

CONNECTING DIMINISHING FERTILITY RATES TO PHILOSOPHY, AND ITS REAL-LIFE IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: Decreasing fertility rates have been a growing concern in today's society; factors are complex, including scarce resources and economic hardships. This essay evaluates the present generation's moral obligation to others' lives and argues that while existing individuals are entitled to protection under the social contract, future generations lack the reciprocal moral claims necessary for similar obligations. By analyzing the philosophical perspectives of Rousseau and others, the paper differentiates between the rights of living beings and the conceptual nature of future lives. It concludes that decisions regarding procreation are deeply influenced by practical considerations of scarcity, autonomy, and the socio-economic concerns, necessitating a reevaluation of ethical responsibilities. Ultimately, analysis underscores the importance of balancing support for existing lives while acknowledging the complexities surrounding future generations in an increasingly resource-constrained world.

Keywords: Ethics; Obligation; Morality; Reproduction; Environment

1 INTRODUCTION

It is untruthful to claim a society like today owes any moral obligations to any future generation. It may be true efforts that United Nations have put into climate preservations, aiming to provide an equal share of Earth's resources to our descendants is substantial; but on a larger scale, the present generation achieved little at this point. However, witnesses of violence grew, regardless as force or violation, killing those yet to be born.

This paper starts by conceptually stating the meaning of "future people". It is widely consented that future people is those unborn, or unfertilized, ranging from a sperm to be injected into an embryo, to those living on this planet thousands of years away. Do we have a moral obligation to them is the question. Thus, center to this discussion, we ought to understand how to draw the lines differentiating those who are living and future generations whose existence are only previsioned. First, people we are not guaranteed that the future generation will act in any predictable way, especially to conform to our social norms. People before the world war one shall not foresee our invention of nuclear weapons, and our course of actions during the second world war. Thus, no probable assumptions could be made when responding to the question: How does the future generations look and act? Second, unlike living ones, future ones simply do not exist, it means we cannot feel them, visualize them, or speculate them in any sense. In this way, we cannot bond emotionally with the future generation, and tend not to take into consideration of them at any point. Third, they are not physical lives, and there is no illegality in clearing their existence. Put in simple words, there are no actual consequences in causing harm to non-existent bodies, thus we can violate or force the future generations at low or no physical cost.

This said, for the last 50 years, fertility rates have decreased by 50% globally [1], with South Korea fallen by 8 consecutive years to approximately 0.72 babies per woman [2]. Forecasts show that, by 2100, 198 countries will have a birthrate lower than its deathrate, a firsthand alert before wiping out Earth's entire population [3]. Observed from the consecutive decrements, in some sense, we may have abolished future lives by obliterating their existence, or in other words, violating their right to live, and that is nevertheless one moral obligation we can never set back on a living person.

Above all, this essay intends to argue that we owe moral obligations not to commit violence and harm lives of those living, but do not owe obligations to give births and support lives in the future. In the following, this paper will attempt to explain several factors and perspectives that support the argument and justify its connections to present policy making.

2 THE MORAL OBLIGATIONS IN AN EXISTING SOCIETY

As humans, and due to complex factors including empathy and law, moral obligations not to kill innocent beings purposefully, or in other words, commit any act of violence in all definitions is strongly present; As much as how this statement is natural and consensual, this essay reviews parts of philosophical justifications to this claim.

To begin with, the refrainment against killing existing people may be fundamentally rooted in the social contract, which establishes a reciprocal moral obligation among living members of a society. Primarily, Rousseau posits that individuals surrender their "natural rights" to the collective in exchange for civil liberty and mutual protection, forming a society where sovereignty resides in the "general will" (volonté générale) of the people [4]. This contract supports the reciprocal protection of life. To remain mutually protected and secure, citizens are obliged to waive their will of killing or violation, and thus are convinced not to purposefully harm. Additively, Bufacchi's dual conception of violence, as

both force, that is, physical coercion, and violation as infringement of rights further elucidates why killing constitutes a unique moral breach in all senses [5]. Killing simultaneously destroys the victim's autonomy and undermines societal trust, fracturing the contract's basis in mutual security. However, future generations, by contrast, are not protected or included in this bilateral exchange of moral obligations, for the first condition discussed in the introduction, that is, their actions are unpredictable, rendering them unable to perform any exchange of rights to the present generation; they are neither rights-claimants nor duty-bearers, and lack the reciprocity that binds extant individuals for the moral obligation to exist.

Moreover, the perceptual immediacy of existing lives triggers moral recognition in ways abstract future entities cannot. Soto's principle of "equality" asserts that moral obligations arise only when recognizing others as "concrete beings with plans and experiences" akin to our own [6]. This recognition depends on embodiment in physical presence, emotional expressiveness, and social interactivity, which enables empathy and understanding that killing extinguishes a unique subject of experience. Young similarly argues that the wrongness of killing stems from destroying "life projects" (e.g., relationships, aspirations) that define human identity [7]. Meanwhile, as the second condition states, future people remain epistemically inaccessible; their appearance, values, and desires are unknowable, or their existence is imaginative, rendering them morally inert concepts rather than subjects of direct obligation.

Finally, Feldman notes that killing an existing person inflicts calculable harms: the victim's lost future well-being, trauma, and social destabilization [8]. These costs are empirically verifiable and actionable. Preventing future births, however, eliminates no specific subject of harm, and is not considered illegal; there is no entity deprived of experiences it might have valued, diminishing the utility and rationality of such a moral obligation towards future generations.

All factors above synthesize the philosophical justifications of existing moral obligations not to kill with conditions of the future generations. Together, it is able to briefly comprehend how future generations are not liable to the specific moral obligation.

3 THE NATURE OF HUMANS: SCARCITY AND INTEREST

The differentiation between existing and future beings above attempts to explain why such moral obligations does not apply to those yet to be born: the lack of reciprocity due to ambiguous societal role, the inaccessible episteme that hinder subjectivity, and the non-existence of predictable utility consequences. However, in real life, the choice of not giving birth involves more multifaceted and practical reasonings.

Most prevalently, an economical investigation is able to narrow the problem down to a concept of scarcity: the limitedness of resources and opportunities. An additional child means, to many families, one more subject to share their limited resources among, and to the macro society, an additional dividend in the division of resources among societal members. Therefore, giving birth elicits a common concern that the share of each member will diminish as more and more are born, thus causing objections to increasing populations. For example, scarcities are visible in situations ranging from selective college admissions to limited careers, and even spaces to live or walk on a crosswalk. Nonetheless, scarcity cannot be addressed. Consequentially, many struggle with the limitation of resources and opportunities, with not giving birth or declining population as a steppingstone.

Specifically, scarcity manifests itself in different forms, including career, income, healthcare, caretaking responsibilities, lifestyle, and most importantly, time [9]. This is especially true for housewives as caretakers of the family; having children can mean a division of time and personal interests in various ways, from having to give up their career and thus income to sacrificing time for traveling in favor of educating kids. The burden of having a child is more measurable to a family, thus making the choice of giving birth a harder, complex, hesitant and carefully considered decision. Comparatively, deciding not to have children is a simpler and less costly option. Since a life yet to be born is not a physical entity and is inaccessible, fewer worries are incurred as both utility and morality does not exist for such a non-present life.

Contrarily, some child lovers argue that it is natural to say that giving birth is a moral duty of women: to live a nurturing and unselfish life, quoting majorly androcentric sociology ideas. Nevertheless, this essay should also serve to empower the reproductive rights of women. As Christopher Kaczor discusses in "Philosophy and Theology: Reproductive Rights," reproductive rights are not merely about the freedom to procreate but also about the liberty not to reproduce. The notion of a moral duty to give birth ignores the significant responsibilities and potential setbacks associated with parenthood, which Kaczor argues arise from the unique ability of parents to help or harm their children [10]. The argument for a moral duty to procreate fails to consider the broader ethical framework that respects women's autonomy and the well-being of both existing and future generations. Hence, while the desire to nurture future generations is crucial, it should not overshadow the fundamental reproductive rights of women to make liberated decisions about their own bodies and lives.

4 THE VIOLATION OF FUTURE LIVES

For the reasons above and beyond, the lives of future generations are rather violated when an increasing number of families decide to abandon birth giving, explanatory in three points of views:

First, the global drop in birth rates. According to CNN, fertility rates have been declining in all countries since 1950 and is projected to continue plummeting through the end of the century. Currently, 46% of countries have a fertility rate lower than its replacement rate, and it is predicted that the proportion will increase to 97% by 2100 [11]. Second, the

collective bargaining of rights to not reproduce and accessible abortion care. From 2023, millions of protestors advocated for the right to reproduce or abortion under own's will in the US, raising banners and distributing columns that have elevated the women rights impact [12]. Today, an average of 12,330 abortions per month are provided under shield laws, mirroring the new landscape of free reproduction that exemplifies unprecedented disinterest in birth giving [13]. Finally, the promotion of DINK trends online. In China alone, Zhihu hashtag on "why does woman not want kids?" exceeded 40 million views and 600 thousand comments, from which most were complaints about raising kids and being pregnant [14]. The result of such a trend was the emergence of many DINK advocating organizations; one such organization posted more than 5,000 pieces of content, and its impacts has been profound: by 2020, DINK males in China reached up to 48% [15].

On the one hand, these societal phenomena exemplify the prevailing trend of withholding birth giving. On the other hand, they shed light as to many other determinants of the trend, including social media and political movements, each with a high value of exploration. Yet, these images are testaments to a growing sense of non-obligation to future lives. Thus, unlike to existing beings, present societies do not owe a moral obligation to do no harm to the lives of unpredictable future generations, thereby fostering the erosion of newborn populations worldwide.

5 THE EFFECT ON POLICYMAKING

Above all, recognizing the inexistence of such a moral obligation, policies come in response in two distinct intents. On the one hand, some policies stress the importance of population increase as a key to social welfare and developed labor force, incentivizing families to give birth by providing privileges such as subsidies. In the US, various programs are activated, including the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which provides nutritional food, education, and screening services to pregnant women and new mothers, as well as Pregnancy Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) which provides financial aid to pregnant women with limited resources, and housing support for pregnant and parenting women, etc [16]. In China, differently, money is directly subsidized. According to demographics, one-time payments are offered to families of each child. For example, in Shanxi, 2000, 5000, and 8000 RMB are paid for the first, second, and third child respectively. In places of poverty and severe climates like Hohhot, up to 10,000 RMB is offered annually up to 10 years old, totaling 100,000 RMB [17]. On the other hand, countries must also balance the empowerment of rights to free birth, leaving the social flow unbothered. This can result in implementing a ceiling on numbers of children per family to favor the larger split of societal resources among its limited members. In 2025, "The International Parliament Journal" restates the decriminalization of abortion for women, reemphasizing the free reproductive choice that civics collectively bargained [18]. Beyond this, though China provides subsidies for childbirth, it still embedded a maximum number of children that is encouraged due to the limitation of available resources. Departing from this, China facilitates the balance by limiting the subsidies and financial aids to only the three children count within legal encouragement, in turn to control the possible population overflow that diminishes social interest and welfare [19].

The listed policies above fundamentally serve to maintain and incentivize a decent birth rate in different political contexts and societal needs. However, shadow is casted upon the impact of the policies as birth rates continues to fall as time passes by. This reiterates the need of further investigation into this area, as well as reinforces the argument of this essay, as the rights to live of future generations continues to be laid off in the present.

6 CONCLUSIONS

By and large, we owe existing individuals the duty to protect their lives and well-being, rooted in the social contract and immediate recognition of their needs. Future generations, lacking tangible existence, however, do not evoke the same direct obligations and remain tenuous in this discussion. Policy makers, in turn, must navigate the balance between incentivizing childbirth while also respecting individual reproductive rights and the limitations of available resources. As we move forward, more explorations upon the rights of existing individuals and considerations of the well-being of future generations is necessitated, ensuring that our actions today do not compromise the potential for an equitable future.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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