

Is It Morally Wrong to Have Children?

1. The Argument: Thomas Young begins by noting that the typical environmentalist usually believes the following two things:

- (1) Excessive consumption and resource depletion (“eco-gluttony”) is morally wrong.
- (2) Having children is morally permissible, and even praiseworthy.

Young thinks that these two claims are incompatible. He argues that, in order to be consistent, environmentalists should oppose procreation on environmental grounds.

He focuses his argument around two couples:

The Greens The Greens are an American couple in their late 20’s. If they were *average* American consumers, they’d collectively contribute about 100 years’ worth of average American consumption over the remainder of their lives. (Average life expectancy is late 70’s.) However, they are over-consumers or “eco-gluttons”. They frequently go for long joyrides in their SUV’s, they eat a lot of meat (a major greenhouse gas contributor), they take really long showers, they produce a lot of waste, and so on. All told, they consume 2.5 times more than the average American. So, they actually produce about **250 years’ worth** of average American consumption and environmental impact, instead of 100.

[Note: In Young’s terms, The Greens produce “E5”, where E1=50 years’ worth of average American consumption, E2=100 years’ worth, E3=150 years’ worth, etc.]

Most environmentalists would be outraged by what The Greens do, and would morally condemn their actions. But now compare this with The Grays:

The Grays The Grays are a young American couple in their late 20’s. They consume an average amount of resources. Then they have two children, bringing about a total of 250 years’ worth of average American consumption (roughly 50 more years for each parent, and 75 years’ worth of consumption for each child).

Typically, even an environmentally-minded person will not bat an eye at what The Grays do. They might even congratulate The Grays when they have their babies, and generally respect them for not being eco-gluttonous.

But notice: The Grays, rather than keeping their total environmental impact at **100 years' worth** of consumption, they made a deliberate decision to do something that brought about **250 years' worth** of consumption instead. Namely, they decided to bring two more human beings into existence.

Young's claim is that, if you condemn the eco-gluttonous Greens for deliberately doing something that brings about 250 years' worth of consumption, then you must also condemn the Grays – for, by choosing to procreate, they do exactly the same thing. We seem to have an argument by analogy:

1. What The Greens do (namely, bring about 250 years' worth of consumption via eco-gluttony) is morally wrong.
2. But, what The Grays do (namely, bring about 250 years' worth of consumption by bringing two children into existence) is morally analogous to what the Greens do.
3. Therefore, procreation is morally wrong.

In short, if you consider yourself an environmentalist, the next time a friend says, "We're having a baby!", instead of saying "Congratulations!" you should say, "Oh wow, I didn't realize you were such a terrible person. So, you hate the planet then?" Is that correct? Or can one consistently condemn eco-gluttony, but not condemn procreation?

2. Objections: Are there morally relevant differences between what the two couples do?

(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). Presumably, environmentalists would still condemn the altruistic eco-gluttons, and would *not* condemn the selfish parents.

Second, the implication here is that it is permissible to cause harm to others, so long as you are doing it for altruistic reasons. But that is false. For instance, it still seems immoral to rob a rich person, even if I donate the money to charity; and still wrong to murder an innocent person, even if I do it in order to donate their organs to people who need them; and so on. In each case, I act to benefit others instead of myself, but this does not entail that my action is therefore permissible.

- (b) The Grays are merely exercising a fundamental **human right** – namely, the right to procreate; but there is no basic right to overconsume.

Reply: First, Young points out that, even if there IS such a right, surely it is not absolute. It is typically believed that rights do not extend or apply in instances where exercising them would cause HARM. For example:

A right to **free speech** does not entail that it is permissible to shout “Fire!” in a crowded venue (or engage in hate speech, or speech that incites violence, etc.). Having right to **freedom of religious practice** does not entail that it is permissible to engage in human sacrifice, even if one’s religion demands it. Having a **right to life** does not entail that it is permissible to steal someone’s kidney or heart, if you need a transplant in order to stay alive. A **right to bodily autonomy** does not entail that I may permissibly use my body’s fist to punch you in the nose. And so on.

In short, to the extent that we have basic moral rights (if we have them at all), they are limited in instances where exercising them would cause harm. As the saying goes, *My right to swing my fist ends where your nose begins.*

So, even if there *is* a basic human right to procreate, this right would be limited in an instance where procreation causes harm. For example, imagine that you knew with certainty that, if you procreated, your child (**Miserable Meg**) would suffer in horrible agony for its entire life. It seems immoral to go ahead and procreate anyway.

Life On Mars: Or, imagine 5 scientists are stranded on a base on Mars, where the next rescue shuttle will not arrive for 2 more years. (The launch window for missions from Earth to Mars only opens every 26 months.) There is exactly enough food to sustain exactly 5 people for 2 years (barely) until the re-supply shuttle arrives. But, two of the crew members purposely decide to procreate, bringing a 6th human being into existence. “We’re having a baby!” they say excitedly. Is this permissible? (i.e., procreating in a case where doing so will harm everyone else—perhaps even cost one of the crew members their life?) Surely, an appeal to a “basic human right to procreate” wouldn’t morally justify one’s actions in this case. Right?

That’s essentially what Young is saying here. In today’s world of overpopulation, overconsumption, climate change, and depleted resources, each additional human being added to the Earth causes harm, by exacerbating those problems. So, the “right to procreate” (if there is one) is overridden in today’s world.

Second, even if there IS a fundamental right to procreate, there are probably ALSO fundamental rights to **liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness**. That is, we typically think that we have a right to live our lives however we want to live them, a right to own things and do what we want with those things, and a right to try to attain those things that will secure well-being and meaning in our lives. (Also, any "right to procreate" probably reduces to one of these more basic rights.) So, even if it WAS permissible to cause environmental harms as a result of exercising a basic human right, the eco-gluttonous Greens could simply appeal to this same excuse! (They're just exercising their rights to liberty and property, and pursuing happiness!)

- (c) The Grays produce more **total happiness** in the world than The Greens do. This might be because parenting generally makes people much happier than over-consumption does; or it might be because spreading E5 (250 years of consumption) over four people rather than two leads to more happiness due to 'Diminishing Marginal Utility' (the phenomenon where each additional unit of resources consumed generally produces successively less and less happiness).

Reply: Young dismisses this objection, (*mistakenly*) stating that it relies on utilitarianism, or the view that we are always morally obligated to maximize happiness (which, he says, is false). [*No. The present objection merely requires the claim that harming others can (at least sometimes) be justified if it also generates a certain amount of happiness – a MUCH weaker claim than utilitarianism.*]

The Weak Version: Procreation Generates Happiness What Young's opponent is really claiming here that it is permissible to produce E5 just so long as doing so also generates a lot of happiness.

Reply: But, then, this would entail that the eco-gluttony of the Greens would ALSO be justified, just so long as it made them (or maybe their guests) very happy. Yet, presumably, the environmentalist would not want to say this. Presumably, they would *still* condemn the Greens' eco-gluttony, even if it made them super happy. (Likewise, they would say that procreation is permissible, even in those unfortunate cases where it ends up not generating very much happiness.)

The Stronger Version: Procreation is **Essential** to Happiness: Perhaps Young's opponent could say, "Procreation is **required** in order to be happy. It is an **essential** feature of the good or meaningful life. Meanwhile, eco-gluttony is not required in order to be happy, or have a decent life." (Young does not address this claim.)

Reply: The moral claim here seems to be something like, "If action X is required in order for me to have a good or decent life, then it is permissible for me to do X." But, that is surely false. Consider a case:

Toxic Cure You are sealed in a room with an innocent person and find yourself suddenly terminally ill. To survive, you must immediately manufacture a cure, which will have the unfortunate side-effect of releasing a lethal gas which will kill your roommate.

Is it permissible to manufacture the cure, killing your roommate? It doesn't seem so. The lesson is this: We may have a right to pursue happiness. But if securing our own happiness, or even life itself, entails HARMING or KILLING others, we must not do it. We must sacrifice our happiness in order to avoid harming others.

More replies: Also, how are we arriving at the conclusion that procreation is required in order to live a good life? Is this determined subjectively or objectively? If subjectively – i.e., if each individual just gets to decide for herself what is and is not required in order to be happy – then the eco-gluttonous Greens could just help themselves to the same excuse. "We REQUIRE eco-gluttony in order to be happy!" they could say. Alternatively, if this is meant to be an *objective* fact about human life, then it would seem to follow that childless people cannot have good or decent or meaningful lives – which seems totally false.

Finally: Even if it WAS permissible to cause harm to others, so long as it was essential to one's pursuit of the good life – this seems false, but imagine it were true – then, presumably the harm would only be justified if there were no ALTERNATIVE METHOD of securing that happiness. But, seemingly, one can experience all of the joys of parenting without bringing new children into existence – namely, via adoption. So, this excuse would only be available to those individuals who do not have the resources to adopt.

- (d) Since each **human life has intrinsic value**, The Grays produce E5 but ALSO add lots of value to the world (in the form of two humans). Meanwhile, The Greens do not.

Reply: First, the claim here is that increasing emissions from E2 to E5 is morally permissible, so long as it also generates a certain (large) quantity of intrinsic value. But, the most plausible, least controversial thing with intrinsic value is *happiness*. Yet, as we have just seen, an appeal to an increase in happiness does not seem to justify the Grays' behavior. (Meanwhile, the claim that human life has intrinsic value is far more controversial.)

Second, Young points out that this objection could only succeed if “**speciesism**” were true. For, the average American consumes roughly 8 cows, 25 pigs, 1,800 chickens, and 50 turkeys, 1,000 fish and 11,000 shellfish, as well as a handful of sheep, ducks, etc. – not to mention all of the living things that we are responsible for killing via contributions to habitat loss, water depletion, greenhouse gas emissions, and other pollutants, all of which cause the loss of life. So, even if each human life IS valuable, and makes the world better merely in virtue of existing: Even so, if animals, plants, ecosystems, etc. *also* have inherent value, then each additional human being *also* takes a significant amount of value *out* of the world in order to sustain their existence. Only a thoroughly anthropocentric view of value (where all non-human life lacks inherent value) would entail that each additional human puts more value into the world than they take out of it. But, says Young, such a view is implausible. [*What is Young implying here? That – even IGNORING the problem of climate change – each human being makes the world worse? For each individual human being, it would be better if they had never been born? Is that really plausible?*]

3. Additional Objections: Years after Young’s essay, some additional objections have arisen which are well worth exploring. I’ll provide my own replies on Young’s behalf.

(e) The Greens are responsible for 150 years’ worth of consumption above the average because they are **personally producing** it, but The Grays do not personally produce those extra 150 years’ worth of consumption. Rather, their CHILDREN do. As such, the parents are not responsible for that consumption. Rather, their children are. And, if the claim is that BOTH the parents and the children are responsible for the extra consumption, then Young is **double-counting** emissions!

Reply: Even so, the procreating Grays deliberately perform an action which they KNOW – or at least have every reason to believe – will result in a massive increase in the total amount of consumption and emissions. As such, they are responsible for the results of their decision.

It is not controversial that one can be morally responsible (at least in part) for harms that result from the actions of OTHER moral agents. For example, if I hire a hitman to kill a target, *I* am responsible for the death. If I sell someone a gun, despite the fact that they are loudly stating their intent to murder someone with it, then I am at least partly responsible for the resulting death.

The very idea that one can be morally guilty for **enabling** or **being complicit** in a harm that someone else does requires that we accept this. Even in the context of procreation, it seems clear that we can be responsible for harms that our children do:

Killer Baby In a future society, those who wish to procreate create multiple embryos in a lab, which are then scanned by a super-advanced artificial intelligence capable of predicting the future of each embryo. To date, the A.I.'s predictions have been over 99% accurate. Karen, a prospective parent, await her results. The A.I. predicts that all of her embryos will live pretty typical lives, except embryo #3. Embryo #3 will, if incubated, go on to murder one person. Karen then deliberately selects embryo #3 to be implanted for gestation, discarding the rest. Thirty years later, her child murders one person.

It seems clear that Karen is morally responsible for that future death. This is true because she deliberately brought someone into existing KNOWING that doing so would result in someone else's death. Similarly, if it really is true that each additional human in today's world causes significant harm to others via their greenhouse gas emissions, then EVERY child is like embryo #3. In our world, EVERY parent is a Karen!

Regarding double-counting: In the hired assassin case, BOTH parties are morally responsible for the death. We're not double-counting deaths – as if there were TWO murders. (That WOULD be a mistake.) Rather, we're double-counting *moral responsibility* – and that is not a mistake. Similarly, Young's argument is not double-counting *emissions* – as if the emissions were produced TWICE. (That WOULD be a mistake.) Rather, Young is merely double-counting *responsibility* for those emissions.

(f) If true, Young's reasoning would **prove too much!** For, other seemingly praiseworthy actions would be rendered immoral, in virtue of the fact that they significantly increase the total amount of consumption and emissions. For example:

- Saving a drowning child
- Adopting a child from a low-consumption nation to the U.S.
- Permitting immigration from a low-consumption nation to the U.S.

Each of these actions significantly increases total consumption. So are they too immoral!? (Should environmentalists add a "Build the wall!" sticker next to their "Save the planet!" bumper sticker?) That is totally absurd. And any proposal which entails that the above actions are immoral is clearly mistaken.

Reply: It's true that these actions increase total consumption, and so – assuming that every bit of additional consumption causes additional harm – they DO cause harm. However, procreation merely GIVES someone a pure benefit (namely, life), and furthermore, gives it to someone who would not have otherwise existed. (If I fail to give some existing child a happy life, at least there's a victim I can point to who is worse off because of my failure to benefit them. But, with procreation, there isn't even an existing victim! No one is deprived of any good, in virtue of not existing, if I choose not to procreate.) By contrast, saving a drowning child SAVES an EXISTING person from severe harm. It seems that we have VERY strong duties to save people from harm – so strong, I contend, that these duties override any prima facie wrongness associated with the fact that saving them increases the total emissions (and causes harm by contributing to climate change).

In short, **our duty to save others from harm is very strong, while our duty to procreate is very weak (or even non-existent)**.

For this reason (I contend), it is permissible to save a life, even if this leads to an increase in total consumption, because our duty to save a life is much stronger than (and therefore overrides) our duty not to increase total consumption.

A similar reply can be given for immigrants and intercountry adoptees who would be much worse off, if we did not help them (e.g., refugees).

(Note: There may be *some* instances of adoption or immigration that WOULD be rendered impermissible, on Young's proposal. For example, allowing someone to immigrate from a low-consumption nation to the U.S. who would NOT suffer significant harms if they stayed where they are. For example, average emissions in the U.S. are three times higher than those of France – even though the standard of living in both nations is roughly the same. Also, certain actions such as working as an IVF doctor would probably be rendered immoral on Young's proposal – because it results in a significant increase in consumption WITHOUT saving someone from significant harm. Are these potential implications of Young's view acceptable? What do you think?)

[Problem: But, what if saving someone's life really does cause SIGNIFICANT harm? Like, what if, for every life you save, this causes TWO future people to suffer and/or die (as Nolt claims)? For example, even though you have very strong moral reasons to save a drowning child, should you still save them even if you know that they will go on to one day kill two people – even if it's by accident, such as vehicular manslaughter? It's not clear that this IS permissible. Just consider Toxic Cure, above.]¹

¹ Note: For this reason, as we'll see, I ultimately end up suggesting that we **embrace our causal impotence**. For, if saving a life causes no harm, then it is clearly permitted, or even obligatory.

4. Conclusion: Young concludes that there are only two consistent stances. Either:

- (i) Both procreation AND eco-gluttony are morally permissible, or
- (ii) Neither procreation NOR eco-gluttony are morally permissible.

Young endorses the latter claim, concluding that (in most cases) having children is morally wrong.

Final Clarification: Some might object, "If everyone fulfilled this obligation by not having children, **we would go extinct!** Is that what Young is endorsing!?"

Reply: This criticism is based on a confusion. Even if it were the case that everyone PRESENTLY has an obligation to stop, or at least reduce, procreation – a claim that even Young doesn't seem to endorse, since he is only addressing procreation in high-consumption nations – this does not entail that we ought to go extinct. Consider a shallow pond with 100 people standing around it, where one child is drowning. EVERYONE there has an obligation to save the drowning child. But, once someone has saved the child, the other 99 are no longer morally required to do so. Similarly, perhaps we ALL have a duty to curtail procreation. But, once we get back down to a sustainable population (even if only SOME refrained from procreating), none of us have this duty any longer. In short, we don't have duties to solve already solved problems.²

[Virtue ethics to the rescue? A virtuous person would not engage in "eco-gluttony" as the Greens do. Rather, the virtuous person would practice "eco-moderation". So, the virtue ethicist would condemn the eco-gluttonous Greens. However, is it clear that they would condemn the procreating Grays? The Grays are merely living a modest life, consuming an average amount, and raising a modest number of children. Perhaps this does not display any failure of virtue on their part. On the other hand, perhaps a virtuous person would NOT bring children into the world in a situation where doing so was causing tremendous harm in the form of climate change? (Consider the Life on Mars case.) What do you think?]

² A practical worry: If the next generation is much smaller than the present one, there will be a lot of problems to deal with—e.g., economic hardship, a "top-heavy" elderly population who would deplete Medicare and Social Security funds, and so on.

Reply: Perhaps. But these harms are surely not as bad as the ones that will occur if we continue our present trend of population growth and over-consumption. If procreation really does cause severe harm (by exacerbating climate change), then an appeal to the economic hardship that we would experience by curtailing it does not seem to justify the behavior. (Just imagine an 1800 plantation-owner in the deep South trying to argue that slavery was justified despite how much harm it caused, because its abolition would cause economic hardship. Ridiculous!)