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Extreme Overpopulation

In the past in the West, large numbers of children in a single family were not uncommon, occasionally even as many as 25 (Worth 2002, 127–143, 281–290). These children were presumably not the result of choice but rather of necessity and inevitability in an environment where reliable contraception was unknown, agriculture required many workers, and moral and religious beliefs supported being fruitful and multiplying.

Today, reality shows depict procreative carelessness in shows such as *I Didn't Know I Was Pregnant* and give reason to worry about the possibility that the citizens of some developed nations, including especially the most powerful one, are indifferent to population overgrowth. Consider the media attention given to large families. It includes both families that are large because of the birth of multiple children at once (such as the Gosselin family in *Jon and Kate Plus Eight* and its successor *Kate Plus Eight*, which are about a family with twins and sextuplets, and the Hayes family in *Table for Twelve*, about a family with two sets of twins and a set of sextuplets) and families that are large because of the birth of many children serially (the most notorious of which is *Nineteen Kids and Counting*, about the Duggar family, the parents of which have set no limits on the number of children they will "welcome"). We can refer in the former case to the production of large families synchronically and in the latter case to the production of large families diachronically. Today, many people would say that it is morally acceptable to have such large numbers of children provided the family can sustain them all and do a reasonably good job of rearing them. I argue that this view is profoundly mistaken.

Worries about global overpopulation and the extreme stress on the planet's carrying capacity are familiar news. Jennifer Wise writes, "On a global level we produce millions more babies each year than we can possibly care for. According to UNESCO, we allow over 10 million children

to die of poverty, war, malaria, and other preventable diseases—every year" (2006, 128). Indeed, there are more and more human beings on this planet, but the fertility rate varies from nation to nation, and some areas are growing much faster than others.

> According to the *2008 Revision* of the official United Nations population estimates and projections, the world population is projected to . . . surpass 9 billion people by 2050. . . . Most of the additional 2.3 billion people will enlarge the population of developing countries, which is projected to rise from 5.6 billion in 2009 to 7.9 billion in 2050, and will be distributed among the population aged 15–59 (1.2 billion) and 60 or over (1.1 billion) because the number of children under age 15 in developing countries will decrease.
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> In contrast, the population of the more developed regions is expected to change minimally, passing from 1.23 billion to 1.28 billion, and would have declined to 1.15 billion were it not for the projected net migration from developing to developed countries, which is projected to average 2.4 million persons annually from 2009 to 2050. (United Nations 2008, 9)

One reason for the difference in fertility rate between developing and developed nations is simply that women in developed nations tend to have more education, and the more education a woman has, the less likely she is to have children. "Why this is happening is the subject of much theorizing: educated women delay childbearing until it's no longer an option; they refuse to pay what economists call the 'motherhood premium' in which the salaries of university-educated women plateau after childbirth and then drop, while fathers' incomes are unaffected; they recognize that raising children is a sacrifice of time, money and freedom they're not willing to make; or they simply don't want to have children and are able to say no" (Kingston 2009, 39–40). Some researchers point to later marriage, access to better contraception, and reduced poverty as causes of Western women's lower fertility rates (Vallely 2008). Moreover, delaying childbearing stretches out the generations and results in the birth of fewer people (Dawkins 1989,[1] 110–111).

It is not controversial that humanity's long-term goal must be, at the very least, to achieve a population size compatible with our continued existence on this planet. But that compatibility must surely be such that human beings do not merely survive but also thrive—and not just some of us, but all of us. Given the facts about population size, I leave open what precisely the immediate population goal should be—whether it is to bring the population down to a particular size, to reduce the rate of population growth, or to even out variations in population growth either

geographically or temporally (see O'Neill 1979, 32–33). But what do the facts about population growth indicate about the ethics of childbearing, especially within the developed world, the focus of this book? There is an interesting division of opinion. On the one hand, some express concern about the relatively low rates of birth in Western nations. For example, consider the views of Margaret Wente, a Canadian journalist. Writing about Patricia Rashbrook, the Briton who gave birth at 63 to a baby created with a donor egg, Wente writes hyperbolically: "We should kiss this mother's feet for making her own contribution to the future of Western civilization—this is her fourth child—because the demographic curve of Western civ is not promising, to say the least" (Wente and Eddie 2006, F7). The Infertility Awareness Association of Canada similarly supports a demand for public funding of IVF by stating, "Canada needs more babies" (quoted in Hanck 2009, C2).

On this view, overpopulation is not a problem for the developed countries; the problem lies in the developing countries. But comments such as Wente's are at least incipiently xenophobic because they are posited on fears about the possibility that North Americans and Europeans are being outnumbered by those who are not part of "Western civ" (Rashbrook, a white woman, gave birth to a white child). But if the future of Western civilization seems threatened by its "demographic curve," Western countries can always increase their rates of immigration. Civilization can just as well be preserved by nonwhites as by whites and by immigrants as by the native born.

In contrast to Wente, Corinne Maier writes, "It's not that there are too many people on the planet—there are just too many *rich* people. We are the planet's freeloaders, and we keep increasing our consumption. . . . If you live in Europe or America, then having kids is immoral" (2007, 121, her emphasis). Two physicians, John Guillebaud and Pip Hayes, agree:

> Should we now explain to UK couples who plan a family that stopping at two children, or at least having one less child than first intended, is the simplest and biggest contribution anyone can make to leaving a habitable planet for our grandchildren? We must not put pressure on people, but by providing information on the population and the environment, and appropriate contraception for everyone (and by their own example), doctors should help to bring family size into the arena of environmental ethics, analogous to avoiding patio heaters and high carbon cars. (2008, a576)

They are correct: in general, children in developing countries generate less net cost to the environment than children in developed countries. Guillebaud and Hayes recognize that planetary capacity is not merely a matter of how many human beings there are, but how those human beings live their lives. From that point of view, overpopulation is not (just) a problem for the developing countries; the currently bigger problem lies in the developed nations.

Guillebaud and Hayes appear to be exhorting physicians to take some responsibility for fixing that problem, but it's evident that they also think their patients—indeed, anyone who is fertile—have a responsibility to limit their procreative behavior. Children are persons, not consumer goods. But *having* children and being able to afford them are a luxury—both for the parent and also for the planet. Because of the dangers of planetary overload, the responsibility to limit the number of one's offspring falls on people living in the developed world.[2] It may also fall upon people in the developing world; I don't want to rule that out. However, at the very least it's a responsibility of people in the West, for several reasons. First, most of us living in the global West are on average well educated. As a result, we know (or should know) about the dangers of overpopulation. We collectively are also sufficiently informed to know how to curb our numbers. Second, we in the West consume far out of proportion to our numbers. Most of us, based on nothing but the accident of where we were born, have the privilege of living in what is probably the most comfortable and luxurious society that has ever existed in human history. Those luxuries are not free; at the very least, we need to help pay for them by curbing our fertility. Third, we in the West have the ability—the research, resources, and technologies—to limit the number of children we have. Fourth, we in the West do not have the same economic needs for many children that people elsewhere have (or think they have). Finally, if prosperous westerners make a concerted attempt to limit their numbers, then arguments to citizens of developing nations that they should consider using effective contraception likewise to limit the numbers of their children will be far more credible. Hence, whatever citizens of the developing world may decide to do (or may have decided for them by their leaders), we in the developed world have a moral responsibility to limit our numbers, given the current threats to planetary carrying capacity posed by overpopulation.

Individuals in the West might wonder why this burden should fall on them—that is, why a global problem should become theirs to solve. Surely, they might say, problems of overpopulation must be resolved at the level of cultures, societies, and states. I agree, but this issue is not a matter of either/or. Entire societies must take responsibility for curbing population growth; decisions must be made and policies enacted on a national level. Nonetheless, population will not stabilize, let alone decline, without active decisions being made by individuals. Societies do not have fewer babies; individuals do.

A Proposal for Procreative Limitation

By how much should individuals and couples limit their procreation? American philosopher Thomas Young says that the motives behind both reproduction and overconsumption are "often identical: cultural expectations, improved status, elevated self-esteem, increased happiness, or an altruistic desire to share with others" (2001, 185). Hence, Young argues, if we regard having children as morally permissible, let alone desirable, then we must say the same thing about "ecogluttony"—that is, increasing one's own consumption to a level equal to adding to the American population another human being who will live to eighty (2001, 185–186). Doing so is clearly wrong. He concludes that because "having even just one child in an affluent household usually produces environmental impacts comparable to an intuitively unacceptable level of consumption, resource depletion, and waste," human procreation is morally wrong in most cases (2001, 183).[3] His arguments are aimed at Americans in particular rather than at persons in the developing world, whose consumption is a tiny fraction of that of U.S. citizens. Even if one American has just two children, those children will use huge amounts of resources during their lives, and they will then probably go on to have children of their own, compounding the problem. "Two more children . . . in a world with over six billion people is insignificant; yet most agree that the cumulative effect of a number of people acting that way is, and will continue to be, disastrous for species diversity, ecosystem preservation, and future generations," says Young. The implication is that having any children at all is likely to be morally wrong: "Since having even just one child in an

affluent household usually produces environmental impacts comparable to what mainstream environmentalists consider to be an intuitively unacceptable level of consumption, resource depletion, and waste, they should also oppose human reproduction (in most cases)" (2001, 185, 182).

I have argued throughout this book that citizens of developed nations have a responsibility to see procreation as a moral issue and to evaluate their reasons for reproducing. I agree with Young that environmental degradation and overpopulation behoove all of us to limit the numbers of offspring we create.[4] However, I disagree with Young's idea that westerners (at least those who care about our outsize environmental impact) should give up procreation altogether.

Given the centrality of childbearing and child rearing to human existence, an obligation not to have any children at all would be a huge sacrifice, one that is too much to expect of anyone who wants to have children. Moreover, people are not likely to adhere to such an obligation, not only because it would be so difficult in the first place (given how much some people value procreation), but because it would most likely be violated in some instances, thereby lowering their own motivation and drastically increasing resentment. It would also be hard to undertake such an obligation knowing that once the population was sufficiently reduced, people in the future would no longer have to adhere to it. In addition, unlikely as it is, if large numbers of people did not have children at all, then a sizable gap in the population would develop that might create serious problems within a few decades as a result of lack of workers (unless adoption from the developing world were undertaken on a massive scale). For all these reasons, I suggest both that people cannot be expected to accept an obligation to have no children and that there is no such obligation.

Perhaps, however, in the spirit of Young's proposal we should consider a moral obligation to have only one child per couple (the legally mandated requirement for most couples in China). Although such an obligation would not face the insuperable difficulties of an obligation to have none, it would still create major problems, some of which would be similar to the problems of an obligation to have none. Once again, limiting procreation to such a degree might be a major hardship for many. People are not likely to adhere to such an obligation; some would likely violate it, thereby reducing potentially compliant individuals' motivation. It would also

be hard to undertake such an obligation knowing that, if it is successful, then in the future people would not have to make such sacrifices.

In addition, I suggest that a further problem with the one-child-per-couple obligation is that it implicitly negates one person in the couple. If a couple has two children, however, there is a child for each one—not in the sense that each raises only one child, but in the sense that each individual has replaced himself or herself. By contrast, a moral rule of only one child per couple says, in effect, "You ought not to replace yourself." (Perhaps it would also carry the message "You do not deserve to be replaced.") Such an obligation would also incur hardships for single people seeking to procreate, who would violate the obligation unless they were in some way paired with another person who does not have a child.

There are also important questions about the likely results of raising a nation of children who have no sibling relationships at all. Not all sibling relationships are positive, but there is plenty to be learned from such relationships. In China, the one-child policy is in effect a long-term social experiment on a grand scale. Although it is good not to have families so large that the children are overlooked or taken for granted, it is also good not to have so few offspring around at any given time that most of the next generation lacks familial peers and cannot learn from experience and observation how to relate to and care for babies and other children in the family.

Even more worrying, in nations where there are strong preferences for children of one sex/gender (usually boys) rather than the other, the one-child policy leads to high rates of abortion for sex selection and tragically high frequencies of neglect, abandonment, and infanticide of females. In China, since the introduction of the one-child policy in 1979, substantial numbers of girls and women are simply "missing" (Ebenstein 2010), and the proportion of males to females is very high. We cannot assume that Western nations are so free of sexism as not to be motivated by preferences for children of one sex over children of the other; the preference for the sex of offspring might be exacerbated by an obligation to have only one child per couple. And unless the nation's social safety net is highly developed, a one-child-per-couple arrangement puts elderly people into a potentially precarious position because almost every adult will eventually have to care for two aging parents. Even when eldercare is socialized, there may not be enough young workers to support very elderly

citizens (MacKinnon 2009, A12). For all of these reasons, then, an obligation to have only one child is at most supererogatory and unlikely to be sustainable.

It instead makes more sense to say that every individual adult has a moral responsibility to limit himself or herself to procreative replacement only. The idea of the two-child family is not, of course, a new one; it was advocated at many times during the twentieth century. What may be somewhat novel, however, is to think of procreation limits in terms of one child per adult person, whether the person is single, in a heterosexual relationship, or in a same-sex relationship.[5] I am of course not saying that people *must* replace themselves; if they choose not to have a child at all, they have done nothing morally wrong and in fact are contributing to population reduction. Nor, given what I said in chapter 2 on reproductive rights, am I suggesting that anyone is somehow owed a child or that anyone has a moral right to a baby. Nor am I advocating the violation of people's liberty right to reproduce: I am not arguing for social constraints on or interference in people's procreative behavior or for sanctions against those who produce a large number of children. I am simply saying that we should consider it morally justifiable for every individual, whether in a relationship or not, to have one biologically related child; it would then be permissible for a couple to have two. (However, they could presumably increase the size of their family by adoption, fostering, or the formation of blended or communal families—that is, any approach that involves the inclusion in the familial group of children who already exist.)

This responsibility to have no more than one child each is easily justified. All persons get to (try to) have a child of "their own," if they want one, and the value of every adult is implicitly endorsed through the fact that each one is allowed to reproduce herself or himself. Such a responsibility implies that every person is sufficiently valuable as to be worth replacing (even though a one-child-per-person morality will eventually result in population decline, given that some people will have no children and some couples will choose to have only one). Because one child each is already close to the reproductive norm in many developed countries, it is more likely to be accepted and acted upon. In addition, for those couples for whom the sex/gender of the offspring matters (whether such a preference is rational or fair or not), there would be two opportunities to have the kind of child they want.[6] Finally, "one child per person" is not the

same as "two children per couple." "One child per person" is preferable because it is not based on a sexist and heterosexist notion that women must necessarily be in a couple and that every couple must consist of a male and a female. "One child per person" recognizes the possibility that a single woman might procreate, as might two women in a committed relationship.

Criticisms of the One-Child-Per-Person Responsibility

Proposing a moral responsibility to have no more than one child each is likely to provoke many objections. Bear in mind that I am *not* suggesting that this reproductive limit be *legally* required or enforceable or that its violation be legally punishable. I am also doubtful that social policies should be put in place to enforce it—for example, by providing baby bonuses only for the first two children or by offering no more maternity leaves after the second child. Such policies would simply make children—in particular, those born third and later—and their mothers suffer. Such a consequence is insupportable. So my proposal is not to embed the "one adult/one offspring" suggestion in state laws or policies but simply to argue that it is a matter of individual moral responsibility. I'm saying that having children ought to be undertaken within a commitment to self-limitation and to the moral justification of one's choices. Individuals should be thinking about why they want children and about their reasons for the number that they want to have.

A citizen of the West might protest that of course she can have three or four children because so many others in her society have only one or even none. But such an argument may not be sustainable. Unless extensive state regulation of procreation is introduced—regulation that would infringe on people's reproductive rights and violate their privacy—there is no way of ensuring against the possibility that others might reason likewise. That is, if one couple may have four children because another has none, or a second couple may have three children because another has only one, we would then have a series of procreative choices that are perilously dependent on very specific decisions by other couples. And although I do believe that we need to take others into consideration when we make procreative decisions, we cannot count on others' reduced fertility as a way of exempting ourselves from a responsibility to limit our own. If

everyone reasoned similarly, then no one would adopt the one-child-each responsibility; in effect, all persons would be handing procreative limits on to others while exempting themselves.

I can imagine that once the global population stabilizes at a level that is compatible with the planet's carrying capacity and flourishing by all, individuals might be able to justify somewhat larger families, both because the dangers of overpopulation would no longer be so imminent or overwhelming and because by then human society would have evinced a long-term pattern of reduced fertility on which individuals might plausibly depend for planning a larger number of children. We are nowhere near that point yet, and although fertility levels are declining in most of the developed world, they are declining at varying rates. I would argue that they have not been low for long enough to justify one's having more children simply on the supposed grounds that others can be counted on to have fewer.

In response to arguments like mine, Clifford Orwin, a Canadian political scientist, is skeptical. He writes of a study that calculates that the environmental impact of each new child "is almost 20 times greater than whatever energy the parent could save by all other righteous choices combined." In response, he says, "I'm sorry, learned researchers, but my calculus is different from yours. Looking at my own two children, now young adults, I find myself completely unrepentant. . . . I wish I could have had more." He adds to those who are trying to decide whether to have children, "Go ahead, have kids, the more the merrier. God has commanded it, and nature's cool with it" (2009, A11). Obviously no one expects Orwin to regret the births of his two children or even to reevaluate the choice to have them, but his failure to acknowledge any environmental responsibility is reprehensible.

Though Scott Wisor takes the problems more seriously, he nonetheless argues that people in the West have no particular obligation to reduce the size of their family for the sake of environmental concerns. He agrees that "affluent individuals" have obligations to prevent environmental destruction and even, where possible, to reverse past environmental harms. But he thinks that limiting family size in order to prevent environmental harm is a form of "consumer-driven activism" that will not be successful in changing the world by changing individual behavior. The reasons, according to Wisor, are that consumers lack adequate knowledge about

their environmental impact; they therefore make irresponsible choices. Some simply choose not to make environmentally responsible decisions because they don't care. In addition, consumer activism inappropriately "relieves pressure" on states and institutions to lead the end to environmental degradation (2009, 26, 27, 28). Environmental activism requires changing institutions, not changing individual actions.

I agree with most of Wisor's claims, but they are not sufficient to obviate an obligation to confine procreation to one child per person.[7] Even if dealing with environmental destruction is a state responsibility, it is also an individual responsibility: a person who lives in a nation that is taking active steps to conserve resources does not thereby have the right to be profligate with those resources. If some individuals are ignorant about what steps to take to reduce their environmental impact, then the state has a responsibility to educate them, and they may have a responsibility to educate themselves.

Wisor also claims that "in some cases increased population sizes have actually led to increases in environmental stewardship and preservation of natural resources" (2009, 28). Even if there were some truth to this factual claim, it would be a risky foundation for allowing populations to increase and for not recognizing a responsibility to limit one's procreative behavior. He acknowledges that one U.S. citizen consumes as much energy as 900 Nepalis: all the more reason, then, for North Americans to acknowledge a responsibility to limit the number of new citizens they create.

Wisor thinks that even though it is practically and morally justified to consider whether one can care and provide for additional children, one should not make procreative decisions based on the children's potential impact "on their community and world" (2009, 29). He's right insofar as it would be problematic to *have* a child for the sake of the child's effects on society and the environment. In chapter 5, I argued against making purely consequentialist assessments of children's value. But those who are deeply concerned about the effects of population growth, especially in the wasteful West, are arguing instead that people should choose *not* to have many children in order to avoid those children's potential effects on society and the environment. There is a difference. The former would be a case of creating and using children for ends that are neither chosen by the children nor necessarily tied to the children's own interests and goals;

it would be wrong. The latter is a case of choosing to limit one's behavior and have fewer offspring in order not only to protect environmental resources in general but also to try to produce a world that will be far better for the offspring one does have. Whereas Wisor thinks it is morally appropriate for reproduction to be motivated by "the desire to have a *large*, fun, supportive family" (2009, 29, his emphasis), I am arguing that there is something morally problematic, perhaps morally wrong, about having a large family in the wasteful, consumerist West. Although there may be ways by which one can reduce a family's environmental footprint, every additional child nonetheless produces a substantial additional cost to planetary resources—a cost that is likely to persist for eighty or more years.

Some people would reject any moral limit on numbers of offspring on the basis of the deontological arguments discussed in chapter 4. These arguments include passing on one's name or property, having a genetic link to children, keeping a promise, and fulfilling duties to other family members. As I argued there, those reasons for having children are for the most part weak and uncompelling. But even if they seem compelling to some people and hence appear to provide urgent reasons for procreation, the opportunity to have one child or two with a partner can and should satisfy people's desires to "do their duty" in the way that deontologists understand it.

The one deontological reason that might not be satisfied by the responsibility to have no more than one child per person arises from the teachings of some fundamentalist religions that expect women to treat the production of lots of babies as a woman's purpose. Some fundamentalists, such as Michelle and Jim Bob Duggar, would say that they cannot be expected to curb their numbers because they are morally committed to following the word of God. Indeed, the Duggars state repeatedly that they want as many children as God sends them, and on their Web site they proclaim, "We believe that each child is a special gift from God and we are thankful to Him for each one" (Duggar and Duggar 2011).

Enthusiastic viewers also point out that the Duggar children are seemingly happy and healthy.[8] The family is prosperous, at least in part because of substantial revenues from their reality television appearances. This very large family seems not to be a result of the victimization of the wife;[9] it is evident that Michelle Duggar knows what she is doing, and

her husband, Jim Bob Duggar, says he leaves it up to her whether to have more children. Moreover, we can't say that children are *entitled* to be part of a small family, and there may be some advantages to being a member of a large one (provided there are sufficient resources for them to live well), such as a ready source of playmates and plenty of personal support. What, then, is the moral problem with a large family such as the Duggars?

To say that the children are well cared for is an inadequate defense of the adult Duggars' procreative behavior. If each Duggar child in turn has 19 children, then there will be 361 grandchildren. If each of those children has 19 children, there will be 6,859 great-grandchildren. The next generation would number 130,321. Just as worrying, the Duggars may well serve as role models and inspiration to at least some other prospective parents. As research psychologist Michael Ashton says (ironically), "In a few years we will all be Duggars" (personal communication, July 2010). With the example set by the Duggars, there would be no hope of population stabilization, let alone reduction. Despite their claims to "buy used and save the difference," the family presumably consumes resources at a rate more than five times that of the average family in North America. And, frankly, it is highly doubtful that the genes of Michelle and Jim Bob Duggar (or the genes of any human being at all) are so valuable as to need or deserve to be so often reproduced.

The justification for having many children that is derived from God's alleged command does not exempt individuals from reevaluating their procreative behavior in light of the dangers of overpopulation. The argument I am making is not about compelling people to toe certain reproductive lines, nor is it about forcing morality on anyone. I simply suggest that even religious believers who think God mandates repeated procreation have a responsibility to consider whether in light of the social, environmental, and even personal costs of overpopulation it really is morally acceptable to have more than two children. I have no illusions that religious fundamentalists are likely to give up their beliefs. But if some human beings claim to know in some detail what is God's will, then they can also reconsider whether there are good grounds for believing that their God wants them to procreate (and consume) to a degree that degrades the planet and destroys the environment that makes human life possible. The simple moral question—and one that religious believers can and should

ask themselves—is this: Assuming that God's command to procreate is directed at everyone, is it possible for every (heterosexual) couple to follow God's supposed mandate and have 5, 10, 15, or 20 children (Bob Cadman, personal communication, December 2009)? The obvious answer is no; the outcome is not sustainable. It is wrong to consider oneself a moral exception, and scripture provides no basis for supposing that some parents are more entitled than others to procreate. Large families are parasitical on small ones in the sense that some families' lower fertility rate gives parents of large families the illusion that their procreative choices are not environmentally costly.

There is, however, one further counterargument to my one-child-per-adult proposal that is different from any of those discussed so far. This counterargument is intended to show that adopting a moral responsibility to limit procreation to one child per adult would in fact be ineffective and even counterproductive to the aim of containing population growth. Ashton asks us to imagine a scenario in which some people accept a responsibility to limit their procreation:

> The more socially responsible people end up having fewer children, on average, than do the people who don't have much sense of social responsibility. Therefore, to the extent that "social responsibility" is transmitted from parents to children, then the next generation will be somewhat lower in social responsibility than the current generation. (Note that it doesn't matter if social responsibility is mainly transmitted genetically or through social learning [culture].)
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> The next generation will therefore have a smaller proportion of people who will voluntarily have fewer children (or who will do anything else) out of a sense of social responsibility. This cycle then repeats, so that there are fewer socially responsible people with each generation. (Note that the total population might not decline at all, if the less socially responsible people have many children.) This in turn means a lower likelihood of avoiding the kinds of "commons dilemmas" that were supposed to be solved by telling people to have fewer children.
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> . . . [T]his process might be slow: It depends on *(a)* the extent to which the more socially responsible people have fewer children and *(b)* the extent to which social responsibility is transmitted from parents to children. If either *(a)* or *(b)* is not strong, then the problem will be relatively small. Now, based on what we know about the transmission of traits and attitudes, *(b)* is probably pretty substantial, though far from a perfect link. I think *(a)* is likely to be smaller, so there might not be a problem in the next few generations. But the more "successful" one is in encouraging socially responsible people to have only one child or no children at all, the less socially responsible the next generation will be, and the less successful one will be in getting that next generation to have fewer children. So the policy defeats itself. (email message to the author, August 17, 2009)[10]

Perhaps the social supports widely found in developed countries make Ashton's predicted outcome more likely. Richard Dawkins writes that "in nature" at least or in times when there is no state support for children or families, "individuals who have too many children are penalized, not because the whole population goes extinct, but simply because fewer of their children survive. Genes for having too many children are just not passed on to the next generation in large numbers, because few of the children bearing these genes reach adulthood" (1989, 117). But with the advent of good medical care, free public education, and at least minimal welfare payments and unemployment insurance, the offspring of individuals who have many children are quite likely to survive, along with the tendency to have more children.

Ashton's argument depends on a number of empirical predictions. To assess the argument's strength adequately, it would be necessary to test its predictions by widely (and successfully) promulgating the idea that there is a moral responsibility to limit the number of one's children and then seeing whether the adoption of the moral responsibility is, as predicted, self-defeating. This informal experiment is worth trying both because we need to know whether an attempt at individual ethical regulation of population growth is effective and because by publicizing the concept of a moral duty to limit procreation, we would be taking the action that seems morally justified by the problems facing our planet. The evidence that people *can* change in this way is that they *have*—the number of babies born has declined precipitously in the West over the past century, although probably not primarily out of apprehension of global overpopulation. Concern for the planet is both a simple and a significant reason for people to evaluate carefully their procreative goals, but if Ashton's prediction turns out to be correct, then appeals to immediate personal benefit rather than to planetary preservation might be the most effective way of persuading people to change their reproductive behavior.

Wisor less plausibly uses an argument similar to Ashton's to assert that "individuals concerned about the environment" ought to have even *more* children rather than fewer on the grounds that their influence can then counterbalance the effects of people who don't care about the environment (2009, 29). It just seems counterproductive and rhetorically implausible, if not crazy, to promote having more children in an effort to reduce the impact of population growth on the environment. One cannot count

on one's children sharing one's own views, especially when they are seemingly contradicted by one's own behavior. It seems just as likely that a child born into a large family will reject her parents' environmentalism—or at the very least regard it as a manifestation of bad faith. (Of course, that being so, we might also anticipate that the offspring of persons indifferent to planetary depredation might turn out to be environmentalists.)

If having more children is counterproductive, then at least at the level of individual ethics there is no alternative for those concerned about the future of the planet than to limit their own procreation. If we have a responsibility to limit our consumption and our environmental footprint, then surely we also have a responsibility to limit the birth of new human beings who will otherwise contribute both to that consumption and to the despoliation of our planetary home.[11]