

Is There a Moral Obligation to Have Children?

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ABSTRACT *I argue, counter-intuitively, that under certain conditions many people are under some moral requirement to attempt to bring children into being (in order to raise them). There is only rarely a strict obligation to have children, but more moderate, inclining moral considerations in favour of having children, have a place in our moral world. I begin by considering a large number of arguments in favour and against the possibility of an obligation to have children. Then I examine when the weight of one set of arguments is greater. And I conclude by pointing out some general lessons from the discussion.*

Having children is a very serious matter. Children are human beings, and caring for them is demanding. The last thing we should want, it would seem, is that deeply unwanted children be born. But not only from the perspective of the children is it desirable that they be wanted. Would-be parents are also human beings, and should not be forced in any way to take on the burdens and responsibilities of parenthood. What rights does a person have if he or she lacks the elementary right to have children when he or she want them? There are sometimes problems when couples want 'too many' children, e.g. a population explosion, and there is a very large body of literature dealing with this issue. By contrast, there has hardly been any credible philosophical argumentation that people in some way morally *must* have children. Or at least this is so if we dismiss certain extreme nationalistic claims, and make no theological assumptions. Even if it is not your right to have as many children as you like, surely you have the right to choose to have none?!

I argue, counter-intuitively, that under certain conditions many people are under some moral requirement to attempt to bring children into being (in order to raise them) [1]. Trying to have children can even be an ethical duty (I speak of the moral and of the ethical interchangeably). I limit my argument to people living in relatively economically advanced countries, i.e. I do not extend it to the Third World. This is not because of the assumption that there is no lack of desire to have children in the Third World (which may also be the case), but rather because the moral considerations on this issue are so very different in the different contexts, that discussing things together will only confuse matters.

I consider the general obligation to have children, without specifying numbers. I assume that 'at least one' is the relevant number. It should be hard enough to make a case for an obligation to have one child, and if we succeed then perhaps we can extend the required number. But for reasons which will become apparent when we confront the 'pro-moral-case-for-having-children' (or 'pro-birth') arguments with the opposite ('anti-birth') arguments, having one child should considerably lessen, if not eliminate, any ethical need to have more children.

Similarly, my case can be taken to be addressed to couples who are contemplating not

having children. If this case is convincing, this may mean that 'unattached' individuals may need to think about finding a person who can be their co-parent, but the ramifications of this further matter will not be considered in themselves.

Individuals and couples in the West very often deliberate whether to have children. Few decisions exercise people more. Arguments and sheer rhetoric about the 'population explosion', the 'deteriorating national birth rate' and the like are common. The joys and losses of parenthood are constantly presented in newspapers, literature and movies. Philosophy has, however, considered this central issue only rarely. I present here a tentative survey of the relevant arguments, which should help us to start filling this lacuna.

Before trying to defend the odd claim that having children may be an ethical duty, we need to see in greater detail the reasons commonly given for the permissibility of not having children. Some of these are reasons for not having children, while some make the weaker claim that while having children can be good, it can never be obligatory. The following list may not contain all possible reasons, but it surely contains the major ones.

A. Why Having Children Cannot Be Obligatory

1. Having children is a *personal thing*. There is very little which is more intimate than a person's decision as to whether he or she wishes to become a parent; and then engaging in a parent-child relationship. What right do we have to put pressure on people in such deeply personal matters of their lives? Moreover, on the assumption that having children is usually best done in couples, any requirement to do so points towards an intimate couple relationship which can also, it seems, hardly be required from people.

2. Having children *comes in the way* of much personal development and creativity. The energy and attention diverted in that direction can often serve the relevant people, and society, better. It has even been argued that having children is, from the point of view of seeking personal happiness, often irrational [2]. If people feel that they would be happier without children, or that their life-projects require that they remain childless, what can be said against it? The difficulties that having children often creates for women's careers, make their option not to have children especially important.

3. Children can be gratifying, but there are few things *harder* than to be a parent, if one takes this task seriously. It is so much work, very expensive, and an enormous, long term, responsibility. Much emotional and other sorts of risk is also involved. How can something like that be required?

4. In many cases people feel that they will be bad parents. They feel that they have *no emotional capacity* for parenthood, are not mature, or patient or loving enough. How can we call on them to nevertheless have children?

5. There seem to be *too many* children in the world as it is. Bringing more will only make the global situation worse. At most, one should be called upon to adopt Third World children.

6. The world is such a *dangerous* and potentially unpleasant place, that it is doubtful if one *may* bring children into it, to face potential nuclear warfare, environmental disaster, and the like. Let alone being *required* to do so.

7. In some cases, it is very *risky* to have children, because of the dangers of child-birth to the mother or because there are high probabilities that the child will turn out genetically defective.

8. As it is, the importance of parenthood is very much emphasized in our culture. Putting more emphasis in this direction, and colouring the issue in moral terms, would have adverse *pragmatic* effects. Even if there is some moral duty to have children, we should thus not speak of it. For example, doing so would just make it harder, in emotional and social terms, for those people who want but *cannot* have children, for e.g. biological reasons. And this is not fair. Moreover, speaking about the positive morality of having children could lead people who should not have children, because they are too young or mentally disturbed or the like, to go and have them.

B. A Preliminary Evaluation Of The Above

Before proceeding to explore why there might be anything to be said, in an ethical way, for having to have children, let us consider the wealth of reasons given above against an obligation to have children. Let us start from the end.

8. The point about people who cannot have children has some merit, but even besides the doubt as to the relevance of the pragmatic effects of disclosure, it cannot have much weight in our context. There are many people who wish to have children and cannot. Scientific advances are making it easier for more people to have children, and there are often other possibilities, such as adoption. And if this does not work out, the couple obviously ought to be helped not to feel guilty, and to have a happy and meaningful life. But while this issue is deeply important to the people involved, it cannot affect our general issue very much. Morally central claims, such as the claim of a right over our lives, will carry most of the negative weight on this issue, and the possible effects on those who want and cannot have children are negligible in comparison.

The relevance for our case, of considerations about the possible effects of disclosing our conclusions, is in any case not clear. It is reasonable to assume that putting a moral premium on having children could result in some unfortunate parenthoods. But how can this affect the possible obligation of *other* people to have children, if there is such an obligation? The principled and pragmatic concerns can be separated. Even in pragmatic terms it is hard to see why those who morally ought to have children should not be told of this conclusion. But whatever we think on the pragmatic issue, it is surely important for those engaged in philosophical research to ask themselves whether there may be any truth in the idea that there is a moral obligation to have children, and the answer to this question cannot only depend on the separate question, whether it is best if all know the answer to the first question.

7. The argument about the dangers of having children can be similarly dismissed, but for another reason — I can, and clearly should, accept it. If giving birth is liable to cause death or serious suffering to the mother or child obviously there could be no moral obligation to give birth. Such cases are however only a small minority, and this does not affect our main issue.

6. Is the world such a bad or dangerous place that there is reason not to have children? Well, who knows? I might claim otherwise, and be refuted next year by a nuclear war. In order to meaningfully discuss this issue we must make a central distinction. Firstly, the argument can derive from a general feeling that life is not a blessing, that it would have been better not to have been born. Such pessimism is however hardly common. Those who put forth the ‘anti-birth’ argument under discussion do not normally contemplate suicide, and,

moreover, often combine this argument with a desire to have more time to enjoy life — so a general melancholic view of human existence is not the main point of the argument. No doubt many people have occasional thoughts about the emptiness of life, but the vast majority of people do find life worth living. Indeed, many people cling to life even in the most adverse circumstances, when frail and elderly, or in life-threatening situations [3].

So perhaps the claim is not so much against life, but rather that there are *particular* circumstances in the modern world which make having children irresponsible, or at least make it permissible not to have them. As I said, one can never be certain. But when separated from the ‘pointlessness of life’ issue, this claim is not convincing. The life prospects of a child born in, say, a Western or former Eastern-block country should be much better than those of an equivalent child before the twentieth century. Life expectancy, medical availability, living conditions, educational facilities, working hours, the availability of leisure — all are vastly improved. The prospects of a world war or pan-European war are similarly less than they have been for centuries. And there have never been so many democratic regimes in the world. So unless one claims that it has been unreasonably risky to have children throughout history, which is implausible, it is hard to see how one could think that there are good reasons, in the light of the nature of the modern world, not to have children.

5. What about the population explosion? Surely the last thing we need is an ethical demand to have more children? Well, things are not that simple. There is no reason to go into a detailed discussion of the ethical issues involved in the adoption of Third World children by those in more economically advanced countries who can have children of their own, for there is no likelihood that that sort of thing will be common. In our context, it is only a rhetorical device. The main question is whether adding children to the world is necessarily bad. I simply do not see how a strong argument can emerge here. When contemplating whether to have a child or two, one should bear in mind that the effects of this decision on the world’s population or resources will be infinitesimally small, and in themselves these effects surely can be dismissed. Here one can reply that I am merely playing a game — for in deciding we ought to think that our position on this issue is a general unsizeable ethical decision, and the relevant question is what would happen if many people in the relevant situation decided to have children. It is not at all clear that in such a deep decision, where such crucial personal values are involved, the hypothetical consequences of generalising one’s act in this way are the crucial question. This, for one, would entail that couples who do have children are doing something in some sense wrong, which is a much stronger, and less plausible, claim than the claim that in the light of the population explosion it is permissible not to have children.

But even if the general hypothetical consequences are the relevant consideration when (say) a couple want to decide whether or not to have children, it is hard to be scared by the prospect. What awful results would occur if, say, Norwegians or Czechs had more children — even a few tens of thousands more births every year? Surely some of those children would become (say) doctors or inventors, and if their parents encouraged them, might even go and provide assistance in the Third World, or invent alternative methods of exploiting energy sources, or whatnot. The world is clearly under-populated by people who will care about the right values and work for them — even in terms of the values of those wary of an increase of population. Even beyond such specific goals for environmentally-fearful would-be parents, it is very dubious that the sort of population increase under discussion is harmful. At most, it will have very little effect on the world’s population and resources. And if we contemplate

the general increase in GNP and so in contributions to poorer societies that (say) an increased Scandinavian population could cause, it almost seems as though to keep the population level down in such countries is harmful. There surely is a need for greater birth control, but arguably this need is limited to some of the countries of the Third World and to the very poorest populations in the more advanced nations. This of course is not to say that an all-out call for the maximal number of children is required, but that having a few children can in effect — unless they are criminals, and similar fears which can normally be discounted — do no harm, and presumably do good.

4. To recall, this argument works from the feeling some people have that they cannot be good parents. Here one can reply in two ways. Firstly, such feelings are often unjustified. Not everyone is a 'born' father or mother, but it usually does not take an unusual combination of traits to become a reasonably good parent. It is actually difficult to imagine, in most cases, that there is anything beyond the potentially reversible lack of desire for children that stands behind the feeling that one was not cut out to be a parent. In some cases there are convincing reasons to believe that, and then there is of course no obligation to have children, and perhaps an obligation not to have them. The case of this paper clearly does not affect the fact that many parents should not have become parents, at least not when they did (e.g. many teen-age parents). For the point is not to procreate under any conditions, but to bring oneself to become a parent who desires to do the best he can for the child. However, in normal circumstances, where it is mostly only the lack of desire that is involved, the argument is hardly conclusive. The fear that one will not be able to love one's child and give it a satisfactory start in life is usually unreasonable (and where there are good reasons to believe this, there is no obligation to have children, as I said before).

Secondly, we cannot in any case decide the issue without considering the reasons for having children. After all, morality often demands from people things they are not crazy about doing. And sometimes when they do these things they are happy to have been convinced to do them — I suspect that in the case of having children this situation could be quite common. Various factors, such as a discussion of the sort we are currently engaged in, can influence the reluctant potential parent. And this would be good, in countless cases. We cannot really judge the weight of this factor independently of the 'pro-birth' arguments.

1–3. These arguments, roughly from the person's right to her or his own decision in such an intimate area, from the sacrifices in self-development which are involved, and from the sheer burden of having children, are certainly weighty. Indeed, they touch the deepest convictions about our rights to freedom of choice, to privacy, to self-development, to not having to carry heavy burdens, and the like. What place we ought to give these central concerns in deciding our issue is now an open question. As with other moral issues, we need to see the arguments on the other side before we can reach a conclusion. None of the three arguments we are now considering would entail that no moral obligation of any sort could exist. Which is to say that these three arguments are not knock-down arguments against moral requirements as such. In fact, moral requirements often concern intimate issues, are normally burdensome, and demand sacrifices. Whether the 'pro-birth' case is sometimes able to overcome these three strong arguments depends, then, on the argument for that case.

C. Moral Considerations In Favour Of An Obligation To Have Children

1. It can be argued that to give birth to children is to *bring value* into the world. There are two forms that such an argument might take. Firstly, if people *themselves* are considered valuable, giving birth to them is, literally, creating value. Secondly, if it is thought that much, if not all, of the value of this world resides in people's valuing things (e.g. works of art), then to have children is to create more potential value-*appreciators*. There is of course room for dispute on such questions as 'is there intrinsic value?', 'do non-humans have intrinsic value?', 'does value depend on appreciation?', and the like. We cannot consider these issues in this paper. But to the extent that we believe that human beings are valuable, and/or that human beings are important for the appreciation of value in the world, which are rather common and manifestly reasonable beliefs, to create human beings is *pro tanto* to contribute to the existence of value in the world [4].

2. It can also be argued that loving *relationships* are one of the major sources of value in the world. Given certain reasonable assumptions, having children would thus create value in the world in this way as well. Here again the value could be diverse. One could concentrate on the value of *personal development* involved in having and caring for your children, on the sort of unique emotions, depth of attachment, seriousness of commitment, feelings of fulfilment, potential for creativity in giving to one's children, expansion of the self, and the like. But the *connection* between the parent and the child is also a possible source of great value in the world, a loving care and emotional involvement of which there are few equivalents. People who do not have children, however else they may gain from this fact (we are not balancing matters as yet now), lose out on those two accounts, in that they lack the personal development and the relationship with the child that only having children can supply.

3. If relatively few children are born, those who do not have children will put a *burden* on the few who are born. Children being born now are, by and large (i.e. excluding immigration) the persons who will support the economy and provide all care and services in society. It can thus be argued that those who do not have children are in a sense 'free riders', for when they grow old they will depend on other people's children. It has been argued recently that those with children should get significantly more support from society, for they are doing something for the general benefit, for which they get very little in return from society [5]. In many economically advanced countries there is even today a negative internal population growth rate, i.e. the birth rate per couple does not reach the level required in order to keep the population constant.

But even beyond such practical concerns, there seems to be something morally problematic about not reproducing yourself and *not carrying one's share* in the continuation of society. If the existence of children is morally of great importance, those who do not do their bit are *pro tanto* morally 'parasitic', even if no actual negative effects materialize. The ethical structure of this issue is similar to the much discussed general problem of 'free riding'. This applies not only to the general importance of maintaining the human race or one's society, but to more limited groups as well. Even if the survival of such units does not require that everyone have children, there is a need to explain why one lets others carry all the burden, why this is not unfair.

4. The existence of *promises* to have children can also be a moral consideration towards a possible duty to have them. If I promise my girl-friend to marry her and have children, it is morally problematic of me to go back on my word shortly after the marriage. Since the

institution of promising is a subtle one, a clearly-stated promise by me would not even be necessary for some obligation to have been incurred. In certain circumstances my spouse could have reasonably assumed that we were going to have children, and it is thus morally problematic of me to oppose having children (without a good, and probably new, reason). To the extent that I have promised other people that I will have children, e.g. the would-be grandparents, I am under a certain (albeit slight) *pro-tanto* obligation to have them. But beyond our most immediate relatives, the role of explicit or tacit promising is unlikely to be large, and we would speak more about the expectations that exist.

5. *Expectations* by others that one will have children may be great, and morally important in themselves — which still does not show that we morally need to take them into account. It may break my mother's heart that I do not want to be a doctor, but that need not be a crucial moral concern when I decide what I want to be when I grow up. However, we can find here some moral considerations which may at least incline one towards having children. Such expectations need not even be those of existing people. To the extent that we see units beyond the individual, and the individual's membership in them, as valuable, expectations may carry moral weight. We naturally want our efforts to be significant, our achievements to last, and a memory of us to persist, longer than our lives. Many people also wish that their genes, or gene-based features (looks, traits) should also continue. And it is natural to hope, even to expect, that our children, grandchildren, and perhaps even more distant relatives, will to some extent 'extend our genetic existence', remember us, and carry on with whatever it is which we think to be of value. Such expectations are not limited only to our relatives. Just as we normally have expectations from strangers, so we may want (say) 'our sort of people' to have children. Unless there are additional reasons, fulfilling such expectations would, in itself, seem to be a (minor) good.

6. Having children may be important for the continuation of a cultural *form of life*. This may be thought to be relevant, if at all, only with almost-extinct tribes on the edge of progress, but it is not so. Many sub-cultures, religious practices, languages and dialects, occupations, and communities, depend for their flourishing, if not for their existence, on a relatively small number of people. If you happen to belong to such a group and identify with it, there is some ethical pressure on you to do your part to ensure its future. Even if you do not identify with your group, in some extreme situations membership may mean that you can share responsibility for the disappearance or decline of this form of life. The ethical significance of this would depend not only on your preferences but on the value of the form of life.

7. Similarly, we need to consider the matter of the continuation of the genetic and cultural *familial* pool. One reads of so many families with unique traditions and talents, which have given fruit for generations, dying out because the people who were the last link in the chain decided not to have children. These talents are not limited to musical ones, perhaps the obvious example. Traditions or talents in areas as diverse as cooking, sports, academic pursuits, circus work, craftsmanship, politics, writing and many others, simply 'run in families'. It seems to me that in such cases we can say not only that it is a great tragedy that such families have died out, but that those 'at fault' are *pro tanto* to some degree wrong to have allowed such a state of affairs to occur. It was their responsibility to try and keep the continuity. The 'familial fruits' involved may depend on genetic factors or on a particular cultural milieu, or both. But in any case, if we take the value of those fruits seriously, it becomes plausible to see those responsible for the disappearance of this value as (morally) potentially culpable.

8. Finally, having children has *social and political* importance in some contexts, i.e. in supplying future voters and concerned individuals. These sorts of considerations may seem inappropriate when we are considering intimate life decisions, but nevertheless may have some call on us, to which we should at least give some thought. Even in the most advanced societies, the fact that the most highly educated people tend to have fewer children is significant. It makes improving the social composition so much harder [6]. I do not deny the possibility of influencing other people's children by education, and the need to do this, but it is largely true that such influence rarely equals the influence parents can have on the abilities, values and pursuits of their children. At any rate, those people who oppose having children on account of the population explosion, cannot dismiss the present argument because having one or two children cannot make much social and political difference. Furthermore, because of the different natures of politics and e.g. eating, it is easier for a single individual to change the general situation with respect to the former, than it is for her to significantly harm the environment.

D. Weighing The Balance Of The Arguments In Different Situations

After seeing the wealth of reasons for and against the option not to have children, we can begin to assess the weight of these reasons. Let us start from an extreme scenario:

What if humanity were going to die out?

We are assuming that this would be so not because of any external calamity, but only because people were looking for a good reason to have children, and, unless we supplied them with one, were simply going to stop. In such a situation, it seems to me, there would be a serious moral obligation to have children (if one were in a position to, had a good life partner, no serious medical risks were involved, and the like). A number of the above 'pro-birth' arguments would be activated in the strongest possible way. Primarily, the possibility that value would disappear or be largely taken away from the world could not fail to move almost anyone. The prospect of a world without people who have value and without the value that human appreciation creates, that is a world without human love, without conversation, without humour, without historical memory, without creative endeavour, without the laughter of children, without an appreciation of nature or art or music or wisdom, seems like a nightmare [7].

While most people might agree here, it could be argued that this scenario does not teach us very much. For, with human sexual appetites and desires for parenthood being what they are, there is no chance of the human race dying out. This is factually correct, barring some not impossible calamity. But I think that it is significant that we see that much, if not all, value in the world depends on people's having children. For, firstly, this means that having children is a *prima facie* duty on almost anyone (or at least on any couple), and does not obtain only because enough people are doing their bit. Secondly, this lesson does say something personal to all of us. To bring a child into the world, irrespective of the number of other children currently alive, is to give life, to create someone who is of value in herself, and a great potential appreciator of value. This cannot be easily dismissed. And to it we can add the value of the loving relationship of parenthood, in its development of the parent and in the value of the interaction itself. Love, devotion, joy, identification, maturity and more are

often the results of parenthood, and can compete with what one loses by having children, in terms of freedom or career development. This is not to say that for everyone parenthood is worth the sacrifices, but there is certainly an enormous amount to lose if one decides not to have children. Even when having children does not seem to increase happiness (or even harms happiness in certain senses of this term), it is one of the primary ways of achieving meaning in one's life. Having children has proved to be a good way of fulfilling needs such as the need for purposefulness, for fulfilment, for efficacy, for accomplishment, and for self-value [8]. To the extent that morality ought to give guidance as to the good life, or ought to point people in the direction of creating value in the world, there is a need to emphasize the moral significance of having children [9].

These sorts of concerns about increasing value do quite well with the 'anti-birth' argument from personal development, but we are still far from an actual obligation upon reluctant people, to think seriously about overcoming their reluctance. It is one thing to say that having children is to be recommended, and another thing altogether to speak of an obligation to have them. What right have we to put moral pressure in that direction, knowing the intimate matters and the great burdens involved? One answer emerges when we proceed from the 'end of humanity' scenario in a different direction. When families, cultures, peoples (etc.) are dying out, it is not only that direct intrinsic value of the sort mentioned above is being lost, but that hopes, dreams, aspirations and much historical continuity are under threat.

The Holocaust gives tragic illustration of this. To many people the horror of the extermination of the six million Jews by the Nazis in the forties does not lie only in the loss of life through untold cruelty. There are also intrinsic evil features beyond the enormous loss of life and the cruelty: for example, that a civilian non-armed people were murdered without military reason (and in fact using scarce resources, at the expense of the strictly military effort); that the extermination was carried out in a 'scientific', ordered, deceitful and preplanned way and not in the heat of battle, by one of the most highly cultured nations; that the issue was based on a 'racial' criterion, without a chance that any behaviour or conversion could affect the victim's lot; that there was an attempt to eliminate a whole people, i.e. a genocide. Such evil features have relevance to our issue.

The fact that communities where a distinct and rich culture survived for hundreds of years were erased in weeks, with no remnant, is *in itself* awful. And the fact that families with long lineages were made extinct is in a way also awful, *beyond* the loss of lives. For it is not as if (say) one member of every family had died, but that the whole history of the generations has stopped — indeed, a great many family names were extinguished in the gas chambers. Survivors of such horrors have natural expectations that their families not be extinguished, and it is hard to dismiss such expectations as lacking moral weight — even if we subscribe to the most liberal view about the rights of children to choose their own lives. It is not that e.g. a sole survivor has a *right* to demand of his only child that he have children. The language of rights is inappropriate and crude here. But the *expectation* that there be children is morally significant.

Even for those not immediately concerned, there may seem to be something troubling of a historical magnitude, and morally awful, about the success of evil in wiping out people's, communities, families and ways of life. One wishes that the remnants of such attempts as it were put up a historical ethical fight, by having children.

Such concerns exist to a more limited degree in many less extraordinary situations, as we saw with the arguments from promises, from expectations, from carrying one's share, and

from the social and political influence of having children. It very often matters to some extent, in a moral way, whether one has children or not — even beyond the direct issue of creating and enabling value, and even when no specific acute moral concerns are involved.

E. Conclusion

The decisions taken by individuals (and couples) whether they wish to have children are of the greatest consequence. These decisions should take account of the moral issues at stake. We have examined a large number of intricate arguments on both sides of the issue, in varied contexts. Since every one of those arguments could have been discussed in a full-length paper, we naturally could not explore every complication and distinction in detail. But the general situation has, I think, been clarified, namely that the issue is very complex, and that, at the very least, it should be *difficult* to dismiss the idea that there are moral concerns which call on many people to have children, and even moral obligations to have them. Not everyone will agree with *every* ‘pro-birth’ argument we have considered, but the diversity of the ethical concerns they express, and the variety of perspectives from which these arguments have been made, means that the ‘pro-birth’ case should be perceived as substantial.

There are strong arguments against the obligation to have children. The ‘anti-birth’ case was not found to be based so much on various popular arguments, e.g. that the world is too dangerous to bring children into it, or that there are too many children anyway. These simply are not convincing arguments, within the scope of our concern. And they perhaps are more rationalisations than genuine reflective reasons. Rather, the burdens and sacrifices of parenthood, and the rights of would-be parents, are the central matters which make it hard to claim the existence of an obligation to have children.

The arguments in favour of having children were also seen to be significant. In a nutshell, we saw that two sorts of claims could be made when confronting those with no obviously persuasive reason not to have children (except a lack of desire to do so). We could argue on grounds of the would-be parent’s good, and on grounds of furthering or fulfilling additional values, interests and commitments. We saw, firstly, that in the light of what is at stake in terms of the would-be parent’s happiness and meaning in life, there is room for moral counsel towards having children, not bypassing the person’s autonomy but rather enhancing it. It is difficult to speak here of a strict moral obligation to have children, but the moral implications of this momentous decision cannot be overlooked. This choice is so crucial that it cannot be a mere matter of thoughtless decision. While I do not wish to enter into a detailed discussion of the complexities of human nature, it nevertheless seems that having children has the potential to provide a different *order* of value for people’s lives. Countless parents will attest to the significance of this experience in their lives, beyond anything they could have expected. Even without the idea of ‘duties to oneself’, surely morality has a role in advising people on the importance, for the meaningful life, of having children.

Secondly, we saw a large number of ways in which the choice of the reluctant would-be parent could affect other people and matters of value beyond the chooser. This choice is ethically significant in diverse ways, both in itself and in its consequences. Here we did see a potential for arguments about obligations to have children, either because the would-be parents were uniquely situated with respect to morally weighty expectations and the like, or

because there were strong general moral reasons for procreation, and no reasons meeting the test of fairness why a particular couple should not play their part. There is no reason to repeat the details.

The combined strength of the 'pro-birth' case was sometimes extremely strong, and sometimes relatively weak, depending on the circumstances. The basic conclusion is this: (1) there is a *prima facie* strong moral duty on almost everyone to have children (which is not actualized under current conditions, e.g. because humanity is not dying out); (2) there is generally a weak moral presumption (but not a strict obligation) in favour of having children, so that not having them is *pro tanto* problematic, and not *morally neutral*; and (3) sometimes there is even some sort of a direct personal obligation to have children.

We have been used to extreme nationalistic arguments according to which the individual, and mostly the mother, should sacrifice herself for the sake of the greater good (e.g. have children who will be able to kill the other groups' children). And the emphasis on the value of having many children has also been aimed (among other things) at keeping women in traditional roles. Such claims have understandably put off anyone who values the individual and his or her rights, autonomy and self-development. But when we examine this issue dispassionately, using widely accepted values and ideas, we realize that we cannot see any decision not to have children as merely a matter of amoral personal preference or even whim. There is a place for considerations of a moral nature.

The 'pro-birth' arguments appeal to our common sense intuitions and should, in different ways, convince those who have different normative commitments. Utilitarians as well as communitarians, perfectionists and those for whom morality is more a matter of fulfilling expectations and promises, all should come to accept the possibility of an ethical case for having children.

There is only rarely a strict obligation to have children, but more moderate, *inclining* moral considerations in favour of having children, have a place in our moral world.

F. Some Lessons

In addition to the conclusion we have reached, the discussion of the issue of whether there is any moral obligation to have children provides more general insights about morality and moral philosophy. The following are the main things that I think we can learn.

Firstly, morality is more demanding than many have thought, and its reach goes further, and deeper, than is generally realised. Morality may call on some people, as we saw, to have children when they have, on the whole, little desire to have them. The most intimate decisions, and the most deep and wide-ranging consequences for one's life, are in principle within the scope of moral considerations. This is, however, not to deny that the spheres of the moral and of the amorally value-laden are not always clearly distinct.

Secondly, we see in a most striking way the relevance of applied moral philosophy, not in specific (e.g. medical or business) areas but with regard to a question of almost universal concern. Philosophy can give virtually everyone a new insight on his or her life, and, if my case is convincing, millions are called to rethink their life-plans [10].

Thirdly, the importance of 'moral luck' is emphasised. There are great differences between people in the degree to which there are good moral reasons to point them towards having children. And these differences largely depend on morally arbitrary factors, such as one's nation or family. Some reasons considered above may apply to everyone, such as the

'argument from personal development', but even here the differences between people's potential for personal development with or without children matter greatly to the force of the argument in their case, again often for morally arbitrary factors.

Fourthly, when we examine our deepest reflective intuitions on the issue of having children, we see that we need a wealth of differing ethical perspectives to do justice to this issue. Moreover, if taken as exclusive positions, strictly liberal and rights-based theories do not do very well, when confronting our issue. There is of course a place for considerations of freedom of choice, autonomy and privacy, but these rarely sum up all that can morally be said on the issue of having children. Utilitarian, communitarian, perfectionist and value-based conceptions of morality are often useful, in different ways, in elucidating the moral situations and ethical intuitions under discussion. This may only be an indication that the issue of having children is unique. But arguing along those lines would not be easy. In any case, a pluralism of persuasive ethical perspectives and basic assumptions is called for.

Finally, we see a picture of a morality less filled with strict obligations but full of inclining reasons, which should affect different people, in different situations, to different degrees. The presence of morality is perhaps richer and greater than under many common views, but it is not so much a demanding, oppressing, presence as a mild reasons-based one [11].

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NOTES

- [1] When I mention the obligation to have children I mean of course only the obligation to *attempt* to have them. The discussion assumes that 'having children' goes beyond bringing them into the world (and then e.g. abandoning them or giving them for adoption), and includes taking good care of them, as this is normally understood.
- [2] This claim is made by MARSHALL MISSNER, Why have children?, *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 3 (1987), pp. 1–13. A survey of the 'anti-birth' literature can be found in ROY F. BAUMEISTER, *Meanings of Life* (New York: Guilford, 1991), Appendix B. Cf. G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, Why have children? *Proceedings of the Catholic Philosophical Association* (1990), pp. 48–53.
- [3] On this last point it may be claimed that people cling to life because they fear death. This is often true, but undoubtedly many value living, want to see their grand-children grow up, and the like.
- [4] This argument may seem to force us into the much discussed utilitarian quagmire with regard to the benefits of increasing the population indefinitely, increasing e.g. happiness by producing multitudes of somewhat happy people; and other such problems. See e.g. MICHAEL D. BAYLES (ed.) (1976), *Ethics and Population* (Cambridge, Mass., Schenkman), Part 2; R. I. SIKORA and BRIAN BARRY (eds.) (1978), *Obligations to Future Generations* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press), Part 1; DEREK PARFIT (1986), *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), p. 351f. However, in our context there is no need for great worry about such matters. One can see value in the existence of people and in bringing about that existence without being committed to the maximisation of value. Furthermore, the talk about an obligation to have children is directed to individuals, and must confront the 'anti-birth' case. Thus it is unlikely that the 'pro-birth' argument under discussion will entail that one need have *many* children. And it must also be seen that our current argument is only one of the many arguments making up the 'pro-birth' case, and most of these other arguments are not open to 'paradoxes of quantification'. (The ethical considerations involved in reflections about abortion in cases where the prospects of the child for normal functioning are low, and similar issues, also need not concern us.)
- [5] GEORGE ROLF (1987), 'Who should bear the cost of children?', *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 1, pp. 1–42.
- [6] The relatively low birth rate in the West also has indirect effects on the prospects for international democratic unity and on attitudes towards immigration. See for example my The political-economic population-paradox, *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 8 (1993), pp. 9–12.
- [7] It may be argued that such a state could not be a nightmare, for there would not be anybody it would be a nightmare for. But this implies that we cannot value states of affairs impersonally. Such a position has severe counter-intuitive implications, and is rarely held. Its most thorough defence is by DAVID HEYD (1992),

Genethics (Berkeley, University of California Press), pp. 118f. I do not find this stance convincing. A world without value would be less valuable than a world with (a positive preponderance) of value, and thus the replacement of the second by the first would be a turn for the worse.

- [8] BAUMEISTER op. cit., p. 160f. I think that we should be suspicious of notions of happiness which do not include a sense of meaning in life.
- [9] We can of course distinguish between the existence of moral obligations (or less strict moral concerns) and the issue of whether these should be declared, but in this context there is no reason to consider this distinction.
- [10] For another such widely relevant argument see my On practising what we preach, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 31 (1994), pp. 73–79
- [11] The following people have commented on drafts of this paper: Avner De-Shalit, Amihud Gilead, Hagar Kahana-Smilansky, Gilead Margalit, Amiram Raviv, Moshe and Sarah Smilansky, Daniel Statman, and the editors and anonymous referees for this journal. I am very grateful for this assistance.