

Radical Existentialist Exercise: Strongly Disincentivizing Procreation as a Hypothetical Climate Change Solution

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ABSTRACT

The problem of climate change raises some important philosophical, existential questions. I propose a radical solution designed to provoke reflection on the role of humans in climate change. To push the theoretical limits of what measures people are willing to accept to combat it, an extreme population control tool is proposed: allowing people to reproduce only if they make a financial commitment guaranteeing a carbon-neutral upbringing. Prior to their existence, there is no obligation to bequeath the earth to next generations. Such generations will only exist if they are actually created, and there is no obligation to create them. The lack of existence should not be confused with harm. Climate change provides an important reason to stem overpopulation. Ironically, fast rates of procreation may lead to the earth becoming uninhabitable for humans altogether. The radical solution that has been proposed here is an unrealistic scenario. For now, the average global birth rate is just over 18 per thousand people, but there is a need to ensure that the number of people is not greater than the planet can endure. While it is better to prevent problems than to solve them, the interest in procreation and its associated joys, usefulness, and cultural value make mass reduction in the population unlikely.

Keywords: Climate change, philosophy, overpopulation, population growth, anti-natalist, Benatar, greenhouse gases, carbon footprint

INTRODUCTION

The problem of climate change raises some important philosophical, existential questions. I propose a radical solution designed to provoke reflection on the role of humans in climate change. To push the theoretical limits of what measures people are willing to accept to combat it, an extreme population control tool is proposed: allowing people to reproduce only if they make a financial commitment guaranteeing a carbon-neutral upbringing.

Solving the problem of climate change in the long run by halting the procreation of human beings is controversial. In the absence of human beings and consequent climate change, other animals and plant species would benefit from an atmosphere more conducive to prolonging their existence and even improving their ability to thrive. If someone were to invent something to reverse the effects of climate change *and* improve animals' lives, then human beings' presence would be justified by the invention. Whether the propagation of the human species is beneficial to anyone or anything but human beings themselves is difficult to answer. Perhaps human beings are unfit to tackle this issue, being unable to judge it objectively.

Managing Procreation: An alternative to Piecemeal Approaches

Measures aimed at reducing greenhouse gases by nudging individuals and corporations may have a positive effect, but if their behavior is not climate neutral, they continue to contribute to climate change. Consequently, as long as the number of people increases, reducing greenhouse gases is at best a mitigation tool. If humans could rely solely on renewable energy, decreasing the population arguably would not be necessary.

Significantly reducing the number of people appears to provide a solution to both problems: people who do not exist do not contribute to climate change, and renewable energy could meet the demand of a smaller population. One option is to let only those who produce the problem pay for its solution. One could determine the expected annual emission of greenhouse gases per person, assuming an average life expectancy, and calculate the costs to compensate them by, e.g., installing extra solar panels. Those expected costs could then be paid by the parents of each new person annually over the first eighteen years of that person's life by dividing the total expected costs by eighteen.

There are also practical difficulties. It would be difficult to determine the payment necessary. What should be done if a child has been born whose parents cannot afford to pay? In addition, child benefits could be canceled, contrary to recent incentives for child births instated in Italy,¹ where additional benefits will be made available to pay for childcare, and Hungary,² where women with four children or more will be exempted for life from paying income tax. A transition period could exist once the policy has been adopted, since it would be unreasonable to confront those who are already pregnant with costs they could not reasonably have expected. While the analysis is both hypothetical and theoretical, the impracticality is a noteworthy obstacle. There are several practical issues that cannot be addressed here, like the difficulty of calculating the added negative effects of each new individual and the unlikelihood that many citizens will support politicians who propose adopting policies that discourage having children.

The upshot of what I have proposed is that climate change can be solved in the long run without financial costs to society as a whole, notwithstanding the transitional measures that would bring costs with them.

Managing Procreation to Reduce Suffering

Should this be deemed too harsh a stance, it is important to consider the basic issue of whether it is justified to introduce measures to reduce the number of people in an already overpopulated world, especially if climate change leads to additional suffering. One need not agree with Benatar, but his perspective must at least be taken seriously:

It is curious that while good people go to great lengths to spare their children from suffering, few of them seem to notice that the one (and only) guaranteed way to prevent all the suffering of their children is not to bring those children into existence in the first place.³

Benatar argues that non-existence is preferable to existence,⁴ which raises the question why new people should be created at all. Those who question whether this planet will be habitable for future generations presuppose that such generations will *exist*. If people are not brought into existence, they may be said to be deprived of what life has to offer, but life must not be *presupposed* to be something positive. Whether this is the case in fact merits an inquiry of its own. A solution to the problem of climate change despite an increased population does not equate to a *positive* outcome since it merely means that something *negative* is removed. After all, solving the problem is not a means to an end, but a means to a means, the latter means being a means to a happy life, which does not automatically ensue from a solution to the problem.

Benatar, as an anti-natalist, argues that procreation is morally wrong. His basic idea is that there is an asymmetry between pleasure and pain and that the pleasure that is not experienced by someone because that person does not exist is not something bad whereas the absence of pain that is not experienced – for the same reason – is something good.⁵ Accordingly, “The reason why we do not lament our failure to bring somebody into existence is because absent pleasures are not bad.”⁶ One may question whether such a perspective suffices to prove that coming into existence is *always* a harm, but the assertion that coming into existence exposes a new being to potential harm is clear.

Objections

A drawback of the proposed radical solution, placing the financial impediment on procreation, is that it will not solve climate change in the short run. A significant drop in the number of people (if that were achieved) may have a positive effect in the long run, but for now the behavior of the people in existence is the problem. Other climate change mitigation policies would necessarily continue.

Additionally, there are important practical reasons to continue to procreate. The benefits for the elderly are paid for by the labor force. It is a problem that new generations are created as mere means to benefit older people. Perhaps more troubling, a pyramid scheme is created: by the time those people have themselves become old, a new labor force must have been brought into existence, a process that must presumably continue. If a consideration for people in developing countries to have children is that they cannot provide for themselves at an advanced age, while benefits are either lacking or insufficient, developed countries could collectively fund a pension scheme.⁷ This may be low-cost if it is tailored to the living standard in the countries in question and given the life expectancy. Such a pension scheme should be predicated on the countries’ efforts in reducing the birth rate.

If the labor force decreases, the economy may suffer. The focus on economic growth is arguably one of the causes of climate change, but if the number of people is reduced, the living standard does not have to be compromised, since the economy can then still grow. If fewer people began to use natural resources and nonrenewable energy at higher per capita rates, then the procreation might not be beneficial to the climate. It would need to be accompanied by regulations on use.

One may also object that only wealthy people will be able to afford children. This is correct, but there is no right to have a child one cannot afford. The right to procreate does not entail the right to have as many children as one wants.⁸ Yet in many countries, like the United States, it is a fundamental right that is constitutionally protected.

There are numerous social, emotional, and even biological reasons why people choose to procreate. These may include the joy of having a family, the hope that children may bring in society, and the intergenerational transference of knowledge. People may have a strong desire to raise children or even a religious duty.

If someone procures a sports car that is highly polluting, it would be justifiable to impose a tax in such a case (also discouraging future buyers). Many taxes and fines are imposed on corporate polluters. Procreation is significantly different but if the issue is regarded with some distance, then a climate change prevention tax could be appropriate.

Some may argue that raising children is expensive already, which nonetheless does not deter people from having children. The tax I propose would be additional and specifically dedicated to carbon neutrality, but it would be difficult to predict whether it would discourage procreation.

One last objection may be that for those now dedicated to sustainability for preserving the earth for the sake of future generations, there would be little or no incentive to continue any climate change mitigation efforts at all. If they sense they cannot afford to procreate, they may simply use every natural resource rather than save the earth for animals or for next generations. In a democracy, this problem does not exist if the majority can afford to procreate and agree with legislation on the basis of which such behavior is discouraged or punished.

CONCLUSION

Prior to their existence, there is no obligation to bequeath the earth to next generations. Such generations will only exist if they are actually created, and there is no obligation to create them. The lack of existence should not be confused with harm. Climate change provides an important reason to stem overpopulation. Ironically, fast rates of procreation may lead to the earth becoming uninhabitable for humans altogether.

The radical solution that has been proposed here is an unrealistic scenario. For now, the average global birth rate is just over 18 per thousand people, but there is a need to ensure that the number of people is not greater than the planet can endure. While it is better to prevent problems than to solve them, the interest in procreation and its associated joys, usefulness, and cultural value make mass reduction in the population unlikely. Some countries have smaller average family size than others and can act as models for reducing population in a less radical way. The need to continue efforts to reduce climate change persists. Whether it would curb population growth or not, an additional financial burden applied to neutralizing each person's offspring's carbon footprint provides a meaningful thought exercise that could help alleviate the pressure on current climate mitigation strategies.

¹ The Local Italy, How Italy's new 'Family Act' aims to increase the plunging birthrate (2020), <https://www.thelocal.it/20200612/what-you-need-to-know-about-italys-new-family-act/>.

² BBC, Hungary tries for baby boom with tax breaks and loan forgiveness (2019), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47192612>.

³ David Benatar, *Better never to have been* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 6.

⁴ David Benatar, *Better never to have been* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 44, 58.

⁵ David Benatar, *Better never to have been* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 14, 30, 38.

⁶ David Benatar, *Better never to have been* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 35.

⁷ Alastair Leithead, "Can Niger break out of its cycle of poverty?" (BBC, 2017), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-41018081>; Sebastien Malo, "Fewer children, fewer climate risks? Niger ponders a controversial option" (Reuters, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-niger-climate-change-familyplanning-idUSKBN1WM11E>.

⁸ Sarah Conly, "The Right to Procreation: Merits and Limits," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2005): 105-115, 105, 106.