

The Immorality of Having Children

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Abstract This paper defends the Famine Relief Argument against Having Children, which goes as follows: conceiving and raising a child costs hundreds of thousands of dollars; that money would be far better spent on famine relief; therefore, conceiving and raising children is immoral. It is named after Peter Singer's Famine Relief Argument because it might be a special case of Singer's argument and because it exposes the main practical implication of Singer's argument—namely, that we should not become parents. I answer five objections: that disaster would ensue if nobody had children; that having children cannot be wrong because it is so natural for human beings; that the argument demands too much of us; that my child might be a great benefactor to the world; and that we should raise our children frugally and give them the right values rather than not have them. Previous arguments against procreation have appealed either to a pessimism about human life, or to the environmental impact of overpopulation, or to the fact that we cannot obtain the consent of the non-existent. The argument proposed here appeals to the severe opportunity costs of parenting.

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1 The Biggest Decision in Life

1.1 Parenthood, Not Marriage

My father, who taught college for nearly four decades, was fond of saying that the biggest decision people face in forming their worldview is whether to believe in God. Sometimes he put the point this way: If the question is not what to *do*, but what to *believe*, then God's existence matters most. Religious belief is crucial because so much turns on it. If you embrace Christianity, for example, then this may affect your view of anthropology, biology, cosmology, history, love, morality, metaphysics, politics, and much else.

But what if we're interested in action rather than belief? What is the biggest *practical* decision that most of us will face at some point in our lives? I think our culture favors a particular answer to this question, namely: *Should I get married?* This does not mean, "Should I *ever* get married?" or "Do I want to involve the government in my most intimate

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relationship?” Rather, our culture’s most celebrated question is, “Should I marry [fill in the name of one’s girlfriend/boyfriend]?” We ask ourselves: Is s/he good enough? Am I ready? Am I in love? Will it last forever? Note that our culture glorifies marriage with its biggest ritual celebration: the wedding. Admittedly, our culture also regards other questions as vital, for example: What career should I pursue? Where should I live? Whom should I vote for? and so on. Yet we agonize the most over getting hitched.

However, that emphasis is misplaced. To be sure, tying the knot is a big decision: marriage is currently supposed to last a lifetime, and if a couple participates in the (aptly nicknamed) wedding-industrial complex, then their nuptials will be both time-consuming and expensive (over \$25,000 on average¹). But, to be crass, there’s always divorce: marriage has an escape hatch. It’s not an easy hatch to open; divorce is almost always emotionally traumatic. Yet once it’s done, it’s done. And divorce is so common in our society that divorced individuals are not stigmatized.

Instead, I suggest, the biggest decision that most of us will face is whether to have children. There are three reasons for this.

First, each additional person profoundly affects the world. For starters, an individual is likely to have a marked effect on the environment over the course of her life.² But also, each person probably impacts the social world even more: given the vagaries of social life, each of us affects whom others will meet, befriend, fall in love with, and lust for—which, in turn, will affect the identities of future generations. In sum, just as one’s religious beliefs have logical implications that ripple across one’s worldview, so one’s procreative decisions have causal implications that ripple across one’s world.

Second, being a parent entails drastically changing one’s lifestyle for at least 18 years. Parenting consumes vast sums of time, money, and energy. It is a monumental undertaking.

Third, parenthood has no morally viable escape hatch. You can divorce your spouse, but you can’t divorce your kids—you can only neglect them. You *can* give your children up for adoption (and thus opt out of parenthood), but even that wouldn’t put the genie fully back in the bottle: someone else would still have to raise your biological children, and those children would still affect the world profoundly.

So, in sum, the question of whether to have a child is more important than the question of whether to marry one’s sweetheart—and, indeed, is *the* most significant question that most people will face—because every new child will profoundly affect the world in general and two parents in particular. Moreover, whereas marriage can be undone by divorce, once a baby exists, there’s no turning back: a human life will unfold with all of its ramifications. The decision to beget is awesome and irrevocable.

1.2 Our Culture Downplays the Biggest Decision

Why doesn’t our culture regard parenthood as being the biggest decision in life? There are several reasons.

- (i) Although creating a new human being will have profound effects on the world, most of those effects are unpredictable. Would the world be better in the long run if my spouse and I have a child? Would people be happier? Would justice prevail more often? Those questions dissolve into countless others, whose answers can’t be known. And what we can’t know, we don’t mull over. Thus, we don’t think much about the momentous

¹ The exact estimate is \$25,631, according to the May, 2012, *Harper’s Index* (source: The Wedding Report [Tucson]).

² See, for example, P. A. Murtaugh and M. G. Schlax 2009.

causal processes unleashed by having children. Yet those processes still occur; the decision is still—at least in a certain sense—momentous.

- (ii) Parenthood might seem like the default option in life. Having kids in our home may seem normal to us simply because we grew up in a home that had kids in it. Perhaps we learn subliminally from a young age that *When I grow up, I will be the mommy (or daddy) in the home*. Some children even play games to this effect.
- (iii) In the real world, many parents didn't choose to become parents, exactly: they chose to have sex; the woman accidentally became pregnant; and then the woman chose not to abort. We call such babies “accidents”—a term that stands in contrast to choice. Many children are accidental. For example, in 1994, 31 % of babies born in the United States were accidents.³ Even though the specter of unintentional pregnancy makes some people think harder about whether to have kids, the frequency of such pregnancies also makes some people view parenthood as something that simply happens at a certain stage of life. And parenthood can't be a big decision if it isn't (really) a decision at all.
- (iv) Sometimes, one member of a couple (or both) wants to have a child *really* badly. In such cases, we may see parenthood as automatic or inevitable—in other words, as not (really) chosen. And again, if parenthood isn't chosen, then it can't be life's biggest decision.

1.3 Our Culture Commends Begetting

Yet I want to emphasize a further reason, (v): Our culture downplays the importance of the critical decision by viewing the choice to conceive as being obviously respectable so long as certain minimal conditions are fulfilled (for example, the mother is not in extreme poverty, neither parent is dying, and the parents are not on the verge of divorce). In other words, we view begetting as an obviously good thing. In our culture, nothing seems more natural than to congratulate someone who has just had a baby: “What a blessing!” “It's a little miracle!” “What a bundle of joy!” We've all seen someone react to the presence of a baby like Frances McDormand's character in the movie *Raising Arizona* (1987): “He's an angel! He's an angel straight from Heaven!” Our own parents are likely to foster a positive view of parenthood in us, first because they may want grandchildren; and second, because emphasizing the advantages of parenting to one's children is a way of expressing love to them—it is a way of saying, *I'm glad I had you* (this is true as a matter of psychology, even though loving one's children is different from the love of raising them). In general, almost no parent wants to talk publicly about the disadvantages of parenthood, for fear of looking like a bad parent or uncaring person. Thus, we tend to hear mostly positive things. Furthermore, many of us want to be like our parents, and one way to do that is to become parents ourselves. Further still, some subcultures put a special premium on large families: Italian-Americans, Catholics, Jews, and Mormons, for example, all traditionally prize big families. Finally, most people in our society are either Christians or Jews, and the Book of Genesis quotes God as saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth ...”⁴—a clear directive to make babies. Thus, people in our culture thus tend to view parenthood favorably.

However, few people in our culture see parenthood as obligatory; these days, a young couple is unlikely to be pressured by outsiders to start a family. Instead of censuring the

³ See Table 1 in S. K. Henshaw 1998.

⁴ *The Holy Bible* 2001, Genesis 1:28

childless, we are more likely to pity them. We may suspect, for example, that an older couple who have no kids tried and failed, and we assume that their lives are the poorer for it. So, we feel sorry for them. The upshot is that our culture views parenthood as a no-pressure dilemma: if you choose to have kids, great; but if you don't, no one will complain. Again, we view the decision surprisingly lightly.

On the whole, then, our culture regards the decision to procreate as being both less important and less controversial than it should. I have emphasized these points in order to say to the reader: I expect this essay to rub you wrong; please keep an open mind. In what follows, I will argue that it is immoral to have a child, by which I mean *it is immoral to conceive and rear a child*. The argument will be limited in two ways. First, it will say nothing about adoption. Adoptive parents do not conceive their children and thus do not "have children" in the sense relevant to my argument. (In another, perfectly normal sense, adoptive parents do of course have children.) Second, I won't argue that it is always, in every conceivable circumstance, immoral to have children; rather, I will assume some background conditions, which almost always hold true in contemporary Western society. The argument itself is simple. As I've said, parenting consumes vast sums of time, money, and energy. It would be much better to direct those resources elsewhere—so much better, that having a child must be considered immoral.

2 The Famine Relief Argument against Having Children

How much does raising a child cost in the United States? Each year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture answers this question in its *Expenditures on Children by Families*. The latest report estimates that a middle-income family with a child born in 2010 will spend about \$226,920 on child rearing.⁵ That figure, however, doesn't represent the full price of having children, because it ignores all the costs that accrue after the child turns 18—for example, the cost of college tuition. Also, many young adults live at home where they can receive routine assistance from Mom and Dad.⁶ Robert Schoeni and Karen Ross estimate that children between the ages of 18 and 34 receive an average of \$38,000 from their parents (plus a lot of free labor!).⁷ Thus, the overall (average) cost of parenthood might be closer to \$226,920 + \$38,000 = \$264,920. However, I can't offer a total estimate because I don't know what financial arrangements hold, on average, between children over the age of 34 and their parents. On the one hand, the children may continue to receive support (here and there, and eventually via inheritance); on the other hand, the parents may increasingly depend on their grown children as they get older. But we needn't settle on a final figure; my argument will merely assume that having a child is so expensive that a significant amount of moral good could be accomplished by using that money for other purposes. In what follows, I'll assume that having a child costs around \$227,000, although I suspect that the true figure is even higher.⁸

⁵ See M. Lino 2011. Also see the U.S. Department of Agriculture's press release, "A Child Born in 2010 Will Cost \$226,920 to Raise, According to USDA Report," Washington, June 9, 2011. The \$226,920 figure is in today's dollars; given projections about inflation, one is likely to actually pay \$286,860.

⁶ At the end of 2011, 29% of American adults aged 25 to 34 lived at home (see K. Parker 2012).

⁷ See R. F. Schoeni and K. E. Ross 2005. The authors were writing before the financial crisis that began in December 2007. That crisis probably increased the amount of money that parents spend on their adult children because, in a bad economy, more adult children are unemployed and more live at home with their parents.

⁸ Moreover, my analysis has ignored the economic opportunity costs of having children, which make parenthood more expensive still. Many women, for example, have lower salaries because at some point in their careers they "took time out" to take care of their children.

Now let's consider how much good could be accomplished by giving \$227,000 to humanitarian causes. I'm not asking the utopian question, how much good would \$227,000 accomplish *if spent optimally*? Rather, I am asking how much good would likely result from giving \$227,000 to a smattering of reputable poverty relief organizations over the next 20 years. Even that question, however, requires philosophical clarification, because there are two ways to understand the notion of accomplishing good. On the *simple causal interpretation*, I do good by bringing about a valuable state of affairs. For example, I do good by helping an old woman carry her groceries into her home. On the *causal/counterfactual interpretation*, I do good by bringing about a better state of affairs than would have existed without my action. On that understanding, I do good by helping the old woman only if no one else would have helped her. For reasons I'll explain later, I'll employ the causal/counterfactual interpretation. Thus, I am asking: how much better would things be if we gave \$227,000 to charity than if we gave none?

It would be easy to assess the value of charitable giving if it worked like this: you send a \$20 bill to a large organization (UNICEF, say); that organization uses your \$20 bill to achieve a specific, short-term goal (feeding a particular child, say); and your donation "makes the difference" in the sense that the goal would not have been achieved without your donation. Under those conditions, your donation has the value of the accomplished goal. In the real world, however, it is typical for contributions to simply be added to the large operating budgets of charities. Thus, to assess the value of a donation, we must know what the charity would have done differently without the amount of one's donation. And we never know that. Even employees at the charity will not typically know the answer to questions like this: how would the Hunger Eradication Initiative have differed with \$710,861 in its budget instead of \$710,881? Moreover, let's not forget that charitable organizations often pursue long-term economic development projects alongside short-term assistance programs. And long-term endeavors are hard to assess.

The upshot is that we rarely know what difference we make when we give to large charities. That fact may dishearten us, but it doesn't mean that our efforts are wasted. The major charities provide birth control to millions of women; vaccinate multitudes of infants; educate legions of children; feed vast camps of refugees; and so on. They need money to do these things. Giving \$227,000 to such groups is likely to make a wonderful difference, even if we don't know exactly what that difference will be.⁹

Let's now consider the main argument. Having a child costs hundreds of thousands of dollars; that money would be *much* better spent on famine relief; therefore, it is immoral to have children. This is essentially an expected-utility argument: we shouldn't have children because having a child is a poor way to squeeze benefit out of \$227,000. If the language of expected utility seems cold, then we might say: *We should immunize, feed and clothe impoverished children who already exist rather than spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on having one child of our own.* I will call this the *Famine Relief Argument against Having Children*. It applies almost across-the-board within our culture. However, it would not apply in cultures that expect children to economically benefit their parents—where, for example, children work on the family farm from a young age and then support their parents later in life. In such cases, remaining childless might make one poorer and thus *diminish* one's ability to give.

⁹ Givewell.org, which assesses charities, estimates that a life is saved for every \$205 spent on expanding immunization coverage for children in Sub-Saharan Africa—apparently one of the most cost-effective projects. See L. Brenzel et al. 2006, p. 401. For a more pessimistic view of the value of charity, see K. Horton 2011.

Before continuing, let me say three things about the argument.

1. We can now see why we need the “causal/counterfactual” conception of doing good rather than the “simple causal” conception. The Famine Relief Argument against Having Children urges us to remain childless in order to be more generous. However, for many people, remaining childless would be a sacrifice, and I would not urge anyone to sacrifice anything unless the sacrifice paid off counterfactually. Suppose, for example, that you gave \$227,000 to a charity that eventually vaccinated 10,000 children against the rotavirus. Further suppose that the same children would have been vaccinated without your donation, because a wealthy benefactor was waiting in the wings, poised to donate whatever the charity needed in the end. If you knew all this in advance, then I can’t see why you’d give \$227,000 to that charity, unless you simply preferred for the wealthy benefactor to have an extra \$227,000 rather than you. The Famine Relief Argument against Having Children urges us to sacrifice for others only if those others would be worse off without our sacrifice.
2. Although the argument concludes that it is immoral to have children, I do not believe that parents should be punished, admonished, or blamed in any way, simply for being parents. Blame is usually irritating and unwelcome to the blamed, and in this case, I doubt that blaming parents would do any good. Would chastising parents make them less likely to have more children and more likely to give to charity? Would it deter potential parents from having children? Casting blame on parents would probably have little effect other than bothering the parents and pointlessly diminishing the world’s limited appetite for moral ideas and moral debate. Also, I reject the Kantian idea that people should be punished simply because they have done something wrong. Thus, I oppose parenthood *and* the blaming of parents.
3. There is a difficult question in value theory which is relevant to the argument but which we needn’t answer. The question is whether adding a happy person to the world increases the world’s value in a way that gives us a reason to have children. If so, then that is one possible advantage of having children, and it counts against my conclusion.¹⁰ However, from a cost/benefit perspective, it is much better to save numerous lives and/or to significantly reduce suffering than to create one person who is likely to be happy. Thus, we needn’t worry about this vexing issue.

3 Connections to Singer’s Argument

The great philosophical advocate of generosity in our time is Peter Singer. My argument is named after Singer’s “Famine Relief Argument.”¹¹ One version of Singer’s argument goes like this: “If we can prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable or nearly comparable moral significance, then we ought, morally, to do it; we *can* prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable or nearly comparable moral significance, by foregoing our luxuries and giving our money to famine relief instead. Therefore, we ought to do so.” Like Singer, I use the phrase “famine relief” as a stand-in for whatever charitable causes make sense. Feeding the hungry is one excellent charitable idea, but of course there are others.

¹⁰ And I have argued that it does increase the world’s value: see S. Rachels 1998.

¹¹ See P. Singer 1972.

My argument relates to Singer's in two key ways. First, my argument might merely be a special case of his. Singer says that we should forego our luxuries in favor of generosity, and having children might be one of those luxuries. Thus, we might amplify Singer's second premise to read: "We can prevent something very bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable or nearly comparable moral significance, by foregoing our luxuries (for example, by foregoing having children) and giving our money to famine relief instead."

Admittedly, it seems odd to call children a "luxury." We think of luxuries as things typically enjoyed by the rich—diamond earrings, Ferraris, and summer holidays in the South of France, for example. But people of all economic classes have children. Also, we contrast "luxury" with "necessity," and children are necessary for the continuation of our species. Yet, despite these observations, we might still consider children luxuries. After all, having kids is expensive and isn't necessary for the parents' health or survival.

Moreover, we might decide to start using the term *luxury*, at least sometimes, as a moral term: luxuries are those things that we should forego in a world of preventable death and suffering. This would also treat 'luxury' as a functional term: anything is a luxury that plays the role of being condemned by a sound Singer-style argument.¹² Thus, someone who accepts the Famine Relief Argument against Having Children might want to call parenthood a "luxury" in light of their belief that we should forego having children in a world of preventable death and suffering. Singer says that his argument should lead us to redraw the traditional distinction between charity and duty¹³; perhaps my argument should lead us to redraw the traditional distinction between luxury and necessity.

The second connection may be deeper. Before stating it, let me fill in some background. Singer's argument is part of a moral worldview that sees suffering as the greatest evil and the prevention of suffering as the greatest good. The morally best life that a person of wealth and opportunity can lead, on this view, is a life of saintly self-sacrifice—she sacrifices everything to combat the causes of suffering, where those causes are things like factory farming, depression, poverty, microbial illness, and political repression. Even if perfect beneficence is unrealistic for creatures like us, it is at least a noble ideal: we can always strive to be more generous, and we can morally assess people by seeing how close they come to this benevolent endpoint.

Most people don't come very close. Money is easy to spend, and many people feel like their expected lifestyle leaves little room for giving. In the United States, even the wealthy may find themselves in credit-card debt after making only "normal" purchases. "I don't know where all my money goes," they might say, as though their money had hotwired their Lexus and driven off, whereas in fact they made concrete choices that resulted in their money's going to the mortgage company, the school, the car dealership, the airline, the clothing designer, the online electronics store, and so on. If we can admit that we choose our lifestyle, then we can honestly address the question: What are the biggest decisions we make that affect how much we give to charity?

Our relevant decisions fall into two groups: those that affect our own level of wealth, and those that affect how much of our wealth we donate. I'll consider these topics, briefly, in turn.

How can we affect our own wealth-level? Naturally, there's a lot of advice out there, most of it bad. The most common route to wealth is being born into a rich family, but we can't

¹² Singer himself was not using 'luxury' in this sense, because it would have turned his conclusion into the claim that "we should forego what we should forego and give our money to famine relief." Instead, Singer was understanding 'luxury' in the ordinary way.

¹³ See P. Singer 1972, p. 235.

choose our lineage. Instead, the biggest wealth-affecting decision we make is probably that of career choice. And certainly, one attains brighter economic prospects by choosing to go to law school than by choosing to become a dishwasher. However, I wish to emphasize the extent to which luck and circumstance, rather than choice, influences our ultimate income level. Let me make three observations about this.

First, the idea that a person has a variety of career options representing a variety of possible income levels largely assumes the perspective of the well off. Most people don't have the personal connections or educational background to compete for *any* high-paying job. Indeed, they may be lucky to be employed. Choice is not irrelevant here; one can try to network and to maximize the educational opportunities one has. However, choice can only do so much. Second, people's employment options are limited by their talents, interests, and personality traits. To some extent, we can shape these things through our decisions; but to some extent, we cannot. Third, pure luck often determines how well a person's career goes. Did a good job open up at the right time and place? Did the interview go well? Did the market unexpectedly turn? Did you get a good boss? Did you join a well-run or poorly-run company? No career protects a person from the vagaries of life. Many lawyers are unemployed or underemployed; businesses fail; banking is risky. Perhaps the best bet is medicine—doctors can always make good money. However, becoming a physician is notoriously difficult; it requires having a knack for science, a strong work ethic, a tolerance for blood and needles, an ability to function on little sleep, and a general high intelligence—high enough to secure a spot in a medical school, anyway. Thus, I am impressed by the extent to which luck and happenstance contribute to a person's ultimate level of wealth.

Choice matters more when we examine *what we do with the money we have*. The best advice for rich people who strive to be more generous is captured by the cliché, *Live simply so that others can simply live*. For example, one should drive an economy-class car rather than a luxury vehicle; live in a modest house rather than a mansion; fly coach rather than first class; and not cultivate a taste for expensive pleasures like fine wines, country club surroundings, and overseas vacations. If an affluent person lives by such rules, he'll have a lot more money to donate at year's end.

And now comes the rub: If you want to lead the most generous kind of life, then the most important decision you'll ever make is whether to have kids. Having kids—with all the financial and emotional commitments that parenthood involves—is the single greatest impediment to the realization of the benevolent ideal. To put this point another way: if you wish to help others, then the worst decision you can make is to become a parent, because your child will tie up most of your spare time and resources for the next two decades. This is the deepest connection between Singer's Famine Relief Argument and the Famine Relief Argument against Having Children: my argument tries to expose the most important practical implication of Singer's argument—namely, that it requires us to be childless.

A slogan for my view might be, "Moral living begins with not having children." Of course, being childless doesn't ensure a moral lifestyle; you must also be generous with the money you save. If you do have children, then you place a (presumably low) limit on how generous you can be. Consider an analogous slogan: "Being healthy begins with not smoking cigarettes." Not smoking cigarettes doesn't ensure a healthy lifestyle; you must also exercise and eat well. If, however, you do smoke, then you place a (presumably low) limit on how healthy you can be. Both slogans emphasize an omission (not having kids; not smoking), and the omission is significant because its corresponding commission (having kids; smoking) is tempting, commonplace, and ill advised.

4 Five Objections

My argument endorses a two-part plan for moral living: *Don't have kids*, and *spend the money you'll save on the poor*. Some readers might dislike the whole tenor of this. They might think, "Even if I were rich and childless, I wouldn't be obligated to use my money benevolently." That outlook, however, raises questions that are beyond the scope of this paper. In general, I am assuming a viewpoint friendly to Singer's Famine Relief Argument. It would be too much, and too boringly familiar, to review all of the standard objections to Singer's position. Instead, I'll focus on what's distinctive to this paper—namely, its application of Singer's perspective to parenthood. So let's engage with the objector who believes, "Even if it would be immoral for me to spend \$227,000 on a yacht, it would *not* be immoral for me to have a child knowing that I will spend \$227,000 on her; children are relevantly different from yachts."

I'll consider five objections to the Famine Relief Argument against Having Children.

1. Some objections point to disastrous consequences that would ensue if everyone remained childless. If nobody had kids, then the human race would die out, and before it did, there would be the Era of the Elderly, when every living person would be over 70. After that would come the Era of the Very Elderly, the Era of the Half Dead, and, finally, the Era of Please Kill Me But There's No One Still Around Able to Do That. A different objection laments the prospect of taking all the good people out of parenting. It says that if every *good* person were to refrain from procreating, then tomorrow's parents would come only from the Pool of Scoundrels, and the future of humankind would be bleak. The first objection is of the form, "What if everybody did that?" The second objection is of the form, "What if all the good people did that?"

It would be fair, if un-philosophical-sounding, to respond by saying, "But they won't." Both objections are fallacious. Consider the principle underlying them: it would be wrong to do *x* if some very large number of people's doing *x* would have bad consequences. On this principle, it would be wrong for the cable guy to come to my house, because if billions of people came to my house, then there would be no place for anyone to park. Or, it would be wrong for me to go to law school, because if everyone did that, then who would teach the classes? The principle is indefensible.

I have not been arguing that *we should all refrain from having kids*; I've only been arguing that *you, the reader, shouldn't have kids*. Or, to put the thesis more generally: *anyone in our position shouldn't have kids* (where "our position" includes facts about how others will behave as well as facts about our own economic situation).

There is nothing paradoxical in saying that *you* should do something but that it might be bad if *everyone* or if *many people* did it. In deciding what to do, we need to be realistic about what others will do. If we become saints, then we do so alone. The rest of the world won't follow our lead, nor will all the people whom we think would make good parents. Kant notwithstanding, we choose only for ourselves. And the choice that you or I should make is not to have children.

2. The second objection says that having children isn't wrong because having children is so *natural* for human beings. But showing that some behavior is natural is a poor moral defense of it. If we were created in the image of a perfect God, then what's natural for us might always be good—indeed, might always be god-like. But, as the world attests, we have no such nature. Rather, we evolved by the morally blind forces of natural selection, and what's natural for us is what promoted our ancestors' reproductive fitness. Yet what promoted their fitness might have been something horrible, like rape. Rape might be a

natural consequence of males being sexually voracious, aggressive, and physically stronger than females.¹⁴ However, this is no defense of sexual assault.

In general, what's natural bears no regular relation to what's good. Leukemia, failing eyesight, and aggression in males are all natural for human beings, yet all are bad. Nor does saying that something is "natural" entail that it is inevitable. Men can choose whether to assault women, despite the "naturalness" of wanting sex. Similarly, a couple can choose whether to have a baby, even if desiring children is natural.

3. Some people will say that an ethic which prohibits parenthood is too demanding. On this view, a moral system that forbids procreation forbids too much: it is too intrusive, or it expects too much of us, or something like that.

How exactly is the objection supposed to go? The thesis that *having children is immoral* is not literally intrusive; stating the thesis does not, for example, involve going inside somebody's house and looking around to see whether they have kids. Nor does the thesis "expect too much of people"—to say that x is immoral is not to predict or expect that people won't do x. So I think the objection must instead go something like this: "to require that people remain childless is to require them to make a big sacrifice, and we cannot rightfully require big sacrifices of people, even if we can rightfully demand small things from them." The principle behind this objection is that you can't be obliged to do x if x requires you to make a large sacrifice.

In response, one might wonder why morality can't demand big sacrifices of us. Is there any good reason to think such a thing, or do we believe it merely because we imagine ourselves *making* the sacrifice instead of *benefitting* from it, and we are too selfish to like what we imagine? However, I won't pursue that response. Instead, I'll argue that remaining childless is not a big sacrifice.

What is a "big sacrifice?" In my idiolect, a big sacrifice involves giving something up for someone else's benefit, at a great cost to one's own happiness. What is sacrificed is not the thing given so much as the happiness attending it. Others might say that a sacrifice counts as "big" if it involves a lot of effort or a change in lifestyle, even if making the sacrifice doesn't greatly diminish one's welfare.

None of these ideas implies that remaining childless is a big sacrifice. First, not having kids requires no effort at all—it is *the having of kids* that requires great effort. Similarly, not having kids requires no lifestyle change—rather, it is *the having of kids* that requires a lifestyle change. Asking people not to have children is, in a sense, asking them to do nothing at all (except, perhaps, to use birth control). Thus, the Famine Relief Argument against Having Children is not "demanding" of people in these ways.¹⁵

In a sense, however, requiring prospective parents to remain childless does require something "big" of them: it requires them to forego the sort of future they'd been expecting. In considering this point, let's not worry about whether the phrase 'big sacrifice' properly applies to such a counterfactual difference or shift in expectations. Instead, let's ask more directly whether a moral system can properly require that people acquiesce to a far different future than they had been expecting. My argument assumes only that such a requirement is reasonable when the change in the future *would not* lessen the individual's happiness but *would* greatly improve the lives of others. To bar morality from making such judgments—to bar it from requiring such *Pareto*

¹⁴ See R. Thornhill and C. T. Palmer 2000.

¹⁵ The Famine Relief Argument against Having Children does require people to give around \$227,000 to charity, and that requirement might be considered too demanding. However, this is the kind of objection that I won't discuss because it also applies to Singer's Famine Relief Argument.

improvements—would be strangely conservative. The suggestion seems plausible to me only insofar as having to change my life plan sounds disruptive, disconcerting, and inconvenient to me, if not disturbing on an even deeper emotional level. In other words, the objection seems plausible to me only insofar as it seems grounded in protecting my interests. However, the objection cannot be grounded in that way. The objection isn't that "morality cannot require us to be unhappy;" it's that, "morality cannot require us to acquiesce to such a big change—regardless of whether that change would benefit us or harm us."

But the main question is whether being childless greatly reduces one's happiness. Until recently, such questions were left to commonsense observation and good judgment. In the last 15 years, however, a new academic subfield has emerged, variously called "positive psychology," "the economics of happiness" or "happiness studies." This new subfield uses survey data and statistical analyses to investigate the causes of happiness and unhappiness. At root, happiness is hard to study because it cannot be directly measured; instead, we must rely on self-reports, and those reports might be inaccurate for myriad reasons. Thus, the findings of happiness studies are rarely conclusive. However, they probably represent our best-supported beliefs on the subject.

Happiness researchers have studied how children affect parental well-being. The details of these studies are fascinating, but we needn't delve into them, because the upshot is clear: being childless does *not* have a large negative impact on happiness. Instead, the data suggest that childless couples are actually happier than parents. In part, this is because children hurt marital relations¹⁶—relations that improve once the children leave home. "Despite what we read in the popular press," writes Daniel Gilbert, "the only known symptom of 'empty nest syndrome' is increased smiling."¹⁷ Another expert summarized the overall picture like this: "Parents experience lower levels of emotional well-being, less frequent positive emotions and more frequent negative emotions than their childless peers."¹⁸ Not all researchers draw such depressing conclusions for parents, however; another said, "The broad message is not that children make you less happy; it's just that children don't make you *more* happy" (unless, he adds, you have more than one child: "Then the studies show a more negative impact").¹⁹

The range of current expert opinion on the impact of children on parental happiness thus extends from "very little impact" to "a medium-sized negative impact." No expert believes what the third objection requires, namely, that parenting makes people *much* happier, and so an ethic that forbids it could be too demanding. Nor can one object that these studies focus on happiness but ignore meaning. The studies ask respondents such broad questions about their well-being that the respondents' feelings of pride and fulfillment and belonging (or, conversely, their feelings of despair and listlessness and isolation) are taken into account alongside more traditional hedonistic elements.

Some people find these conclusions incredible. In his best-selling book, *Stumbling on Happiness*, Daniel Gilbert devotes only three pages to the topic, yet most of the skeptical questions he receives at his lectures concern it. "I've never met anyone who didn't argue with me about this," he says.²⁰ Given Gilbert's experience, I'll say a little more about the drawbacks of parenting—not to prove that parenting is miserable (it

¹⁶ See, for example, J. M. Twenge, W. K. Campbell and C. A. Foster 2003, and see the National Marriage Project's 2011 "State of Our Unions" report.

¹⁷ D. Gilbert 2006, p. 243.

¹⁸ Robin Simon, quoted in L. Ali 2008.

¹⁹ Andrew Oswald, quoted in J. Senior 2010.

²⁰ Quoted in J. Senior 2010.

isn't), but just to combat any incredulous stares at the data. Gilbert writes: "Careful studies of how women feel as they go about their daily activities show that they are less happy when taking care of their children than when eating, exercising, shopping, napping, or watching television. Indeed, looking after the kids appears to be only slightly more pleasant than doing housework."²¹ Gilbert, himself a parent, adds: "None of this should surprise us. Every parent knows that children are a lot of work—a lot of really *hard* work—and although parenting has many rewarding moments, the vast majority of its moments involve dull and selfless service to people who will take decades to become even begrudgingly grateful for what we are doing."²² Another parent laments that children are "all joy and no fun." Still another says that kids are "a huge source of joy, but they turn every other source of joy to shit."²³ And now consider the alternative. If you don't have children, then what will you do with the time that you would have spent changing diapers, constructing science fair projects, cleaning up spills, purchasing school supplies, acting as a chauffeur, and responding to toddler tantrums and adolescent freeze-outs? Answer: *anything you want*. Even if it's not obvious that having children diminishes parental happiness, it's obvious that it might.

One caveat: the studies on parental happiness do not exclude the possibility that childless couples are happier than parents for reasons that have nothing to do with children. In other words, the link between childlessness and happiness (insofar as it exists) might be non-causal. According to one literature review, the voluntarily childless tend to be: more educated than parents; more likely than parents to be employed in professional and managerial occupations; more likely to have both spouses earning relatively high incomes; more likely to live in urban areas; less religious; less conventional; and less traditional in gender role orientations.²⁴ Not everyone who is childless is *voluntarily* so, but any number of these differences might account for an overall difference in happiness between parents and non-parents. It is even possible that children *add* to parental happiness *even though* parents are less happy than childless couples. For this to be true, however, it would have to be true that actual parents would be *much* less happy than actual non-parents, had the actual parents remained childless. And that claim seems implausible, at least to me.

As I said, happiness-study findings are rarely conclusive. However, overall, there is little reason to think that being childless is such a deprivation that an ethic which requires it could be too demanding. Yet I do recognize one type of exception. Some people want kids *really* badly; their desire for children is like a desperate thirst that needs quenching. For them, it may be psychologically impossible to choose childlessness. I don't think it makes sense, either as social policy or as abstract philosophy, to hold people accountable for choices that are psychologically forced on them (even if they could physically do otherwise). For that reason, even though it would be regrettable for such people to have children (because their \$227,000 could be better spent), I would not regard their decision to have children as immoral. Indeed, I'm not even sure I would regard it as a decision.

4. The fourth objection goes something like this: "What if we raise our children to care about others, and to have the right values? My child might give *more* than \$227,000 to charity. And what if my child becomes the next great inventor or finds the cure for

²¹ D. Gilbert 2006, pp. 244–245.

²² D. Gilbert 2006, p. 245.

²³ The last two quotes come from J. Senior 2010.

²⁴ K. Park 2005, p. 374.

malaria? My child might achieve goods far greater than I could achieve by giving \$227,000 to charity.”

This objection might be called the “Wishful Thinking Objection” or the “Pass-the-Buck-and-Hope Objection.” Of course it is *possible* that our child would become a great humanitarian. But if we compare the number of well-meaning parents to the number of great humanitarians, then we can see how improbable this is. Moreover, we must also consider the possibility of less welcome outcomes. For example, there’s around a 1-in-88 chance that a child born today will be autistic.²⁵ Also, one’s child might have a tremendously bad effect on the world—not necessarily due to malice; maybe just due to causal bad luck.

We could try to improve the utility calculation by self-consciously raising our child to become a great humanitarian. However, that would probably do more harm than good. Children tend to respond to unusual parental pressure either by developing neuroses or by rebelling as soon as they can. Our child might even decide that we were right: the best way to improve the world *is* to have children and to raise them properly. Thus, they might do exactly what we did. And so might their children.

The fact that “child” means both “offspring” and “youth” might encourage us to overestimate the amount of control we’ll have over our children.²⁶ The danger is that we will think of our potential children only as children. *When they are children*, we can influence their lives significantly. However, what matters here is how much good our children would do as adults. And *when they are adults*, we cannot control them any more than our parents now control us.

Sometimes people think that *their* child would have a decent chance of becoming a great benefactor, even though they’d admit that a randomly selected child would have little such chance. But that’s just vanity. Realistically, our children are probably going to be like us: thoughtful and caring but also selfish and susceptible to rationalization.

5. Finally, one might say that I have drawn the wrong conclusion from my arguments. Instead of not procreating, shouldn’t we have children but raise them on less than \$227,000? If we do, then we’ll have more money than our neighbors to be generous with, and our children can more easily right the scales later by benefiting the world more than we could have done by not having them.

In response, I should begin by agreeing that, *if* you have children, then you should raise them frugally, for two reasons: you’ll have more money to be generous with, and your children won’t cultivate expensive tastes. *Live simply so that others can simply live, and raise your children to do the same.* However, I reject the fifth objection for three reasons.

First, I have been assuming that raising a child costs around \$227,000. Yet I would defend the Famine Relief Argument against Having Children even if the cost were much less—say, \$100,000. Thus, I am not sure whether raising a child frugally would bring the cost down enough to invalidate my argument—especially because \$227,000 was a conservative estimate.

Second, for simplicity I have focused on how much *money* it takes to raise a child, but I could also have focused on the *time* and *energy* that parenting consumes. If you

²⁵ See the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website on Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs): <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>, based on the CDC’s “Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)” for March 30, 2012.

²⁶ This ambiguity in the word “child” was exploited for comic purposes on the TV show, *Saturday Night Live*. Jack Handey, one of the show’s writers, said, “I believe in making the world safe for our children, but not our children’s children, because I don’t think children should be having sex.”

have a child, then raising that child will take up time and energy that you could have spent doing volunteer work and/or making more money to give to the poor. Thus, one advantage of not having kids, as compared to frugal parenting, is that childless adults have more time and energy to spend on others.

Finally, if you become a parent, then your love for your children may impel you to spend more money on them than you had intended. Love, though itself a great good, conflicts with benevolence. The great altruist Zell Kravinsky understands this. Kravinsky, who gave his entire \$45-million fortune to charity, once lamented that “The sacrosanct commitment to the family is the rationalization for all manner of greed and selfishness.”²⁷ In practical terms, it might be easier to remain childless than to deny one’s children luxuries that other children enjoy.

5 Concluding Thoughts

Often, writers say or imply that it is immoral to have children under certain exceptional circumstances: for example, if the mother is very young, or if the child would suffer from a severe genetic disorder. It is less common for writers to suggest that parenthood is immoral *in the usual case*. When such an argument is made, it typically takes one of three forms:

- *Pessimism about human life*. Human life contains more bad than good; therefore, we shouldn’t create more human lives. Sometimes people express this idea by saying, “I wouldn’t want to bring a child into this world.”²⁸
- *An unusual rights violation*. Creating a child exposes her to all the harms of life, without her permission. Yet we cannot obtain the consent of the nonexistent. Therefore, we shouldn’t make babies.²⁹
- *Environmental strain*. Increasing the population of first-world countries adds to their overuse of scarce, depletable and environmentally hazardous resources. Therefore, people in those countries shouldn’t have children.³⁰

The Famine Relief Argument against Having Children takes a different approach:

- *Opportunity costs*. In countries like the United States, parents typically spend over \$200,000 to raise a child. That money would be *much* better spent on the poor. Therefore, individuals who live in countries like the United States shouldn’t have children.

I have been advocating this kind of argument in conversation since 1986.³¹ Remarkably, I haven’t found it in the literature.³² The closest discussions I’ve seen concern whether adoption is superior to attaining parenthood via expensive assisted reproductive therapies.³³

²⁷ I. Parker 2004, p. 60. Incidentally, Kravinsky donated one of his kidneys to a stranger—but he didn’t tell his wife, out of fear that she would object. (p. 54)

²⁸ This argument is rarely given by philosophers, but see D. Benatar 2006.

²⁹ See S. Shiffrin 1993 and S. Shiffrin 1999 (Section III). For a related (but different) argument, see D. Benatar 2010.

³⁰ See, for example, T. Young 2001 as well as P. Murtaugh and M. Schlax 2009.

³¹ In 1986, I discussed this argument with some high school classmates as well as with my father.

³² For example, the argument is not given anywhere in D. Archard and D. Benatar 2010, nor is it mentioned in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s informative entry on “Parenthood and Procreation” (accessed in August of 2013). However, I did mention it in S. Rachels 2005, p. 132.

³³ See, for example, T. S. Petersen 2002.

Yet the Famine Relief Argument against Having Children is so obvious that other people must have thought of it, too. In the late 1990s, one philosopher told me that he had heard a version of it which concluded: “Having children is equivalent to mass murder.”³⁴

If other philosophers know of the argument, then why hasn’t anyone written it down? One reason might be that the people who know about it are parents. Who wants to criticize themselves? And who wants to be perceived as implicitly denigrating their own children? And who wants to hear *ad hominem* or *tu quoque* rejoinders? Also, one might feel that giving the argument amounts to criticizing one’s parents—which, at least in my case, would amount to criticizing the two people in the world who have done the most for my welfare. Despite these explanations, it still puzzles me that the argument has not appeared in the literature.

Like many moral arguments, the Famine Relief Argument against Having Children is more likely to win verbal assent than practical compliance. If someone wants to start a family, then philosophical arguments are unlikely to dissuade him or her from doing so. Dry philosophy is no match for long-established habit and visceral desire.

Is the argument therefore doomed to be an empty academic exercise? Not necessarily; it could have good effects on both individual behavior and public policy. First, consider individual behavior. Even if individuals are unlikely to alter their life goals because of it, the argument adds to a growing literature on the disadvantages of parenthood. That literature might, in concert, convince some people who were undecided not to take the parenthood plunge and to pursue a more beneficent life-plan instead. Also, that literature might spur individuals to stop perpetuating social norms that place a high value on parenthood. Finally, reflecting on the argument might move us, as individuals, to help children understand the financial realities of parenthood better and thus to warn them of its burdens.³⁵

In terms of public policy, of course it would be naïve to try to outlaw parenthood for some segment of the population in order to encourage charitable giving. No legislature would seriously consider such a bill, and if such a bill became law, then the law would be perceived as so Orwellian that it could not be effectively enforced, and even the partial enforcement of it would be heavily resented. Nor do I think that anything as coercive as China’s one-child policy could become law in a present-day democracy; the people would not stand for it. However, public policy measures needn’t be so intrusive. In practice, our leaders might want to pursue two separate public advocacy campaigns, one discouraging parenthood and another encouraging charity, and hope that the campaigns will be jointly beneficial. But I won’t try to canvass all the ways in which public policy might aim at encouraging generosity or at lowering the birth rate. Those are big topics, and anyway my concern is not with lowering the birth rate per se but only in conjunction with rationally reallocating resources. One tax proposal that could encourage both childlessness and generosity would be to let childless couples deduct for charitable giving at a higher rate than parents. That might be a good idea.

³⁴ Professor Kai Draper told me this. As to whether parenthood might be considered morally equivalent to mass murder because potential parents should instead devote their resources to saving lives, see P. Singer 2011, pp. 194–199, on whether failing to save the lives of distant strangers is equivalent to murder.

³⁵ I used to volunteer at a day care facility for homeless children, and one day a five-year-old girl named Latesha was playing with a doll, pretending that it was her baby. When she began putting fake make-up on herself in preparation for going out—just play, of course—another volunteer told her sharply, “Are you going out with your friends tonight? Okay, but first you gotta pay the babysitter!” Latesha looked annoyed as she doled out play money to the volunteer. But her compliance as well as her irritation suggested to me that she might have learned something valuable.

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