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.

Young thinks that these two claims are incompatible. He concludes that the mainstream environmentalist should oppose procreation on moral grounds. Here is his argument:

First, let ‘E1’ = 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 ‘E2’ (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 conceive 2 children, resulting in an environmental impact of E5 (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 E2 (by not having children). Instead, they made a lifestyle choice that resulted in E5. But, now consider another couple:

**The Greens** The Greens are overconsumers or “eco-gluttons”. They frequently fly around the world, they go for long joyrides in their SUV’s, they never buy locally, they never recycle, they use a lot of disposable items, take long showers and often water their lawns, they eat a lot of meat (a major greenhouse gas contributor), and so on. In short, The Greens consume 2.5 times more than the average couple. They have an environmental impact of E5.

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, E5). 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 (namely, over-consume, resulting in E5) is morally wrong.
2. But, what The Grays do (namely, create two children, resulting in E5) is morally analogous to what the Greens do.
3. Therefore, procreation is morally wrong.

So, if you think eco-gluttony is wrong, then when your friends say, “We’re having a baby!” your reaction should be, “How terrible! You must hate the environment!” Is that correct? Or can one consistently condemn eco-gluttony why approving of procreation?

2. Objections: Young think the choices of the two couples are morally analogous. For, they both voluntarily make lifestyle choices that result in an environmental impact of E5. But, perhaps there are some morally relevant 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, etc. In each of these cases, I act for the sake of others and not myself, but this does not automatically entail that my action is permissible.

(b) The Grays are merely exercising a fundamental **human right** – namely, the right to procreate; 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:
For instance, the right to **free speech** should be restricted (one does not have the right to shout “Fire!” in a crowded venue; furthermore, words that incite illegal activities or actions, libel, slander, and certain obscenities—e.g., on television—are all currently prohibited by the government); **freedom of religion** should be restricted (for instance, one does not have the right to make human sacrifices, even if one’s religion demands it; the **right to life** is also restricted (for instance, killing in self-defense is permissible), as is the **right to liberty** (for instance, you will have certain liberties taken away and be imprisoned if you commit a crime).

In short, whatever supposed “rights” we have, none of them are absolute. They are overridden in special circumstances—namely, circumstances in which exercising them would result in harm to others. And, arguably, this may be true of today’s world of overpopulation, overconsumption, climate change, and depleted resources. So, the “right to procreate” (if there is one) may be overridden.

Second, even 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., joyride in our SUV’s, etc.).

[Young also asks: If **HUMANS** have a fundamental right to reproduce, do **ANIMALS** have this right as well? Or rights to life? 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 die more and reproduce less. So, does exercising OUR rights violate THEIR rights?]

(c) 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 he could have added: Overall, even if The Grays produce more net happiness among their **FAMILY** ALONE, The Grays contribute to overpopulation while The Greens do not, thus perpetuating overcrowding and overpopulation and making the world a little worse off because of it (especially if their kids also go on to have children of their own, and those children go on... and so on).
(d) Since each human life has intrinsic value, The Grays produce E5 but ALSO produce 2 valuable human lives. Meanwhile, The Greens only produce E5 alone.

For instance, imagine that the eco-gluttonous The Greens achieve E5 merely by building two robots which will go around for the next 75 years and consume resources. Isn’t there something MORE valuable about producing two real, live human beings who will do this, as compared with two robots? If that seems right, perhaps you believe that there is something inherently valuable about human life.

Reply: First, many question whether human life has intrinsic value at all. Does it?

Second, most Americans consume at least 2,000 animals over the course of their lives. But, even if they are vegetarian, they contribute to the death of plant life, as well as 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 animals, plants, ecosystems, etc., have inherent value, then each human being is likely to take just as much value OUT of the world as she puts INTO it (due to her inherent worth as a human). To think otherwise is to adopt an anthropocentric view of value (or what Singer called "Speciesism"). Though, as we have seen, there are reasons to doubt that Speciesism is true.

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

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

Young endorses the latter claim, concluding 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. Young seems to even be endorsing human extinction!

Reply: It may be the case that everyone PRESENTLY has an obligation to stop, or at least reduce, procreation. But, this does not entail that we ought to go extinct. Recall the shallow pond with 100 people standing around it. EVERYONE there had 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.
Second, it is true that, 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. But, these harms are surely not 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 E1,000,000!). 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.

[Even then, we might ask: Who is responsible for, say, Apple’s environmental impact? The founder, Steve Jobs? He’s dead! The present CEO? Or maybe the responsibility gets divvied up among the consumers who buy their products?]

[One more possible objection: Virtue ethicists tell us that the morally right action is defined by what the “virtuous” person would do—and the virtuous person always chooses the “golden mean”, the moderate action between two extremes. For example, don’t be a coward, and don’t be foolhardy, blindly rushing into danger. Rather, be brave. Don’t starve yourself, and don’t be a glutton. Rather, consume in moderation. So, perhaps we could take a virtue ethics stance here, pointing out that a virtuous person would not engage in “eco-gluttony” as the Greens do, but rather “eco-moderation”. And that is exactly what The Grays seem to be doing (living a modest life, consuming an average amount, raising two children). This does not display any failure of virtue on their part. What do you think?]