that the CO₂ has been emitted twice, or that we have counted it twice. That would be absurd.

Admittedly, some philosophers have been a bit careless in citing Murtaugh and Schlax's calculations, wording their findings in ways that might suggest that they are counting emissions twice. For example, Rieder (2016:18) claims that "each child that an individual has adds about 9441 metric tons of carbon dioxide to her carbon footprint ...", while Hedberg (2020: 88) states that "choosing to have one fewer child is 24 times more effective at reducing one's carbon footprint than living without a car!" If by 'carbon footprint' it is meant 'the quantity of carbon that one personally produces'—and assuming that each child also personally produces her own emissions—then it is easy to see why we might think that these authors are guilty of double-counting emissions, in a bad way. Now, I suspect that Rieder and Hedberg only mean here that parents are *causally responsible* for their children's emissions—and *not* that they also *personally release* those emissions. And *that* claim is perfectly acceptable. For, as we have just seen, quantities of emissions can be (and in fact *are*) causally attributable both to parents and their children without this entailing that those emissions are produced twice, or counted twice. Nevertheless, if anyone really *has* ever endorsed a position which legitimately double-counts quantities of CO₂ in this way, then Pinkert and Sticker were correct to criticize it, as it is clearly mistaken.

As a moral philosopher, I do not pretend to know how we ought to divide up the total of global emissions into individual quantities assigned to each person, so that the sum of the individual quantities is equal to the total—especially given that there is so much causal overlap. And certainly, none of the early proponents of the moral argument against procreation—e.g., Young, Overall, and Conly—ever made any suggestions about how to count up global emissions or carve them up into individual carbon footprints.¹⁵ So let us set that question aside. Even so, one might worry that there remains a *different* form of undesirable double-counting here—namely, a double-

¹⁵ Pinkert and Sticker (2021: 298n) actually grant this of Young, the earliest proponent, but nevertheless write,

While Young (2001) does not explicitly use the term "carbon footprint", he treats procreation as analogous to consumption. As consumption is the paradigmatic contributor to people's carbon footprints, it is fair to frame Young's view in terms of the Footprint Thesis [i.e., the thesis that "A person's carbon footprint includes some or all of the consumption emissions of her children and subsequent descendants." (Pinkert and Sticker, 2021: 298)].

Yet, I think, it is *not* fair to frame Young's view in this way. (And certainly not, if 'carbon footprint' means something like 'the quantity of carbon that one personally produces'.) What Young *actually* claims is only that procreation and eco-gluttony are "comparable" and "morally equivalent" in virtue of their "similar environmental impact" (Young, 2001: 186). In short, eco-gluttony significantly increases total consumption, and so does procreation. End of story. For this reason alone, Young concludes that "whatever negative judgment one makes [about eco-gluttony], it also applies to having children whenever doing so produces a similar or greater environmental impact." (Young, 2001: 185) There is no double-counting of emissions here.

counting of *moral responsibility*. Consider: Young and company have argued that, if I bring a child into existence, then I am morally responsible for increasing total, global consumption by one lifetimes' worth. Yet, surely my child is *also* morally responsible for doing this—at least, once they reach adulthood, or some age where they become morally responsible for their own behavior. The result is that moral responsibility for the child's consumption is over-determined. This is the second version of the present objection.

But, I contend, when it comes to moral responsibility, *double-counting is not a bad thing!* To illustrate, imagine a mob boss, The Don, who instructs his henchman, Tony: "Tony, go bring me both of Jimmy's kneecaps." Tony brings back exactly two kneecaps. Now ask: Is Tony morally responsible for the loss of two kneecaps? Answer: Yes. Is The Don morally responsible for the loss of two kneecaps? Answer: Yes. "Absurd!" my opponent objects. "That's four kneecaps!" And, to be sure, it really would be absurd if assigning moral responsibility to two different individuals for one and the same crime (of removing two kneecaps) entailed that the crime had been committed twice, and that *four* kneecaps had actually been removed! Again, I will not pretend to know how we ought to assign the "kneecap footprint" in this case. But, *that* is not the issue that we ethicists are concerned with. The *moral* fact of the matter is that The Don has acted wrongly, *and* Tony has acted wrongly, and they are *both* morally responsible for what has happened to Jimmy. For, they *both* deliberately acted in such a way that they *knew*, or had good reason to believe, would result in significant harm to Jimmy (namely, the loss of his kneecaps). In short, two individuals can both be morally responsible for one and the same harm. This is not grounds for rejection. This is just how moral responsibility works. Moral responsibility is not a pie to be divided up, so that the individual slices must always add up to exactly one pie. No. Moral responsibility can be overdetermined.

Yet, perhaps my opponent's worry is something like this: "But surely we are never responsible for *what others freely choose to do!* For, when someone *else* decides to behave wrongly, the wrongdoing flows from *their* agency, *their* autonomy, and not our own. Granted, The Don is morally responsible for the harm that Tony causes. But that is only because Tony is acting as The Don's *surrogate* in this case. The Don *instructs* Tony to cause the harm, and furthermore he does this (presumably) with *malicious intent*. By contrast, when parents create a child, they neither instruct their child to produce a lifetimes' worth of emissions, nor do they create that child with any malicious intent or ill will toward the future victims of climate change. For this reason, unlike The Don, parents are *not* morally responsible for their child's lifetime of consumption, nor any of the resulting harms."

In reply: Fair enough. Even so, my opponent will surely agree that, when parents procreate, they *do* at least deliberately perform an action which they recognize significantly increases the probability that someone else (namely, their child) will cause serious harm. I contend that this still renders them morally responsible for the harm that their child causes (at least partially, if not fully). Consider: If I sell a gun to someone who is openly issuing death threats to others, then I bear at least some responsibility for the resulting deaths, should my customer autonomously choose to use the weapon for murder. If a political leader loudly and publicly insists that an election was rigged, and that its certification must be stopped, then they bear at least some

responsibility for the later insurrection, and resulting deaths—even in the absence of any explicit instruction or malicious intent.

I am assuming that we have a very strong (*prima facie*) moral duty of non-maleficence, not to cause harm. But, I contend, this entails not only that we have strong moral reasons to refrain from causing harm *personally*, but that we *also* have strong moral reasons to refrain from those actions which we *reasonably foresee* or *expect* will *result* in harm. Furthermore, this is true *even when* the resulting harm will ultimately flow most immediately from the agency of other individuals. If that is correct, then moral responsibility for harms is at least sometimes overdetermined (just as it seems to be in the examples above). And surely this *must* be correct. Otherwise, the very concept of there being a moral prohibition against *enabling* the wrongdoings of others, or being *complicit* in those wrongdoings, would be an incoherent one.

What is more, parents can even be complicit in the wrongdoings of their children—merely in virtue of choosing to create them. To illustrate, consider:

Killer Baby In a future society, those who wish to procreate must first create multiple embryos in a lab. These are then scanned by a super-advanced artificial intelligence capable of predicting the future of each embryo. To date, the A.I.'s predictions have been over 99% accurate. Karen, a prospective parent, awaits her results. The A.I. predicts that all of her embryos will live pretty typical lives, except for embryo #3. Embryo #3 will, if incubated, go on to murder one person. Karen then deliberately selects embryo #3 to be implanted for gestation, discarding the rest. Thirty years later, her child murders one person.

Surely Karen behaves wrongly in this case. And surely she is responsible—at least partially, if not fully—for the resulting murder. Furthermore, this is true *despite* the fact that the later harm flows most immediately from her child's agency and not her own (which renders her child *also* morally responsible for the murder). Yet, if our individual emissions do in fact cause significant harm to others, then our situation is not so different from Karen's. For, in today's world, *every* parent who deliberately creates a new person is *also* knowingly and intentionally bringing someone into existence who will later cause significant harm to others via their consumption and emissions. (In the developed world, *every* embryo is embryo #3! *Every* parent is a Karen!)

What is more, note that parents are not *mere* enablers of these later harms. Rather, they *create the very conditions* which ultimately result in those harms. The latter seems much worse. (Compare: Someone who merely *hands* a murderer his weapon, versus someone who *creates* both the murderer and his weapon!) For this reason, it is clear that parents are morally responsible for their children's emissions, and the resulting harm.¹⁶ Of course, the child is *also* morally responsible for her own con-

¹⁶ Exactly *how much* of the child's consumption are parents responsible for? At the very least, I contend, they are responsible for whatever amount of consumption that ought reasonably to be expected from their child. (Typically, it will be reasonable to expect that one's children will be average consumers, unless one has good reason to believe otherwise.) That said, if The Greens have two children who later go on to burn down the remainder of the Amazon rainforest, it seems that only the children are responsible for *that* act, since their parents could not have reasonably foreseen that this atrocity would follow from their decision to bring them into existence. (Similarly, if The Don orders Tony to take only Jimmy's wallet, and

sumption and emissions, and the resulting harm. But this is perfectly fine. For, as I have shown here, there is no problem in admitting that we can be (at least partially) morally responsible and blameworthy for outcomes that ultimately flow most directly from the agency of other autonomous individuals.

In sum, double-counting is not a problem for the present proposal. It is perfectly acceptable to maintain that both the parents *and* their child are *causes of* the child's greenhouse gas emissions. And it is perfectly acceptable to maintain that both the parents *and* their child are *morally responsible for* the child's harmful environmental impact.

4 The 'Proves Too Much' Objection

The second more recent objection is this: If *any* action which significantly increases total consumption and emissions (e.g., eco-gluttony and procreation) is for that reason immoral, then it seems to follow that many other clearly permissible actions are *also* immoral. For example:

- (a) Saving a drowning child.
- (b) Adopting a child from a nation with near-zero per capita emissions and bringing them to a developed nation with much higher emissions (e.g., the U.S.).
- (c) Granting entry to an immigrant from a nation with near-zero per capita emissions, into a developed nation with much higher emissions (e.g., the U.S.).¹⁷

Each of these actions would result in a significant increase in total consumption and emissions. For instance, if you rescue a drowning child in the United States, this will cause there to be roughly 1,000 more tons of CO₂ emitted than there would have

Tony unexpectedly brings back a wallet *and* two kneecaps, it seems reasonable to say that, while *both* are responsible for the stolen wallet, only *Tony* is responsible for the kneecaps.) What is more, I believe that parents still act wrongly and are blameworthy for procreating *even if* their children grow up to be the next Greta Thunberg, or end up living a carbon-neutral life—because it is *still* the case that they performed an action which they had every reason to expect would result in a massive increase to total consumption and emissions. After all, if I fire a gun at someone and a random soccer ball flies in front of my bullet just in the nick of time, surely I have still acted wrongly, and am blameworthy for knowingly doing something that I had every reason to believe would result in significant harm—despite the fact that no harm actually occurred. (Note: This bullet case is inspired by one in Nagel's (1979) chapter on moral luck.)

¹⁷ The life-saving version of this objection appears in Pinkert and Sticker (2021: Sect. 4.1). The adoption worry is mentioned in passing by Rulli (2016: 313), but is quickly dismissed. Hedberg (2020: ch. 9) discusses the concern that immigration increases environmental impact. Immigration is briefly mentioned but quickly dismissed in Earl et al. (2017: 585). Nawrotski also raises the immigration worry, only to dismiss it (Nawrotski, 2014: 79), though this is because his focus is on what we owe to *climate* refugees. (The claim is that our duties of justice to compensate the victims of climate change override any concerns about their increased emissions.) Cafaro (2015) opposes immigration on environmental grounds, but primarily because he is concerned with protecting the natural resources of the U.S.—though he does briefly consider the fact that preventing people from low-impact nations from immigrating to the U.S. would also benefit the world, by keeping our *total, global* ecological impact lower (see pages 147–148).

been, had you just let the child die.¹⁸ The instances of adoption and immigration cases described above will yield similar results.¹⁹ Therefore (the present objection goes), the position defended in this paper entails that these behaviors are *immoral*. Yet, intuitively, these actions are all permissible, and even praiseworthy. In short, the environmental argument against procreation proves far too much.

Reply. My opponent's accusation is that it is inconsistent to condemn procreation on environmental grounds while maintaining that saving lives is permissible, since these two actions have the same negative environmental impact. Therefore, to resolve the apparent inconsistency, we must identify a morally relevant difference between them. As Pinkert and Sticker (2021: 316) put it, any proponent of the view that I am arguing for here:

face[s] the following challenge ... they have more work to do: they have to argue that, under current circumstances, having children ... is relevantly dissimilar from cases like Roxanne [an ER surgeon who saves many lives]

This challenge, I think, can be met. The brief version of the reply that I shall give is this: Our moral reasons in favor of saving a life (or adopting, or permitting immigration in certain instances) are much stronger than our moral reasons to procreate. Because of this, the resulting environmental harms are justified in the former case, but not the latter.

Now, we *do* seem to have *some* moral reason to procreate. Assuming that our children will have lives worth living, we have a *beneficence-based reason* to bring them into existence—namely, doing so will benefit them.²⁰ By contrast, our moral reason

¹⁸ As of 2021, the average American produces 14.86 tons of CO₂ per year for 76.4 years—a total of 1,135 tons of CO₂.

¹⁹ **Some data:** The U.S. has *by far* the greatest number of foreign-born residents, and the greatest number of intercountry adoptions. Yet it also has one of the highest per capita emissions in the world (14.86 tons of CO₂ per year). **Immigration:** By far the primary source of lawful immigration into the U.S. is Mexico. Yet, the average American emits nearly *five times* more CO₂ than the average citizen of Mexico. Assuming that these immigrants go on to become average American consumers—an oversimplification, I know—allowing an infant to emigrate from Mexico to the United States causes there to be an additional 60 years' worth of average American consumption (or, roughly 900 tons of additional CO₂ emitted into the atmosphere). And it is actually even worse for all but two of the remaining countries in the top ten sources of immigration to the U.S. over the past five years with available data (2017–2021). For example, the average American consumes *thirteen times* more than the average citizen of El Salvador, the #8 source of lawful immigration into the U.S. over that period. **Adoption:** The situation is similar for adoption. The primary source for intercountry adoptions into the U.S. over the past five years is China. Yet, the average American emits almost twice as much as the average citizen of China. In effect, adopting an infant from China causes there to be an additional 35 years' worth of average American consumption—or, roughly 500 tons of additional CO₂ emitted. And the situation is actually *far* worse for all but one of the remaining countries in the top ten sources of intercountry adoption to the U.S. over the past five years with available data (2017–2021). For example, the average American emits *ninety-nine times more* CO₂ than the average citizen of Ethiopia, the #9 source of intercountry adoption into the U.S. over that period!). Sources (Accessed 19 February 2023): Immigration: <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2020>. Adoption: https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption/adopt_ref/AnnualReports.html. Per capita CO₂ emissions data: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/co-emissions-per-capita>.

²⁰ See, e.g., Gardner (2016), who argues for this claim at length. See also Hedberg (2016). Both admit the existence of a very weak duty to create happy people, which entails that we ought to procreate *if* doing so is

for saving a drowning child is not merely that it will benefit them, but rather that it will *save them from harm*. And, I contend, our duty to prevent harms is much stronger than our duty to ensure benefits.

While it is true that harm-preventions are often *described* as ‘benefits’—for instance, if I save someone from drowning, it seems appropriate to say that I have in some sense *benefitted* them—I think this is misleading. For there are clearly two morally distinct categories here. Their difference can be illustrated by the fact that doing harm is more easily justified when done in order *to prevent a harm* than when done *to ensure a benefit*. To illustrate, consider the following pair of cases, inspired by those from Shiffrin (1999: 127 and Shiffrin, 2012: 364):

Broken Arm (Preventing a Harm) Ava is super smart, and has super-strength—far above the average. She is about to be hit by a car that will result in physical injuries and some mild brain damage that will permanently reduce her to average intelligence and physical strength. You forcefully yank Ava out of harm’s way, but in doing so break her arm.

Broken Arm (Ensuring a Benefit) Bea is of perfectly average intelligence and physical strength. There is a magical booth nearby that grants permanent super strength and intelligence to anyone who steps into it. However, the booth will close in a few seconds. You forcefully yank Bea into the machine just in the nick of time, but in doing so break her arm.

It seems permissible to cause Ava a lesser harm in order to prevent her from suffering a much greater harm, but wrong to cause Bea that same lesser harm in order to secure for her a much greater benefit. Thus, as Seana Shiffrin concludes, “There is a substantial asymmetry between the moral significance of harm delivered to avoid substantial, greater harms and harms delivered to bestow pure benefits” (Shiffrin, 1999: 126).

And we may strengthen Shiffrin’s case for this distinction. For, we *also* seem far more obligated to make large *personal sacrifices* to prevent harms than to ensure benefits. For example, you ought to save Ava in the case above, even if doing so ruins your expensive phone, but you have no obligation to trade in your phone to buy Bea a ticket into the magical booth. This contrast is made even *more* apparent when the benefit in question is *bringing someone into existence*, and the harm-prevention is *saving someone’s life*. To illustrate, consider another pair of cases:

Important Interview (Preventing a Harm) You are on your way to an important interview which will result in your getting a new job that significantly improves your well-being, when you pass by a small pond where a child is drowning. Not wanting to miss your interview, you keep walking. The child dies.

Important Interview (Ensuring a Benefit) You are on your way to an important interview which will result in your getting a new job that significantly improves your well-being, when you pass by a small pond where a couple sits,

costless. (However, the actual, substantial costs of procreation easily override this duty in the real world.) For the record, I agree with this claim.

debating whether to have one child or zero children. You are certain that they are about to reach the decision to have zero children, but could easily be persuaded to decide to have one child instead, if only you stop to talk with them for a few minutes. Not wanting to miss your interview, you keep walking. The couple's would-be child never comes into existence.

You act immorally in the first case, but not the second. In other words, you *are* morally obligated to sacrifice something morally significant in order to save a child's life (preventing a harm), but you *are not* obligated to make that same sacrifice in order to ensure that a child comes into existence (ensuring a benefit). Thus, our duty to save lives is much stronger than our duty to procreate.²¹

Applying this lesson to the argument against procreation, and the present objection: It is true that the resulting increase in global emissions counts as a reason against *both* procreation *and* life-saving. However, this reason is *only* overridden in the case of life-saving, because we have a *very* strong duty to prevent existing persons from coming to harm (but only a *very* weak duty to benefit non-existing persons by bringing them into existence).

A similar conclusion may be applied to our adoption and immigration cases: Arguably, in many cases, the relocation of an individual from an undeveloped nation at near subsistence to a developed nation with a high standard of living *saves them from harm*. This is especially clear in the case of *refugees*—i.e., those who are fleeing death, war, famine, persecution, natural disasters, and so on. In such cases, we have very strong moral reasons to prevent these harms—reasons which plausibly override

²¹ There are two other potential morally relevant differences worth noting here, I think: (1) First, when you save a life, you benefit a *presently existing person*. But, when you procreate, you benefit a *non-existing future person*. And many have the intuition that our duties to existing persons are much stronger than our duties to future persons. (2) When you save a life, you are *preventing the total amount of harm from being reduced* (by preventing global emissions from decreasing). However, when you create a life, you are *causing the total amount of harm to be increased* (by causing an increase in global emissions). The latter seems worse, morally. For, as Hanser (1999) argues, doing harm (i.e., increasing total harm) is morally worse than preventing someone from being saved (i.e., preventing total harm from being reduced). To see why, compare three cases. (Cases I and II are from Foot (Foot, 1984), while III is inspired by Hanser's essay.)

Rescue I You drive past one drowning person, to make it in time to save five others.

Rescue II You run over someone in the road, to make it in time to save five others.

Rescue III You run over a life preserver that was rolling toward a drowning person, in order to save five others.

Rescue I is an instance of allowing harm, and seems permissible. Rescue II is an instance of doing harm, and seems impermissible. Rescue III is an instance of preventing someone from being saved, and seems permissible. In short, doing harm is much worse, morally, than either of the other two categories. The implication is that our environmentally-based reasons against procreating are much stronger than our environmentally-based reasons against saving a life, since the former *increases* the total harm, while the latter merely *prevents a decrease* in the total harm—and the former is much worse, morally. (Note that this difference does *not* apply to intercountry adoption and immigration cases, since—assuming that the would-be adoptees/immigrants will not die if left where they are—relocating someone to a high-impact nation *does* increase global emissions, just like procreation, rather than prevent them from being decreased.)

any wrongness associated with the increased environmental impact that saving them from harm would bring about.^{22,23}

In short, the conclusion that procreation is immoral on the grounds that it increases the total environmental impact does *not* commit us to the further conclusion that saving lives is also immoral on these same grounds. (Nor does it prohibit the instances of adoption and immigration described above.) Thus, Pinkert and Sticker's Roxanne (the ER surgeon who saves many lives) behaves permissibly, even while the Grays (the couple who brings two children into existence) do not.^{24,25}

²² Our duty to help is even *more* apparent if the refugees in question are *climate* refugees—for example, the citizens of Tuvalu or Kiribati, two island nations that are disappearing due to rising sea levels caused by climate change. In such instances, those in developed nations are very clearly the *cause* of the refugees' dire circumstances. So, in addition to having a moral duty to *prevent harms*, there is also a duty of *reparations* to compensate for the harm or injustice done.

²³ Qualification: I should note that what I have just said does *not* apply to immigrants or adoptees who are not facing severe harms or hardships in their home nations. For example, if a family of four from France applies to immigrate to the United States, where per capita CO₂ emissions are roughly three times higher, this would result in an increase of approximately two American lifetimes' worth of total emissions. In terms of ecological impact, this is morally equivalent to what the eco-gluttonous Greens do (from Sect. 1). Yet, since the French enjoy a high standard of living, on average, granting them entry would not be an instance of saving them from harm, but rather a (pure) benefit. And so allowing them to immigrate would seem to remain immoral, on a par with procreation. Is this a problem for my view? Perhaps the reader will find this unacceptable. I myself am not too perturbed by it. After all, recall that the slight increase in happiness produced by the Greens' eco-gluttony was *not* enough to justify their increased consumption. Yet, the French family would enjoy a similar benefit by relocating—namely, a slight increase in happiness. (Presumably. Otherwise, why do they wish to relocate?) Certainly, it seems obvious to me that, when it comes to relocating people to nations like the United States, our focus should be on the very worst off in the world, and we have only the very weakest sorts of moral reasons for facilitating the relocation of individuals who already enjoy a very high standard of living—reasons which are too weak to justify permitting the relocation, if it will lead to a significant increase in environmental impact.

²⁴ What of Ivy, the in vitro fertilization doctor who helps thousands of couples conceive a child (from Pinkert and Sticker 2021: 313)? Assuming that these couples would not have otherwise conceived without Ivy's help, then Ivy's actions do result in a massive increase in total consumption and emissions. Yet, her actions *cannot* be justified in the same way that Roxanne's are. For, Ivy is merely *ensuring pure benefits* rather than *preventing harms*. As such, the view defended in this section entails that Ivy's actions are immoral. Perhaps some readers will find this counter-intuitive. I do not. After all, if the argument here is that *procreation* is immoral on environmental grounds, then it should come as no surprise that anyone who intentionally *enables* procreation is also acting immorally. To put it simply, Ivy is *complicit* in the wrongdoings of her patients—much in the same way that someone who enables a murderer by handing them a weapon *also* behaves immorally, and is complicit in the victim's death.

²⁵ My opponent *might* criticize the view defended in this section as follows: Consider the pond again, but this time really take seriously the claim that, if you save the drowning child, they will go on to cause others to suffer, or even die. Is it *really* permissible to save them? ...I think so? Still, most believe that saving the child is not merely *permissible* but *obligatory*. Singer (2009: 3–4) takes this obligation to be uncontroversial, for instance. Is saving the drowning child *obligatory*? Is there a moral obligation to save a life *even when you know that they will go on to cause significant harm to others*? The answer, I think, is not clear. This is a bad feature of the view defended above. In the next section, I will argue for a better one. There is, I will argue, a route toward condemning both eco-gluttony and procreation, which is compatible with a clear obligation to save the drowning child. (That route involves denying that our individual emissions actually cause harm.)

5 What If Our Individual Actions Make No Difference?

The replies to objections in the preceding sections have all been stated under the assumption that an eco-gluttonous lifestyle *causes harm*. When the Greens choose a lifestyle of driving SUV's, taking regular flights, eating a lot of meat, and so on, *this causes others to suffer, or even die*, by exacerbating climate change. If that is correct, then it is easy to see why an eco-gluttonous lifestyle is immoral, and it is *also* easy to see why procreation is immoral, given that both of these behaviors cause others to suffer significantly, or even die.

Yet, many have argued that our individual contributions to climate change do *not* cause any harm.²⁶ Why might this be true? Consider a joyride that burns one gallon of gasoline: The amount of CO₂ that this adds to the atmosphere is equivalent to adding one single drop of water to a flood that is one meter deep, and covering an area 40 times larger than Vatican City.²⁷ Now ask: How much additional harm do you think adding a single drop of water to such a flood would cause? The only plausible answer is: None at all. Some say that our individual emissions are merely “a drop in the bucket”. But, that is false. They are *a drop in the flood*. In fact, the amount of CO₂ emissions produced by the average American over the course of their *entire lifetime* does not even add up to what we emit globally *every single second*.²⁸ It just is not plausible that our individual contributions to climate change make any perceptible difference to the amount of harm that occurs.

Is the environmental argument against procreation still defensible if it turns out that our individual emissions – even a *lifetimes' worth* of emissions – cause no harm at all? I think it is. In order to argue for this conclusion, I will first provide a brief survey of some of the moral claims that I have argued for elsewhere (Vance 2017, 2023). I will then apply that framework to the issue of procreation.

First, I contend that it can still be wrong to contribute to a harmful collective action *even when your contribution makes no difference*. This is illustrated by the following case, from my (2017):

Car Push (Light Exercise) Four people are pushing a car off of a cliff with an innocent person trapped inside of it. It takes the strength of three people to push the car. They truthfully claim to be pushing the car only for the purpose of getting some light exercise—though foreseeing, of course, that together they will collectively cause the death of one person as a side-effect of their efforts. You are a bystander who happens to be jogging by just then. Correctly seeing that your individual contribution will make no difference to the amount of harm done, you help to push the car, also merely for the purpose of getting some light

²⁶ See, for example, Sinnott-Armstrong (2005), Sandberg (2011), Cripps (2013: 119–124), Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong (2018), Budolfson (ms), and my (Vance, 2023).

²⁷ Or 5.3 times larger than New York's Central Park—18.2 km² total. See my (Vance, 2017: 563n) and (Vance, 2023: 524).

²⁸ In 2021, humans produced 36.3 billion tons of CO₂, or about 1,151 tons per second. By comparison, the average American produces only 1,135 tons of CO₂ over an entire lifetime (14.86 tons a year for an average age of 76.4 years). Source: <https://www.iea.org/reports/global-energy-review-co2-emissions-in-2021-2> (Accessed 18 February 2023).

exercise. The car goes over the cliff, the one inside of it dies, and the rest of you are all a bit more fit.

It seems immoral to help push the car, despite the fact that your push makes no difference. (With or without your contribution, the person inside of the car will die.) On the basis of this intuition, I have argued elsewhere that *it is prima facie morally wrong to contribute to a harmful collective action, even if one's contribution makes no difference*. For a full defense of this moral claim, see my (Vance, 2017). It is worth noting that Rieder endorses a similar position, proposing that:

there is a **Duty Not to Contribute to Massive, Systematic Harms**. This is not a duty not to *cause* harm—even partially—but is rather a duty not to inject oneself as an active contributor into the large, causally complex machine that is doing the harm. (Rieder, 2016: 29, emphasis in original)

If this claim is true (as I believe it is), then it follows that it is *prima facie* morally wrong to do things like go for joyrides, engage in excessive air travel, meat consumption, and so on—even if these actions makes no difference—because such activities nevertheless *contribute to a harmful collective action*, namely, anthropogenic climate change.

Interestingly, *subsistence* emissions remain all-things-considered permissible on this proposal, even though they too contribute to the collective harm. To illustrate, consider another case, from my (Vance, 2023):

Car Push (Anti-Venom) Four people are pushing a car off of a cliff with an innocent person trapped inside of it. It takes the strength of three people to push the car. You are a bystander who has just been bitten by a poisonous rattlesnake. There is some anti-venom under the car, which will save your life. However, if you approach the car without helping to push it, you know with certainty that the others will forcibly prevent you from reaching the anti-venom, and you will die. So, correctly seeing that your contribution will make no difference to the amount of harm done, you help to push the car. As the car and its passenger hurtle downward toward their destruction, you reach the now-accessible anti-venom in time to save yourself.

It seems *permissible* to contribute to the harmful collective action in Anti-Venom, even while it seemed *impermissible* to contribute in Light Exercise. This is because the *prima facie* wrongness associated with contributing to a harmful collective action in a causally impotent way is *overridden* in the Anti-Venom case by competing moral reasons; namely, your strong moral reasons to save someone's life (in this case, *your own* life). Meanwhile, the wrongness associated with your contribution is *not* overridden in the Light Exercise case, because the benefit of contributing to the collective harm in that case is so trivial. On these grounds, I have argued (Vance 2023) that, *even if* our individual contributions to climate change make no difference to the total amount of harm that occurs, *our luxury emissions are still immoral*, while our subsistence emissions are not.

In my (Vance, 2023), I highlighted the above conclusions as an *upshot* of accepting our individual causal impotence. For, it is not so clear that subsistence emissions are morally justified if our individual emissions *do* cause significant harm to others. It really does seem that, if performing an action will cause others to suffer and die, then it is still morally wrong to perform it *even if you must* do so in order to save your own life. To illustrate, consider the following case:

Toxic Cure You are sealed in a room with an innocent person and find yourself suddenly terminally ill. To survive, you must immediately manufacture a cure, which will have the unfortunate side-effect of releasing a lethal gas which will kill your roommate.

It seems immoral to manufacture the cure, despite the fact that you must do it to save your own life.²⁹ This is because its manufacture will *kill* another person. But, then, if all of our individual emissions *do* cause serious harm to others, it seems to follow not only that *luxury* emissions are immoral, but *subsistence* emissions as well (or so I argued in that earlier work).

For these reasons, I have previously urged environmentalists to stop resisting the claim that our individual emissions make no difference. For starters, as I pointed out above, I think there is good reason to believe that our individual emissions *don't* in fact make any difference to the total amount of harm that occurs. Second, we do not *need* to reject this empirical claim in order to successfully argue for the conclusion that eco-gluttony is immoral. (Eco-gluttony, I have argued, turns out to be immoral *regardless* of whether our individual actions make any difference.) Third, it is much clearer that our subsistence emissions are morally justified if our individual actions make no difference.

Moving on, my project here is to apply that earlier framework (summarized above) to the issue of procreation. If my conclusions above are correct, as I believe, then it follows that, even if our individual emissions do *not* cause any harm, *creating* a life is still immoral. Meanwhile, *saving* a life remains permissible—even obligatory—on this framework. Start with life-saving: It seems clearly permissible, even obligatory, to save someone's life, *even if one must contribute to a collective harm* in order to do so—provided that one's contribution makes no difference. For example, in Car Push (Anti-Venom), it seemed clear that your moral reasons against contributing to a harmful collective action in a causally impotent way were *overridden* by your competing moral reasons to save a life (namely, your own in that case). But, now imagine that you must make a causally impotent contribution to the car push in order to save the life of *a stranger* instead—say, to get to their heart pills in time. It seems not merely permissible, but *obligatory* to help push the car in this case. After all, your contribution makes no difference. The person trapped inside of the car will die with or without your push. Pushing the car has no morally significant effect on the world whatsoever, except that you will save a stranger's life by doing it. So, you ought to do

²⁹ This case, from my (Vance, 2023), is adapted from one by Foot (1967). It is worth noting that Foot assumes it obvious that it would be morally wrong to manufacture a cure which releases fumes that kill one person, but saves *five* others from dying!

it. For this reason, I contend that, even though saving someone's life *does* ultimately contribute to climate change by increasing total consumption and emissions, it is nevertheless permissible—or in many cases, *obligatory*—to do so, provided that this contribution ultimately makes no difference to the amount of harm that occurs.³⁰ In short, the 'Proves Too Much' objection (from Sect. 4) still fails, *even if* our individual actions ultimately make no difference.

What about procreation? Clearly, creating another human being contributes to the massive, collective harm of climate change—albeit in a causally impotent way. So, if what I have said so far is correct, then there is a *prima facie* duty against it. Now, we have seen that this duty not to contribute to collective harms is overridden whenever our competing moral reasons in favor of contributing are very *strong*—when saving a life, for example. (As I argued in Sect. 4, we have very strong reasons to prevent harms.) Yet, this duty is *not* overridden whenever our competing moral reasons are very *weak*—when seeking the frivolous benefits associated with light exercise or SUV joyrides, for example. Yet, procreation seems to fall somewhere in between these two extremes: Our moral reasons in favor of it are not as frivolous as those in favor of joyriding. Yet, they are still *much* weaker than our reasons in favor of preventing harms. So, it is not immediately clear what my proposal entails regarding the moral status of procreation, in the event that procreating makes no difference to the total amount of harm.

An appeal to biological procreation's being *essential* to the parents' happiness or well-being may strengthen my opponent's position here. Recall that in Sect. 2 I argued that, even if biological parenting were *essential* to well-being or a decent life, procreation still would not be permissible, so long as bringing a child into existence caused significant suffering or death to others. For, we are clearly morally obligated to make huge sacrifices to our own well-being in order to avoid seriously *harming* others. But, it is less clear that we are morally obligated to make huge sacrifices to our own well-being in order to avoid merely *contributing to harmful collective activities in a causally impotent way*. For, as we have seen, the duty to avoid the latter is much weaker than the duty to avoid doing harm. Perhaps another variant of the Car Push case will help us here:

Car Push (Biological Procreation) Same as the previous cases. Only this time, a canister of your last remaining genetic material—perhaps your harvested eggs, or a frozen sperm sample—is rolling toward the cliff underneath the car. You will need to help push the car if you are to get to the canister in time. Otherwise, you will lose your ability to biologically procreate. But, biological procreation is your lifelong dream. If deprived of the opportunity to experience pregnancy, childbirth, and raising a genetically-related child, you will not be happy, or able to live a decent life.

³⁰ It also seems plausible that it would be permissible—and perhaps in many cases *obligatory*—to help to push the car in order to help a refugee, immigrant, or adoptee avoid a terrible or life-threatening situation and trade it for a life with a much higher degree of well-being.

Is it permissible to push? Perhaps. The moral verdict in Biological Procreation is certainly less clear than it is in Light Exercise or Anti-Venom. Though, I am willing to grant that it is permissible to contribute to the collective harm in this case, provided that it really is true that the alternative is to forfeit a decent life.

Note that this will not be true of *every* potential parent, however. Perhaps for *some*, refraining from procreation would leave them significantly impoverished (as in the case above). But, for others, perhaps biological parenting is a frivolous benefit that they could easily do without—a *luxury* item, if you will. Plausibly, in the former case, the duty not to contribute to the collective harm of climate change is overridden, while in the latter case it is not. In short, I am willing to grant that, if (a) bringing a child into existence does *not* cause any harm, *and* (b) biological parenting can be a necessary condition for someone's happiness, then procreation may sometimes be justified—namely in those cases where refraining from procreating will cause the parents to fail to live a minimally decent life. (Even so, if there is some alternative route toward a decent life which does *not* involve making a significant contribution to a massive, collective harm, then they ought to do that instead.) *Perhaps* this is true for some. For example, it might be true of someone who desperately wants to be a parent, but lacks the resources to adopt. I confess, I do not see how biological procreation could be *essential* to someone's well-being, but I am open to this being the case for some. In those instances, I would be inclined to agree with Hedberg when he writes:

Given the carbon footprint associated with procreation, if there is a general duty to limit one's carbon footprint, then people should not procreate *unless they have a strong reason to do so*. ... If the child's genetics and the experience of pregnancy are not significant concerns for the prospective parents, then they should attempt to adopt a child. Should this prove impossible or unduly burdensome, then they may permissibly procreate. (Hedberg 2019: 61, emphasis mine)³¹

[In short] *in the absence of any compelling justificatory reasons* to procreate, a person should have zero children. (Hedberg 2020: 94, emphasis mine)

One might worry that this admission opens my view to the objection that now some instances of *eco-gluttony* will *also* be morally permitted—for example, if refraining from eco-gluttonous behavior would *also* prevent someone from living a decent life. For then, just like the parent in the Biological Procreation case, *they too* would be contributing to a harmful collective action in a causally impotent way, via their eco-gluttony, merely as a *necessary means* to securing some positive degree of well-being. Of such an individual (if they even exist at all), I would simply insist that they were being disingenuous. Here, I would echo the sentiment expressed by Conly, who writes,

[Imagine that you believe that] you can't be happy unless you own a Maserati ... If you say that you can't be happy, even minimally happy, without some-

³¹ Assume here that the term 'carbon footprint' is being used in a way that does not count any particular quantity of emissions twice. See Sect. 3 above for further discussion.

thing most people do just fine without, our common reaction is to direct to you a therapist, rather than to assume that you ... somehow have special requirements for happiness. If I claim, however sincerely, that I can never find any contentment in life if I don't win a Nobel Prize, a therapist would probably try to address the deep-seated insecurities that lead me to [this conclusion]. ... He'd think that my real need can be met in different ways. (Conly 2016: 60–61)

Thus, an appeal to procreation being a necessary condition for a minimally decent life may morally justify procreation for some—provided that such a decision ultimately makes no difference to the total amount of harm—*without* also justifying eco-gluttony on these same grounds.

That said, I should clarify that the concessions I have made in this section entail only that some individuals may be morally permitted to have *one* biological child. For, as Conly points out, while “it’s possible that we don’t really need any biological child at all to lead a minimally decent life, ... if we do, we certainly don’t need more than one” (Conly 2016: 2).³² Surely the goods associated with procreation—the goods of parenting, the parent-child relationship, of pregnancy, and passing on one’s genes, etc.—obtaining these goods does not require more than one child. To claim more than this would be, I think, like the eco-glutton’s claim above: Either disingenuous or deluded about what is essential to one’s own well-being.

6 Conclusion

Here, I have argued that, for most of us in nations with high per capita emissions, it is immoral to procreate. If our individual emissions *do* cause significant harm, then we are obligated to have zero children (as I argued in Sects. 1–4). And if our individual emissions *do not* cause any harm, it is *still* immoral to procreate in most cases (as I argued in Sect. 5), though bringing *one child* into existence might be justified in *some* cases.³³

Before I close, I should note that I have *not* argued the following: First, I have *not* argued that there should be any sort of legislative *policy* or government *prohibition* on procreation.³⁴ Second, my conclusion is *not* a misanthropic, or anti-humanist one.

³² Conly is referring here to one child *per couple*. And I do think that this will be true in most cases. Though it is worth noting Overall’s concern that, as an upper limit of our moral obligation, “‘One child per person’ is preferable because it is not based on a sexist and heterosexist notion that women must necessarily be in a couple and that every couple must consist of a male and a female.” (Overall, 2012: 184).

³³ It is *possible* that procreation could be justified in a greater number of cases via offsetting. At least, I am open to this conclusion— though with reservations about whether offsetting is *ever* a plausible absolver, and with the reservations raised by Burkett (2021: 804) that such a conclusion would render permissible biological procreation less available to the poor. But, a full investigation of the moral implications of offsetting falls outside of the scope of this paper.

³⁴ Nor are most of the other proponents of the environmental argument against procreation arguing for such a policy. For instance, Overall writes, “I am *not* suggesting that this reproductive limit be legally required or enforceable or that its violation be legally punishable” (Overall, 2012: 184). See also Burkett (2021: 805). Conly is a notable exception, writing, “government legislation to limit how many children we have can be morally permissible” (Conly, 2016: 3). For the record, I would oppose any policy which prohibits or limits procreation. Though, I should say, I am sympathetic to the recommendation of Earl et

I think that additional human lives do add value to the world, whenever they are lives worth living, and it would (in ideal circumstances) be a very *good* thing for there to be a lot more of us. In fact, I even hope that we will one day expand far beyond the carrying capacity of Earth, colonizing Mars and even other star systems, so that trillions upon trillions of human beings with lives worth living may populate our future for countless millennia to come. Only, for the moment things are *not* ideal, and adding more of us is collectively causing a lot of harm, and it is jeopardizing our species' continued existence and future well-being. So, we need to slow our growth, but just for the time being, to buy ourselves some time to clean up our mess. Finally, by focusing here upon our *individual* obligations, I do *not* mean to absolve corporations, governments, or the fossil fuel industry from any moral responsibility. If anything, these larger entities have a much *greater* obligation to help to combat the problem, since they are both *capable* of doing a lot more, and have *contributed* to the problem a great deal more than each of us has individually. Nevertheless, this fact does not entail that we as individuals have *no* obligations.

In summary, there is a moral obligation to refrain from eco-gluttonous behavior because it contributes to climate change. But, if that is true, then there is also a moral obligation to refrain from procreating (for the same reason). For most of us, procreating is the most environmentally significant thing that we will ever do. No amount of resource conservation, of bicycling, of recycling, of vegetarian meal choices, etc., will ever reduce our impact on the total amount of consumption by as much as the single act of deciding to have one less child. The verdict is clear: Procreation is immoral on environmental grounds. Meanwhile, though saving lives—and in some cases, adopting children or permitting immigration—also contribute to climate change and negative environmental impact, the wrongness associated with such contributions is overridden by our greater obligation to prevent significant harms to others.

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al. (2017: 583) to offer tax incentives for reduced procreation (to the poor at least, but perhaps tax *penalties* on the rich).

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