

On the Duty to Procreate if Pro-Natalism is True¹

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Abstract: This paper defends anti-natalism, the view that procreation is always morally impermissible, improving on recent arguments by Tina Rulli (2016a, 2016b) and others that leverage adoption against pro-natalism. First, I motivate the consensus view, shared by anti-natalists and pro-natalists alike, that procreation isn't morally obligatory. Second, I motivate the claim that assisting children in dire need is *pro tanto* obligatory and that the obligation can be discharged in ways other than adoption. Third, I argue that persons declining to help children in dire need in order to preserve the possibility of having their own biological child acquire a residual obligation to procreate in the future. Fourth, I identify two key takeaways from our argument: pro-natalism threatens procreative autonomy as strongly as anti-natalism and existing moves available to the pro-natalist to counter the apparent undermining of procreative autonomy are also available to the anti-natalist. I consider and respond to objections before concluding.

1. Introduction

This paper defends anti-natalism, the view that procreation is always morally impermissible. The paper improves on recent arguments that leverage *adoption* against pro-natalism, the idea being that existing children ought to be prioritized over the creation of new children. These arguments tend to assume either that adoption is itself obligatory (Friedrich 2013) or that having a child, while not itself obligatory, entails an obligation to adopt rather than procreate (Rulli 2016a & 2016b).

My argument assumes neither thesis, thus avoiding problems associated with both approaches. Moreover, adoption-centered arguments for anti-natalism typically attempt to relieve pressure on anti-natalism by demonstrating its compatibility with a robust account of the interests supporting rights to reproductive autonomy (Rulli 2016a & 2014). I employ a different strategy. Rather than directly relieving this theoretical pressure for anti-natalism, I *apply* the same pressure to *pro-natalism*. It is not just anti-natalist, but *pro-natalism*, that undermines procreative autonomy, at least if interpreted as a mere permission to procreate. To my knowledge, no critique of pro-natalism has relied upon the premise that even the weakest forms of pro-natalism entail obligatory procreation. Thus, my strategy is novel.

First, I motivate the consensus view, shared by anti-natalists and pro-natalists alike, that procreation isn't morally obligatory. Second, I motivate the claim that assisting children in dire need is *pro tanto* obligatory and that the obligation can be discharged in ways other

¹ Earlier drafts of this paper, co-authored by Blake Hereth and Anthony Ferrucci, defended an adoption-based argument for anti-natalism. However, we came to believe that argument was unoriginal. The current draft expands on a supporting argument from that paper developed by Hereth to support anti-natalism and, as a result, is single-authored. My thanks to Anthony Ferrucci for his invaluable help developing these ideas in conversation over the past two years, to Jason Hanna for his comments on what became the central argument of this paper, and to audiences present at both the 2020 Central APA in Chicago and the 2019 Northwest Philosophy Conference at Pacific College.

than adopting, fostering, or other burdensome responsibilities. Third, I show that persons declining to help children in dire need in order to preserve the possibility of having their own biological child render any future procreation *obligatory*. Fourth, I identify two key takeaways from my argument: pro-natalism threatens procreative autonomy as strongly as anti-natalism and existing moves available to the pro-natalist to counter the apparent undermining of procreative autonomy are also available to the anti-natalist. Thus, even if objections from procreative autonomy aren't bad news for anti-natalism in the sense that they offer reason to accept pro-natalism. I consider and respond to objections before concluding.

2. Why Procreation Isn't Obligatory

Among pro-natalists, the consensus is that procreation is morally permitted but not morally required (Browne 2017; Meyers 2016; Epstein & Zosmer 2015; Buller & Bauer 2011). That is, the overwhelming majority of pro-natalists endorse what I call

WEAK PRO-NATALISM (WPN)

In general, procreation is merely morally permissible.

Below, I address why most pro-natalists endorse WPN. Before considering that, however, I'll outline the two competitors to WPN:

STRONG PRO-NATALISM (SPN)

In general, procreation is morally obligatory.

ANTI-NATALISM (AN)

In general, procreation is morally impermissible.²

Catholics traditionally accept SPN for married persons, teaching that "each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life" (Paul VI 1968, II.11). Liberals in procreation ethics strongly oppose both SPN and AN and universally affirm WPN (Cavaliere 2020). But why? In an essay devoted to reconsidering SPN, Anca Gheaus writes of its opposition:

[T]hese claims do not sit well with a liberal view that respects individuals' autonomy. Societies worldwide or committed to individuals' freedom to decide whether or not to have children, and how many. This freedom is protected by legal rights encoded in widely endorsed—if not always binding—international conventions. Not only is there no legal duty to have children, but philosophers discussing the matter generally believe that there is no such enforceable duty either. (Gheaus 2015: 88)

² This construal of AN allows that procreation is *possibly* permissible—that is, in some possible world. But for the AN, that world needs to be radically dissimilar from ours to render procreation permissible.

Gheaus ultimately defends a *collective* obligation to procreate “to avoid great harm to a potential last generation of childless people” (2015: 87), thus endorsing a variant of SPN.³ Another pro-natalist, David Wasserman, remarks,

[M]ost of us do not believe that the prospect of a good or even great life gives fertile couples or other potential child makers an obligation or strong moral reasons to have children. (2015: 135)

Indeed, Wasserman endorses the stronger claim that procreation “is never a requirement” (2015: 135). Similarly, Christine Overall claims that “people’s rights to control their reproductive functions ‘militate against any supposed duty or obligation to reproduce in any way’” (2012: 76). Travis Rieder, in a paper critiquing Tina Rulli’s pro-adoption anti-natalist view, contends that “the radical intimacy involved in forming a family tends to block the application of duty or obligation” (2014: 304), thus entailing the falsity of SPN.⁴

The strong consensus against SPN implies that an argument against pro-natalism of the form *if AN is false then SPN is true* would carry considerable weight. Further, it should have special purchase among pro-natalists who reject AN on the grounds that AN severely restricts procreative autonomy. In the next section, I defend one such argument.

3. How Pro-Natalism Makes Procreation Obligatory

Peter Singer’s famous case of the drowning child, whose salvation requires you to muddy your clothes, underscores the powerful intuition that we have duties of assistance to others. He writes,

It makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor’s child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away. (1972: 231-2)

Some deny Singer’s conclusions (Markoč 2020; Timmerman 2015; Kamm 2000). And as mentioned above, Rieder concludes that adoption is not obligatory. However, none of this defeats a *pro tanto* duty to rescue. We need not agree with Singer that our duty to rescue others is equally strong regardless of distance, that we should prioritize saving more than fewer, or that the duty to rescue can be uniquely discharged by donating to famine relief or (as Rieder discusses) by adopting needy children.

As the least controversial motivation for the duty to rescue is lesser-evil obligation, I will proceed under the assumption that persons have a lesser-evil obligation. Both pro-natalists and anti-natalists alike endorse this view (Miller 2020; Millum & Wendler 2018; Rulli & Millum 2016; Savulescu 2007). Helen Frowe refers to this principle as the *Requirement Thesis*:

REQUIREMENT THESIS:

³ Cf. Smilansky (1995) for other possible justifications of SPN.

⁴ Cf. Wispeleere & Weinstock (2014) for a defense of a position similar to Rulli (2016a).

In ordinary cases, an agent is morally required to act on lesser-evil justifications for harming for the sake of others, unless (a) acting would impose some very significant psychological cost on her, or (b) an alternative action would be equally or less harmful overall. (Frowe 2018: 463)

On that basis, Frowe concludes we're morally obligated to turn the trolley, averting five deaths but killing one as a side effect. We accept the Requirement Thesis as a provisionally adequate account of lesser-evil obligations. In turn, we propose the following characterization of the duty to rescue, which we call the *Assistance Thesis*:

ASSISTANCE THESIS:

In ordinary cases, an agent is morally required to rescue others from serious unjust harms unless (a) acting would impose some very significant cost on them or (b) an alternative action would be equally or less harmful overall.

What does the Assistance Thesis imply about Singer's original drowning-child case?⁵ The only costs to the would-be rescuer are muddy clothes, which hardly compares to the loss of a child. So, the Assistance Thesis requires the bystander to rescue the child. Now let's raise the stakes somewhat and ask what the Assistance Thesis implies:

Interview. Child is drowning in a shallow pond and will die unless you jump into the water to save them. However, you are late for an interview at your dream job and cannot reschedule it. If you save Child, you will miss the interview and lose the job. If you make the interview, you will get the job but Child will die.

Let's assume, for argument's sake, that you decline to save Child and they drown *and* that you're permitted to let Child drown for the sake of securing your dream job. But on your way to the interview, you realize what a lovely day it is and prefer spending it in the local park to getting your dream job. Your actions in that case are plainly and egregiously wrong. Letting Child drown for the sake of your dream job is pushing it, but letting them drown for a nice stroll around the park is beyond the moral pale. The conjunction of these assumptions entails a *moral obligation* to attend your interview, which seems plausible. But now consider a variant of the *Interview* case that's more relevant to the topic at hand:

Wannabe. Child is drowning in a shallow pond and will die unless you jump into the water to save them. However, the pond's water is runoff from a nearby chemical plant that causes infertility. If you save Child, you will become infertile. You reason, "If I save Child, I will never have biological children of my own—a significant cost to me." On that basis, you leave Child to die.

Like in the previous case, let's assume your decision not to provide life-saving aid to Child is justified for this reason. But now let's add one further fact: You never have biological children of your own. You *could* have them; there's no infertility or lack of opportunity. Rather, you just *don't* have them. Your actions in that case seem deeply wrong. Letting Child drown to

⁵ In section 5, I consider the objection (Objection 2) that the Assistance Thesis is false.

preserve your fertility *and then procreating* is one thing. But letting them drown *and then never procreating* seems wrong.⁶ Even assuming a high value to preserving the opportunity to procreate (i.e., fertility), its value pales in comparison to Child's value. I'll offer two arguments for this conclusion: the *Lesser-Evil Argument* and the *Parental Analogy Argument*. Here's the first argument:

The Lesser-Evil Argument

1. You are morally justified in letting Child drown *only because* saving Child would impose substantial burden B. [Assumption]
2. If either (a) the imposition of B would occur irrespective of whether you saved Child or (b) you subsequently decide freely to self-impose B or relinquish your desire that B not be imposed, then your justification for letting Child drown is defeated and you have acted impermissibly. [Assumption]
3. In both *Interview* and *Wannabe*, your actions satisfy either (a) or (b).
4. Therefore, in both *Interview* and *Wannabe*, your actions were impermissible.

Premise (1) is true by stipulation. There's no other justification for refusing to save Child. So is premise (3). That leaves only (2) to defend. Lesser-evil justifications permit causing (or allowing) a lesser harm *only* to prevent some greater harm. Because you know the greater harm, B, would not be prevented by allowing Child to drown under either (a) or (b), allowing Child to drown is not lesser-evil justified.⁷ To motivate the second argument, consider the following case:

Newbie. You witness your own child, Spawn, drowning in your pool. Spawn will die unless you jump in and save them. However, your pool was recently treated with chemicals that cause infertility. If you save Spawn, you will become infertile. You reason, "I love Spawn, but I have always wanted *two* biological children, and saving Spawn would prevent that." On that basis, you let Spawn drown.

Your reasons are insufficient to justify letting Spawn drown. So, you act impermissibly if you let Spawn drown in order to preserve the possibility of having additional biological children. Even assuming your obligation to save *someone else's* child is weaker than your obligation to save *your own* child, it's not weak enough to justify not saving them. First, if duties of rescue are even partially grounded in the child's claim-rights, then it's hard to see why the mere fact that Child isn't biologically yours would weaken their claim-right to your assistance. Second, the duty of rescue is typically strong and not limited to kin. It justifies different prioritization but not nonparticipation. Thus, we have our second argument:

The Parental Analogy Argument

⁶ My thanks to Jason Hanna for this objection.

⁷ This allows for cases where you mistakenly but reasonably believe that letting Child drown would avert B. Thus, I don't claim that lesser-evil justifications require that the greater evil be averted. All that's necessary is that the agent causing the lesser evil is not culpable for the non-prevention of the greater evil, which they would be under both (a) and (b).

1. You would be morally unjustified in letting Spawn drown for the sole purpose of preserving future opportunities for procreation. [Assumption]
2. The moral differences between rescuing Spawn and rescuing Child are restricted to priority-based considerations. [Assumption]
3. The purpose of preserving future opportunities for procreation is not a priority-based consideration. [Assumption]
4. Therefore, you would be morally unjustified in letting Child drown for the sole purpose of preserving future opportunities for procreation. [From 1-3]

So, if you leave Child to die in *Wannabe*, you acquire a *moral obligation* to use the opportunity you preserved—i.e., to procreate. That conclusion contradicts the consensus view that procreation isn't morally obligatory. In the next section, we explain how this changes the debate over anti-natalism, procreative autonomy, and caring for existing children. Before moving on, however, let's consider precisely *how many* persons are under the sort of obligation described in *Wannabe*.

In 2019, births in the United States declined by 1%, with 58.3 births per 1,000 women aged 15-44 (Martin *et al* 2020). Still, most people reproduce, with Pew Research Center showing a total fertility rate of 1.73 children per 1 woman across their lifetimes (Livingston 2019). By contrast, only 2% of Americans have adopted a child with nearly 108,000 children awaiting adoption and over half a million in foster care, according to Adoption Network (2021). These statistics might tempt the inference that since most Americans procreate, most Americans discharge their obligation to needy children detailed in the Assistance Thesis. We are happy to grant this inference for argument's sake. However, it does nothing to undermine our argument. The fact that most Americans meet their obligation to needy children presupposes the very obligation everyone rejects, namely, an obligation to procreate. The vast majority of Americans—nearly 98% of them, according to Adoption Network—don't adopt. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Administration for Children and Families reports that, as of 2019, nearly 424,000 children were in foster care (AFCARS 2020: 1). There's limited data on the number of foster *parents*, but let's assume there are two foster parents for each foster child: $424,000 \times 2 = 848,000$ foster parents. That's a mere 0.33% of the 2019 total American *adult* population of 255 million.

These are imperfect measures of the extent to which American adults provide much-needed aid to children. However, they are evidence of minimal or insufficient involvement. The Assistance Thesis does not require adoption or foster care, though there will be some cases in which those are the only ways to help specific needy children. Instead, the Assistance Thesis requires us *to help needy children*, an obligation whose satisfaction can take a variety of forms: adoption, fostering, providing affordable or free childcare, caring for your siblings' children, donating to Oxfam, becoming a Pre-K or K-12 teacher, working for adoption or foster agencies, etc. Efforts like these prevent a range of harms from the urgently important (e.g., malnutrition, inadequate housing, substance abuse, and suicide) to the eventually important (e.g., lacking a loving family or a sense of belonging, thinking no one cares, sibling reunification, and future economic and employment opportunities).

The empirical evidence strongly suggests that most Americans stockpile their resources, skills, and time for their own future biological children. The National Philanthropic Trust's "Charitable Giving Statistics" for 2017 estimate that only 30% of U.S. adults volunteered financially or otherwise to *some* philanthropic cause (National

Philanthropic Trust 2020). Furthermore, these data are restricted to the United States, thus excluding billions of adults whose efforts to aid children are similarly stagnant. So, it is not the rare American who is obligated to procreate, but rather the *overwhelming majority* of Americans—and, indeed, adults worldwide. So, unless AN is true or the Assistance Thesis is false, then SPN is true.

4. How This Changes the Debate

Most people, including most bioethicists, think AN is too restrictive. Under liberal approaches, AN is false because, if it were true, it would violate reproductive autonomy. How would it do that? Two general answers are often provided: (a) by undermining a moral permission to reproduce or (b) by justifying coercive measures to prevent reproduction. Let's consider each in turn, beginning with (a).

It's obvious that AN undermines a moral permission to reproduce. However, equally bad (if not worse) is undermining a moral permission *not* to reproduce. SPN does just that. So, the acceptance of (a) as the measure of a plausible theory of ethical reproduction undermines SPN in addition to AN. If, as I have argued, WPN collapses into SPN, then (a) is hardly the bludgeoning tool it once was against AN. On, then, to option (b).

First, we should note that neither SPN nor AN *simpliciter* justifies coercively preventing reproduction. David Benatar (2013: 102-13), for example, denies it, although he has recently offered a partial defense of it (2020). Still, some such as Sarah Conly (2016) support state-based coercive measures to limit procreative autonomy and we can grant some credence to the worry that authoritarian states like China could again curtail reproductive liberties. Second, defenders of SPN might try to regain their advantage over AN by appealing to the 'right to do wrong'. The existence of such a right could allow SPN's advocates to claim that while not procreating is wrong, third parties are forbidden from forcing you to act rightly. Judith Jarvis Thomson (1971: 59-64) famously invoked the right to do wrong to defend abortion rights, and Andrew I. Cohen (2014) has more recently claimed that famine relief is obligatory but unenforceable. But this right can just as easily be embraced by AN. Thus, SPN cannot regain its advantage in this way.

The irony that *pro*-natalism undermines reproductive autonomy should not go understated, as reproductive autonomy is *the* principal objection to AN. Thus, if *pro*-natalism is equally violative of reproductive autonomy, the *comparative* case against AN is substantially weakened and the debate has significantly shifted. I am unsure what it would mean to view procreative autonomy as a *non-comparative* (or *intrinsic*) problem for AN, but one possibility is that it provides reason to reject AN but no reason to accept SPN in its place. That much seems right but its import is unclear: If AN, SPN, and WPN exhaust the possible views of permissible procreation, and if undermining reproductive autonomy is a feature of all three, then reproductive autonomy is *irrelevant* to debates over which view is true.

5. Objections & Replies

In this section, I anticipate a number of potential objections to the paper’s main argument and argue none succeeds. Each objection is stated and followed by a reply.

Objection 1: Obligatory procreation is more plausible than wrongful procreation because the latter entails widespread culpability whereas the former does not.

AN entails only that procreators acted impermissibly, not that they were culpable. Further, as most humans are (nonculpably) unaware of the truth of AN, most procreation is nonculpable.

Objection 2: The Assistance Thesis is false and there’s no minimal duty of rescue, including for needy children.

This undermines WPN’s intuitive status, as a minimal duty of rescue is widely endorsed (MacKay & Rulli 2017; Douglas 2016). It entails the absence of even a *pro tanto* obligation to rescue Singer’s drowning child. Thus, it furnishes grounds for a new AN argument: If there’s a duty of rescue, then AN is true.

Objection 3: The Assistance Thesis entails a form of effective altruism, but effective altruism is false.⁸

Effective altruism is the view that each person ought to maximize the good they do (MacAskill 2017). Not surprisingly, this view is principally endorsed by consequentialists like Peter Singer (2015) and critiqued by non-consequentialists (Gabriel 2017; McMahan 2016). Whether or not effective altruism is true, the Assistance Thesis doesn’t entail it. A principal critique of effective altruism, like the consequentialism that often undergirds it, is excessively demanding, but the Assistance Thesis allows for justified abstention in the face of significant life projects. Thus, unlike effective altruism, the Assistance Thesis does not require that you forgo your career and instead become an altruist or ascetic.

Objection 4: If needy children did not exist, procreation would not be obligatory, and thus AN is not confirmed by the argument.

First, needy children do exist, so (given this paper’s central argument) procreation is generally obligatory. Second, even the moral possibility of obligatory procreation (which the objection concedes) is sufficient to falsify WPN. Indeed, this is why Wasserman claims procreation “is never a requirement” (2015: 135) and why Overall denies “any supposed duty or obligation to reproduce in any way” (2012: 76).

Objection 5: The argument only requires that we refrain from procreation until we have discharged our obligation to existing children. Thus, the argument doesn’t entail AN.

This misunderstands the argument. The central problem for WPN isn’t that procreation is *temporarily* impermissible, but rather that it was *ever obligatory*—or, worse still, *generally*

⁸ Thanks to Jason Hanna for this objection.

morally obligatory for prospective procreators. It's the inclusion of obligatory procreation, not wrongful procreation, that threatens WPN.

Objection 6: The conclusion that procreation can be obligatory is morally trivial (i.e., in cases of emergency), as virtually anything could be obligatory.

If cases of emergency justify a lesser-evil obligation to procreate, that obligation, like almost all lesser-evil obligations, would be enforceable. That entails an obligation to rape, or at least asexually inseminate, in cases where consent is not given but is necessary to prevent the greater evil. Such a horrific conclusion is both false and morally non-trivial.

Objection 7: The conclusion that procreation can be obligatory is plausible in some cases, such as in a case where a partnership would not have been formed without a promise of procreation.

Unlike lesser-evil obligations, promises are not always enforceable and thus largely preclude the possibility of an obligation to procreate nonconsensually. First, it is widely acknowledged that fulfilling promises ceases to be obligatory when doing so requires the promise-maker to face unreasonable burdens (Hurd 2017; Kolodny & Wallace 2003). An unwanted pregnancy is an unreasonable burden, and it's doubtful a hypothetical partner would be *obligated* to procreate if they could eliminate the obligation by simply ceasing to desire it.⁹ Second, this objection fails to rescue WPN, which requires (contrary to my argument's conclusion) that procreation be *generally* permissible, not just in promissory cases.

6. Conclusion

Most pro-natalists view procreation as morally permissible but not obligatory. Thus, they accept what I call Weak Pro-Natalism (WPN) while rejecting Strong Pro-Natalism (SPN). Additionally, pro-natalists of all stripes reject Anti-Natalism (AN).

This essay has endeavored to push pro-natalists into an uncomfortable dilemma: either accept SPN or accept AN. In brief, pro-natalists who accept a mix of empirical facts (i.e., that needy children existed and can be helped by any minimally responsible prospective parent) and moral principles (i.e., that there's a duty to help needy children) can justify allocating their resources to procreation rather than caring for needy children, but at the cost of procreation becoming *obligatory*. To evade the problem, pro-natalists cannot appeal to the right to do wrong or unenforceable obligations without both conceding SPN and undermining the case against AN. Nor can pro-natalists claim that the obligation to procreate wouldn't exist provided that eligible prospective parents never procreate, as that effectively concedes SPN and conflates an obligation's *existing* with it being *satisfied*. Indeed, even if no needy children existed, it remains counterfactually true that the existence of such children would, for persons choosing to procreate rather than care for needy children, render their procreation obligatory. Finally, pro-natalists attempting to escape the dilemma by denying a

⁹ Alternatively, they can be morally excused (but still obligated). However, if moral excuse is sufficient to square SPN with a robust account of procreative autonomy, then the same holds for AN.

minimal duty of rescue thereby furnish a new argument for AN: If there's a duty of rescue, then AN is true.

In summary, then, WPN is unstable. To be a pro-natalist, one must concede—as Catholics have historically done—that procreation is generally obligatory, thus endorsing SPN. The more attractive alternative, however, is to embrace AN and concede that procreation is generally wrong. Wrongful procreation, however counterintuitive to pro-natalists, is less counterintuitive than obligatory procreation.

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