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### Is it Morally Permissible to have Children

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**Is it Morally Permissible to have Children?**

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Having children is something that has always been considered morally good. Generations of human beings have been raised with the idea that procreating is part of the natural process of life. To have a child is considered an important milestone in a person's life in most societies. In fact, it is expected of a well-rounded adult. However, in recent years, some philosophers have argued against the moral permissibility of having children. In this thesis, I aim to examine the debate about the morality of procreation. I will consider the extreme position in this debate, Anti-Natalism (having children is morally impermissible), as defended by David Benatar. I will consider objections to it by David Wasserman, who is a moderate Pro-Natalist (having children is morally permissible and good). Taking the strongest aspects of each side, I will explore the idea of what makes having children morally permissible or impermissible, and argue that although in general it is morally permissible to have children, it is morally impermissible to have children in certain instances.

### Section 1: Why have children?

People have children for many reasons. When people were asked why they had or wanted to have children their answers included: <sup>1</sup>

- To have someone to take care of them when they get old
- To carry on the family name
- Because they love children
- To fulfil their maternal instincts
- To give their parents grandchildren

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/02/why-have-children-google>  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/05/how-people-decide-whether-to-have-children/527520/>  
<https://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/07/why-does-anyone-have-children-2/>

- To continue the bloodline.
- Because children bring happiness
- To experience the joy of parenting with a significant other
- To fulfill innate desire to procreate
- Because it is the next logical step in life.

Although all are understandable reasons for having children they do not make having children morally obligatory, or morally good, or even morally permissible. In order to know if having children is morally permissible, we will first have to ask ourselves what constitutes a morally permissible act.

### Section2: Deontic and the Axiological

All of our actions fall into two categories: the morally permissible and the morally impermissible.

If an action is morally impermissible then it is morally wrong. We often categorize moral wrongness in terms of the concept of harm: it is wrong to harm others. Harm is understood in multiple ways. It can be understood in terms of suffering and pain. For example, while walking at night Max is mugged and stabbed multiple times by a stranger. This action is morally wrong because Max suffered in multiple ways. First, he was robbed; second he was stabbed. Both actions harmed him.

Moral wrongness can also be understood in terms of being deprived of things that we have a right to. For example, while taking a hike in the forest Celine was abducted and held

against her will for ransom. This action is morally wrong because Celine is being deprived of a basic right, her liberty.

We also categorize moral wrongness in terms of the concept of autonomy: it is wrong, to violate someone's autonomy. For example, Jason, an adult is dying of terminal cancer and is about to end his life by drinking a cocktail of drugs; as he is about to drink the drug cocktail, he is stopped by his uncle. In this case, although Jason was saved from death, his autonomy was violated by his uncle. In that moment as a grown man, dying from cancer, Jason had every right to do what he wanted with his life. By saving him his uncle took away Jason's autonomy, even though he was not harming him.

All of these actions are morally impermissible, even if some of them do not involve harming someone.

If an action is not morally wrong, then it is morally permissible. Moral permissibility can be divided in two categories, which have several subcategories. In order to explain this further, a distinction needs to be made between the deontic and the axiological:

<sup>2</sup>Moral discourse is normative in nature, that is, concerned with guiding behavior rather than describing the world. But this normative character of moral judgment falls broadly speaking under two categories, the axiological and the deontic. The former refers to goodness, ideals and virtues; the latter to what ought to be done, to duties and obligations, to justice and rights. Whereas the object of axiological assessment is primarily states of affairs and human agents, the object of deontic evaluation is human actions. For instance, the state of affairs of a world with no war is a moral ideal and the individual Socrates is virtuous, whereas the practice of paying back debts is obligatory and acts of theft prohibited.

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<sup>2 2</sup> David Heyd, "Supererogation," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015

A morally permissible action can either be morally obligatory or morally optional. Morally obligatory actions are actions that we do because we have a duty or responsibility to do them. We can have either positive moral obligation or negative moral obligation. For example, we are morally obligated to tell the truth. Telling the truth is something that is required of us to do in fact, lying in a court of law is a punishable offense. This is an example of a positive moral obligation.

In a similar way, we can also have a negative moral obligation to not do something that we consider to be impermissible. Actions like murder, thievery, etc. are example of negative moral obligations.

On the other hand, things that are morally optional may be divided into a number of different categories and subcategories: the good, the neutral and the bad.

The morally optional actions that are morally good can either be merely good, or they can be supererogatory, i.e., extremely morally good. Things like giving to charity or volunteering at a homeless shelter are perfect examples of merely good actions. It is morally good to give to charity, but it is not morally obligatory to do so. A supererogatory action on the other hand would be to give all your possessions to the poor and to live a selfless life devoid of any material possessions, or to donate a kidney to a total stranger. Although such actions are extremely morally good, they are also optional because there is no moral obligation to do such actions.

<sup>3</sup>Morally optional but morally bad actions, otherwise known as suberogatory actions, are actions that are morally bad, but not morally bad enough to be considered morally impermissible.

Consider two scenarios:

Suppose a boy and his small brother are jointly given a box of chocolates for Christmas. If the older boy takes the box and refuses to give his brother any of the chocolates, he is unjust to him, for the brother has been given a right to half of them. [...] Suppose that box of chocolates I mentioned earlier had not been given to both boys jointly, but was given only to the older boy. There he sits, stolidly eating his way through the box, his small brother watching enviously.

In the first scenario, a box full of chocolates is given to two brothers, so that it could be shared amongst them. However, one brother simply refuses to share and proceeds to eat the whole box by himself. In this case his actions are morally impermissible, because he stole the half of the box of chocolate that rightfully belonged to his brother. In the second scenario, only one brother is given a box of chocolate which he promptly eats without sharing with his brother. In this case the actions of the brother are morally bad, but not morally impermissible. It would have been morally good if he had shared with his brother, but by not sharing, he did not unjustly take anything that belonged to his brother. He was within his rights to eat the whole box.

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1 (1971), 56, 60.

Lastly morally optional but morally neutral actions are actions not morally bad or but are not morally good either. In this category falls things that most of us do all day that have no real weight. For example, wearing certain color clothes is not bad or morally good.

In the same way as humans there are a lot of actions that we do that although they are not morally bad, we do not have any real justification to call them morally good. Having children is one of those actions morally optional but morally neutral actions.

### Section 3: Extreme Natalism

Extreme Natalists argue that it is always morally permissible to have children regardless of the situation surrounding the birth of a child, because it is morally obligatory to have children.

Extreme Natalists tend to espouse Christian beliefs; they believe that we have a moral obligation to bring children into the world because it is a direct command from God. "Genesis 1:28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." "Genesis 9:7As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it."

Extreme Natalists do not make an exception in any scenario. Most of us would agree that they are certain cases where it would ultimately be morally wrong to have children.

Most people will grant that if you are unable to provide this care to your child, it is morally impermissible to bring a child into a world. It is wrong to bring a child into the world who will suffer. An example of this would be bringing a child into the world whom you know

will be born with severe genetic disabilities and who will never have a painless day, never mind a normal life. If you had a choice, and the choice was (1) no child, or (2) a child who would suffer always for its entire life then it would be morally impermissible to have that child, and morally obligatory to not have that child.

Knowingly bringing a child into suffering is cruel because it is voluntarily subjugating another human being to avoidable pain. We have a moral duty to not inflict pain on others. Bringing a child who is set to suffer their whole life is inflicting pain on another, and thus impermissible. Most would agree that in such a case it would be morally impermissible to have the child.

Anti-Natalists however maintain that it is always a harm to bring a child into the world because by bringing a child into the world, you are exposing the child to all sorts of harm. This harm could be avoided by simply not bringing the child into existence.

#### Section 4: Anti-Natalism

Anti-Natalists argue that having children is morally impermissible. They defend this view with different arguments. At first glance, the idea that having children is immoral is completely ludicrous. However, Anti-Natalist views force us to acknowledge that there is something wrong with the current state of things in terms of how our society handles having children.

Anti-Natalists argue that it would be better if people stopped having kids all together. Most Anti-Natalists are concerned with the effects that having children have on the children themselves. They consider the harm, to children, of having children to be greater than the benefits.

Section 5:

I. <sup>4</sup>A. The Asymmetry Argument

The asymmetry argument by David Benatar is an Anti-Natalist argument that claims that we are in fact making a comparison error.

Benatar considers two scenarios:

<sup>5</sup>Scenario A

Scenario B

(Child exists)

(Child never exists)

(1)  Presence of Harm  (Bad)	(3)  Absence of Harm  (Good)
(2)  Presence of Benefit  (Good)	(4)  Absence of Benefit  (Not Bad)

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<sup>4</sup> David Benatar and David Wasserman, *Debating Procreation: Is It Wrong to Reproduce?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

In the first scenario, when the child exists, there is the presence of harm, which is bad, but there is also the presence of benefits, which is good. In the second scenario, when the child does not exist, there is the absence of harm which is good, and there is also the absence of benefits, which is not bad.

When comparing these two scenarios it seems that the second scenario offers a somewhat better alternative. The avoidance of harm, added to the absence of benefits, paints a rather simple picture. Non-existence is only considered bad to us because, as existing beings, we have already enjoyed the benefits of existence, and the lack of it would cause us a loss. Someone who is nonexistent, cannot feel the loss of something they have never experienced; this makes the lack of benefits not bad. In the first scenario, however, the child experiences benefits, which are good but he also must experience harm, which is bad.

Anti-Natalists acknowledge that it is morally impermissible to bring people into the world who will have miserable lives. However, they also believe that we have no duty to bring people into the world who will lead happy lives. We have no reason to bring people into the world who may live happy lives. Arguing that you are bringing somebody into the world for his/her own good seems to be an impossible argument to make. The opposite argument, however is possible: we can choose to not bring people into the world for their own good because they will suffer harm if they are brought into the world.

For us to claim that bringing somebody into the world is doing something for their own good would mean that the person had prior knowledge of the benefit that they were to acquire once existing, which is impossible. Prior to existence we do not know of the benefits nor of the harms that might ensue once coming into existence.

However, not bringing children into the world for their own good is possible because as existing beings, we have prior knowledge of the harms that may befall those newly coming into existence. To stop the harms from happening we can choose not to bring people into existence, because the lack of harm is a good, for them.

Similarly, we can regret bringing into the world children who suffer, but we cannot regret not bringing into the world children who will be happy.

### Section 7: The Quality of Life Argument

Although the presence of harm is indeed bad, most of us would argue that the harms suffered in our lives are certainly outweighed by the benefits we enjoy in our lives. Benatar argues that human judgements about the quality of their own lives are often unreliable, however.

He argues that people's self-assessments of well-being are unreliable indicators of a person's quality of life because these self-assessments are influenced by three psychological phenomena: Pollyannaism, habituation, comparison.

Pollyannaism, also known as an optimism bias is the tendency to recall positive experiences more accurately than negative ones. Benatar argues that we all have various degrees of this optimistic bias. If we are unable to accurately remember all the bad in our lives, then we are also making an inaccurate judgment on how good our lives are.

What Benatar refers to as habituation (or adaptation) is the idea that we get used to bad things in our lives. Our self-assessments do not remain stable because we get used to certain conditions in our lives. For example, consider Marie who in a freak accident loses one of her

legs. At the time of the accident losing a leg might be considered a terrible negative in Marie's life. However, with the distance of time Marie might consider their life to have gotten better not because her situation would have changed but because she got used to it.

Thirdly, Benatar argues that we often tend to compare our situations to others. We compare our situations to those who are worse off than us, and to those who are better off as well. However, he concludes that this is not enough to offset the biases that come with comparison. When comparison is paired up with the optimism bias he argues that we tend to compare ourselves with those who are worse off than us rather than those who are better off than us.

### Section 8: The Misanthropic Argument

Benatar's third argument is what he considers the misanthropic argument as opposed to the asymmetry argument, which he considers to be a philanthropic argument. Philanthropic arguments are rooted in a concern for the welfare of those who will be brought into existence. Misanthropic arguments, on the other hand focus on the evils that humans unleash on the world.

He presents his argument as follows:

- 1- We have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing into existence new members of species that cause (and will likely cause) vast amounts of pain, suffering, and death.
- 2- Humans cause vast amounts of pain, suffering, and death.
- 3- Therefore, we have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing new humans into existence.

Humans are the most destructive animals on the earth. This is demonstrated through the countless calamities that have plagued us throughout our history. Calamities such as: slavery, countless genocides, massacres etc. By willingly bringing into the world humans whom we know may cause such levels of destruction we are doing something morally wrong.

### Section 9: Moderate Pro Natalism David Wasserman

Moderate Pro-Natalists argue that having children is morally permissible only in certain instances. Moderate Pro-Natalists reject Anti- Natalist arguments which claim that the charges of harm are great enough to make procreation wrong. However, they do not provide reasons for doing so beyond personal satisfaction and the interests of existing people.

David Wassermann a Moderate Pro-Natalist offers a rebuttal to Benatar's Anti-Natalist arguments and provides his own argument for the permissibility of having children. Instead of trying to prove that procreation is always justifiable, Wasserman instead chooses to advance a weaker thesis: procreation can be justified in certain instances. Although this thesis is not as strong as saying that procreation is always justified it is enough to show that Benatar is wrong.

Wasserman maintains that it is not wrong to have children in some circumstances. He argues that it is not wrong to bear a child if one has a reasonable expectation about the child's well-being and there is only the normal risk that its life will go badly.

“Prospective parents may find appropriate reinforcement for their decision to have children in the expectation that those children will have lives that are no harder or riskier than their own.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> p166

By this Wasserman is directly addressing Benatar claim that the harm is our lives outweigh the good to the extent that we should not have children at all. Instead he offers a more reasonable alternative: if prospective parents can guarantee for their future child a life that they themselves have lived and most likely consider to be good, then that is reason enough to have a child regardless of possible harm.

He however agrees that Anti-Natalism establishes that procreation is a morally risky activity and that it should not be undertaken without serious reflection.

Unlike Benatar, Wasserman argues that people can have children for reasons that concern the good of those children and of the relationship they seek to form with them. These reasons are comparable to the ones one may have in seeking to adopt a child, and in seeking any intimate relationship with another person.

Wasserman believes that people have a moral duty to seek a future partner's good only if they seek a specific relationship with that person. In the same way, individuals can justify their reasons to bear a child, if they seek the good of a future child and intend to become its parents. Pro-Natalism suggests the good for the future child, and of that relationship, can weigh against expected harms to the child.

## Section 10: Problem with Benatar and Wasserman

Unlike the many who have rejected Benatar asymmetry argument, Wasserman issue with the argument is not about the technical coherence of his asymmetry. Instead Wasserman rejects the fact that Benatar goes from the premise that existence is harmful to the conclusion that procreation is wrongful.

Even if Benatar asymmetry argument is correct, and existence is always in comparison worse than non-existence why does it make it wrong to bring persons into existence? Even though existence is worse than non-existence it doesn't say anything about how bad existence itself is. It might be worse but not necessarily so bad that it's wrong. Benatar aim to stop this kind of questioning by advancing his quality of life argument which claims that even good of the best lives are still outweighed by the bad.

Wasserman however, does not think that the quality of life argument is enough to solve that problem in Benatar's asymmetry argument. He believes the quality of life argument to be based on unsubstantiated assumptions about both the measurement of life's quality as well as how the average life stacks up against that measurement.

And, according to Wasserman, once the weaknesses of the quality of life argument are exposed, Benatar's asymmetry argument loses a lot of its strength.

## Section 11: My View

Having children is often good, regardless of the harms that we encounter. In fact, how can a practice that has been so widely spread since the beginning of time be wrong? This is why Anti-Natalism claim's that having children is morally impermissible is a claim that is hard to agree with. In fact, most of us like think that it is an act that is morally permissible. However, although Anti-Natalist claims are extreme they offer a significant truth about the reasons why we have children.

Our reasons for having children are often good, but they have no moral obligations attached to them. The truth is that we have no moral obligation to bring children into the world. The reason for that is that if someone were to refuse to have children for any reason, it would not be considered bad. Consider this example: Jenna and Mike love each other and have been together since high school. They are so much in love that they feel that bringing a child into the relationship would quite possibly change the dynamics of their relationship. For those reasons, they agreed not to bring a child into the world. Most will agree that they are not doing anything wrong by not having a child. If having children was morally obligatory then Jenna and Mike would have been doing something morally impermissible. Nevertheless, they are not doing anything morally impermissible

Although it is not morally obligatory to bring children into the world, it is certainly morally optional and often good. In fact, most of us are grateful to have been brought into existence. Although we do experience harm we do not think that the harm outweigh the benefits. Most of us actually enjoy our lives and will say that we experience more good than bad, to which Benatar will say that our optimism biases are the reason.

In his quality of life argument however claims that we are bias because we tend to be more optimistic about our lives. It is, however, impossible to have an objective perspective of one's life; whether we perceive our lives as better or as worse all of it biased. If there is no objective way to look at one's life Benatar himself is certainly biased

Furthermore in misanthropic argument Benatar argues that we do not have any reason to bring into the world humans being because of the amount of destructions and harm that human have and continue to unleash on the world. These harms however are things that are preventable.

To be a parent means to assume many responsibilities concerning the life of another human being. Children are members of society, and parents are responsible for not only their physical need but for their mental and emotional need as well. By bringing a child into the world you are tasked with providing for all of its need which include education

By educating children who will later become adults and in charge of not only themselves but of the world we can prevent most harm from happening.

Once we establish that parents can justify having children if they aim to have specific relationship with them. It is then wrong to stop prospective parents from having said children. Stopping them would be a direct violation of their autonomy.

If a prospective parent is able to adequately provide care for their child and ensure that the child would have a life that could be considered worth living then it is morally permissible and optional for the prospective parent to have that child.

## Part 12: Conclusion

I chose to examine the debate on procreation because I was curious as to why there was a debate in the first place. I was challenged and made to confront the fact that something as widely accepted could be baseless.

Along this process I was able to explore various views some more extreme than other and analyze them critically in order to take away the good from the bad.

Finally I was able to form my own thoughts on this debate and conclude that It is only morally permissible to have children in certain instances and that, it is never morally obligatory.