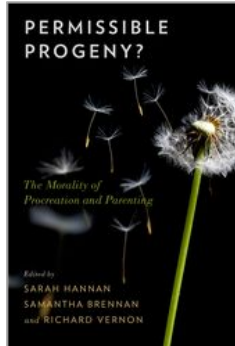


Procreation or Appropriation?

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Permissible Progeny?: The Morality of Procreation and Parenting

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter argues that the standard dichotomy between “procreation” and “consumption” should be collapsed. Procreative choices cannot be materially differentiated from other voluntary choices with environmental consequences. As such, the impacts associated with procreation should be understood as part of the “ecological footprint” of parents—a conceptual distinction that has significant consequences for how we attribute moral responsibility for environmental degradation. Perhaps more importantly, if and when procreation threatens or compromises the material interests of others, it is legitimately subject to moral scrutiny or even intervention by third parties. The idea that procreative decisions are private or pre-political cannot be sustained in a materially finite world.

Keywords: environmental impact, ecological footprint analysis, overpopulation, consumption, procreation

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Contemporary discussions of environmental ethics and green political theory are surprisingly reticent about issues of population or human reproduction.¹ Although modern environmental movements emerged in part as a response to unprecedented and exponential increases in global population over the course of the twentieth century, procreation has largely disappeared from normative dialogue about human ecology and environmental degradation. There are a number of likely causes for this conspicuous absence, some better-grounded than others.²

To some extent, viewing procreation through the lens of environmental politics has become taboo simply by association with some of the discursive and political choices made by those with concerns about population. Broadly environmental discussions of population have, at times, gone down fairly questionable paths with respect to claims about the developing world, immigration, and the status of women.³ Politically, of course, state intervention in reproductive decisions has come to be inextricably linked in the popular imagination with coercive population control policies pursued in China and India, the consequences of which have included forced sterilization, infanticide, and sex-based selective abortion. For many, this association alone is sufficient to put procreative decisions firmly outside the scope of reasonable political discussion.

A second reason for diminished interest in reproduction and population in discussions of human ecology and environmental politics is that initial predictions about the ecological consequences of overpopulation have proven at least somewhat overblown. Although world population is still increasing at a rapid rate, the increase is mostly confined to a few (p.108) regions of the world.⁴ The overall rate of population growth has slowed consistently since peaking in the late 1960s, and political discourse in much of the global North has been re-focused on the social and economic consequences of *under*population as domestic fertility rates dip below replacement levels.⁵ Moreover, the worldwide ecological and social collapse predicted by early, neo-Malthusian accounts failed to occur (or at least failed to occur

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on schedule). Mass starvation and resource scarcity of the sort commonly predicted in the 1970s was avoided, or at least forestalled, by increased agricultural yields and technological innovation. Although our numbers have risen considerably since global population became a cause for concern, our ability to meet human needs in the short term has largely kept up or even improved.

It is also widely assumed that the overall fertility rate will continue to decline, leveling off at some point in the coming century.⁶ As infant and child mortality decline, women are increasingly afforded access to education and social empowerment, and access to modern methods of contraception becomes more widely available, the assumption is that women will voluntarily limit their fertility to a level at or below the rate of replacement, as they largely have in societies in which these conditions obtain.

Although these first two points are empirically sound, neither of them, in my view, constitutes a compelling basis for omitting procreation from discussions of sustainability. On the first point, the stigma of negative associations with real-world phenomena is a poor reason to shy away from discussing a potentially important topic. While I would certainly not defend the *content* of much of the early discourse around global population, it presented a set of questions that are still worth asking—particularly given ongoing (and worsening) environmental degradation. The value of the discussion persists quite apart from specific policies undertaken by particular states or specific positions held by non-state actors, no matter how questionable those may be.

On the second point, it is undeniable that global population growth has slowed and that in some parts of the world reproduction has fallen well below replacement level. What we can and should question is the assumption that this trend will simply continue of its own accord, resulting in a gradual and painless leveling-off (let alone a manageable decline) of the global population. Widespread access to contraception is both a recent and hard-fought right even in the global North, and as recent controversy around the inclusion of contraception in federally funded health insurance in the United States shows,

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powerful opposition to this access is still very active. Moreover, projected decreases in the rate of population growth are estimates, not certainties. As Diana Coole points out in her recent account of green population discourse, the current fertility rate is still quite high. A business-as-usual (p.109) projection of global population leads to the shocking prospect of a 27-billion-person world by 2100, rather than the 10.1 billion currently projected.⁷ In such a scenario, there is almost certainly a point at which human ingenuity will be trumped by natural limits, with catastrophic results.

Finally, and crucially, even if we opt for complacency about the rate of population growth, we are not thereby absolved from thinking about population as such, or about the morality of procreation in general. It is far from clear that the eventual plateau of human population, whatever that number may be, is either desirable or sustainable—particularly given the ecological havoc already being wrought by our current numbers.

A third (and better) reason for the absence of procreation from contemporary discussions of environmental ethics and politics is that their focus has shifted from population to a more nuanced and accurate consumption-based account of anthropogenic environmental degradation. The mere fact of our existence is not, in itself, particularly informative about our ecological impact. What matters is our so-called “ecological footprint”—the sum total (often expressed in spatial terms) of the resources and ecological processes appropriated or consumed or destroyed as a means to or a consequence of our existence.⁸ It is a truism that ecological footprints vary enormously on the basis of affluence and lifestyle; in practical terms an average American and an average Bangladeshi (for example) are not even remotely ecologically interchangeable. Nor, for that matter, are an American in the top economic quintile (of Americans) and one in the bottom quintile. In general, the ecological footprint of the relatively affluent will typically dwarf that of the relatively impoverished based on the kinds of demands that their respective lifestyles and consumption patterns have on the natural world.⁹ As such, it is just empirically false to treat

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ecological impact as a function of mere population. If our concern is with the material impact of human beings upon the natural world, it makes a great deal more sense to focus on what and how people are consuming rather than merely on how many of them there happen to be.

This chapter takes it as given that a focus on consumption, rather than on population as such, is entirely appropriate if we are interested in drawing normative conclusions about human ecology. What I will argue here is that thinking about human ecology in consumptive terms in no way entails that we should stop thinking about procreation. Rather, we should collapse the dichotomy between consumption and procreation, and acknowledge procreation as one of the most significant ways in which individual human beings lay claim to the natural world. When we assess the ecological impact of a given individual (or, perhaps more appropriately, a given set of potential biological parents), this assessment should include not only their demands (p.110) upon the natural world, but also their contribution to the creation of new demands upon the natural world through procreative means.¹⁰ That is, a narrowly consumption-based assessment of individual ecological impacts is fundamentally incomplete, and hopelessly inaccurate, if it fails to take what we might call “procreative consumption” into account—that is, consumption (or other material impacts) arising as a consequence of procreative behavior. The point is not merely conceptual; it may have significant practical consequences. I will argue that if the dichotomy between procreation and consumption is collapsible, it follows that the notion of unlimited procreative rights cannot be sustained—and further, that we should reject the widespread belief that procreative decisions are (or should be) exempt from moral scrutiny or political intervention.

This section will present an argument for the material and moral equivalence of consumption and procreation, building to the conclusion that procreative decisions should be incorporated into ecological footprint analysis, and as such cannot be considered private. To the extent that procreation can infringe upon the legitimate interests of others, it should not be treated differently than other, similarly infringing behaviors. As such, under some conditions it may be

appropriate to apply moral suasion or even intervention aimed at curtailing the procreative behavior of others.

It should go without saying that this is a conclusion with which many will disagree. Procreative behavior is widely held to be in a kind of separate category from (other) consumptive behavior, as well as being fundamentally private and pre-political. Because my conclusion is at odds with prevailing beliefs about procreation, the argument will be set out here as a series of explicitly stated premises. This style of argumentation may strike some readers as tedious, but the aim is to make it as easy as possible for opponents of the argument to discern exactly where it has (on their view) gone wrong. Due to space constraints, some premises will be merely stated rather than argued for at length; I will endeavour to argue for the premises that seem the most likely to generate controversy or misunderstanding. As the discussion progresses, I will try to anticipate and respond to objections to some of the more contentious points.

The argument is divided into three sub-sections, each advancing a conclusion. The first is that human claims to natural goods cannot reasonably be understood as unlimited; we inhabit a finite world and our claims impact the ability of others to make claims of their own. The second is that procreation is materially and morally equivalent to other types of claims to the natural world, and as such it should be included in our assessment of individuals' environmental impact. The third point, following from the the first two, is that our ability to exercise procreative autonomy cannot (p.111) be understood as unlimited. Decisions about procreation thus cannot reasonably be understood as private.

No Unlimited Rights to Natural Goods

P1: Human existence is fundamentally material; that is, human beings have a number of objective interests that can only be met through the appropriation, use, transformation, or destruction of the natural world.¹¹ These include both physical stuff (food, water, and so on) as well as ecological processes and services, and their use is both direct and indirect. I will refer to these, broadly, as "natural goods." Human existence is

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only tolerable, let alone conducive to flourishing, when a certain threshold of natural goods can be reliably obtained and used.¹²

P2: Human existence is predicated on complex ecological relationships and is subject to the same natural limitations as all other species on Earth. A key limit faced by all species is the availability of (species-specific) natural goods. While our ability to exploit the natural world to our advantage fluctuates and has historically increased over time, it remains finite by virtue of the fact that the world in which we live is finite. Ecological decline, moreover, is not merely a theoretical concern for human beings. As uncomfortable as it may make us to acknowledge it, human existence is ecologically precarious. Human history is littered with examples of ecological overreach and collapse, some of which have had profound and lasting impacts on the societies in which they occurred.¹³

P3: Natural goods are limited. Some natural goods are nonexclusive; they can be enjoyed without any discernible impact upon the ability of others to enjoy them. Many, perhaps most, of the natural goods necessary for a decent human life are not like this, however. Their appropriation or use is rivalrous—that is, use or enjoyment by one agent diminishes the supply or quality of those goods available to others, either because the good in question is altered or destroyed through use or because it is the sort of good that can only be enjoyed by a limited number of agents.

P4: No person has any inherent claim or entitlement to a greater share of (rivalrous) natural goods than any other.¹⁴ A full theory of just appropriation is well beyond the scope of this chapter, but in general I assume the (broadly left-libertarian) premise that the natural world is either commonly owned (by humanity, for our purposes) or that it is wholly and permanently (p.112) unowned. In either case, individuals may be afforded an unequal share by force or by convention, but there is no non-arbitrary basis on which any given individual can reasonably claim more natural goods than any other with similar basic needs.¹⁵

P5: Each morally considerable entity (a category that I assume includes human beings, at minimum, and may include a great many other species) has a natural or negative right to the natural goods necessary for a decent life. That is, there is no reasonable basis on which others can permissibly deny or withhold access to necessary natural goods except to protect or secure their own basic interests. Note that this is not an argument for *positive* rights to the natural goods necessary for a decent life. I am not claiming here that anyone should provide these to anyone else where they are lacking.¹⁶ I am making the (considerably less-demanding) claim that we cannot reasonably stand in the way of others obtaining these goods for themselves, and that they can legitimately take whatever measures are necessary to obtain such goods against those who would deliberately withhold them.

P6: If human beings have valid claims to some quantity of natural goods in either of the senses suggested in P4 and P5—that is, if they are entitled to a share of natural goods roughly equal to that of others, or to a sufficient quantity to ensure their well-being, or both—infringing those claims constitutes a wrong, a harm, or both. To claim the share of another in whole or in part is to wrong them, even if they are unharmed by the infringement.¹⁷ Infringing the claim of some other person to the subset of natural goods that they require in order to fulfill their basic needs not only wrongs them in the first sense, but harms them.¹⁸

P7: *Ceteris paribus*, we ought not wrong or harm others.

C1: It follows from premises 1–7 that no individual (in a world populated by more than one person) can legitimately lay claim to an unlimited quantity of natural goods. The scope of what we can legitimately claim is limited by the ability of others to make similar claims, to meet their basic needs, or both.

Procreation and Claims to Natural Goods

P8: Insofar as all people make claims to natural goods by virtue of existing, creating new people is functionally equivalent to creating new claims to natural goods.

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(p.113) As established earlier, human existence is inseparable from a predictable set or bundle of claims to natural goods, with predictable impacts upon the natural world. Thus, to procreate is to act in such a way as to bring about de facto claims to some quantity of grain, plants, or meat; to so much freshwater, coal, iron, cadmium, lumber, or rubber; to the emission of foreseeable quantities of liquid, solid, and atmospheric waste; to the exploitation of a number of biochemical and ecological processes; and so on.¹⁹ The precise demands of any given person will of course depend on the specific cultural context into which they are born, as well as the level of affluence they attain within that context. The basic conceptual point remains, however: whatever else it is, the act of creating a new person is also and always an act of creating a new set of claims to natural goods.²⁰

P9: No person has an interest in being brought into existence. I remain neutral here on the question of whether coming into existence is a benefit conferred upon those who receive it or, as David Benatar suggests, a burden.²¹ Even if being created is a benefit, however, it is not a benefit that anyone can choose to accept or reject (nonretroactively) by virtue of the fact that they do not exist.²²

P10: Parents owe their children whatever natural goods are necessary for or constitutive of a minimally decent life. This follows from P8 and P9; new people have no interest in being brought into existence, but their existence will invariably require a significant quantity of natural goods if it is to be in any way tolerable. Assuming the additional premise (P7) that we ought not expose others to undue harm, procreation should be understood to include or imply a claim by procreators to whatever additional natural goods are required in order for the lives of newly created people to meet some minimal threshold of decency.²³

At the very least, procreation generates a duty upon parents to *intend* to ensure the basic material well-being and flourishing of their offspring.²⁴ The alternative would be that the role of parents is merely to provide the opportunity for new people to struggle for existence—perhaps pledging to assist them where they can, but not taking full responsibility for meeting their

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needs.²⁵ This would be to expose children to an unjustifiable level of risk.

Of course, parents might fail (for a variety of reasons, at least some of which will not be wholly their fault) to secure the natural goods necessary for their children to enjoy a minimally decent life. Children may, upon reaching adulthood, make decisions that inhibit their ability to meet basic needs. These contingencies should not affect our understanding of the kinds of (p.114) duties and claims conceptually associated with procreation, however. In the morally relevant sense, the decision to have children is, or should be, understood as a claim to the natural goods necessary for their well-being over their life span. This claim should be understood as being fundamentally of and by parents, rather than children, for the reasons already discussed.²⁶

P11: The creation of new claims to the natural world by biological parents is not qualitatively distinguishable in any morally significant way from non-procreative claims to the natural world. While they may have a specific and distinct function in the lives of parents, from the vantage point of affected parties procreation-related claims are indistinguishable from other sorts of claims. That is, there is no morally relevant distinction between an individual claiming a large quantity of natural goods for her own personal use, and an individual claiming a large quantity of natural goods for the use of her offspring. There is nothing inherently special or defensible about the latter.

This is not to say that *all* claims to natural goods (procreative or non-procreative) are normatively identical. Some of the natural goods we make claims to are necessary for meeting our basic needs, while others are superfluous. Some of our claims are consistent with the ability of others to make similar claims, and others are not. In general, how we assess the moral (and hence the political) standing of material claims will depend on what is being claimed, as well as whether those claims can be understood as meeting fundamental interests, mere preferences, or something in between. Procreation may or may be the sort of activity that constitutes an interest; I will discuss this further later. The point for the time being is

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simply that procreative claims ought not be exempted from the scrutiny to which we subject other sorts of claims merely because they are procreative.

P12: Each individual has an “ecological footprint,” a metric representing the overall ecological impact of that individual’s activities, arising through the direct and indirect use of natural goods.²⁷ Ecological footprint analysis (conventionally measured in hectares of biologically productive land and sea) is a reasonably straightforward method of quantifying the impact of people or objects on the planet—and, by extension, their contribution to and moral responsibility for environmental degradation. The concept of an ecological footprint is also useful as a means of quantifying entitlements to natural goods, and of comparing claims and impacts made by individuals.²⁸ So, another way in which we could frame these premises is that we are at minimum entitled to a large enough ecological footprint to meet our basic needs. At maximum, we are entitled to a footprint no larger (p.115) than is consistent with not subjecting others to harmful deprivation, however we define this.

C2: The natural goods necessary for or constitutive of a minimally decent life for newly created people should be understood as part of the ecological footprint of procreators. Like other claims to natural goods, the claims associated with procreation should be understood both as part of the ecological impact for which the procreator is responsible, and as subtractable from any entitlement the procreator may have. Or, to put it in more tangible terms, the decision to procreate should not be understood as qualitatively distinct from any other (optional) decision to use natural goods.²⁹ Moreover, and more importantly from a normative perspective, the *quantitative* consequences of procreation far outweigh virtually all other claims to natural goods that a given individual will make over the span of a life.³⁰ Because the claims associated with procreation are so significant, it can singlehandedly cancel out other efforts at mitigating environmental impacts. For example, adopting a range of standard greenhouse gas emission-reducing measures (reducing gasoline consumption, improving home energy

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efficiency, and so on) may generate a reduction of—at best—a few hundred metric tons of GHGs.³¹ Each new (American) child, conversely, is foreseeably likely to emit several thousand metric tons over their life span. This not only negates the benefits associated with taking harm-reducing measures, but arguably undermines them by an order of magnitude.

The argument that the ecological footprint of one generation encompasses some of the claims or impacts associated with another raises a number of interesting practical and conceptual puzzles about how to allocate responsibility between them. One obvious issue is the question of how best to attribute some, but not all, of a given person's impact to their parents. None of the impacts associated with my existence would occur had my parents not decided to bring me into existence, but it is important to acknowledge that I bear responsibility for making better and worse choices (including my own procreative choices) as I go through life. Any allocation of ecological footprint, and hence of moral responsibility for environmental impact, should reflect the agency of both parents and children (or rather, of the adults that children will become). Wherever we draw the line, however, it is clear that the status quo (in which parents are understood as blameless conduits through which additional human beings appear) is woefully inaccurate.

My proposal for redrawing the boundary of ecological footprint analysis is this: insofar as we have no role or interest in being brought into existence, at minimum the *unavoidable* impacts and claims associated with (p.116) our existence should be understood as belonging to our parents—at least for the purposes of assigning responsibility or weighing entitlements. Thus, whatever ecological footprint is necessary to ensure a minimally decent life (per P10) is attributable to parents rather than to children, since children have no reasonable option but to claim those goods.

As noted, each of us has control over our impact to some extent, and it would be unreasonable to assign responsibility for my voluntary actions to my parents in perpetuity. Whatever metric we devise must reflect the agency that can be exercised once we develop the capacity for autonomous

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choice. But we cannot meaningfully exercise agency over the meeting of our basic material needs, because these are not optional in any real sense. Given that the meeting of basic needs is not reasonably within the purview of our agency, moral responsibility for any harms or wrongs visited upon third parties in the process of meeting those basic needs rightly rests with those who could (reasonably) have acted otherwise (i.e., our parents).

It seems plausible to me that we could take a stronger approach and attribute not only the unavoidable but also the *foreseeable* claims of a second generation to the first, even though many foreseeable claims are in principle avoidable (in the sense of not being strictly necessary for a minimally decent life). That is, where children are born into conditions in which the status quo involves use of the natural world at a level over and above that necessary for a minimally decent life, there is a case to be made that responsibility for those impacts rightly belongs with their parents. There are certain impacts that children born in contemporary North America are virtually certain to have, for example, simply by participating “normally” in that society.

To the extent that it would impose hardship for them to refrain from the activities that generate those impacts, it seems inappropriate to hold them responsible—even if we still believe that they ought not, on balance, engage in those activities.

So, for example, one of the most significant environmental impacts associated with life in contemporary North America is the emission of greenhouse gas. It is, strictly speaking, possible to live and even to flourish in North American society while emitting substantially less-than-average quantities of greenhouse gas. One can use public transport, live in a modestly sized home, consume a plant-based diet, and so on. However, there will almost certainly be a point at which a lifestyle conducive to greenhouse gas emissions that are *much* lower than average will be excessively demanding within the social and institutional context that presently prevails. A North American *can* go entirely “off the grid” in order to achieve more drastic reductions, but the individual consequences of

doing (p.117) so are so (contingently) onerous that it seems inappropriate to hold them morally responsible for failing to do so. We might therefore plausibly argue that parents are responsible not only for emissions that are literally unavoidable, but also for the foreseeable emissions that contingent circumstances make it very difficult or excessively demanding to avoid.

However we divide up responsibility for impacts, what is more important for our purposes here is the underlying conceptual point—that procreative decisions are by far the most ecologically significant decisions that individuals will make in their lives, and that causal and moral responsibility for much of our individual ecological impact rightly rests with our parents. When we are calculating environmental impacts, therefore, we cannot reasonably exclude procreation from our analysis.

Procreative Autonomy and Privacy

Thus far, the discussion has focused on the relationship between procreation and (limited) natural goods. I have argued that procreation should be understood as a kind of consumptive or appropriative claim by (would-be) parents, but have said little about what, if anything, might follow from this conceptual argument. The main point of this final section is that procreative decisions cannot reasonably be understood as private. As such, they are potentially subject at least to moral scrutiny, and potentially to political intervention.

P13: In general, we distinguish between private and public spheres of activity. Very roughly, the private sphere is the domain within which our actions are not legitimately subject to scrutiny or to intervention by those “outside.” The liberal tradition (within which this discussion is broadly situated) typically assumes that activities are private unless otherwise demarcated, but that the boundary of the private sphere stops where an activity negatively and unduly affects the interests or life prospects of another without their consent.³²

P14: Where an activity is likely (or certain) to cause harm by infringing upon the legitimate claims or interests of others (without their consent), it *prima facie* ceases to be private.

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Those affected by an activity or behavior, or those acting on their behalf, may reasonably intervene.³³ Activities in the public sphere are at minimum potentially subject to moral censure where appropriate. Under serious enough conditions they may also be subject to preventative or corrective intervention.³⁴ By intervention I mean a (p.118) range of possible behaviors ranging from the mildly discouraging to the overtly coercive, the common theme being that the interaction is intended to change behavior rather than merely to comment upon it.

There are some key exceptions to this premise. An action may be subject to intervention but not to moral scrutiny if it is involuntary or unintentional. We might physically prevent an absent-minded pedestrian from stepping into the path of another, but when it comes to assigning blame we typically differentiate between careless walking and deliberate assault.

Alternatively, an action may be exempt from both moral scrutiny and from intervention if it is undertaken in order to fulfill or protect a fundamental interest.³⁵ The paradigmatic case here is action undertaken in self-defense, but as noted in P5, we have a more general set of negative rights to the conditions necessary for a minimally decent existence.

P15: Appropriation and use of the natural world (in the broad sense) is almost certainly not private much of the time, by virtue of the fact that our interactions with the natural world can and often do have significant negative consequences for morally considerable others. If the ecological sciences have taught us anything, it is that the natural world is interconnected in often unimaginably complex ways. Seemingly isolated actions can have causes and consequences that reach far beyond what may be immediately apparent. Whether any particular instance of natural resource appropriation or use can be legitimately considered private is an empirical matter, of course, and the question of whose (or of which) interests should be taken into consideration is hotly contested, but the basic point stands.

P16: As a kind of voluntary claim to natural goods made by procreators (C2), and especially as a particularly large claim

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to natural goods, procreation has potentially significant impacts upon the interests of others.³⁶ As established earlier, the claims associated with procreation will involve the appropriation, use, or destruction of natural goods in ways that may wrong others by infringing upon their fair share of those goods, or harm them by making it more difficult or even impossible to meet their basic needs.

C3: Procreation cannot reasonably be conceived of as a private activity. It is, as established, a fundamentally material practice, reliant upon the appropriation of significant quantities of natural goods. As a material practice, procreation is significantly other-affecting in ways that can wrong or harm morally considerable third parties. As such, and to the extent that they do affect the legitimate interests of others, procreative decisions are reasonably subject to moral censure and even to intervention.

(p.119) There are likely to be a number of objections to this position, many of which will pertain to specific applications of this general point (i.e., that this or that intervention cannot be justified). Here I wish to address a more general potential objection to the overall point; one that concedes the potential impacts that procreation has (or could have) upon others, but maintains that it is nonetheless a private matter by virtue of the fact that procreation is, or fulfills, a fundamental human interest. As such, the objection goes, we cannot legitimately intervene in the procreative behavior of others, because (as argued in P5 and P14) we have a *prima facie* negative right to act in ways that promote our fundamental interests. Any normative proposal predicated on ceding the pursuit of our fundamental interests can be reasonably rejected as excessively demanding.

I want to strongly resist this characterization, but in a way that does not deny or downplay the importance of procreation in the lives of a great many people. Procreation is widely held to be one of the activities that give a human life “purpose” or “meaning.” Procreation is almost certainly in the interests of many, but the fact that a state of affairs furthers our interests is not sufficient to generate a (negative) right to pursue that

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state of affairs. We must take care to distinguish between interests as such and fundamental interests, however.

Each of us has an objective, idiosyncratic set of interests—that is, there are states of affairs that would make any given life go objectively better by contributing to our flourishing or improving our well-being in some way or another.³⁷ Objective interests in this general sense do not generate strong natural rights of the sort discussed previously, or the presumption of non-interference that accompanies such rights. In part this is because we could not possibly achieve or secure all states of affairs in which we potentially have an interest; some will be mutually exclusive or path dependent. More importantly for our purposes, a great many of the states of affairs in which we can be said to have an interest either require the cooperation of other agents (a good to which we have no claim) or conflict with their own interests. My interests might be maximized if I could simply take whatever I wanted or if I could force others to do my bidding, but here of course my interests are trumped (or at least counteracted) by the interests of others. They would be entirely justified in rejecting my attempts to advance my interests in these ways, and in condemning or even restraining my pursuit of them in order to prevent their own interests from being thwarted.

Fundamental interests, on the other hand, are interests the pursuit of which other actors cannot legitimately deny.³⁸ These are goods that are necessary for a minimally decent life, however this is defined. These will include straightforwardly material goods like adequate food, clean water, (p.120) and shelter from the elements, as well as less tangible goods like meaningful human contact or autonomy. The question about procreation is not whether it constitutes an interest. Clearly it does; for a great many people, rearing children (and, in particular, their own biological children) is among the most fulfilling or meaningful activities they will undertake over the course of their lives. The question is whether the interest many have in procreating is a *fundamental* sort of interest, which would afford it a distinct normative status from (mere) interest-furthering personal projects.

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The argument here is that it is not; procreation (or child rearing) may be one of the most important activities in the lives of many adults, but they do not typically lose their ability to function or even to flourish when they do not or cannot procreate. They may be deeply saddened or disappointed; they may flourish less than they otherwise would; they may need to find other goals or projects with which to give their lives meaning, but they are not obviously or inherently worse off than any other agent with objective interests that have not been maximized, or strong preferences that have gone unfulfilled. We can contrast this with the obviously and universally harmful results of insufficient food, inadequate sanitation, or a lack of meaningful human contact, for example, any of which can impede or even preclude having any projects at all.

If procreation were demonstrably and universally necessary to promote basic flourishing, it might reasonably be argued that it thereby constitutes a fundamental interest, but this is not the case. Many people lead what appear to be perfectly adequate lives in spite of—or, in many cases, because of—the fact that they do not rear offspring. Moreover, it is not necessarily true that procreation actually or always promotes the interests of procreators. At least some parents (likely a great many more than would admit it) are worse off, rather than better off, as a result of their reproductive decisions. Absent some compelling argument that the voluntarily childless (or regretful parents) are seriously confused or misguided about their interests, there is no reason to suppose that procreation constitutes a fundamental human interest.³⁹ As such, there is no reason to suppose that procreation is the sort of activity with which others cannot reasonably interfere.

But let us grant, for the sake of argument, that the point I have just made is wrong—that procreation *does* fulfill a fundamental interest. There are still grounds to reject the notion that it can or should be wholly exempt from external interference. If our interest in procreation generates a negative right, it is limited in at least two ways.

Firstly, any right to procreate (or, more accurately, any right to noninterference in procreation) will be constrained by the

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fulfillment of the interest(s) grounding any such purported right. No matter how strong our (p.121) interest in procreation, it is presumably not an unlimited interest. There will be a point at which the good required to fulfill our interest is satisfied, past which continued procreation will be subject to decreasing marginal utility. To the extent that the right protects an interest, rather than an activity, we can identify a point at which the right fails to apply to the activity because the interest has been realized.

By way of an analogy, no one can (*ceteris paribus*) reasonably interfere with my efforts to obtain food in order to avoid starving. They can, on the other hand, reasonably criticize or act in ways that inhibit my efforts to obtain food that I want simply because it is delicious. A fundamental interest in *x* only grounds a negative right to whatever level or amount of *x* is required to achieve a minimally decent life, in other words. It does not ground unlimited access to that good.

If procreation were a fundamental interest, it would still be subject to limits of this sort—that is, there is some amount of procreation that will be sufficient to ensure that the life of the procreator is adequate in that domain. If our individual interests are furthered by engaging in procreation, it is surely by virtue of the contribution that child rearing relationships make to our well-being, rather than the physical act of fertilizing eggs or gestating embryos.⁴⁰ To the extent that (interest-promoting) parent-child relationships are predicated upon intimacy, on the thoughtful and deliberate sharing of values and shaping of lives, it seems likely that these goods can be readily satisfied by a relatively small number of children. Moreover, having more children will at some point impede the achievement of those aims rather than promote it.⁴¹ As such, even if we believe (however implausibly) that every life would be significantly and objectively improved by procreating, it is almost certainly true that there is a threshold at which fundamental interests are met and further procreative acts become superfluous or even contrary to the interest of procreators, not to mention the interests of others.⁴²

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Second, and more importantly, the natural world imposes limits upon our procreative claims irrespective of whether they are understood as fundamental interests. In fact, treating procreation as a fundamental interest provides an additional reason to think that the exercise of procreative autonomy must be limited: because there is a point at which unchecked procreation will infringe upon the ability of others to fulfill their interest in procreation. As I have argued here, in a finite world the resource claims associated with acts of procreation will eventually conflict with other resource claims.

A more salient point for those who would defend the notion of a fundamental interest in procreation is that the unlimited exercise of procreative (p.122) rights will at some point diminish or preclude the ability of others to realize their own purported fundamental interest in procreation. Because procreation is an irreducibly material sort of activity, in a materially limited world there will be a point at which the exercise of procreative rights becomes mutually exclusive—that is, at some point there will not be enough stuff available for all of the offspring we may want to have. We can no more hold an unlimited right to procreation than we can hold an unlimited right to platinum or snow leopards or beachfront real estate—at some point there will not be enough of these to go around, irrespective of how valid we think our claims to them may be. If procreation is a fundamental interest, in short, procreative rights cannot intelligibly be understood as unlimited, because this would interfere with the ability of others to exercise them.

Thus, even if we were to grant that procreation should be treated as a fundamental interest rather than merely as an objective interest, there are still good reasons to believe that it can and in some cases should be subject to limits. If unlimited procreative rights cannot be sustained, there will be a point at which procreative behavior will be legitimately subject to scrutiny or intervention by others.

Conclusion

I have made three broad points in this chapter. The first is that in a world in which natural goods are both necessary and

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finite, individuals cannot reasonably make unlimited claims to natural goods. The second is that insofar as human reproduction inherently involves claims to natural goods, analysis of our ecological impacts cannot legitimately exclude those claims. It is critical to analyze consumption, rather than brute population numbers, but I have argued that procreation must be understood as a consumptive claim to the natural world. Any narrative of consumption (or of overconsumption) that treats procreation as off-limits is fundamentally incomplete and likely to be seriously inaccurate.

The third point is that wrongful, harmful, or excessive claims to the natural world are legitimately subject to condemnation or intervention in order to limit or reverse impacts upon others. There is no credible reason to exclude procreative claims as such, merely because they are procreative. While procreation may significantly further the interests of many procreators, this fact is not necessarily sufficient to outweigh the potential wrongs or harms associated with the creation of new claims. Even if we were to grant for the sake of argument that procreation fulfills a fundamental interest, it does not follow that rights to procreation are or can be unlimited.

(p.123) None of these points should be especially controversial. Many if not most of the premises here will be difficult to dispute without rejecting the naturalistic understanding of humanity from which they follow. What is striking is the extent to which otherwise rational people reject the conclusions that inexorably seem to follow.

Clearly a great many practical questions remain about when and what kinds of intervention might be warranted. While the discussion here has obvious and potentially significant implications for the real world (particularly given the extent to which we are presently living beyond our ecological means) the development of specific practical prescriptions is outside the scope of this chapter. I will not set out any arguments here about, for example, what the specific boundaries of a reasonable or defensible ecological footprint might be, which agents might be exceeding those boundaries (and through which means), about what number of children it might be appropriate to have in the world we presently inhabit, or about

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what kinds of preventative or remedial action might be warranted where claims to natural goods (procreative or otherwise) infringe upon the claims of others. These are questions that require a great deal more attention than the available space permits.

The aim of this chapter is to lay conceptual groundwork for practical inquiry by advancing the core principle that we cannot sensibly distinguish between “consumption” and “procreation” in the context of human impacts upon the natural world. The understanding of procreation set out here should inform our thinking about whether limits on procreation might reasonably be set under particular real-world circumstances, what those limits might be, and how they might be advanced or enforced. It suggests that where we think about procreation (and by extension, population), we should do so in a much more nuanced way than some have in the past. If we adhere to the broadly cosmopolitan and egalitarian understanding of entitlement to natural goods on which this chapter is predicated, strictly speaking each new person diminishes the natural goods available to the rest.⁴³ From the vantage point of likely ecological impact, on the other hand, we should perhaps be more concerned about the two children borne by the average Qatari or Dane or American than we are about the five or six children that the average Afghan or Burundian will likely have.⁴⁴

Admittedly, the arguments made here could, under certain circumstances, potentially lead to some unsettling practical recommendations. We must tread with caution here—though the fact that a conclusion is uncomfortable does not make it false, any intervention should be consistent with the premises by which it is grounded. Potential intervention in procreative behavior is grounded here by appeal to the premises that we (p.124) ought not inflict undue hardship, harm or deprivation upon others. As such, it remains an open question (at least for the time being) whether and to what extent different forms of interference with procreative autonomy would run contrary to these grounding values.⁴⁵ There is a substantial gap between the premise that your procreation infringes upon my legitimate interests and the conclusion that I can forcibly sterilize you, for example. The gap may or may not be

bridgeable, but significantly more discussion is required in order to answer questions of this sort.

While a great deal of practical discussion remains, the main point to be taken away here is that—as with all claims to limited natural goods—procreation must be justified and balanced against the interests and claims of morally considerable others. Procreative decisions are among the most ecologically significant decisions we can make, and this means that they cannot reasonably be excluded from thinking about human sustainability or environmental justice. Perhaps as or more importantly in the context of the discussion in this volume, environmental impacts ought not be excluded from our thinking about the morality of procreation.

Notes

(p.128) References

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Notes:

(1.) Thanks to Sarah Hannan for many valuable discussions on the subject and for her insightful critical feedback on earlier drafts of this chapter.

(2.) For a recent and much fuller discussion, see Diana Coole, "Too Many Bodies? The Return and Disavowal of the Population Question." *Environmental Politics* 22, Issue 2 (2013): 195-215

(3.) See e.g., Garrett Hardin, "Living on a Lifeboat," *BioScience* 24, no. 10 (1974): 561-568

(4.) World Bank Group, ed. *World Development Indicators 2012*. World Bank Publications, 2012; UNFPA. *State of the World Population*. New York: UNFPA, 2012.

(5.) Ibid. See also Joel E. Cohen et al., "Human Population: The Next Half Century," *Science* 302, no. 5648 (2003): 1172-75.

(6.) Ibid. See also Wolfgang Lutz, Warren Sanderson, and Sergei Scherbov. "The End of World Population Growth," *Nature* 412, no. 6846 (2001): 543-545.

(7.) Coole (2013), 204. See also UNFPA (2012), xv.

(8.) Mathis Wackernagel and William E. Rees. "Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth." British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 1996; WF, Global Footprint Network, and ESA GFN. "Living Planet Report 2012: Biodiversity, Biocapacity and Better Choices." Switzerland: WWF, 2012.

(9.) Exceptions are, of course, possible, though unlikely; one could be an extremely wealthy ascetic or hermit, for example. Strictly speaking the connection between wealth and ecological footprint lies not in wealth as such, but in the spending of it.

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(10.) Where I use the term “parents” here I mean it only in the limited, procreative sense except where otherwise specified. That is, I am not referring to those involved in the rearing of children, only to those involved in their genesis.

(11.) In what follows, the term “use” will serve as a shorthand for appropriation, exploitation, destruction, transformation, and any other ways in which human beings interact with the natural world in the process of furthering (or attempting to further) their own ends. Also, while I will use “interests” here, this is not necessarily or strictly a welfarist account. Natural goods are as equally necessary for the exercise of autonomy as they are for the meeting of straightforwardly bodily needs.

(12.) For the sake of argument, I will assume here that a tolerable or “minimally decent” human life includes access to adequate quantity and quality of food, water, and shelter; the absence of disease, pain, or suffering; the ability to exercise some measure of agency or autonomy; meaningful contact with other human beings; and so on.

(13.) For examples, see Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, revised edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005); Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto, ON: Anansi, 2004).

(14.) I will largely avoid questions here about the claims of non-humans, due more to space constraints than to a belief that non-humans are any less entitled to natural goods than are humans.

(15.) We might add that “convention” here is nearly always predicated upon the use or the threat of force, whether in the past or on an ongoing basis. This premise should in no way be interpreted as an argument for egalitarianism more broadly; I have no qualms about the unequal distribution of non-natural goods or about individuals selling their fair share of natural goods to others.

(16.) One key exception to this, as I will discuss, are biological parents. Children have a prima facie positive right against their parents to be provided with the natural goods necessary for a minimally decent life.

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(17.) In cases of overconsumption, it may not even be possible to identify the agent or agents wronged by the excessive claims of another. This does not negate the wrongness of the action, however.

(18.) Note that I am not claiming that it is wrong to violate others' claims—that is, that there are no circumstances under which we can permissibly do so. The claim is merely that they are wronged, even if it may be permissible to do so under some circumstances. For example, taking surplus food to which another has rightful claim in order to avoid starvation wrongs them, but it is also permissible.

(19.) See also Carol A. Kates, "Reproductive Liberty and Overpopulation," *Environmental Values* 13, no. 1 (2004): 51–79; Thomas Young, "Overconsumption and Procreation: Are They Morally Equivalent?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2001): 183–192; Benatar (this volume).

(20.) That a claim is understood in the abstract does not make it any less material; it simply refrains from speculating about precisely which material goods will be necessary to satisfy the claim.

(21.) David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

(22.) We can of course retroactively endorse having been created, but this is not the same thing.

(23.) I remain agnostic here about whether parents owe children access to an equal share of natural goods, per P4, or merely to a sufficient supply of natural goods, per P5. The former is likely to be a great deal more demanding than the latter. For an extended discussion of a fairly similar point, see Peter Vallentyne, "Equality and the Duties of Procreators," in *Children and Political Theory*, eds. David Archard and Colin Macleod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

(24.) It follows that there is a duty to refrain from procreating if it seems likely that one's progeny will be subject to risks or to suffering that could not justifiably be imposed or inflicted

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upon already-existing people. On this I am firmly in agreement with Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*. This has interesting and controversial practical implications about the relationship between poverty, affluence, and liberty that I lack the space to take up here.

(25.) There are interesting questions about the duration of a parental duty to provide offspring with natural goods, as well as about what responsibility individuals should be expected to take with respect to securing their own well-being. I will discuss these briefly in what follows.

(26.) This is not to suggest that would-be parents are laying claim to anything in an *explicit* sort of way, or even that they have given any consideration to the material consequences of procreation at all. The point is that we can and should ascribe such a claim to them regardless, since the absence of a claim would be morally problematic.

(27.) Wackernagel and Rees (1996); WWF (2012).

(28.) See e.g., Andrew Dobson, *Citizenship and the Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

(29.) Cf. Thomas Young, "Overconsumption."

(30.) To be clear, to attribute ecological impact is not to attribute harm, necessarily. To exist is to have an ecological impact, but this is not itself inherently problematic. The argument here is not that procreation *is* harmful, but rather that it is potentially harmful. What is important is that if and where the impacts associated with existence *become* problematic—for example, when demands upon the natural world outstrip its capacity to meet them—we have an appropriate understanding of who is responsible.

(31.) Paul A. Murtaugh and Michael G. Schlax, "Reproduction and the Carbon Legacies of Individuals," *Global Environmental Change* 19, no. 1 (2009): 18.

(32.) Of course, virtually all of our activities "affect others" in some way or another. This discussion must, for the sake of brevity, gloss over an enormously complex concept. For the

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purposes of this discussion, I will focus narrowly on a wholly negative conception of what makes activities public rather than private—that they expose others (involuntarily) to risk, harm, or other wrongs. This is obviously a crude and colloquial understanding of the public/private distinction, but it will hopefully suffice.

(33.) For the sake of space, I also leave open here the question of who may legitimately intervene in the behavior of others and under what conditions. I will assume for the sake of argument that a legitimate state may intervene in the behavior of its citizens, setting aside the question of whether any states in fact meet the necessary criteria.

(34.) There is potential here for endless debate about what constitutes “harm”; particularly if we include (as I think we must) exposure to risk as a kind of harm. Again, for the sake of brevity I must leave this enormously broad question unanswered here. A fuller treatment of the subject would need to address this issue at considerable length.

(35.) The difficult case is the one in which the interest-fulfilling actions of one agent interfere with the ability of some other agent to fulfill her own interests. Moral theory may have little guidance to offer in such cases.

(36.) This is not intended to be an exhaustive point about procreation; claims to natural resources are but one of the many ways in which procreative choices can affect others.

(37.) These are distinct, at least conceptually, from our preferences at any given moment. Ideally our preferences should align with and further our interests but sometimes (perhaps often) they do not—as when the sedentary person lacks a preference for exercise, or the smoker has a preference for cigarettes. Assuming that obesity or emphysema are not compatible with flourishing, we can say in such cases that the holders of such preferences are misguided about what is in their interest.

(38.) Again, the argument is not that fundamental interests generate positive duties. It is rather (and merely) that they are the sort of goods with which others cannot reasonably

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interfere. There will also be exceptions, of course, related to the fundamental interests of others. For example, we might reasonably restrict the autonomy of a dangerous psychopath.

(39.) Some will argue here that even non-procreators have an objective interest in procreation in the abstract (that is, they have an interest in *someone* having children). This may be true if and to the extent that non-procreators are personally invested in the continued existence of a particular society, or of the human species in the abstract. I do not think we can reasonably assume that all (or even most) non-procreators hold these commitments, however. More importantly, there is no compelling reason to believe that anyone *should* be committed to these.

(40.) See Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, "Parents' Rights and the Value of the Family," *Ethics* 117, no. 1 (2006): 80-108. There are admittedly other ways in which procreation might further our interests—say, by providing unpaid farm labor—but I take it that these are illegitimate.

(41.) The question of where this threshold might lie is well beyond the scope of the discussion here—not least because I do not accept the notion of a fundamental interest in procreation. Whether the purported interest requires one child or seven in order to be fulfilled is less important for our purposes than the conceptual point that any such interest does not ground unlimited procreation.

(42.) Readers may disagree that biological offspring could ever be subject to the sort of diminishing returns noted here. If so, we can substitute the idea of reproductive technology advancing to a point at which it would be feasible for a single individual to create, say, 10,000 children at once. It is hard to imagine a reasonable person arguing that this would further the interests of anyone concerned.

(43.) To be quite specific, the WWF estimates that the available global biocapacity per person was 3.2 hectares in 1961. By 2008, that amount had been reduced to 1.8 hectares. WWF (2012), 9.

(44.) World Bank (2012), WWF (2012).

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(45.) The first and best course of action will always be to allow (and encourage) individuals to limit their own fertility, by ensuring easy and unfettered access to the necessary resources to do so. If global population optimists are correct, reliable access to contraception (along with greater gender parity) may be sufficient to bring about a slow and manageable decline in birth rates without any need for additional intervention.



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