



South African



South African Journal of Philosophy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsph20>

Here's not looking at you, kid: A new defence of anti-natalism

Blake Hereth & Anthony Ferrucci

To cite this article: Blake Hereth & Anthony Ferrucci (2021) Here's not looking at you, kid: A new defence of anti-natalism, South African Journal of Philosophy, 40:1, 14-33, DOI: [10.1080/02580136.2020.1871566](https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2020.1871566)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2020.1871566>



Published online: 19 Mar 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Here's not looking at you, kid: A new defence of anti-natalism¹

Blake Hereth^{1*}  and Anthony Ferrucci² 

¹Department of Philosophy, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, United States

²Department of Philosophy, Green River College, Auburn, United States

*Correspondence: sbhereth@uark.edu

Anti-natalism is the view that persons ought morally to refrain from procreation. We offer a new argument for a principled version of anti-natalism according to which it is *always* impermissible to procreate in the actual world since doing so will violate the right to physical security of future, created persons once those persons exist and have the right. First, we argue that procreators can be responsible for non-trivial harms that befall future persons even if they do not cause them and if the harms are temporally delayed, provided the harms are reasonably foreseeable by procreators. For example, consider a case in which we can create a person in a room that is dangerously aflame. It would be wrong to do so since, once the person exists, they have a right that we avoid being morally responsible for unjust harms to them, and the fire in which we created them is one such unjust harm. Second, we argue that procreators are responsible for unjust harms that befall their children, since many non-trivial physical harms (e.g. broken bones, lower respiratory illnesses) are reasonably foreseeable by procreators. Thus, parents wrong their children by creating them. Third, we argue that procreators are also responsible for the unjust harms their children commit against others, since it is reasonably foreseeable that every person will inflict unjust, non-trivial physical harms on someone else. But this is worse since parents thereby share in their child's future culpable intent. Finally, we consider a number of objections to anti-natalism and argue that none of them succeed against anti-natalism generally or against our argument grounded in the right to physical security.

Introduction

Anti-natalism is the view that it is morally impermissible to bring a child into existence. Anti-natalism is a moral position concerning prospective procreation. As such, it is a moral thesis against procreating for the purposes of bringing new humans into existence. Much recent philosophical literature has been devoted to this topic. Authors who defend this view do so for a variety of reasons. In this section, we discuss some, but not all, of the arguments used to support the anti-natalist position. We will not discuss recent criticisms of these arguments given space restrictions, though much can be said about these arguments.

Anti-natalism's most recognisable defender has been David Benatar. Benatar offers three primary arguments in defence of the anti-natalist position that will be discussed in turn. The first two arguments are labelled "philanthropic" arguments since they focus on avoiding harm to potential children brought into existence. The third argument is "misanthropic" since the argument centres around humans who are already here, specifically the propensity of harm current humans exert over other humans and the natural environment, especially including non-human animals. The first

1 We thank audiences at the 2019 Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress (RoME), the 2019 National Conference of the Italian Society of Political Philosophy, and the 2019 Philosophers on Holiday Workshop for helpful discussion. We also thank our RoME commentator Tiffany Campbell, our rabidly pro-natalist friend and colleague Paul Tubig, and two anonymous reviewers at this journal for extensive feedback and conversation.

philanthropic argument is known as the asymmetry argument. This argument, from Benatar, is as follows:

The asymmetry argument

- (P1) Even if there were more good than bad, the presence of *any* bad would be sufficient for coming into existence to be a harm.
- (P2) Every life includes some bad.
- (C) Therefore, coming into existence is *always* a harm (Benatar and Wasserman 2015, 22; emphasis added).²

The argument can also be represented by the following chart:

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
Presence of harm (bad) (-)	(3) Absence of harm (good) (+)
(2) Presence of benefit (good) (+)	(4) Absence of benefit (not bad) (neutral)

Here, anti-natalists like Benatar defend an asymmetry between Scenario A and Scenario B such that anti-natalism is *axiologically* favoured. Since bringing a child into existence always involves some harm (P2), it follows that there is a presumption against bringing them into existence, since, according to Benatar (in Benatar and Wasserman 2015, 22), “[h]owever, although it is good for those who exist to enjoy benefits, those benefits are not a net advantage over never existing”. But, according to Benatar, even though the asymmetry argument shows that coming into existence is always a harm, the argument by itself does not establish that coming into existence is always wrong. To successfully establish anti-natalism, according to Benatar, requires further argumentation.

The second well-known argument by Benatar, and one that he thinks successfully establishes anti-natalism, is known as the quality-of-life argument. Our reconstruction of this argument runs as follows:

The quality-of-life argument

- (P1) If every time we create a new human life, we are creating a being with a very poor quality of life, then there is a strong presumptive case against creating such lives.
- (P2) Created humans have a very poor quality of life.
- (C) Therefore, there is a strong presumptive case against creating such lives.³

A few points are in order here. First, with respect to the premises of this argument, Benatar claims that humans are exceptionally bad at judging their own quality of life. While Benatar and other anti-natalists do not deny that life can contain many pleasures, the harms that befall humans are much greater than whatever positives life affords. In other words, humans have a psychological tendency to overestimate life’s positives. Take typical human bodily pleasures derived from food, sex, etc. Such pleasures are fleeting, momentary, and quickly forgotten. Life’s extreme pains, however, are much more durable and striking. Consider debilitating human diseases and cancers. In such cases, pain can be constant, unbearable, and debilitating. As such, humans often claim that such

2 See also David Benatar (2006) and David Benatar and David Wasserman (2015) for more specifics on the asymmetry argument.

3 See Benatar and Wasserman’s (2015) extended discussion of the quality-of-life argument. Benatar (2006) also outlines why he thinks human self-assessments of quality-of-life are unreliable.

pains are compensated by the fact that life contains many joys and pleasures. However, as Benatar (in Benatar and Wasserman 2015, 72) claims, “[c]easing to exist and never coming into existence are, unsurprisingly, asymmetrical. Existence is terrible business but never existing is immeasurably better than ceasing to exist”.

The third, and more recently articulated argument for anti-natalism is called the misanthropic argument. This argument, directly from Benatar, is as follows:

The misanthropic argument

- (P1) We have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing into existence new members of species that cause (and will likely continue to cause) vast amounts of pain, suffering, and death.
- (P2) Humans cause vast amounts of pain, suffering, and death.
- (C) Therefore, we have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing new humans into existence (Benatar and Wasserman 2015, 79).

Premise two (P2) of this argument is defended in various ways. First, as Benatar points out, humans are remarkably prone to self-deception and manipulation by others, which invariably leads to the mistreatment of other humans. Manipulation of the masses by political and military leaders of various stripes, warlords, as well the ease with which humans fall victim to their own cognitive biases, have been responsible for catastrophic numbers of human deaths, torture, and other forms of suffering. Similar to the quality-of-life argument, humans are remarkably bad at judging life’s circumstances, Benatar argues, and quick to downplay or minimise the extent to which humans can be manipulated to cause widespread suffering.

P2 is further supported by the sheer volume of actual harms perpetrated by humans against others since the arrival of our species. Historical and contemporary examples are not hard to find. Slavery of various kinds, rape, murder, and other acts of deliberate and non-deliberate violence all can be used to support P2 on behalf of the anti-natalist. Later in this article, we will expand on Benatar’s misanthropic argument concerning discussion of anthropogenic climate change. While Benatar and Wasserman (2015) does discuss climate change in support of this argument, we believe that the argument can be made more forcefully based on recent climate change trends and other factors.

Like anti-natalists, pro-natalist arguments come in many forms. The pro-natalist position holds that it is generally morally permissible to procreate. Since we defend anti-natalism in this article, we have spent more time focusing on the arguments in favour of the anti-natalist position. But this is not to say that there are not worthwhile arguments that can be given to support the pro-natalist position. However, generally, pro-natalists such as David Wasserman contend that there are strong relational and child-centred reasons that justify the moral permissibility of human procreation. These reasons revolve around the idea that prospective parents

can act permissibly in bearing a child they expect to have a worthwhile life, but that in justifying that decision to the child who results from it, parents can adduce the good of the life and relationship they sought with an unknown and unknowable child (in Benatar and Wasserman 2015, 188).

Even though Wasserman concedes that prospective parents may fail that justification for several reasons, prospective parents are morally exempt from the kinds of charges brought against them from anti-natalists such as Benatar. In the next section, we explicate and defend a particular interpretation of the right to physical security (or RPS), defending it against competing accounts of the right and illustrating its application to procreation. In the third section, we argue that the RPS of offspring is violated by their procreators, making procreation impermissible. In the fourth section, we argue that since offspring foreseeably violate the RPS of other persons during their lives, and since this can be prevented by foregoing procreation (which wrongs no one), avoiding procreation is morally obligatory. In the fifth section, we show how these considerations entail not only a strong

presumptive obligation against procreation, but an *all-things-considered* obligation. Then, in the sixth section, we raise and respond to a fistful of objections to our arguments and show that none succeed.

The right to physical security

We will do three things in this section. First, we will articulate a particular formulation of the right to physical security. Second, we will defend that formulation over its competitors. Third, we will explain why our formulation is more relevant to procreation.

Formulating RPS

Here is our formulation of the right to physical security:

RPS: All persons have a presumptive right that others avoid moral responsibility for unjust physical harms to them.

So defined, RPS is a right of *persons*. It might also be a right of non-persons, but it is minimally a right of persons.⁴ RPS is a *presumptive* right, since it can be waived or forfeited. It is a right *against moral agents*: individuals who can presently act on the basis of moral reasons. It is a right against them that they *avoid being morally responsible* for harms to which S neither consents nor is liable. It is *waived* with respect to some physical harm H just in case S consents to H and *forfeited* just in case S does not consent to H but nevertheless is morally responsible for some unjust harm. Here are examples showing the distinction between waiving and forfeiting RPS:

Boxing: Anthony and Blake are aspiring boxers who agree to train with each other. As both of them know, this training involves punching each other in the face repeatedly to build stamina. Anthony punches Blake in the face for fifteen minutes, and then Blake does the same to Anthony.

Knockout: Anthony and Blake are aspiring boxers who do not know each other when they cross paths in the street. Wanting to impress his friends, Anthony tries to deliver a surprise knockout blow to Blake. Fortunately, Blake is quick and blocks Anthony's punch, delivering a swift kick to Anthony and then escaping.

Anthony waives RPS in the first example and forfeits it in the second. By agreeing to train with Blake and *allow* Blake to punch him, Anthony consents to being hit.⁵ He not only engages in voluntary activity the result of which is that Blake will hit Anthony, he volunteers to be hit. In the second case, Anthony does not volunteer to be hit, but he *does* voluntarily (and unjustly) threaten Blake. A result of this voluntary and unjust activity is that Anthony loses his right that Blake not kick him.

Defending RPS

There are several initially attractive alternatives to RPS, but they falter upon further examination. We will now explore and refute them. Let us begin with

RPS*: All persons have a presumptive right that others avoid *causing* unjust harms to them.

The difference between our RPS and RPS* is a matter of *scope of obligation*. Whereas RPS says persons have a presumptive right against others *being morally responsible for* certain harms, RPS* says people have a right against others *causing* those harms. Thus, RPS* indicts a narrower class of harmful actions against persons. We think this is too narrow. To see why, consider that both RPS and RPS* would condemn Blake's action in the following case:

4 Our view is that all sentient individuals have this right. But you need not agree with this claim to agree with our narrower anti-natalist conclusion about persons.

5 This case is importantly different than a similar case in which Anthony and Blake consent only to spar competitively. In which case they do not consent to being hit (which is why they attempt to *evade* the other's punches) but they *do* make themselves liable to be harmed.

Murder: Blake does not like Italians, so Blake breaks into Anthony's home and kills Anthony.

Intentionally causing someone's death is one way of being morally responsible for their death, and thus RPS condemns Blake's action. Causing someone's death is a way of causing someone's death, and thus RPS* also condemns Blake's action. Now consider the case of

Assassin: Blake does not like Italians, so Blake hires Assassin to break into Anthony's home and kill Anthony.

RPS condemns Blake's action in this case, since hiring Assassin is yet another way of being morally responsible for Anthony's death. But Blake does not *cause* Anthony's death, so RPS* does not condemn Blake's action in this case.⁶ Since complicity in someone's murder is surely something persons are obligated to avoid, and since there appears to be a right against complicity, RPS is more plausible than RPS*. Finally, consider one final competitor to RPS:

RPS:** All persons have a presumptive right that others avoid creating or redirecting unjust harms to them.

The language of "creating" is importantly weaker than "causing" since it accounts for cases like *Assassin* in which Anthony's death is created but not caused by Blake, who hires another to do (i.e. cause) the dirty work. It also accounts for tram cases such as the following:

Bigot: Blake has been yearning to kill an Italian and comes across a tram track on which Anthony, an Italian, is stuck. A runaway, unoccupied tram is presently headed for Carly, an Australian, and will kill her unless Blake redirects the tram to hit Anthony. Realising one life will be lost either way but hating Italians, Blake redirects the tram to kill Anthony.

Because Blake's intention is not to save Carly but to kill Anthony for being Italian, Blake's harming Anthony is *prejudicial*. For Blake, saving Carly is a mere side effect of killing Anthony; were Blake able to kill Anthony without saving Carly, Blake would do so. Thus, the harm Blake poses to Anthony is an unjust harm since it is a harm posed with prejudicial intent. RPS** explains why this is wrong: because although Blake does not *create* the harm to Anthony, Blake nevertheless redirects it.

The problem with RPS** is that it cannot account for cases like *Bigot* in which prejudicial intent is absent. Consider a case in which Blake must choose between Anthony and Carly where Blake lacks any motivating prejudice. Call this case *Beneficent*. Intuitively, Blake is permitted to choose either course of action: pull the switch (thereby saving Carly but killing Anthony) or do not (thereby letting Carly die but not redirecting the threat to Anthony). Although Blake redirects the threat to Anthony which is arguably unjust, it is *justified*. The most plausible explanation for this justification is that Anthony and Carly *both* have a right to rescue. The second-best explanation for this justification is that neither has a right to be rescued, but both have a right against Blake not to redirect the tram their way. But there are two devastating problems with the next-best explanation. First, while it explains why Blake would be justified in letting Carly die, it *undermines* our strong intuition that Blake is also permitted to save Carly instead. Second, if Carly has no right to rescue, then nor would *five* Carlys, and thus it would be *impermissible* to redirect the tram to Anthony to save five Carlys, which is implausible. Thus, we should accept that both Anthony and Carly have a right to rescue.⁷ It is here that RPS proves itself superior, again because of scope of obligation: Whereas RPS** restricts *how* we can be responsible for unjust harms to others (i.e. by creating or redirecting unjust harms to them), RPS is non-specific and thus more flexible to account for cases like *Beneficent*. To illustrate, RPS performs better than RPS** on cases like the following:

⁶ Or, if RPS* *does* condemn Blake's action, it is for reasons other than Anthony's right to physical security. But Anthony's right to physical security is clearly the culprit here, so that is further reason to reject RPS*.

⁷ For a different defence of a duty to rescue as it applies to tram cases, see Helen Frowe (2018).

Worse bigot: Blake has been yearning to kill an Italian and comes across a tram track on which Anthony, an Italian, is stuck. A runaway, unoccupied tram is presently headed down a track toward Anthony, who will die unless Blake redirects the tram to an empty track. Despising Italians, Blake allows the tram to run Anthony down, killing him.

Unlike in *Bigot*, Blake neither creates nor redirects an unjust harm to Anthony. The tram is bound for Anthony already and will kill him unless Blake intervenes. Thus, RPS** lacks the resources to explain the apparent impermissibility of Blake's decision to let Anthony die.⁸ However, RPS can explain it: By letting Anthony die for prejudicial reasons, Blake bears responsibility not only for the fact *that* the tram kills Anthony, but also *why* it kills him. Responsibility for the former fact entails responsibility for *harm*, and responsibility for the latter fact entails responsibility for *unjust* harm. Thus, on our preferred variant of RPS, failure to rescue others from harms to which they have neither consented nor are liable makes one at least presumptively morally responsible for unjust harms to them. Thus, failure to rescue is a presumptive violation of one's right to physical security. This is why, as we initially claimed, unjust harms include harms to which persons neither consent nor are liable. Foreseeable harms that occur absent the intervention of agents can be harms to which persons neither consent nor are liable. Thus, our conception of RPS entails that *foreseen* (and reasonably *foreseeable*) harms that agents can reasonably prevent are harms which, if agents fail to prevent them, become *unjust harms* for which those agents are morally responsible.⁹

The relevance of RPS

Before showing why RPS entails anti-natalism, three further remarks are worth making about RPS as a pathway to anti-natalism. First, RPS is popularly accepted as an intuitive account of the moral rights that undergird defensive rights. If it can be shown to support anti-natalism, as we think it can, that is powerful support for anti-natalism.

Second, our preferred variant of RPS avoids a strictly causal account of responsibility for unjust harms. This helps us sidestep certain problems associated with procreation ethics, such as the non-identity problem. According to the non-identity problem, coming into existence cannot itself be a harm because it does not make anyone worse-off than they otherwise would be, since they would not exist otherwise and thus would lack a welfare altogether. Because we do not assume that coming into existence is *itself* a harm, our defence of anti-natalism avoids the non-identity problem. Moreover, because we do not assume that procreators *cause harm* to their offspring, we avoid committing ourselves to the dubious position that common harms such as cancer and premature death at age 40 are caused by procreators.

Third, RPS carries with it some serious implications about *moral liability*. If we are right that RPS entails anti-natalism, and if it is true (as everyone thinks it is) that violating the right to physical security generally results in the responsible party being morally liable to defensive or punitive harms, then an anti-natalist RPS might have radical implications not only for what obligations we have, but also what obligations we can permissibly *enforce*. As we argue later in the article, RPS indeed supports enforceable duties for procreators, and violations may justify defensive or punitive actions including forced sterilisation, mandatory abortion, fines, or imprisonment. We argue this should not be surprising if, as we think, RPS is non-trivially violated by procreation.

8 This is perhaps particularly bad since the appeal of RPS** is that it captures the apparent impermissibility of Blake redirecting the tram to kill Anthony in *Bigot*. What cases like *Worse bigot* reveal is that it is Anthony's *prejudicial intent*, rather than *redirecting a threat*, that better explains our intuitions about these cases.

9 Because our conception of RPS entails that persons can be morally responsible for harms they *allow* (as opposed to cause), one might worry that we cannot accept the doing/allowing or killing/letting die distinctions. On one reading of the distinction, doing/killing is intrinsically worse than allowing/letting die. However, our conception of RPS requires only that killing and letting die be *wrongs* (i.e. voluntary behaviours against which persons have a presumptive right), not that they be *equal* wrongs. That is, we claim the wrongs involved are of the same *kind* (since they both involve a violation of RPS), which itself does not require they are wrongs of the same *degree*. Explanatory unity should not be confused with explanatory flattening.

Harms to your offspring

In the previous section, we defended the following formulation of the right to physical security:

RPS: All persons have a presumptive right that others avoid moral responsibility for unjust physical harms to them.

We argued that our formulation is superior to its chief competitors. Thus, we should accept RPS, at least provisionally. In this section, we will do two things. First, we will argue that RPS makes procreation impermissible for persons who would experience non-trivial harms if they were created. Second, we will defend the view that substantive forms of moral and criminal liability accrue to most procreators.

Moral responsibility

We begin with the following example:

Newborn Blake has magical powers: With a snap of their finger, a new person appears out of nothing. But Blake's powers work only inside the holodeck, a place where the environment is always changing due to a randomised computer program. And Blake's creations cannot live outside the holodeck. Unfortunately, the safety protocols are always off, meaning that persons inside the holodeck are vulnerable to whatever environment is created. The odds of an environment resulting in non-trivial physical harms to a person are at least 80% for any given time someone is on the holodeck. As the holodeck comes to life, Blake snaps their fingers and creates a new person, Anthony, who at some point suffers a non-trivial physical harm.

In our view, Blake's actions in *Newborn* violate Anthony's right to physical security. The reason why is because although Blake is not responsible for the fact that the holodeck is dangerous, Blake is still responsible for bringing Anthony into existence within the holodeck. Blake's responsibility is not mitigated by the fact that Blake does not *cause* the harms to Anthony, as we have shown with cases like *Assassin*. Nor is it mitigated by the fact that non-trivial harms to Anthony are not *guaranteed*. They are not guaranteed in Russian roulette either, but it is still a plain violation of RPS to give someone no option to play the game.¹⁰ Nor is it mitigated by the fact that the harms to Anthony might be *temporally delayed*. Infecting someone with a live Ebola virus will not kill them immediately, but it is still impermissible because you are responsible for their unjust death when they eventually die. Nor is it mitigated by the fact that Anthony *lacked a right* to physical security prior to being created. It is sufficient that Blake is responsible for the fact that a person with that right exists at all, and that Anthony is brought into the world under circumstances where his physical security is threatened.¹¹ While Blake's *intent* can mitigate their responsibility, it cannot make it permissible for them to create Anthony. Notice that Blake's actions in *Newborn* seem impermissible despite the fact that Blake's intentions go undescribed. That is evidence that Blake's intentions, even if they are very good, would not make creating Anthony permissible. Even if Blake was not aware of the risks to Anthony, and even if Blake believed Anthony's creation would result in pure bliss for Anthony, this makes no difference to the facts that there are serious risks and Anthony has a right. And those facts generate an obligation for Blake not to create Anthony.¹²

10 Since persons lack a choice over their creation, creating them effectively leaves them no choice but to exist within the holodeck with all its risks. That is analogous (although perhaps not quite as risky) to giving someone no choice but to play Russian roulette.

11 Some philosophers are puzzled by the possibility of duties to future generations. We do not see why they should be, at least in cases where you are responsible for the existence of future generations. If you are responsible for the existence of future generations *knowing* the risks to them, then you are responsible for the fact that those harms befall *them* once the harms eventuate. The fact that you are not responsible for the world's risks makes no difference here. If anything, your creating these individuals is what makes them "risks" in the first place. In a world without persons (or, more broadly, without sentient individuals), earthquakes, floods, fires, and diseases are not threats at all.

12 We assume it is possible for a moral agent to be obligated to do something even if they are unaware of that obligation.

The analogy to sexual procreation (and cloning) should be obvious: Our world is a dangerous place with prospective physical harms that await a victim, and procreation provides a victim. Here's our argument:

The responsibility argument

(P1) We should (other things being equal) avoid being responsible for non-trivial harms to persons to which they neither consent nor are liable.

(P2) If we create persons, they will suffer non-trivial harms to which they neither consent nor are liable.

(C) Therefore, we should (other things being equal) avoid creating persons.

Two important issues can be raised at this point. First, what harms are procreators responsible for in virtue of procreating, and why? Second, what can be said in defence of P2? We will consider these in order. For present purposes, we will make the following assumption about moral responsibility (MR):

MR: A person is morally responsible for some harm if (a) the person freely performs an action that (b) either results in the harm or does not prevent it and (c) the harm was reasonably foreseeable (or should have been) by the person.

As an assumption about moral responsibility, MR is very minimal. It does not entail the stronger view, not endorsed by us, that persons can be morally responsible even for things they cannot reasonably foresee.¹³ The first condition stipulates that the action must be *voluntary* – that is, it must be one arising from the person's agency. The second condition stipulates that the action must either result in the harm or not prevent it. As we have seen from cases like *Murder* and *Assassin*, persons can be responsible for causing or not preventing harms respectively. The third condition, (c), stipulates that you are responsible for harms that are *reasonably foreseeable*, and also for harms that *should have been* foreseen by the person. For our purposes, a harm is reasonably foreseeable just in case it is a sufficiently likely or risky result of an agent's action or inaction. Consider an example from Jeff McMahan:

Careful motorist A person keeps his car well maintained and always drives cautiously and alertly. On one occasion, however, freak circumstances cause the car to go out of control. It has veered in the direction of a pedestrian whom it will kill unless she blows it up by using one of the explosive devices with which pedestrians in philosophical examples are typically equipped (McMahan 2005, 393).

McMahan thinks the careful motorist is both morally responsible and morally liable to be killed by the pedestrian. Helen Frowe thinks neither claim is true:

When the risk of endangering someone is sufficiently small, one can reasonably believe that one is not going to endanger someone. I do not think Careful motorist is morally responsible for posing a threat to Victim (Frowe 2014, 82).

Thus, if the motorist reasonably believed he *would*, or *would likely*, strike a pedestrian with his car, then he would be morally responsible for striking the pedestrian. We think this is true in the case of procreation. For starters, consider how many persons suffer, at some point in their lives, from

13 Helen Frowe (2014, 74–75) offers a helpful example of why the stronger view is false:

Light switch: Unbeknownst to Neighbour, Villain has wired up her electricity so that when she turns on her light switch, it will detonate a bomb in Victim's house, killing Victim. Neighbour turns on her light switch.

Frowe remarks that although Neighbour "had a reasonable opportunity to avoid threatening Victim" by foregoing flipping the switch, "she is not morally responsible for threatening Victim because she did not intentionally fail to take this opportunity" because "of her ignorance of the trap set by Villain". We agree.

one of the following conditions: broken bones, cancer (including lung and breast cancers), heart disease, chronic pain, chronic insomnia, stroke, pulmonary disease, lower respiratory infections, diabetes, traffic accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, HIV/AIDS, malaria, malnourishment, tuberculosis, and premature death. The list of physical harms is much longer than this, but our list makes clear that the vast majority of persons, if not all of them, will suffer from some serious physical harm during their lifetime. What is more, these harms are widely anticipated by parents.¹⁴ And a minimal condition for responsible procreation is that one is *aware* of these harms and procreates with an awareness of it.¹⁵ Thus, parents who are not aware of the fact that their child will experience some serious physical harm procreate impermissibly.

Of course, most parents lack culpable procreative intentions.¹⁶ Parents typically act from beneficent or morally neutral motives when procreating. But their voluntary procreation, coupled with what they know (or should know) will almost certainly happen to their offspring, makes them morally responsible for the harms they foresee. If they procreate and their child suffers these non-trivial physical harms, they will be morally responsible for those harms at that time – a time when the child is sentient and thus has a right to physical security.¹⁷ Thus, at that time, they will be morally responsible for an unjust harm that befalls their child, which violates RPS. Since they can avoid violating their child's right *only* by foregoing procreation, they should.

Moral liability

The next step involves showing that *responsibility* for these harms entails *liability* for them. As in the discussion on moral responsibility above, we will begin with an example from Seana Shiffrin which we will call *Airdrop*:

Airdrop Imagine a well-off character (Wealthy) who lives on an island. He is anxious for a project (whether because of boredom, self-interest, benevolence, or some combination of these). He decides to bestow some of his wealth upon his neighbours from an adjacent island. His neighbours are comfortably off, with more than an ample stock of resources. Still, they would be (purely) benefited by an influx of monetary wealth. Unfortunately, due to historical tensions between the islands' governments, Wealthy and his agents are not permitted to visit the neighbouring island. They are also precluded (either by law or by physical circumstances) from communicating with the island's people. To implement his project, then, he crafts a hundred cubes of gold bullion, each worth \$5 million (The windy islands lack paper currency.). He flies his plane over the island and drops the cubes near passers-by. He takes care to avoid hitting people, but he knows there is an element of risk in his activity and that someone may get hurt. Everyone is a little stunned when this million-dollar manna lands at their feet.

14 We are assuming that if you are responsible for the fact that q , r , or s will befall your child, then you are responsible if it is r (but not q or s) that befalls your child. If the physical harm is somewhat atypical (say, Bubonic plague), that does not make a difference because it is merely one way of fulfilling the reasonable expectation that *some* physical harm would befall your child.

15 This is widely endorsed even by pro-natalists. For example, see Tommie Shelby (2016) and Rivka Weinberg (2016).

16 As we will see in the next section, however, parents also reasonably foresee (or should reasonably foresee) that any child they create will likely be culpably responsible for unjust, non-trivial physical harms to others. They realise that they cannot prevent their child from culpably committing *all* of those harms, but they intentionally create them anyway. That is impermissible and arguably worse, since in the present case the parents do not reasonably foresee any *culpably* imposed harms, including on their own part.

17 One reviewer offers the following objection: Children often fall off their bikes when learning to ride them, yet we think parents act permissibly when they insist that children try again even if the parents foresee future crashes and burns. If true, this is an apparent counterexample to RPS or its application to procreation. We share the reviewer's intuition about this case. However, we believe it is importantly distinct from procreation. While a fear of life would undermine the quality of life of existing children (and is therefore worth preventing), that does not hold for merely possible children. The choice to procreate therefore cannot be justified on the grounds that doing so is necessary for the child's development. Nor are all of the reasonably expected harms to children (e.g. serious diseases or injuries, abuse, premature death, etc.) necessary for or even instrumental in their development. Moreover, the harms incurred in the average child's bike crash are relatively trivial – small scrapes and bruises, most often. When compared with the alternative harm of allowing children categorically to reject any activity that might cause small scrapes and bruises, which would (if followed consistently) inevitably harm their quality of life, minor scrapes and bruises are a *lesser* harm. Thus, if anything, parents *avoid* moral responsibility for the occasional minor scrapes and bruises that are side effects of bicycling by averting more serious harms to their children.

Most are delighted. One person (Unlucky), though, is hit by the falling cube. The impact breaks his arm. Had the cube missed him, it would have landed at someone else's feet (Shiffrin 1999, 127).

On Shiffrin's view, Wealthy acts beneficently but impermissibly because he risks (serious) harm in order merely to benefit. Had Wealthy dropped the bullion to prevent some greater harm to Unlucky or other island inhabitants, he may have acted permissibly. Since Wealthy imposes unjustified risk on others, we can also ask what *defensive harms* or *criminal penalties* he is liable to. Shiffrin (1999, 128) claims that Wealthy should apologise to Unlucky or pay for Unlucky's restorative surgery, and also that Unlucky "should have a cause of action" against Wealthy for "inflicting unnecessary bodily injury". It is also permissible to shoot down Wealthy's plane before it flies over the island or to confiscate his plane before it takes off if doing so is necessary and sufficient to avert the potentially lethal threats to those on the ground. Both the criminal penalties Shiffrin advocates and the defensive harms we defend are quite severe, but they are closely tied to the serious wrongness of Wealthy's action.¹⁸

The reasonably expected harms resulting from procreation are also serious, as we showed above. Since proportionality is a necessary condition for permissible defence and for criminal penalties,¹⁹ this *raises* rather than lowers the degree of defensive or criminal harms we can permissibly inflict on procreators. Here is our argument:

The liability argument

- (P1) If you are morally responsible for unjust, non-trivial physical harms to a person, then you are morally liable to defensive or criminal penalties.
- (P2) You are morally responsible for unjust, non-trivial physical harms to a person if you create them.
- (C) Therefore, you are morally liable to defensive or criminal penalties if you create them.

We think it is morally reasonable for liability to be determined and imposed *ex ante* (before the harms eventuate) instead of simply *ex post* (after the harms eventuate). It can be imposed *ex ante* because of procreative risk, much in the way we can impose defensive or criminal penalties on parents who plan to drive with their children unbuckled. *Ex post* evaluations cannot discount the initial risk, since it was risky to procreate regardless of how lucky the offspring are. Nor can *ex post* evaluations *worsen* one's *ex ante* liability: Procreators are liable to *ex post* precisely what they were liable to *ex post*. The alternative is to hold procreators responsible for bad moral luck, for harms that eventuated which were not reasonably foreseeable, or at least were not reasonably foreseeable as sufficiently risky.²⁰

What sorts of defensive harms or criminal penalties might procreators be liable to? Here it is useful to consider the harms that typically befall persons, as discussed in the previous section. They include, but are not limited to, the following: broken bones, cancer (including lung and breast cancers), heart disease, chronic pain, chronic insomnia, stroke, pulmonary disease, lower respiratory infections, diabetes, road traffic accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, HIV/AIDS, malaria,

18 It is worth noting that Shiffrin is explicitly defending an *expanded* set of moral and legal liabilities for procreation. They are "expanded" in the sense that wrongful life suits are restricted to cases where the created person's life is not good for them on the whole (Shiffrin 1999).

19 We have in mind both narrow proportionality (which limits harming liable parties) and wide proportionality (which limits harming non-liable parties). For more on the distinction, see Jeff McMahan (2009).

20 We are not unsympathetic to the view that *any* risk of non-trivial harm is "sufficiently" risky to make procreation impermissible. For example, if you think there is a 1% chance that an as-yet-uncreated person would be the victim of a horrific hate crime, then you should not create that person. This seems more plausible when applied to as-yet-uncreated persons than to created persons. Sometimes we take a small risk of imposing very serious harms to created persons (e.g. when we drive), but we do not think it is impermissible to do so. But if we face the choice between *creating* more pedestrians when doing so benefits no one and driving without any pedestrians, it is not obvious that it is permissible to create them. Regardless of whether this view is true, it is consistent with our claim that any liability resulting from violating the obligation not to take *any* risk of non-trivial harm can be determined and imposed *ex ante*.

malnourishment, tuberculosis, and premature death. Returning to the original example of *Newborn*, what might Blake be liable to if one or more of these harms befalls Anthony, and Blake is responsible for it? If a third party can prevent Anthony from breaking his arm only by breaking Blake's arm before Blake snaps their fingers and creates Anthony, that is a harm to which Blake is morally liable. And if Blake *succeeds* in creating Anthony, who then later (as Blake foresaw) suffers from premature death, then Blake's responsibility for an unjust death makes it permissible to inflict serious physical harms on Blake to prevent Anthony's creation – perhaps including *killing* Blake, depending on how many years this takes from Blake compared with the years Anthony would lose were he created.²¹ Moreover, Blake would also be liable to serious criminal penalties for Anthony's premature death.

We think this is sufficient to show that procreators are morally and criminally liable, given the seriousness of the harms for which they are responsible. This is based purely on the harms they reasonably foresee. While this does not demonstrate the *permissibility* of inflicting these defensive or criminal penalties on procreators, it *does* show that the impermissibility of doing so cannot plausibly be grounded in their lack of liability. Procreators *are* liable. Moreover, moral liability has a way of spreading. Those who enable procreation or fail to prevent it might also be morally liable in some cases. We lack the space to explore this here, but it is worth pointing out that moral liability is not guaranteed (or even likely) to be restricted to procreators themselves.

Harms by your offspring

As was pointed out in the first section, the misanthropic argument focuses on the harms done by already existing humans. This is what makes the argument “misanthropic”, since it deals with those already in existence. We are quite sympathetic to what Benatar has already argued. However, we believe this argument can be further strengthened in order to support the anti-natalist position. In this section, we catalogue the ways in which the misanthropic argument can further support our argument for anti-natalism coupled with the principles we outlined above. Our goal here is not to simply provide a complete and exhaustive laundry list of all the ways in which humans mistreat others, the environment, and non-human animals. We fully recognise, as does Benatar, that this argument will strike many as unsettling. But rather than sticking our collective heads in the proverbial sand, we must acknowledge the extent of the harm we humans cause other humans, non-human animals, and the environment.

We argue that the fact that humans produce such vast amounts of destructive harm, that this weighs disproportionately against even the best pro-natalist argument, and as such, needs to be acknowledged by any rational prospective procreator. The misanthropic argument again runs as follows:

The misanthropic argument

- (P1) We have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing into existence new members of species that cause (and will likely continue to cause) vast amounts of pain, suffering, and death.
- (P2) Humans cause vast amounts of pain, suffering, and death.
- (C) Therefore, we have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing new humans into existence.

Our goal here is not to simply repeat Benatar's argument, but rather to elaborate a defence of P2. While we have already argued for P1 in the previous sections by bringing in RPS, we are now in a position to more forcefully support the truth of P2. This does not seem at all difficult to do. Most people, we take it, do not deny P2. Rather, the pro-natalist is likely to hold the view that even though humans do cause vast amounts of pain, suffering, and death, those facts alone do not outweigh the

²¹ This is arguably relevant to narrow proportionality calculations.

case for procreation. Additionally, the pro-natalist is also likely to claim that procreation can be justified by the claim that only a small few are likely to perpetrate non-trivial harms. We think that is false.

We start by claiming that offspring are responsible for non-trivial harm to others. Of course, we do not hold that all offspring are responsible for the same amount of harm. However, we agree with Benatar's assessment that the human species is especially, as he roughly calls it, "perniciously destructive". What is more, we agree with Benatar that humans are especially prone to underestimate the extent of human destruction. Starting with harms done to other humans, it is easy to see why. According to the United Nations, roughly 437 000 people were intentionally murdered in 2012 globally (SOS Children's Villages n.d.). Sexual assaults, rapes, and other forms of sexual violence go drastically underreported (around upwards of 90%). Such harms disproportionately affect women and will affect roughly 1 in 3 around the globe. Many of those that experience sexual violence will often have it occur to them before the age of 15. According to recent estimates by the WHO, more than 200 million girls have been subjected to female genital mutilation (WHO 2021). Sadly, these are only a small sampling of deliberate kinds of harm. Of course, there are countless other ways that humans harm others in non-deliberate ways (structural economic injustices come to mind). Thus, we could talk endlessly about the various and horrible harms humans inflict on other humans, but we believe Benatar has already made that case sufficiently. Rather, we focus on two other kinds of harm, one that Benatar does, i.e. human-caused suffering to non-human animals, and perhaps the greatest harm caused by humans, i.e. anthropogenic climate change.

As Benatar and others have correctly pointed out, it is difficult to comprehend the amount of harm that humans have inflicted upon non-human animals, either historically or presently. Over 166 billion animals are killed each year for their flesh for human consumption (Benatar and Wasserman 2015). Animals are constantly and routinely subjected to tortuous medical and scientific experimentation. Animals are used for human transportation, entertainment, farming, and in many other contexts that result in grievous amounts of pain, suffering, and death. What compounds matters is the fact that we do not fully know the extent of such harms because exact figures from various parts of the world, and activities, are hard to come by or even determine in the first place. Suffice to say, it seems obvious to us that non-human animals have been subjected to unspeakable horrors, mostly due to humans.

We now come to what we take to be perhaps the most compelling motivation for accepting the misanthropic argument: anthropogenic climate change and its effects, including overpopulation. The carbon expenditure per capita per year in the United States alone is a staggering 15.471 metric tons. According to the United States' Department of Agriculture, the average American consumes 222.2 pounds (100.788 kg) of red meat and poultry per year (not including the animals killed for other uses such as clothing, furniture, etc.) (Jones and Haley 2018). Of course, a critic might point out that the obvious solution would be to quickly and drastically decrease our environmentally destructive ways if we are to have any hope of evading the worst effects of climate change. We are not optimistic about that prospect. Emissions from the United States *increased* 3.4% in 2018 (Houser et al. 2019). Cities and states across the world, while making many valiant strides toward cleaner forms of transportation and energy, have had those efforts offset by the increase in the total number of new vehicle drivers, airplane trips (4.55 billion passengers in 2018) (Mazareanu 2020), and increased personal spending power. The Paris Climate Accord, while favoured by the current Biden Administration, continues to face strong political headwinds in the United States, which is further cause for pessimism.

The full extent of the effects of climate cannot be fully captured here, nonetheless we have already witnessed the opening salvo of the harms that it causes. Millions of people have been displaced by rising sea levels, draught, famine caused by desertification, not to mention by wars and political conflict. We have already seen devastating wildfires consume forests, an increase in extreme weather events including hurricanes, that already disproportionately affect those with fewer means. Many climate scientists have said that providing sustainable amounts of fresh drinking water will be perhaps our greatest challenge, barring some kind of technological or scientific breakthrough. According to recent UN statistics, roughly 1.2 billion on the planet still lack access to fresh drinking

water (UN 2021). Droughts, flooding, and increasing global mean temperatures will also produce drastic and catastrophic food shortages (Ramsey 2015). According to the 2014 IPCC report, every decade of warming decreases food output production by at least 2%, again disproportionately affecting the already economically disenfranchised. Unfortunately, climate change and its effects will only continue to exacerbate these problems.

Where does this leave us with respect to the misanthropic argument and anti-natalism more generally? It is sheer wishful thinking to claim that any and all humans do not have drastic and harmful effects not just on other humans, but to the environment as well. In our view, what strengthens the misanthropic argument, and anti-natalism more generally, is the empirical evidence showing the carbon emissions from procreation. According to one recent study, having one less child saves an average of 58 tons of CO₂ in a developed country (Wynes and Nicholas 2017). This adds to other studies that demonstrably show that childless adults, on average, emit far less CO₂ than parents with children. Again, while humans have undertaken and adopted many practices that seek to limit or lessen carbon emissions, such efforts pale in comparison to having fewer or no children (Nordström et al. 2020). What further compounds the problem for procreation, especially in developed countries like the United States, even assuming the most eco-friendly parent(s), households still emit more than double the per capita global average. We think that these facts further tip the scales in favour of the misanthropic argument, and anti-natalism more generally.

Anecdotally, we have heard a common rejoinder to the misanthropic argument: “Perhaps my child will be the one to cure a disease, solve world hunger, or climate change”. This is unlikely to justify procreation, given our arguments. The reality is that while most people live relatively decent moral lives, we are often ignorant of the full extent of the harms we either cause as a species or will suffer ourselves. Bringing a child into the world, especially this world, given climate change and its effects, is irresponsible. Furthermore, it seems especially problematic since there are currently still some 153 million orphans around the world, with 69 million children around the world suffering from malnutrition (SOS Children’s Villages 2021). Given all this, we conclude that procreation is morally impermissible since any prospective procreator can and should be aware of these harms.

From presumptive to all-things-considered rights violations

Thus far, our arguments above have supported the conclusion that there is a *presumptive* but powerful obligation to refrain from procreation. This obligation is grounded in the claim rights of procreated persons and their victims. However, this falls short of demonstrating that procreation is an *all-things-considered* violation of RPS. Pro-natalists can agree with this but insist that there are nonetheless justifications for transgressing RPS. That is, they will maintain that procreation *infringes*, but does not *violate*, the RPS of their procreated person or their victims.

The standard justifications are deontological (Botterell and McLeod 2015). For example, Rivka Weinberg (2016, 196) contends that Shiffrin’s standard of moral liability “misunderstands the nature and underestimates the significance of parental procreative interests”, noting that procreating “contributes uniquely to a person’s social, spiritual, biological, and emotional life”. Others, such as Christine Overall (2012), contend that persons have procreative liberties. John A. Robertson (2004), in particular, argues that procreative liberties mitigate (and perhaps altogether eliminate) both moral and legal responsibility and liability. David Wasserman (in Benatar and Wasserman 2015) points to the future goods and parent-child relationships as moral projects that justify procreation. What these accounts have in common is an appeal to certain deontological ground projects that generate a permission to procreate. These projects, it must be maintained, justify the harms that the choice to procreate fails to prevent.

It is here especially that our account of RPS shows its moral power. Consider the typical harms to persons that would have been avoided by procreation: physical injury, sickness, and premature death. Imagine that parents directly *caused* these harms to their children and invoked the aforementioned goods and interests as justification. The admittedly important interest of becoming a parent or having a child to love and guide through the world would hardly justify physically injuring them, giving them measles or cancers, or prematurely killing them. If these are the otherwise avoidable costs of satisfying these moral interests, they are excessively harmful relative to the valence of

these interests. Of course, procreators typically do not directly cause such harms to their children. They do, however, *permit* them as an unavoidable cost of satisfying their interests, which (as the responsibility argument shows) is presumptively condemned by RPS. The mere fact that parents permit rather than cause these harms is arguably enough to make the average act of procreation *less wrong* but seems clearly insufficient to make it *permissible*. Thus, the presumption established under RPS is sufficiently weighty to generate not only a presumptive obligation to refrain from procreation in almost all cases, but an all-things-considered obligation to do so.

Objections and replies

The forfeiture objection

The first objection to our arguments is that procreated persons *do not* maintain their RPS. Our second argument against procreation is that because the procreated will eventually violate someone else's RPS and because this is reasonably foreseeable by procreators, procreators are morally responsible for those unjust harms. Thus, they should not procreate. However, if the procreated are all but certain to unjustly aggress against others, then they would at some point *forfeit* their RPS. And if they forfeit their RPS, then their RPS cannot be the basis for the impermissibility of creating them. Call this the forfeiture objection.

This objection does not undermine anti-natalism or our defence of it. As it stands, the forfeiture objection fundamentally misunderstands how rights forfeiture works. Persons forfeit their RPS *particularly*, not generally, relative to a particular threat, at a particular time, and for a particular reason (Frowe 2014). For example, in *Murder*, Blake forfeits his RPS, making it permissible for Anthony to kill him. Suppose another murderer walks by and, unaware of the unjust threat Blake will eventually pose to Anthony, decides to kill Blake on a whim. That would wrong Blake, and thus is (presumptively) impermissible. The same is true of most procreated persons. They are not assaulting or punching other persons all the time, so their RPS is maintained until they voluntarily decide to forego a reasonable opportunity to avert risking that harm to others.²² Moreover, we do not think that *every* harm someone faces is just or justified. Every person suffers from *some* unjust harm or other. Since procreation would prevent that, procreation is morally required.

The runaway responsibility objection

Another objection to grounding anti-natalism in RPS is that it makes procreators *too responsible* for harms that befall others. Consider our second argument, for example: Procreators are morally responsible for the reasonably foreseeable, unjust harms their children are morally responsible for. If that is true, then parents who meet these criteria would be morally and even criminally liable for their children's actions. If their children commit murders, for example, then the parents (and not just their murdering children) should serve time. But that is absurd. Call this the runaway responsibility objection.

This objection also fails. We do not claim that procreators are responsible for *all* of the unjust harms their children inflict. Rather, we claim that procreators are responsible for those harms *to the extent* that those harms were, or should have been, reasonably foreseeable. And there is no reason to think that, *in principle*, parents cannot be responsible for their children's crimes. Parents can conspire with their children to commit crimes, for example. Parents can also knowingly permit their children to commit crimes, even in cases where their children are unaware of this oversight. Where procreation differs descriptively from more standard cases of moral and criminal liability is that (a) the details of the crime are unknown (e.g. who is harmed, what harm is done, where the harm is done, and how the harm is done) and (b) the crime is temporally distant from procreation. But these descriptive differences do not make moral differences. To see why, consider the following example:

22 It might be argued that suicide, or even self-confinement, are opportunities to avert risking unjust harm to others. All of us know, or should know, that we are likely to eventually harm someone unjustly. See our response to the suicide/murder objection below. In short, given that we do not typically know *which* particular unjust harms we will someday inflict upon others, we also do not typically know whether suicide (or self-confinement) would impose more harm on the perpetrator than it would prevent for the victim. Thus, we do not typically know that suicide (or self-confinement) would count as *reasonable* opportunities to avoid these harms.

Foreshadow: Child tells Parent about their plans to physically harm another child. Parent asks *why* Child wants to do this, *when* Child plans to do this, and *whom* Child intends to victimise. Child replies, “It is fun to hurt people! I’m not sure when I will do it or whom I will choose, but it will happen”.

If Parent does not take reasonable precautions to prevent Child from carrying out this plan, then Parent is morally responsible for Child physically harming someone. In the case of procreation, the advance warning comes not from your child but from knowledge you are reasonably expected to have about typical human behaviour. Foregoing procreation is a reasonable precaution for preventing these unjust harms – in this case, the *only* possible way to prevent the harms. Parents, however vigilant, regularly fail to prevent their children from posing unjust harms to others, and this is especially true once their children become adults. Indeed, foregoing procreation is in many ways *less* burdensome, from a practical standpoint, than keeping a watchful eye over your existing child for the remainder of the child’s life.

One might reformulate the objection in the following way: If we should forego procreation in order to prevent unjust harms to others, then we should also criminalise *existing* persons to prevent unjust harms to others. After all, the harms are just as certain in either case, and both procreation and confinement are sufficient measures to prevent the relevant harms. Our response to this objection begins with an endorsement of the following moral principle, which we call the no costs principle (NCP):

NCP: If you can prevent Blake from violating Anthony’s RPS without wronging Blake, Anthony, or any other person, then it is *pro tanto* impermissible not to do so.

This principle strikes us as obviously true. You can prevent Blake from violating Anthony’s RPS by not creating Blake. Doing so would not wrong Blake, because Blake does not exist, and nor would it wrong Anthony or any other person. The plausibility of NCP is further supported by the fact that procreation is widely viewed as morally optional: Most people accept that *foregoing procreation* does not wrong anyone.²³ And, quite clearly, if there were fewer people, then fewer people would unjustly harm each other. NCP, therefore, clearly supports anti-natalism.

NCP can also be used as a cudgel against the runaway responsibility objection in its revised form. As it turns out, the proposal to impose criminal penalties on persons (e.g. imprisoning them) before they become responsible for unjust harms to others *would* wrong those persons. Those persons exist and are not yet responsible for unjust harms to others. Depriving them of their liberty, therefore, would harm them. For example, if Blake is only ten years of age and will not unjustly harm another person for another ten years, then Blake has not yet forfeited their liberty or security rights.²⁴ That

23 One might object that foregoing procreation *can* wrong a person, even if it does not wrong one’s offspring or someone else’s offspring. For example, if partners have agreed to procreate and one becomes convinced of anti-natalism, they might wrong their partner by refusing to procreate, since this would be an instance of promise breaking. We offer two replies to this objection. First, if it is true that procreation always results in offspring that violate other persons’ RPS, then such promises are not morally binding. If Blake promises Anthony that they will do whatever Anthony wants, and it turns out that Anthony wants to murder someone, then Blake hardly wrongs Anthony by refusing complicity in the murder. (If anything, Anthony *forfeits* various rights by murdering – including, plausibly, the right to Blake’s assistance.) Second, even if one wrongs one’s partner by refusing to procreate, the wrong of procreating is worse since it violates RPS. If the choice is between breaking a promise concerning family planning and preventing violating a person’s RPS, the latter necessarily takes priority over the former. Thus, the envisioned exception to our application of NCP is not one that undermines our argument to anti-natalism.

24 When *does* Blake forfeit their liberty or security rights? There are two possible interpretations of the imminence requirement to permissible defence. The first is an *epistemic* interpretation on which Blake’s harm to Anthony is imminent just in case it is *reasonably likely to occur*. The first is a *temporal* interpretation on which Blake’s harm to Anthony is imminent just in case it is *soon to occur*. David Rodin (2003) claims that what matters about imminence is certainty, and so appears to endorse the epistemic interpretation. But the temporal interpretation captures an important moral fact, namely that in cases where an unjust harm is certain to occur but temporally very distant (say, ten years), the perpetrator may not have had “a reasonable opportunity to avoid posing the unjust threat and she intentionally failed to avail herself of that opportunity” (Frowe 2014, 73). Under those circumstances, the perpetrating person has not yet forfeited their RPS, and thus defensively harming them wrongs them and is therefore presumptively impermissible. Cf. McMahan (2009). For a general discussion of pre-emptive defensive, see Shue and Rodin (2007). For an example of someone who rejects the imminence requirement altogether, see Marcia Baron (2011).

is not true of merely possible persons who have not yet been created, however. Those persons lack rights and will not be harmed if their parents forego procreation. Thus, there is a moral difference between “imposing” lack of procreation on merely possible persons (who are not harmed by never existing) and imposing criminal penalties on existing persons (who are harmed by those penalties). Accepting NCP supports anti-natalism, but not criminalising all existing persons.

The hypothetical consent and endorsement objections

Another objection to our arguments for anti-natalism is that RPS is *waived* by persons who hypothetically consent to coming into existence, and thus RPS cannot explain why it is impermissible to procreate. Call this the hypothetical consent objection (Singh 2018).²⁵ A related, similar objection is that because most persons *endorse* their lives, procreation is permissible. Call this the endorsement objection (Singh 2018). While these objections are distinct, they are sufficiently similar to treat together.

When persons consent *hypothetically*, they do this as merely possible agents. That is, hypothetical consent does not depend on the agency of any particular agent. Thus, hypothetical consent is a Rawlsian manoeuvre. The general underlying principle would look something like this, which we call the hypothetical consent principle (HCP):

HCP: Anthony can reasonably accept Blake-imposed harms provided that (1) the harms do not undermine the value of Anthony’s life on the whole and (2) the harms provide otherwise unavailable, significant benefits to Anthony.

Seana Shiffrin (1999, 131), however, throws cold water on this principle:

Notably, there seems to be a harm/benefit asymmetry built into our approaches to hypothetical consent where we lack specific information about the individual’s will. We presume (rebuttably) its presence in cases where greater harm is to be averted; in the cases of harms to bestow greater benefits, the presumption is reversed.

Said differently: We can presume hypothetical consent in cases where Blake imposes harms on Anthony to prevent *greater harms* to Anthony, but we cannot presume it in cases where Blake imposes harms on Anthony merely to provide *great benefits* to Anthony. As examples, consider the following cases:

Amputation: Anthony is trapped under rubble at a construction site. Blake, a medic, arrives and attempts to save Anthony, who will die from blood loss unless he is removed from the rubble. The only way for Blake to save Anthony is to amputate Anthony’s leg, which is what is keeping him trapped. Unfortunately, Anthony is unconscious and unable to provide express or tacit consent. Nevertheless, Blake amputates Anthony’s leg and saves his life.

Desert drop-off: Anthony enjoys life, but not nearly as much as he could. While he is not harmed by his minimal enjoyment of life, he is missing out on all of the benefits of enjoying life to the fullest. Blake knows this, and Blake also knows that the *only* way to help Anthony enjoy life more is to kidnap him, take him to the desert, and let him struggle to find his way back home. The journey will be arduous and painful, but the result (unachievable otherwise) is a much happier life for Anthony.

We accept, for the sake of argument, that Blake both acts permissibly and does not wrong Anthony in *Amputation*, since Anthony could (and likely would) reasonably accept losing a leg over losing his life. The loss of his life would be a greater harm to him, and thus amputation averts a greater harm.

²⁵ To be clear, Singh neither explicitly considers nor endorses our conception of RPS, and Singh believes that the hypothetical consent principle fails.

It is also the *only* way to avert that greater harm. If Blake could free Anthony *without* amputating Anthony's leg – say, by doing some heavy lifting with the rubble – then Blake would be obligated to do so, and Anthony could reasonably reject amputation over heavy lifting.

What we *reject*, and what everyone should reject, is the view that Blake's actions in *Desert drop-off* are permissible and do not wrong Anthony. The difference between this case and the first is that in this case, Blake harms Anthony *only* to bestow pure benefits on Anthony. Unlike the first case, Anthony is not under any threat of harm, and thus no greater harm is averted. It seems to us that those who endorse the underlying principle of hypothetical consent must accept Blake's actions in *Desert drop-off* as a consequence. That is, we think Blake's actions in *Desert drop-off* satisfy the HCP. That is a nasty bullet to bite, so we leave it to pro-natalists to defend it or to motivate a claim of disanalogy with procreation. The same judgment holds if, instead of hypothetically consenting to his life on the whole, Anthony *endorses* his existence. Leaving him in the desert, which is both consistent with and necessary for his life being worthwhile for him on the whole, is impermissible.

A further problem with the hypothetical consent principle is that it does not consider the harms done *by* procreated persons. Even if it is true that harms *done to* the created person are ones they can reasonably accept, it does not follow that the harms *done by* the created person are ones their victims can reasonably accept. For example, suppose we are wrong about Blake's actions in *Desert drop-off* and that Anthony *can* reasonably accept the harms Blake imposes. Even if that were true, it would not follow that *Anthony's victims* could thereby accept the harms *he* imposes on *them*. For while Blake is also responsible for Anthony's life being good for Anthony on the whole, this is not true of Anthony's victims. Anthony can perhaps consent to actions that harm him, but he cannot consent for others. Thus, even if HCP succeeds in explaining why Blake does not wrong Anthony by creating him, it fails to explain how Blake avoids wronging Anthony's victims by creating Anthony. The same worry applies to endorsement. Even if Anthony endorses his existence, that hardly justifies creating Anthony. Certainly, it is something Anthony's victims could reasonably reject, despite knowing that Anthony's life was generally good for him and that he endorsed his life.

The suicide objection

Yet another objection to our defence of anti-natalism is that persons (or, even more disturbingly, the entire human species) should kill themselves upon realising that they will be someday violate another person's RPS. We can motivate this objection with the following example:

Manchurian: Anthony and Blake are trapped in a room together. They learn that Blake is a Russian sleeper agent who will soon activate and kill Anthony, for whom there is no moral permission to kill. The only way to prevent Anthony's death is for Blake to use the loaded revolver on himself.

It will seem to some that Blake *ought* to kill himself under these circumstances. Blake knows there is no moral justification for killing Anthony, knows he can prevent it, and knows the means of preventing it does not impose a disproportionate cost on Blake given that he will pose a *lethal* threat to Anthony. Even if it is true that Blake is responsible neither for being a sleeper agent nor for what he does while activated, Blake *is* responsible for preventing (or failing to prevent) himself from activating. And if Blake were a third party, Blake would be obligated to kill the sleeper agent to save Anthony's life, so it is unclear how the fact that Blake *is* the sleeper agent (or the fact that it is *self-killing* rather than *other-killing*) makes a moral difference.²⁶ In cases where persons reasonably foresee that they will violate someone else's RPS, they ought to prevent themselves from doing it. Since all or nearly all persons can reasonably foresee this, they ought to take preventative measures. Those measures include not simply skipping procreation, but also suicide. Call this the suicide

26 The case of *Manchurian* is strange in two ways. First, Blake *realises* that the threat is unjust and hopes to avert it, and typically this can be done by force of will (i.e. Blake refuses to pose the threat). Second, the threat is not attributable to Blake's agency, since Blake is a sleeper agent and thus does not act freely when he attacks Anthony. But we can overlook these oddities because this is not a typical case, and nor is procreation. While agents can typically avert their threats by sheer will, Blake cannot do this in *Manchurian*. And while Blake is not responsible for the threat to Anthony *while the threat is occurring*, Blake *is* responsible for permitting the threat to occur. That is, even if Blake cannot control his actions once activated, he *does* have control over whether they are activated.

objection.²⁷

Rather than reject the suicide objection outright, we maintain that the objection enjoys limited success, at least on the standard picture of self-defence. If someone knows they will imminently be responsible for an unjust threat to another person's life that would justify lethal defensive action by the victim or by a third party, and if the third party would be *obligated* to impose lethal defence against the responsible person, then the responsible person is also obligated to enact lethal measures against herself where doing so is necessary and sufficient to avert the unjust threat. However, most cases are not this severe. To see why, let us return to the disjunction discussed earlier. We can formulate it more explicitly as follows:

The probability that Blake will be morally responsible for either (*using unjust physical force against someone, or unjustly failing to save someone, or unjustly hunting non-human animals, or sexually assaulting someone, or risking infecting someone with a trivial or serious illness, or killing someone unjustly during warfare, or contributing to anthropogenic climate change, or promoting or inciting unjust violence, or...*) is approximately 1.

Call this disjunction 1. Rejecting it makes replying to the suicide objection easier. But we accept disjunction 1. However, we *deny* that disjunction 1 entails the following, which we will call disjunction 2:

The probability that Blake will be morally responsible for either (*an unjust lethal threat to another person, or a non-lethal threat justifying lethal defensive action*) is approximately 1.

The lack of entailment is easy to see: Whereas disjunction 1 includes more than two disjuncts, disjunction 2 includes only two. Since the *individual* probabilities of the disjuncts are not specified in disjunction 1, we do not know how much each disjunct contributes to the high probability of the entire disjunction. For example, if the probability of each human unjustly hunting non-human animals was 1 and the probability of each human killing someone during warfare was 0, then the probability of the disjunction would be 1, even though the probability of the latter disjunct would be 0. Of course, we happen to think that *each* disjunct contributes *something* to the total probability of the disjunction, but we are agnostic as to how much. Thus, we do not commit ourselves to the view that any particular disjunct is itself probable. The suicide objection appears to make the mistake of assuming that because we are each responsible for violating someone's RPS *somehow*, we are also responsible for violating someone's RPS in a way that justifies (or even requires) taking lethal defensive measures against ourselves. That assumption is false.

In addition to thinking that disjunction 2 is not entailed by disjunction 1, there is also reason to *deny* disjunction 2. That is, it is doubtful that the average human is responsible for unjust lethal harms to other persons or non-lethal threats to other persons that would justify lethal defensive action. Most of us do not murder, maim, or torture each other, for example, even if we are likely to harm each other in other morally serious ways.²⁸ This means that *lethal* defensive threats against us are disproportionate to the harms for which we will likely be responsible. Imagine a variant of the *Manchurian* case in which Blake will merely slap Anthony. If the only means of preventing this is Blake's suicide, Blake is not obligated to commit suicide because doing so would impose far more harm on Blake than the harm for which Blake is responsible (i.e. a slap). This is true of most existing persons. While they are individually unlikely to become murderers and the like, they are individually likely to violate the rights of others *in some way or other*. Imposing the cost of suicide on them, therefore, is too costly. As Benatar and Wasserman (2015, 20–21) observes, there is a distinction between *lives worth starting* and *lives worth continuing*:

27 This objection might motivate not only suicide, but "speciecide". Our replies are the same to both objections. For Benatar's replies to the suicide objection, see Benatar and Wasserman (2015). For another reply, see Gerald Harrison (2012).

28 Those who deny this should be more, not less, sympathetic to the view that suicide is generally morally required for persons. For those who accept that view and agree that our arguments for anti-natalism entail a general obligation for suicide, they should think the suicide objection fails *as an objection*. That is, they should think it is a *plausible* implication of our arguments, not a problem.

It is perfectly intelligible to say that although coming into existence was a harm because the life was not good enough to be worth starting, it is nonetheless not so bad that it is not worth continuing.

Our suspicion is that many, perhaps even most, persons have lives well worth continuing. The losses incurred by suicide for most persons, therefore, would be both grave and excessive relative to the harms for which they are likely to be responsible. But other preventative measures are morally required. For example, as we have argued, persons can mitigate the harms for which they are responsible by foregoing procreation. Thus, the suicide objection fails.

Conclusion

Anti-natalism is the view that procreation is generally impermissible. We have defended a strong version of anti-natalism grounded in the right to physical security (RPS). According to our formulation of RPS, all persons have a presumptive right that others not be morally responsible for unjust harms to them. This entails not just an obligation to refrain from unjustly killing others, but also an obligation not to be responsible for harms imposed by others, as cases like *Assassin* show. We then offered two arguments for the conclusion that procreation generally violates the RPS of future persons, and thus there is a general moral prohibition on procreation. The first argument concerns harms done *to* one's offspring. We argue that because foregoing procreation would prevent foreseeable harms to one's offspring, procreators are responsible for failing to avert these harms to their offspring. Thus, procreation is a *pro tanto* violation of the offspring's RPS. Since procreators can avert these harms, as well as their own responsibility for them, without wronging anyone else, they should. The second argument concerns harms done *by* one's offspring. Another reasonably foreseeable harm of procreation is that one's offspring will very likely be morally responsible for harming another person at some point in their lives. This follows closely with paradigmatic cases where parents are responsible for their offspring, as cases like *Foreshadow* show. While procreators rarely foresee, and rarely are obligated to foresee, the particular details of who their offspring will harm and how, they foresee *that* it will happen. Thus, they should not procreate. We appealed here to a general moral principle which we call the no costs principle (NCP), namely that if you can prevent an RPS violation without wronging anyone, then you ought to do so. If persons procreate in spite of such knowledge, they share responsibility (and liability) in the outcome. We then raised and responded to several objections to our arguments, showing that none succeeds.

ORCIDiDs

Blake Hereth <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9338-0417>

Anthony Ferrucci <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2832-2020>

References

- Baron, M. 2011. "Self-Defense: The Imminence Requirement." In: *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Law: Volume 1*, edited by L. Green and B. Leiter. New York: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199606443.003.0007
- Benatar, D. 2006. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Clarendon: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199296422.001.0001
- Benatar, D. and D. Wasserman. 2015. *Debating Procreation: Is it Wrong to Procreate?* New York: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199333547.001.0001
- Botterell, A., and C. McLeod. 2015. "Can a right to reproduce justify the status quo on parental licensing?" In: *Permissible Progeny? The Morality of Procreation and Parenting*, edited by S. Hannan, S. Brennan, and R. Vernon, 184–207. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frowe, H. 2014. *Defensive Killing*. New York: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199609857.001.0001
- Frowe, H. 2018. "Lesser-Evil Justifications for Harming: Why We are Required to Turn the Trolley." *Philosophical Quarterly* 68(272): 460–480. doi:10.1093/pq/pqx065

- Harrison, G. 2012. “Antinatalism, Asymmetry, and an Ethic of Prima Facie Duties.” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31(1): 94–103. doi:10.1080/02580136.2012.10751770
- Houser, T., H. Pitt, and H. Hess. 2019. “Final U.S. Emissions Estimates for 2018.” Rhodium Group. <https://rhg.com/research/final-us-emissions-estimates-for-2018/>
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2014. “AR5 climate change 2014: impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability.” <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/>
- Jones, K., and M. Haley. 2018. “Per Capita Red Meat and Poultry Disappearance: Insights Into Its Steady Growth.” Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2018/june/per-capita-red-meat-and-poultry-disappearance-insights-into-its-steady-growth/>
- Mazareanu, E. 2020. “Number of scheduled passengers boarded by the global airline industry from 2004 to 2021.” <https://www.statista.com/statistics/564717/airline-industry-passenger-traffic-globally/>
- McMahan, J. 2005. “The Basis of Moral Liability to Defensive Killing.” *Philosophical Issues* 15(1): 386–405. doi:10.1111/j.1533-6077.2005.00073.x
- McMahan, J. 2009. *Killing in War*. New York: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199548668.001.0001
- Nordström, J., J. F. Shogren, and L. Thunström. 2020. “Do parents counter-balance the carbon emissions of their children?” *PLoS ONE* 15(4): e0231105. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0231105
- Overall, C. 2012. *Why Have Children?* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. doi:10.7551/mitpress/8674.001.0001
- Ramsey, L. 2015. “4 ways climate change could cause food shortages.” World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/08/4-ways-climate-change-could-cause-food-shortages/>
- Robertson, J. A. 2004. “Procreative Liberty and Harm to Offspring in Assisted Reproduction.” *American Journal of Law & Medicine* 30(1): 7–40. doi:10.1177/009885880403000101
- Rodin, D. 2003. *War and Self-Defense*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shelby, T. 2016. *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. doi:10.4159/9780674974647
- Shiffrin, S. 1999. “Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm.” *Legal Theory* 5(2): 117–148. doi:10.1017/S1352325299052015
- Shue, H. and D. Rodin, eds. 2007. *Preemption: Military Action and Moral Justification*. New York: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199233137.001.0001
- Singh, A. 2018. “The Hypothetical Consent Objection to Anti-Natalism.” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 21(5): 1135–1150. doi:10.1007/s10677-018-9952-0
- SOS Children’s Villages. n.d. “Children’s Statistics, UN Data on the Plight of Children.” <https://www.sos-usa.org/our-impact/focus-areas/advocacy-movement-building/childrens-statistics>
- United Nations (UN). 2021. “Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene.” <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/water>
- Weinberg, R. 2016. *The Risk of a Lifetime: How, When, and Why Procreation May Be Permissible*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- World Health Organization (WHO). 2021. “Female genital mutilation.” https://www.who.int/health-topics/female-genital-mutilation#tab=tab_1
- Wynes, S. and K. A. Nicholas. 2017. “The climate mitigation gap: education and government recommendations miss the most effective individual actions.” *Environmental Research Letters* 12(7): 074024. doi:10.1088/1748-9326/aa7541