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One Child: Do We Have a Right to More?

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We love our children, and for many of us the time we spend with our children is the best part of our lives. The time has come, though, to acknowledge that we need to have fewer of them, and that indeed we don't have a right to give birth to more than one.

The United Nations has predicted a global population of 11.2 billion by the year 2100. They know, of course, that the fertility rate – the number of children a woman has over her lifetime – has dropped a great deal, to 2.5 per woman. Even so, given the high number of young people who will themselves be having children, we still arrive at the mind-boggling figure of 11.2 billion. If 2100 seems too far away to think about, the prediction is 9.7 billion by 2050, well within the lifetime of many of us (UN 2015).

No one who is familiar with these facts doubts that such a growth in population will be a great danger, both to humans and the environment at large. The question has been what to do about it. Many people believe that while having more than one child per couple is dangerous, the most we can do about this is plead for people to refrain. People have a right to have as many children as they want, it is argued, and so there is nothing we can actually do that might interfere with childbearing. Education about the dangers of overpopulation is permissible, since education doesn't actually prevent people from doing what they want; in fact, it helps people do what they want, since they can better see the effects of their actions. Anything else would violate a fundamental human right, and it

is morally wrong to violate fundamental human rights, even when we think that would benefit society at large. That's why we don't allow slavery, even if lots of people would enjoy it: there are certain things you just can't do to people, no matter how much other people benefit from them.

In fact, however, having as many children as you might happen to want isn't a fundamental right. In my book, *One Child: Do We Have a Right to More?* (2016), I argue that when you claim something as a right you need to justify that claim, and you simply can't justify the claim that you have a right to have as many children as you want when that will be as harmful to others as this much overpopulation is bound to be.

We claim moral rights sometimes just because we want something a lot, but wanting something and having a right to it aren't the same thing. People who study rights generally argue that there are two possible justifications for claiming that you have a right to do something. First, many people argue that if you absolutely have to have something in order to have a chance at a decent human life, then you can claim that thing as a right. For this reason, many people believe that we have a right to food, because it's impossible to live a decent life if we are starving. Now, having food doesn't guarantee a life of human happiness, but it gives you something no one can be happy without. Other people argue that we have a right to education for a similar reason – we might be contented even if we are completely ignorant, but for one thing, that is less likely, and for another, even if we are contented in a state of complete ignorance it seems less than a human life. For a decent human life we need the basics for mental and physical health.

The fact that there is a justified claim to food, though, doesn't mean you can claim a diet of lobster, truffles, and champagne, no matter how much you might prefer that. We have a right to basic nourishment, what we need for a chance at satisfaction and good health, not to whatever might most please us. Similarly for education: we think there is a right to education, but that doesn't mean that everyone has a right to go to Harvard or Oxford, or a right to be maintained by others in the study of particle physics for all of life. What you can claim from other people is limited to what you need for a decent life, not for the life you would most want.

Similarly for children. Some people think that having a child is necessary for a decent life. I actually find this unlikely, given the number of happy, flourishing, productive people we all know of who are childless, but let's say, for purposes of argument, that most people need the experience of childbearing and childrearing to have a decent life. It doesn't follow from that that you have a right to as many children as you want, any more than the right to food gives you a right to lobster and champagne. A family with one child is just as much a family as a large family. Any parent with one child experiences both the cares and rewards of childbearing and childrearing. The fact that you would like more doesn't mean you have a right to more, any more than the fact that I would really like to work fewer hours for the same salary I get now means I have a right to work fewer hours for the same salary.

So, the fact that we can make reasonable claims to have our own basic interests met doesn't mean we can claim a right to have as many children as we may happen to want. However, basic interests aren't the only thing that can justify a claim to a right. Often we claim a more general right to live our lives as we want, to shape our lives in line with our own values. Here, we say that respect for our autonomy as persons gives us the right to do certain things. We say, for example, that we have a right to freedom of speech, whether or not speaking freely makes us better off. Even if our basic interests in food, education, etc. can be met without our having access to these freedoms of self-expression, we feel these freedoms are morally ours to claim. Indeed, we usually claim these rights even if what we want to do is downright bad for us – the idea is that we should be allowed to craft a life in accordance with our own values.

Do we then have a right to have as many children as we want, arising from our general right to live autonomously?

Well, it depends. Right now we don't. The truth about these autonomy rights, these rights to choose to live your life the way you want, is that which of these rights you have is always sensitive to context. We say we have a right to free speech, but we also say you don't have the right to falsely yell "Fire!" in a crowded theater. John Stuart Mill, who wrote one of the most eloquent defenses of freedom that we have, conceded that of course when and how you can permissibly say something depends on how much harm that might do. We have a general right to practice

our religion, but if our religion required human sacrifice, we obviously wouldn't have a right to that. We often have a right to do things that are somewhat harmful (saying mean things, for instance) but we don't have the right to do things that are devastatingly harmful. Right now, having more than one child is just that: a world of 11.2 billion is a world of climate change, water shortages, soil depletion, overcrowding, species extinction, and many fear, insufficient food. It's just too harmful to be something we have a right to do.

But what can we do? One problem is that we often don't see how we can stop people from having too many children for the planet to bear. The Chinese one-child policy famously led (at least sometimes) to forced abortions and forced sterilizations, and people rightfully see these as violating the right to bodily integrity. Even if you don't have a right to do something, if I can't stop you without violating a right you do have I'm not allowed to do that. If, say, the only way I can stop you from trespassing through a distant corner of my field is to shoot you, I am not allowed to shoot you, even though you have no right to trespass. So if there is no morally permissible way to prevent people from having more than one child, what is the point of talking about it?

Fortunately, there are morally permissible ways to influence people's childbearing practices. First, of course, we do need education, as was mentioned above. Whatever else we do, we will need to explain how the fact that the fertility rate has dropped does not mean that we need not worry about population. Demographic momentum, the fact that with so many young people replacing themselves the population will continue to grow past, as far as we can tell, the breaking point, needs to be explained. We need to teach, too, that so far we don't see a technological fix that will allow 11.2 billion people to live happily – many people seem sure that we can easily produce lots of fresh water from sea water (not realizing how much energy this takes), or that we can "fix" global warming despite our continued increase in greenhouse emissions, or even that we can colonize other planets to relieve the population burden. These things may perhaps be possible, but we have no reason to think they are going to happen. Trusting in such fanciful solutions would be like introducing your child to cigarettes on the chance that someday we will know how to cure cancer – just plain irresponsible. We need to teach that this isn't something anyone has a right to do.

As I have said, though, education is probably not enough. Habits are hard to change, and the habit of thinking of something as harmless is particularly hard to get over. We've always celebrated the birth of children, and the idea that it can be dangerous requires a real conceptual shift, and we are very slow to do that. More is needed. We could, for a start, cut down on the number of unplanned pregnancies. There is a huge unmet need for contraception in the world, especially (not surprisingly!) in some of the places with the highest fertility rates, such as Sub-Saharan Africa. Women who would like to have fewer children aren't able to, because they have no way to control their own fertility. This is something the richer countries of the world could help with, making universal access to family planning facilities a priority. This would, honestly, be the right thing to do even if overpopulation were not a danger.

However, the worst contributors to greenhouse emissions are those of us in countries where contraception is relatively easy to get. In these places more is needed than simply the ability to have no more than one child. We need the desire. And here the government can take important steps. We could, for example, give tax benefits to one-child families. Alternatively, we could give tax penalties to those with more than one. Or, we could change the expressive power of the message by simply saying that we are fining those who have more than one child. We know that the number of children people have is sensitive to finances – each economic depression and recession sees a drop in the fertility rate, and each recovery sees a rise. And the fact that the fertility rate has fallen as far as it has is probably due at least in part to financial considerations – education and general childrearing cost a fair amount of money, in most places, and may also require that a two-income family become a one-income family, at least while the child is small. There is good reason to think, then, that financial incentives and disincentives would be enough to reduce the fertility rate. When a financial disincentive is great enough to change our behavior that may strike some as coercive, but again, the pressure here is to prevent us from doing something we don't actually have a right to do.

Would everyone be sensitive to such pressures? Perhaps not, but we should bear in mind that sanctions for undesirable activities are not generally designed to make those actions literally impossible. We disapprove wholeheartedly of theft, and we punish it, but we don't do everything we possibly could to stop it. We don't

have cameras that follow the activities of every citizen every second, because that would be too intrusive. We don't require that thieves have their hands cut off even if that would persuade more people not to steal, because that would be too brutal. We do what, combined with education and shared cultural values, will prevent the vast majority of people from stealing. Similarly with children: we want to reduce the fertility rate, but the fact that there are some who would rather accept the sanction than refrain from having more than one child doesn't mean the policy has failed. It means it is like other public policies, where we would like 100% compliance, but don't expect to get it. We need enough to bring about the requisite change.

Even if we have no right to more than one child, is trying to prevent that a good idea? There are disadvantages to a one-child policy, of course. It would involve personal losses. First and foremost is simply that some people who want more children will be disappointed. Secondly, it means that children would not have siblings. While earlier beliefs that an only child would be predictably lonely and/or spoiled have been shown to be false, it may still be a loss not to have a sibling. There are also ethical concerns: will a one-child policy lead to sex selection in procreation of the sort that will lead to a society that is disproportionately male? And then there are more material concerns: some ask how an economy based on unending growth can succeed with a population that isn't constantly growing. If we adopt a one-child policy, the population will fall. Eventually we will reach a sustainable number, and at that point, of course, we would aim for stability, with an average of two children per couple, or replacement value. Even then, though, our economy would have to run differently. Our economy so far as been based on a plan of infinite growth, and with a stable population rather than a growing population our economy would need to function differently.

These are legitimate concerns. However, none of them provides a sufficient reason to oppose a modern one-child policy. To take the last first: it's true, we don't know how to run an economy with a falling or stable population. At the same time, we don't know how we are going to run an economy with constant growth, either. A constant increase in the use of resources just isn't possible on a finite planet. It can't happen – we will simply run out of resources. Not everyone is happy with the economy as it is working now, given the increasing inequality we see between rich and poor, but even those who do think it functions well must

admit that it just can't keep running the same way. We will simply run out of stuff. Given this, a number of economists have suggested that we need to make a change – that we need to figure out how to have satisfying lives that aren't based on the prospect of producing more and more things. No one wants a crashing economy, but the way to avoid that isn't just to keep doing what we have been doing. Better to change now, while we still have fuel, water, food, and precious minerals, than later.

Sex selection, too is something we want to avoid. The evidence, though, is that sex selection is a phenomenon distinct from falling fertility rates. People in the United States, Western Europe, and the Far East have greatly reduced their fertility rates without this resulting in any disproportion between boys and girls. And one of the places that does show a clearly unnatural sex ratio is India, where people can have as many children as they like. The cause of sex selection is, to make a long story short, sexism. When women are not allowed to earn as much as men, or are much more expensive to raise (if, say, they need unaffordable dowries for marriage) they will naturally be the second choice for many people. This can change, though, as we have seen. When women have equal standing, there is no preference for boys.

The loss of the larger family one might have wanted, and the loss of siblings, are real losses for some of us. There will be parents who would be happier with more children, and children who would be happier with siblings (as well as parents and children who wouldn't be any happier with more children). For some families, adoption may be possible, but of course with a smaller number of children in the world this wouldn't be possible for everyone. I don't think it can be denied that some people will be worse off with fewer children in a family than they would be in a family with more. Still, even if they have lost something of value, that haven't lost as much as would be lost in an overpopulated world. Small families are still families, as said above, and bring the rewards of family life. The fact that some people would have found a larger family more rewarding doesn't mean they need one for a happy or rewarding life. A life in which we lack food, or water, or space, or any access to the natural world, is not a decent life. And of course a shortage of resources like these leads, typically, to conflict – civil wars and international wars as people struggle for what they need. Having a happy family in the midst of war is virtually impossible.

We need, then, to change our ways. We need to recognize that those who have more than one child when they could do otherwise are doing something they don't have a right to do, and the consequences will be disastrous.

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