Is It Morally Wrong to Have Children?

1. The Argument: Thomas Young begins by noting that mainstream environmentalists typically believe that the following 2 claims are true:

   (1) Needless waste and resource depletion (due to overconsumption, or “eco-gluttony”) is morally wrong.
   (2) Having children is morally permissible, and even praiseworthy.

But, Young thinks these 2 claims are incompatible. Ultimately, he concludes that the mainstream environmentalist should oppose procreation on moral grounds. Here is his argument:

First, let \( \text{E}_1 \) = The quantity of the average American’s environmental impact over 50 years (their GHG emissions, resource usage, etc.). So, an average couple (say, 30 years old) would have an impact of \( \text{E}_2 \) (i.e., they would have the environmental impact of TWO people over 50 years). Now, consider two couples:

- **The Grays:** The Grays are a young couple (about 30 years old). Their resource consumption is average. They also conceive 2 children. So, the couple has an environmental impact of \( \text{E}_5 \) (or, about 250 years-worth of consumption).

Typically, we do not think that there is anything morally suspect about what The Grays do. We might even commend them for consuming only an average amount of resources, and for bringing two children into this world. Notice that The Grays COULD HAVE made a lifestyle choice to remain at \( \text{E}_2 \) (by not having children). Instead, they made a lifestyle choice that resulted in \( \text{E}_5 \). But, now consider another couple:

- **The Greens:** The Greens are overconsumers or “eco-gluttons”. They buy a yacht and a jet and take private trips all over the world, they take extra-long showers, they eat way more meat and calories than other people, they buy all disposable items and produce far more waste than others. In short, The Greens consume 2.5 times more than the average couple. They have an environmental impact of \( \text{E}_5 \).

Most environmentalists would be outraged by what The Greens do, and would morally condemn their actions. But, most would not condemn the Grays. When The Grays say “We’re expecting”, the typical reaction is, “That’s wonderful! I’m so happy for you!” However, BOTH couples have made life-decisions that have identical environmental impacts (namely, \( \text{E}_5 \)). The conclusion that we should draw, says Young, is that we should condemn both couples as acting equally immorally.
We can consider the above as the following argument by analogy:

1. What The Greens do is clearly morally wrong.
2. But, what The Grays do is morally analogous to what the Greens do.
3. Therefore, what the Grays do is also morally wrong.

2. **Objections:** As with any argument by analogy, the most vulnerable premise is the analogy claim. But first, here are the ways in which Young claims that the two cases ARE analogous:

- Both couples make lifestyle choices that have an environmental impact of E5
- In both cases, the environmental impact that results from their lifestyle choices is FORESEEN but not INTENDED
- Both couples act voluntarily
- Assume that both couples act on similar motives (e.g., increased happiness, social expectations, improved status, etc.)

Now, here are some possible disanalogies:

(a) What The Greens do is **selfish**, while what The Grays do is not.

**Reply:** First, it should be noted that many (most?) people have children for selfish reasons (e.g., to continue one’s family line, to experience unconditional love, to have an adorable baby in the house, to save a marriage, to “live on” forever through their children, and so on). Similarly, one can overconsume for NON-selfish reasons (e.g., imagine that I own a bunch of jet-skis, a hot tub, an indoor swimming pool, a yacht, and so on so that I can be the best host in the world and show all of my friends a good time).

Second, and especially when harm to others is involved, acting selflessly does not automatically make something permissible. For instance, I might steal from the rich to give to the poor, or murder innocent people to distribute their organs to those who need them, or lie to a jury so that a criminal avoids punishment, and so on. In each of these cases, I may act for the sake of others besides myself, but this does not thereby make my action permissible.

(b) The right to procreate is a fundamental **human right**; but there is no “right” to overconsume.
Reply: First, Young points out that, even if there IS such a right, surely it is not absolute. For, no right is absolute. Consider:

Commonly recognizes “rights” include that of freedom of speech and freedom of religion, as well as rights to life and liberty. But, are these rights ABSOLUTE? It seems not. For, some restriction of them is surely permissible:

Free Speech: The right to free speech should be restricted to some extent. For instance, one should not have the right to shout “Fire!” in a crowded venue; or the right to give racist “hate speeches” against minorities; furthermore, words that incite illegal activities or actions, as well as libel, slander, and certain obscenities (e.g., on television) are all currently prohibited by the government.

Free Religion: Freedom of religion should be restricted to some extent as well. For instance, one does not have the right to make human sacrifices, even if one’s religion demands it; furthermore, polygamy is illegal in the U.S., even though it is endorsed by some branches of Mormonism

Rights to Life and Liberty: The right to life is also restricted. For instance, killing in self-defense is permissible; furthermore, the death penalty is still legal in approximately 2/3 of the U.S. states. Liberty is also restricted (e.g., when imprisoned for a crime). In fact, EVERY enforced law, as well as every tax, is a restriction of one’s freedom. Yet, most of us find this to be acceptable.

In short, whatever supposed “rights” we have, none of them are absolute. They are overridden in special circumstances. And the fact remains that, in today’s world of overpopulation, overconsumption, climate change, and depleted resources, the “right to procreate” (if there is one) might be overridden.

Second, if there IS a fundamental right to reproduce, there is probably ALSO a fundamental right to property and liberty. That is, we typically think that we have a right to own things (e.g., wages, property, possessions), and furthermore, we are free to do whatever we want with them (e.g., ride in private jets, etc.).

Third, Young makes the following observation: if HUMANS have a fundamental right to reproduce, do ANIMALS have this right as well? If so, the more WE populate the Earth, the more it is the case that we encroach upon nature, and ANIMALS are being run out of their habitats, and dwindling in numbers. In short, if we reproduce more, animals will reproduce less. But, then, if we exercise OUR right to reproduce, we violate THEIR right to reproduce (if they have it).
Due to 'Diminishing Marginal Utility' (where each additional unit of resources consumed produces successively less and less happiness), The Grays produce more total happiness in the world than The Greens do.

Reply: Young dismisses this objection, stating that it relies on Utilitarianism (which, he says, is false), and also stating that, even if it were true, we could just deny that Diminishing Marginal Utility applies in this case by stipulating that The Greens are made enormously happy by their excessive consumption.

But, perhaps a more satisfying response is this: Overall, even if The Grays produce more net happiness among their FAMILY ALONE, The Grays contribute to overpopulation while The Greens do not. As such, The Grays have added to 50 years of highways being a little more crowded, and lines being a little bit longer, and so on—and, what is more, The Grays are likely to produce GRANDchildren, and GREAT-grandchildren, and so on, thus perpetuation overcrowding and overpopulation and making the world a little worse off because of it.

(d) Since each human life has inherent value, The Grays produce E5 but ALSO produce 2 valuable human lives. Meanwhile, The Greens only produce E5 alone.

Reply: First, Young points out that many question whether human life has inherent (or “intrinsic”) value at all.

Second, if one is a Biocentrist, then adding a human being to the world adds the value of a HUMAN life, but only at the expense of subtracting other NON-human lives (e.g., all of the plants and animals and trees, etc., that the human will consume). So, overall, adding a human does not increase total value.

Third, if one is a Sentientist, then adding a human being does not increase the total value either. This is obvious if the added human eats meat (most Americans consume at least 2,000 animals over the course of their lives). But, even if they are vegetarian, they contribute to environmental degradation and destruction which results in more animals dying (e.g., due to climate change, other pollutants, or simple deforestation and so on). So, if all sentient creatures have inherent value, then adding one human being is not likely to increase the total amount of value in the world.

Fourth, only on an Anthropocentric view (or what Singer called "Speciesism"), where ONLY humans have intrinsic value, can one consistently hold this claim. Though, as we have seen, there is reason to doubt that Speciesism is true.
3. Conclusion: To remain consistent, therefore, Young concludes that we must adopt one of two stances. We must either:

- Conclude that both procreation AND eco-gluttony are morally acceptable
- Conclude that neither procreation NOR eco-gluttony are morally acceptable

Young opts for the latter, and claims that (in most cases) having children is morally wrong. Let’s look at a couple of objections to this conclusion.

(a) If everyone acted “morally” by not having children, it would be a disaster.

Reply: It is true that, if the next generation is radically smaller than the present one, there will be a lot of problems to deal with—e.g., failures in the economy, a “top-heavy” elderly population who would deplete Medicare and Social Security funds, and so on. However, Young claims, most people will probably ignore his argument and keep procreating anyway. Also, even if these disasters DO occur, they will probably not be as bad as the ones that will occur if we continue our present trend of exponential population growth.

(b) This argument proves too much. For example, someone who starts a business is now responsible for E5, or probably more (maybe E1000!). But, clearly, starting a business is not immoral.

Reply: Not necessarily. Young points out that industries and businesses CAN be positive contributors to society—by producing goods and improving the level of well-being of its customers. While it IS probably the case that Young’s argument proves that SOME industries are doing something morally equivalent to eco-gluttony, it does not entail that ALL industries will fit that description.

[One more possible objection: Perhaps we could take a Virtue Ethics stance here, and point out that the sort of activity that leads to depletion that The Greens do is “wasteful”, “gluttonous”, and “excessive”, and that this is not what a virtuous person would do. Meanwhile, the lifestyle choice that The Grays choose is not—namely, living a modest life and having two children—does not display any failure of virtue on their part. What do you think? Is this a morally relevant disanalogy between the two cases?]