



Famine, Affluence, and Procreation: Peter Singer and Anti-Natalism Lite

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Abstract

Peter Singer has argued that the affluent have very extensive duties to the world's poor. His argument has some important implications for procreation, most of which have not yet been acknowledged. These implications are explicated in this paper. First, the rich should desist from procreation and instead divert to the poor those resources that would have been used to rear the children that would otherwise have been produced. Second, the poor (and possibly also the rich) should desist from procreation because doing so can prevent the very bad things that would otherwise have befallen the children they would have brought into existence. Third, the rich (and others) sometimes have a duty to prevent the poor from procreating. Fourth, the rich sometimes have a right to prevent the poor from reproducing. Although these implications may not amount to a categorical prohibition on all procreation, they do significantly restrict the permissibility of procreation. They are, in that sense, anti-natalist.

Keywords Peter Singer · Poverty relief · Poverty · Demandingness · Procreation · Anti-natalism

Peter Singer (2010a) has written briefly *about* anti-natalism – the view that we ought not to create new people. However, he has made it clear that he does not endorse this view himself (2010b). He offers only a few sketchy comments in support of this conclusion. He thinks that, for most people, life is worth living, and that even if that is not now true, he is “enough of an optimist” to think that in another century or two we could “bring about a world in which there is far less suffering than there is now”.

Although he has not embraced anti-natalism, an apparently unrelated argument of his – a famous argument that we have very extensive duties to the world's absolute poor – may commit those who accept it to a less expansive version of anti-natalism. By

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“absolute poverty” (or “extreme poverty”, a term he sometimes uses instead), he means the condition of being so under-resourced that one’s basic needs are not met.¹

His argument takes the following form²:

1. If we can prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought to do it.
2. Extreme poverty is bad.
3. There is some extreme poverty we can prevent without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.
4. Therefore, we ought to prevent some extreme poverty.

Let us call this the “poverty relief argument”. Those who accept this argument can differ in how demanding they take the conclusion to be. How demanding it is, will depend on how much extreme poverty we can prevent without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. This is because the conclusion requires us to prevent *all* the extreme poverty that we can prevent without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. Peter³ Singer himself thinks that because most things in life are not of comparable moral importance to extreme poverty, the amount of sacrifice required is extensive. He, and those who agree with him about the conclusion’s demandingness, seem committed to the impermissibility of procreation in many more situations than they and most other people would think. Even if they *would* concede that procreation is impermissible in all these circumstances, they do not seem to have explicated this yet, and thus there is some value in highlighting the implications for procreation, of the poverty relief argument and the demanding interpretation of its conclusion.

Moreover, some of those implications, including that the affluent are sometimes morally required to prevent the world’s poorest people from procreating, are unlikely to be comfortable for progressives. Given that progressives are those most likely to embrace the conclusion that the world’s affluent have extensive duties to the world’s poor, they may, as I shall argue, face a dilemma. Either they must accept the famine relief argument’s implications for procreation, or they must question if not Peter Singer’s argument, then certainly the more demanding interpretations of its conclusion.

The poverty relief argument, although formulated by a noted utilitarian, is specifically formulated to bypass disagreements between utilitarians and non-utilitarians (Singer 1993, p. 199). They can agree that we should prevent something very bad from happening without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, even if they disagree about *what* constitutes a “sacrifice of comparable moral importance”. Thus, what implications the poverty relief argument has for procreation may depend in part on what ethical theory one accepts. In

¹ In one place he quotes Robert McNamara’s definition approvingly: “a condition of life so characterized by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality and low life expectancy as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency” (Singer, 1993, p. 219). Elsewhere he follows the World Bank definition of extreme poverty “as not having enough income to meet the most basic human needs for adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, sanitation, health care, and education” (Singer, 2009, p. 6.)

² His argument was first presented in (Singer, 1972). There are slight variations on the argument in his various formulations of it. The one listed here is from (Singer, 2011, p. 200).

³ Although I am familiar with the academic convention of using surnames only (after first mention), I eschew that convention on grounds of courtesy, preferring to use either first and last names, or title and surname. See (Benatar, 2019a). For a fuller version of the argument see: (Benatar, 2019b).

other words, the procreational implications for utilitarians, deontologists, virtue theorists, and others, may differ.

Some people may want to resist applying the label “anti-natalism” to views that seek (merely) to significantly reduce rather than categorically oppose procreation. I do not see why we should follow this view. We do not apply the label “pro-natalism” only to the view that recommends maximal fecundity for all. Instead, we use the term, for example, to describe government policies that aim to *increase* population. A parallel use of “*anti-natalism*” can be used to describe government policies that seek to *reduce* population growth. Thus, the former “one-child” policy in China can reasonably be interpreted as an anti-natalist policy. Now, I recognize, of course, that Peter Singer may accept minimally anti-natalist conclusions – for example, that we should restrict the number of children we have. In this paper, I shall be arguing that his argument, at least when its conclusion is very demanding, supports more extensive anti-natalist conclusions. Those who, notwithstanding what I have said, dislike the “anti-natalist” label for anybody but those opposed to all procreation, may simply rephrase my conclusion. They may say that the poverty relief argument and the demanding interpretation of its conclusion imply opposition to procreation under the conditions I outline.

1 Opportunity Costs

First, and perhaps most obviously, Peter Singer’s argument implies that, at least for now, the relatively affluent ought to desist from having children because they could use the resources that would be needed to raise resulting children to prevent extreme poverty. This particular implication was first made explicit by Stuart Rachels.⁴

In the developed world, children cost a lot to raise. Methodologies for assessing the costs obviously vary. Even when they do not, they are determining only an average or representative cost. Some parents obviously spend more than others on their offspring. Nevertheless, in first world countries it costs, on average, between around two hundred thousand and three hundred thousand dollars to raise a child to the age of eighteen (Cornell 2011; Brown 2015; Lino et al. 2017). Nor do the expenses typically end there. The costs beyond age eighteen include university education, which can amount to tens of thousands of dollars, or even a few hundred thousand dollars in the case of private United States universities.

By having children, one creates needs (and desires) that, insofar as they can be met, require these vast resources. If one desists from having children, one frees up the resources and can prevent a great deal of bad. Of course, many people want to have children. For them, desisting from having children is *a* sacrifice, but is it a sacrifice of comparable moral importance? To answer this, we should first identify exactly what the sacrifice is. On one interpretation, it is only forgoing having children who are one’s genetic offspring, for one could still adopt an

⁴ Stuart Rachels (Rachels, 2014) considers only *this* anti-natalist implication of Peter Singer’s argument. He generally calls his own argument the “Famine Relief Argument against Having Children” but he briefly notes that it appeals to “opportunity costs”. He does not discuss the other connections between Peter Singer’s argument and anti-natalism, that I shall present in this paper. There are other differences too between his paper and mine. For example, he considers some objections that I do not discuss (because I take them to be insufficiently important for my purposes) and I consider objections that he does not consider. Even where we do discuss the same objection, we often do so differently. I shall not discuss all these differences here because they are beyond the scope of this paper, the purpose of which is to discuss the different anti-natalist implications of Peter Singer’s argument rather than to engage Stuart Rachels’ presentation of one of those implications.

already existing and otherwise unwanted child. In this way one prevents something bad (a child being raised in an orphanage) without sacrificing the satisfaction of rearing a child. That does not seem like a sacrifice of comparable moral importance.

However, effective altruists, including Peter Singer (2015) and others who agree that we have extensive duties to the world's poor, might be forced to conclude that the resources one spends on rearing an adopted child could do more good if directed instead to saving a larger number of people from evils much worse than being raised in (a humane) orphanage. In that case, the sacrifice is forgoing not merely genetic offspring but also the satisfaction of rearing a child. Yet, if we accept Peter Singer's conclusion in the demanding way that he understands it, we may be forced to agree that the moral importance of even this sacrifice is not comparable to the bad we can thereby prevent.

This is not to deny that others could regard these sacrifices as being of comparable moral importance. Aristotelians, for example, might argue that forgoing child-rearing, at least for many people, would so threaten their human flourishing that it would constitute a sacrifice of comparable moral importance.⁵ However, it is precisely because Aristotelians can regard the moral importance of more sacrifices as being comparable to preventing extreme poverty, that their interpretation of the conclusion of Peter Singer's argument will be much less demanding than his.

Aristotelians are but one example. Anybody who thinks that forgoing either the creation of biological children or the rearing of either biological or non-biological children constitutes a sacrifice of comparable moral significance is likely committed to a much less demanding conclusion than Peter Singer reaches. For if forgoing the creation and rearing of children is a sacrifice of comparable significance then it is very likely that many other sacrifices are also of comparable significance. This is because rearing children is not the only costly personal project that can mean a great deal to people.⁶

In summary, then, Peter Singer's argument seems to commit him to the following:

1. If we can prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought to do it.
2. Extreme poverty is bad.
3. There is some extreme poverty we can prevent (*by desisting from producing children and redirecting those resources*) without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance.
4. Therefore, we ought to prevent some extreme poverty (*by desisting from producing children and redirecting those resources*).

Peter Singer himself wants to avoid this particular anti-natalist conclusion. He does so by rejecting the third premise of this application of his argument. When asked whether he thinks that "it is wrong for individuals in the developed world to have children, when they know that this will make them more partial and contribute less to the overall good", he responded in the negative, saying that he is worried instead "that if people who think a lot about others and act altruistically decide not to have children, while those who do not care about others continue to have children, the future isn't going to be good" (Singer

⁵ A few people have raised this objection in response to reading a draft of this paper or to hearing me present the arguments contained in it.

⁶ I say more about this below.

2016). In other words, he thinks that desisting from procreation will involve a sacrifice of comparable moral significance. When Peter Singer speaks about a “sacrifice of comparable importance”, he is not referring *only* to something that the person who stands to prevent something bad from happening would have to give up *personally*. He is also referring to other goods that would be lost if the bad were to be prevented.⁷

However, unless he thinks that altruism is significantly influenced (even if not determined) by genes, his response is not a defence of *procreation*. If altruism is largely a matter of nurture rather than nature, then parents can impart these lessons to adopted children. Those who accept the Peter Singer conclusion in all its demandingness, could prevent the bad of unwanted children being reared in orphanages (including impoverished third world ones) without sacrificing the stated benefits of future altruism.⁸

It is possible that the role that nature plays is sufficient to make it significantly harder to turn children without a genetic disposition to altruism into altruists. However, even this possibility is not a sufficient defence of an affluent couple deciding to procreate. First, it is only a possibility. We do not currently know how great a role genes play in producing altruism. Second, there are other uncertainties. Even if genes do have a significant influence on altruism, it is possible that one’s own child will not get those genes, and it is possible that a child one adopts will have such genes from his or her biological parents.

Perhaps the chances of an altruist’s own biological child not getting altruistic genes are smaller than the chances of an adopted child having altruistic genes. However, all these *uncertainties* have to be weighed against the *certainty* that money one would spend on a child one creates will not be available to spend on an already existing child or other needy people. A certain benefit is forgone for the sake of a merely speculative one. Even if the speculative benefit turns out to be real, there remains the question whether that benefit is greater than the short-term one. It is very difficult to answer that question.⁹ Therefore, at the very least, a discount rate would need to be applied to future possible benefits, with the result that these are less likely to outweigh the benefits of forgoing procreation and using the money one would have used to rear them to help others.

The opportunity costs argument does not commit Peter Singer to an extreme anti-natalist position – that creating children is always (or even almost always) wrong. (This is one reason why human extinction cannot be the “sacrifice of comparable moral importance”.) Indeed, if all affluent people were contributing what they should contribute – and contributing in the right way – global poverty could be prevented without anybody having to give up creating and rearing children. However, Peter Singer thinks that the extent of one’s own duties depends in

⁷ This is apparent both from his answer to the question above, but also from his explanation elsewhere that by “sacrifice of comparable importance”, he means “without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failure to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent” (Singer, 1972, p. 231).

⁸ This will be true only so long as there are unwanted children in need of adoption, but that does not undermine the force of this consideration until that time. People can *now* (and for the foreseeable future) rear altruistic children without first reproducing.

⁹ Peter Singer does not directly address this question (so far as I know). He *has* commented on a related question – whether it is better to give now or to invest and give more later. In response to that question he says that if one has the investment skills of a Warren Buffett then one should invest and give later. Otherwise, he is unsure. He cites Claude Rosenberg’s view that “the rate at which the cost of fixing social problems grows is ‘exponentially greater’ than the rate of return on capital” but notes that this is “difficult to prove or disprove” (Singer, 2009, pp. 37–38).

part on whether others are in fact discharging their duties. The demanding conclusion is generated when others are not doing what they should do.¹⁰

The opportunity costs argument shows that following his various commitments, the demanding conclusion should extend in the current circumstances to forgoing procreation and possibly also rearing adopted children. At least for the foreseeable future, affluent Singerians should desist from procreating.

2 Natality Costs

Peter Singer's argument, suitably adapted to procreation, has other anti-natalist implications. More specifically, it implies that at least many people should not have children, because in desisting from procreating they can prevent the very bad things that will otherwise befall *those* children. This argument, which applies most obviously to the poor but perhaps also to the affluent, takes the following form:

1. If we can prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought to do it.
2. Pain, unhappiness, illness, injury, and death (among other things) are bad.
3. There is some pain, unhappiness, illness and death we can prevent by desisting from producing children who will suffer these ills, and we can do so without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.
4. Therefore, we ought to prevent some pain, unhappiness, illness and death by desisting from producing children.

Because we are investigating the implications of Peter Singer's poverty relief argument, we must accept, *arguendo*, the first premise of the above argument, which is the same as the first premise in his argument. The second premise is different from the second premise of his argument, but it is hard to see how anybody accepting his second premise could reject it. Indeed, something like this claim is what explains his second premise, namely why extreme poverty is bad.¹¹

It might be objected that there is a subtle equivocation in the use of "bad" between the first and second premises of this argument (an equivocation which though also present in Peter Singer's original argument is less problematic there): in the first premise "bad" means "bad all things considered", whereas in the second premise "bad" means "*pro tanto* bad". (According to this criticism, the pain one experiences going to the gym, for example, is *pro tanto* bad, but this does not mean it should be prevented.)

We should reject this suggestion that there is an equivocation. Both in Peter Singer's original argument and in my adaptation, the use of "bad" in the first premise need not mean

¹⁰ More generally, he thinks that our duties are influenced by what others are and are not doing. Thus, if one accepts that if altruists were not to procreate the future would have fewer altruists, it does not follow that every altruistic couple can use this as a justification for their own procreation. The more other altruists are procreating, the less a particular altruistic couple can invoke the need for new generations of altruists in order to justify their own procreation. While others are providing the more tenuous benefit of future altruists, this couple could instead provide the immediate and more reliable benefit.

¹¹ In any event, we know from his drowning child analogy that he (plausibly) regards a death even in the absence of extreme poverty as bad.

“bad all things considered”. The first premise can and should comfortably assert that we should prevent even pro tanto bads if we can do so without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance. The point about many pro tanto bads is that we cannot prevent them without sacrificing anything of comparable significance. If you prevent the “pain” of exercising, you will sacrifice your health. However, this does not apply to all pro tanto bads. The pain of having one’s gangrenous leg amputated is not bad all things considered, given that the amputation saves one’s life. This does not mean that we should not prevent that pain by using anaesthesia if we can.¹²

The first half of the third premise is similarly difficult to resist. When people procreate, they know that their child will be subjected to plenty of harm during the course of its life, and that it will die. They can prevent these very bad things from happening by not procreating. The crucial question, then, is whether they can prevent this *without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance*.

What are the possible sacrifices, and are these of comparable moral importance? One possibility is that the sacrifice in question is parents’ forgoing the opportunity to rear a (genetically related) child. However, if forgoing the satisfaction of such life projects counts as comparable moral significance, then many other life projects will similarly count, and we are not obliged, contrary to what Peter Singer says, to give up the financial resources that make them possible.

Perhaps it will be suggested that having children is a qualitatively different, even if not a unique, kind of project, and thus forgoing it – but not other projects – is a sacrifice of comparable moral importance. Child rearing is indeed a very important project to many people, but other people treat different projects as equally or more important. There are some people, even if they are a minority, who desist from becoming parents precisely because they want to devote their time, energy and other resources to other (personal) projects.

Another possible sacrifice is, once again, the potential (affluent) child’s future altruism. To think that forgoing the benefits of one’s progeny’s future altruism is a sacrifice that compares in importance to avoiding their certain suffering and death, is to be unduly confident both in the likelihood and in the magnitude of one’s progeny’s altruism.¹³ The future harms of any child one creates are serious and certain,¹⁴ but their future altruism is not.

A final, and more compelling possibility is that in desisting from procreation one is sacrificing the periods of happiness, pleasure and other benefits of the potential child. However, we must reject this suggestion if we are speaking about the extremely poor – those whose lives Peter Singer thinks we have an extensive duty to save. These lives surely contain plenty of bad. Hunger gnaws at such people, and malnutrition corrodes their health. They have limited access to clean water for drinking and bathing. As a result, they are especially vulnerable to disease. Access to health care is limited, if available at all. These sorts of bad

¹² It is no use responding that given the availability of anaesthesia the pain of amputation is bad all things considered, because then we might as well alter the first premise to: “If we can prevent something (all things considered) bad from happening we ought to do it.” The “without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance” condition would be unnecessary because if one had indeed considered everything one would already have established whether something of comparable importance would be sacrificed.

¹³ This undue confidence is the product of a well-established human optimism bias. See, for example (Matlin and Stang, 1978), (Taylor, 1989).

¹⁴ Of course, one cannot be certain of every harm that will be befall one’s child, but one can be certain that serious harms will befall that child.

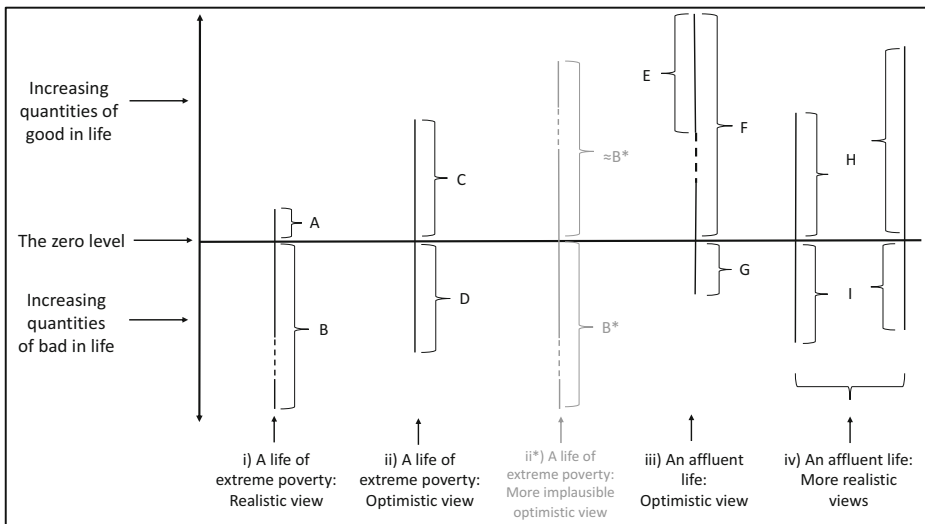


Fig. 1 Comparable moral significance

are so extreme that they crowd out the possibility of much good. There may be *some* goods in such lives. However, a life of grinding poverty cannot support many goods.

It is thus entirely reasonable to think that prospective children of those in extreme poverty have lives that, on balance, contain much more suffering than happiness.¹⁵ If the goods in a life of extreme poverty are dwarfed by the bads, then it is hard to see how forgoing the goods in order to prevent the bads could be seen as sacrificing something of comparable moral importance.

However, some optimists might want to claim that the lives of the absolute poor contain more good than bad, even if barely so. That is deeply implausible. It would involve either underestimating how much bad there is, or overestimating how much good there is, or (more likely) both. However, if we were to accept such a claim despite its implausibility, it would imply that the poverty relief argument has a less demanding conclusion than Peter Singer suggests it does. If the good in the lives of the absolute poor is considered of comparable importance to the bad in those lives, then the affluent are not required to make sacrifices of *that* (inflated) magnitude. That renders the conclusion of the poverty relief argument less demanding.

In other words, one faces this dilemma, as portrayed in part of Fig. 1.: Either (i) one recognizes that the amount of good in the lives of the absolute poor is overwhelmed by the bad, or (ii) one inflates the value of the good so that it is comparable to the considerable amount of bad, which one also underestimates. (Underestimating the amount of bad is essential to keeping the required inflation of the good within limits that are “reasonable” even by the distorted standards of optimists. In other words, the optimist needs both to

¹⁵ If we think seriously about lives of absolute poverty – lives of people who lack the bare essentials for living and who are thus on the brink of dying or who actually die from poverty – it is hard to imagine that the good could possibly outweigh the bad. One way to see this would be to enumerate all the awful features of such lives, then enumerate the goods and ask whether the latter really do outweigh the former. Put another way, if one fully appreciated just how appalling a life of absolute poverty is, could one really think that it contained as much or more good?

underestimate the amount of bad and also overestimate the amount of good in the lives of the extreme poor. Otherwise, the optimist seeking to avoid (i) must adopt something like (ii*), which is even less plausible than (ii.)

If one opts for (i) then those in extreme poverty can prevent the suffering of their potential children without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, in which case the poverty relief argument implies that the absolute poor should not procreate. (A, in Fig. 1, is not a sacrifice of comparable importance to B.)

If, by contrast, one opts for (ii) then (positive) utilitarians could argue that the good (barely) outweighs the bad and thus that preventing the bad would come at the cost of something of comparable moral significance. (C is a sacrifice of comparable importance to D.) However, they would then need to grant that equivalent sacrifices would not be required of the affluent in order to save the absolute poor. (E is as great a sacrifice as C.¹⁶ If C is of comparable importance to D, then so is E.) That seems like considerably less than Peter Singer thinks we must sacrifice. Think about how much bad there is in lives of extreme poverty and how much good there would need to be in order to be comparable to the bad. That is the amount of good that the affluent would not need to sacrifice.

For at least some non-utilitarians, forgoing the positive features of a life (C in Fig. 1) will not be a sacrifice of comparable moral significance to bads as awful as these (D in Fig. 1). For example, priority might be given to not inflicting such bads, even if greater goods are thereby not brought about. Those holding this view, would judge procreation by the extreme poor to be impermissible even on the optimistic view depicted in (ii).

Peter Singer and other (positive) utilitarians might accept the “natality costs” argument when applied to potential procreators who are extremely poor, but deny that it – and, more specifically, premise 3 – can be applied to affluent potential procreators. They might do this by saying that there is generally¹⁷ so much more good than bad in the lives of their offspring. Avoiding the bad by not conceiving those children thus comes at the cost of much greater amounts of good. (In Fig. 1, F outweighs G.) Even if we accept this, it remains the case that the opportunity costs argument rules out procreation by the affluent, at least for now, while the natality costs rules out procreation by the absolute poor. This is not a categorical form of anti-natalism, but it does amount to a fairly wide-ranging form of anti-natalism.

The natality costs argument, combined with some *non*-utilitarian views, would arguably rule out procreation even by the affluent. The lives of affluent people contain considerable amounts of pain, unhappiness, illness, and injury. For example, many affluent people suffer the torments of cancer and degenerative diseases. Like the poor, the affluent *all* die. These are severe bads, which is one reason why, in Fig. 1, (iv) is a more accurate representation than (iii) is of affluent lives. Another is that the ratio of good to bad in affluent lives is more like (iv) and less like (iii).¹⁸ Many might not recognize this, but their failure to do so is on account of the optimism bias referred to above.

¹⁶ To clarify, E and C are not resources, but rather quantities of good. It remains true, given diminishing marginal utility, that more resources will produce less good for those with more than for those with less.

¹⁷ The most common kind of exception is disease.

¹⁸ (iv) contains two options. These can be viewed in two different ways. They can be seen as reflecting examples of the variation in quality of life among affluent individuals. Alternatively, they can be viewed as reflecting reasonable disagreement about the average ratio of good to bad in affluent lives. Some might wonder why the amount of bad in these lives is comparable to the amount of bad in (ii). The answer is that optimists underestimate how much bad there is in the lives both of extreme poor (ii) and of the affluent (iii). (iv) is not the view of optimists.

For those non-utilitarians who give priority to not inflicting severe bads even if greater goods are thereby not brought about, forgoing the positive features of an affluent life (H in Fig. 1) will not be a sacrifice of comparable moral significance to the awful bads in such lives (I in Fig. 1). As long as the bads in affluent lives are bad *enough* – which cancer and death, for example, plausibly are – it should not matter to most of *these* non-utilitarians whether the amount of good is greater than (iv) suggests. Nor need they hold directly anti-natalist views in order to think this. The priority that they give to avoid inflicting severe bads applies even in non-procreative cases. On this view, one may not inflict severe suffering or death on somebody even if avoiding doing so involves forgoing much greater amounts of good.

Given that the natality costs argument would, according to (some) non-utilitarian views but not according to (positive) utilitarian views, rule out procreation by the affluent, procreative restrictions are one area in which the poverty relief argument may have *more* demanding conclusions for (some) non-utilitarians than it does for (positive) utilitarians.

3 Poverty Costs

Peter Singer's argument has anti-natalist implications of a third kind. His argument implies that sometimes the affluent must prevent the world's poor from reproducing. One version of the argument takes the following form:

1. If we can prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought to do it.
2. Extreme poverty is bad.
3. There is some extreme poverty we can prevent (*by preventing the poor from producing children*) without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance.
4. Therefore, we ought to prevent some extreme poverty (*by preventing the poor from producing children*).

Again, because we are determining the implications of Peter Singer's argument, we must accept, *arguendo*, the first premise, as this is the first premise of his argument. We must accept the second premise too, not only for that reason but also because it is incontrovertible. What about the third premise, which introduces a means of poverty prevention not explicitly considered by Peter Singer? This premise makes two claims, both of which must be true if the premise is to be accepted.

First, there is the claim that some extreme poverty can be prevented by preventing the poor from procreating. This is real poverty *prevention*, as distinct from poverty *relief*. However, it is a particular kind of poverty prevention. It prevents poverty by preventing the existence of those who would suffer it. This does not make it a lesser form of prevention. In this regard it is no different from some means of disease prevention – for example, where genetic tests are used to prevent bringing into existence those who will suffer from a genetic disease.

Of course, it is often not possible to prevent the extremely poor from procreating. However, for the claim made in the first half of the third premise to be true, it need only be the case that there is *some* poverty that could be prevented by preventing the poor from procreating. Given how modest a claim this is, it is very likely to be true. The crucial question, therefore, is whether this prevention involves the sacrifice of something of comparable moral importance.

Some non-utilitarians might argue that preventing the poor from procreating would violate their rights to reproductive freedom, and that the violation of rights is something of comparable moral significance. This problem can be avoided in those cases where we prevent the poor from procreating with their informed consent. One means of doing this is by providing contraception to those who want it but are otherwise unable to obtain it. This implication is unlikely to be controversial, except to those opposed to contraception.

Other ways of preventing procreation would be more controversial. However, invoking a right to reproductive freedom is not sufficient to reject the third premise of the poverty costs argument. This is because *some* of these more controversial interventions may not violate the right. This, in turn, is because there are two ways in which the scope of a right to reproductive freedom might be limited (Benatar 2010).

First, it might be limited with regard to the kinds of interference it rules out. A right to reproductive freedom can be understood more narrowly or more broadly. According to a very narrow interpretation it protects against only physical interferences in one's reproductive choices. According to a more extensive interpretation it would *also* protect against unobtrusive interferences with one's reproductive choices (such as adding contraceptives to the drinking water or food supply). According to a yet more expansive interpretation, it would *also* include protection against (tempting) incentives not to procreate. Unless one adopts the most extensive interpretation of the right to reproductive freedom, there will be some interventions to prevent procreation that do not violate the right and that are thus compatible with the third premise of the poverty costs argument.

There is a second way in which the scope of a right to reproductive freedom might be limited. Rights are limited by their impact on others. Not every (wrongful) impact on others imposes a limit on a right. A right to do something can include a right to do *some* wrong, but there are limits on the kind and severity of the wrong one may inflict while still being within one's rights.

Consider a right to freedom of expression. It does include a right to say some things that are morally wrong. For example, it might permit one to express an undeserved unkind sentiment or opinion. However, there are *some* limitations on a right to freedom of expression. It typically is not thought to include a right to defame, to commit perjury, or to incite (imminent) violence. This is true not only of words but also of deeds. If your right to swing your arm ends at the tip of my nose,¹⁹ then your right to reproductive freedom might not extend to creating lives of extreme poverty (or other extreme suffering).

Some people will seek to deny that swinging one's arm into somebody's nose is like creating a suffering child. There are at least three ways in which they might try to argue this. First, they might argue that whereas I have a right that you not swing your arm into my nose, future people have no right not to be brought into existence. This, it might be said, is because one cannot be *harmed* by being brought into existence. There are responses to this "non-identity" problem, but it is not clear that they need to be mustered here. Even if the potential child somebody could bring into existence does not have a right not to be brought into existence, it is still the case that the procreative activity will result in a child suffering extreme poverty. That impact may be sufficient.

A second reason why somebody might seek to distinguish arm swinging from procreation is that interferences with procreation will be more intimate. Much will

¹⁹ This, of course, is quite different from what a (law) student of mine once wrote in her exam: "Your right to swing your arm ends at the tip *your finger*" (my emphasis).

depend on what one means by “intimacy” here. One could stipulate that any interference with procreation is, by definition, more intimate than other interferences. However, that is mere stipulation. There seems to be no independent reason to regard a physical restraint of somebody seeking to hit another as less intimate than placing contraception in the drinking water, for example. The latter unlike the former involves no physical contact between two people. Decisions whether to procreate *are* very personal. However, other kinds of decisions, such as religious ones, are also very personal, and yet a right to religious freedom is limited. If religious convictions required keeping children in conditions of absolute poverty, such convictions would not be protected by a right to religious freedom.

A third possible justification somebody might offer to distinguish arm swinging from procreation is the view that future people’s interests should count less than the interests of existing people. This rationale also falls short. It is true that there are conditions under which it does seem that the future people’s interests should count less. More specifically, it seems reasonable to discount future suffering to the extent that we can be less confident that it will actually occur. This is why the discount rate increases the further into the future the interests are. The more temporally distant, the greater the uncertainty. However, given that the (potential) child whose life will be one of suffering, is in the immediately next generation, if any discounting applies it will be minimal and likely offset by the greater magnitude of the suffering relative to a slap in the face.

Another possible response to the poverty costs argument is to argue that instead of preventing the poor from procreating, the affluent should focus on contributing towards uplifting the poor, and on encouraging other affluent people to do likewise. One basis for this might be that the affluent, given their complicity in the conditions of the poor, do not have the standing to prevent the poor from procreating. The problem with this suggestion is that the poverty costs argument, like the poverty relief argument from which it is derived, is not premised on the responsibility of the affluent for the existence of extreme poverty.²⁰ Instead the argument is rooted in one’s ability to prevent very bad things (irrespective of whether one is responsible for those bad things having been brought about). If one can prevent something very bad without sacrificing any of comparable significance, then one should do it. It does not matter whether one contributed to the existence of the bad.

A much more plausible basis for suggesting that the affluent should focus on uplifting the poor (and encouraging other affluent people to do so), is that this will produce more good at lower cost. This argument is available not only to non-utilitarians but also to utilitarians. Although the latter cannot appeal to a *right* to reproductive freedom, they can acknowledge that restrictions of reproductive freedom are nonetheless a cost.²¹ Another cost to preventing the poor from procreating is that resources spent on this cannot be expended on improving the lives of those in extreme poverty. This too is relevant to non-utilitarians and utilitarians alike.

If poverty could be prevented at least as effectively via a means involving a lesser moral sacrifice, it is that alternative that should be adopted both by utilitarians and non-utilitarians. What this shows is that the first and third premises of the poverty costs argument require some qualification:

²⁰ There are other family relief arguments that have this basis. See, for example (Pogge, 2002).

²¹ How great these costs are, depends in part on whether procreation is really the result of autonomous decisions. People in dire poverty often lack access to contraception and do not always intend to have children. Insofar as their procreative actions are not fully autonomous, we would not be violating their autonomy by preventing them from procreating, in which case the moral costs of such interventions would be reduced.

1. If we can prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, *and there is not a less costly means of preventing the bad*, we ought to do it.
3. There is some extreme poverty we can prevent (by preventing the poor from producing children) without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, *and there is not a less costly means of preventing the bad*.

Nothing in the (revised) poverty costs argument precludes the possibility that sometimes improving the lives of those in extreme poverty will be the less costly means of preventing extreme poverty. The conclusion of the poverty costs argument simply does not apply to those situations. However, to accept the poverty costs argument, it need only be the case *sometimes* preventing the extreme poor from procreating is at least as good as the alternatives. There are two good reasons to think that this is true.

First, relieving poverty and preventing the poor from procreating are not always mutually exclusive. Sometimes one can relieve some poverty by preventing the poor from procreating. For example, if the poor do not have children, they can use the resources they would otherwise have spent on their children for their own upliftment. On other occasions, one can prevent the poor from procreating by relieving poverty. We know, for example, that birth rates tend to drop following a decrease in infant mortality (although there is typically a lag). Even when poverty relief is not a means to preventing the poor from procreating, or vice versa, one can sometimes do both simultaneously. One can devote some resources to the one and some resources to the other. Of course, resources spent on the one are not then available for the other, but it may sometimes be best to have dual strategy.

Second, preventing procreation is often much more effective and lasting than improving the condition of existing poor people. Some interventions do not lift people out of extreme poverty but rather fix or prevent some component problem of their lives by, for example, deworming, repairing fistulas, or preventing or treating avoidable blindness. Such interventions bring valuable relief, but directing the same resources to preventing the poor from procreating prevents *all* the miseries of absolute poverty. Even if one lifts people out of extreme poverty, they may still be in (non-extreme) poverty, with the hardships attendant upon that. By contrast, preventing a new extremely poor person from coming into existence prevents any lesser evil on the same spectrum. Moreover, when extreme poverty is relieved, it is sometimes only temporary. Those uplifted can fall back into extreme poverty. There is no such problem with the prevention of procreation. A life prevented is forever prevented. It is sometimes true that the prevention of one life can open up the opportunity for another life to be created. However, this is not always the case, especially when long term contraception and especially sterilization²² are the means whereby procreation is prevented.

4 Duty Costs

Peter Singer's conclusion has anti-natalist implications of a fourth kind. However, here the implication is not a *duty* to prevent the poor from procreating, but rather a *right* or *prerogative*

²² This need not be forcible sterilization. There might be incentive or inducements to sterilization.

(at least sometimes) to prevent them from procreating. To generate this implication, one must accept something like the following principle:

“If A has (or will have) a duty to save C, then, all things being equal,²³ A must have a right to prevent B from causing C to need to be rescued.”

The antecedent of this conditional is, of course, Peter Singer’s conclusion. The consequent is, in the current context, the prerogative to prevent the poor from reproducing. But why should one accept the principle that causes the former to entail the latter? There are at least two reasons.

The first is a reason I outlined earlier: if some condition (such as extreme poverty) is one from which C should be saved, it is also a condition in which C should not be caused to be. But if C should not be caused to be in some condition, then, all things being equal, A (or anybody else) may prevent B from causing that person to be in that condition.²⁴

The *ceteris paribus* clause is necessary because we can imagine situations in which all things are not equal. Consider, for example, a situation in which C is B’s assailant and the only way in which B can defend himself is by shooting C. In such a situation, A (perhaps a passing doctor) will have a duty to save C from dying of his injuries even though A would have no right to prevent B from shooting C (assuming that A was not able to prevent C’s assault on B some other, less harmful way). Such cases, however, are exceptional and not typically like cases of creating new poor people who then need to be saved from poverty.

A second reason to accept the principle is that if A has *no* right to prevent B from causing C to be in the situation from which he or she needs saving, then A can be held to moral ransom by B. In other words, B can keep generating duties for A by producing C and then D, E, F, G, and so forth, and A can only stand by as his or her duties are multiplied. That seems very unfair.

Perhaps it will be suggested in response to the second of these reasons that it is even more unfair for the extremely poor to be denied the option of becoming parents, which many people take to be a valuable feature of life. After all, it is typically not their fault that they are poor. Moreover, it might be added, it is not quite so unfair for the world’s affluent to have duties generated for them by the poor, given that the world’s affluent are the beneficiaries of, even if not also complicit in the conditions that cause extreme poverty.

These responses are not objections to the general principle but rather to the principle’s application in the current context. There are also a few problems with them. If I am correct that Peter Singer’s argument implies anti-natalism for the affluent for the “opportunity costs” I have outlined, then forgoing the benefits of having children is a sacrifice of lesser moral importance than the ravages of extreme poverty are. If the rich ought to forgo having children in order to prevent the ravages of poverty, then the same should be true of the poor. This is also the conclusion of the “poverty costs” argument.

One difference, of course, is that the affluent may, practically speaking, retain the choice whether to forgo children (even if they do wrong by not so choosing), whereas in the scenario we are imagining, the poor are *prevented* from having children. However, even if it is very unfair for the poor to be deprived of children involuntarily, that unfairness also needs to be

²³ The “all things being equal” condition is important because, it may sometimes be the case that moral costs of preventing the poor from procreating are too great. Nevertheless, as I have argued, this is true much less often than may be thought.

²⁴ The conclusion of the “poverty costs” argument was that the affluent sometimes *must* prevent the poor from procreating (just as they must prevent themselves from procreating). If one *must* prevent X, then *a fortiori* one *may* prevent X.

balanced against the unfairness to the child of creating it. The unfairness to the created child must certainly outweigh the unfairness to their parents if they had been prevented from having the child. By analogy, consider surgeons who develop debilitating arthritis. It is unfair to them to be barred from continuing their professional work. It is not their fault that they develop this disease and they lose an important good in life, namely practising their chosen profession. Nevertheless, it would be more unfair to their patients if the surgeons were permitted to continue operating.

What about the suggestion that it is not that unfair to the affluent to be bound by duties generated by poor procreators? Let us grant, at least for the sake of argument, that the affluent are indeed beneficiaries of and perhaps also complicit in the conditions that cause extreme poverty. The problem is exacerbated when the poor produce more extremely poor people in whose plight the affluent will be said to be complicit. One cannot both be prohibited from preventing the expansion of one's complicity and then deemed complicit in the expansion.

5 Conclusion

If Peter Singer's argument is sound and his demanding interpretation of its conclusion is correct, then we have very extensive duties to the world's poor. If I am correct, then that same argument and interpretation of the conclusion has a range of other implications *as well*.²⁵ One implication is that the rich should desist from procreating and should instead devote the resources that would have been used to rear one's child to helping the world's poor. Another implication is that the poor and possibly also the rich should desist from procreation because they can thereby prevent the very bad things that would befall those potential children if they were brought into existence. A third implication is that, in some circumstances, the rich (and others) may have a duty to prevent the poor from reproducing because that would prevent the suffering and death of the poor offspring who would otherwise have been brought into existence. (It can also sometimes require the poor to prevent the rich from procreating. I have not focused on this because the poor rarely have the power to prevent the rich from procreating). The fourth implication, at least if one accepts a plausible ancillary principle, is that the rich may sometimes have a right or prerogative to prevent the poor from reproducing.

These implications are anti-natalist in the sense that they significantly restrict the permissibility of procreation, even though they do not categorically prohibit all procreation. They are nonetheless significant implications. First, those who accept Peter Singer's argument and his interpretation of its conclusion have not typically recognized all these implications.²⁶ They are thus worth elucidating in order to understand what the conclusion requires (and permits) with regard to procreation.

Second, there is some reason to think that the stated implications will meet with resistance. Peter Singer himself, as we have seen, has tried to ward off the implications of the "opportunity costs" argument – unsuccessfully, I have suggested. While many people are willing to accept that they should restrict the number of children they produce, most are resistant to the idea that they should not have *any* children. Moreover, those who identify as "progressives" or as being

²⁵ To clarify, the implications presented in this paper – and especially the conclusions of the natality costs, poverty costs, and duty costs arguments – are not *alternatives* to the conclusion of the poverty relief argument. They are *further* implications.

²⁶ Stuart Rachels, as noted above, is one exception, but only in the case of the "opportunity costs" argument.

on the “left” are especially likely to be uncomfortable with suggestions that the poor should not be having any children and that others sometimes have a duty or a right – albeit only a *moral* duty or a *moral* right – to prevent the poor from procreating.

This discomfort may be attributable to an ideological framing of such matters as “rich versus poor”, coupled with a reflex favouring of the poor. The latter part – a *presumption* in favour of those with fewer resources – is reasonable (as long as one can recognize exceptions). What is not reasonable is to insist on framing these procreative issues always in terms of “rich versus poor”. The rich may have power relative to the poor, but the existent poor have power relative to those potential suffering people they can bring into existence.²⁷ It is a mistake to be so concerned about the power differential between rich and poor that one completely ignores the power differential between procreators and their “procreatees” – those they bring into existence through procreation.

Because those who accept Peter Singer’s argument about our duties to the world’s poor are more likely to identify themselves as “progressive” or “left”, the implications for procreation may pose a dilemma for them. If they accept Peter Singer’s conclusion about the extent of affluent people’s duties to the world’s poor, then they must also accept the possibly uncomfortable implications for procreation by the poor. Alternatively, if they wish to avoid these implications, then they will have to settle for a less demanding interpretation of Peter Singer’s argument. The way to do this (without rejecting the argument) is by understanding the scope of “some” in the third premise (and thus also in the conclusion) to be more restricted than Peter Singer understands it to be. Put another way, the more sacrifices are regarded as being of comparable moral significance to averting the poverty-related evils one could prevent via that sacrifice, the less of such evil one can prevent without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance.

Whether it is plausible to restrict the scope of the third premise (and thus the conclusion) in this way is a separate question that is not engaged by the arguments advanced in this paper. Instead, these arguments show that how permissive a view those accepting Peter Singer’s poverty relief argument can have with regard to procreation, depends on how permissive a view they have with regard to other personal projects and activities, the sacrifice of which would enable one to help the world’s poor.²⁸

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²⁷ We are all utterly powerless in the face of the reproductive decision or action that led to our being brought into existence, but the worse the quality of one’s life, the more significant that powerlessness is.

²⁸ I am grateful to anonymous referees for incisive, helpful comments, offered in a constructive manner, that significantly improved the paper.

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