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More Co-parents, Fewer Children: Multiparenting and Sustainable Population

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Abstract

Some philosophers argue that we should limit procreation—for instance, to one child per person or one child per couple—in order to reduce our aggregate carbon footprint. I provide additional support to the claim that population size is a matter of justice, by explaining that we have a duty of justice towards the current generation of children to pass on to them a sustainable population. But instead of, or, more likely, alongside with, having fewer children in in each family, we could also create families with more than two parents. I explore this possibility by pointing out the ways in which multi-parenting can advance children's interests: in higher levels of well-being, in non-monopolistic child-rearing, and in a future opportunity to become themselves parents.

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Introduction

Many believe it is imperative to limit population growth worldwide in order to prevent or mitigate the harmful effects of excessive consumption. At the same time, many believe that denying people the opportunity to parent amounts to a grave injustice, at least in cases when the individuals in question would make good (enough) parents and give their children reasonably flourishing lives. This paper is written for the subset of people who subscribe to (some version of) both beliefs—a subset that, I contend, is not small.

Usually, the two beliefs above are taken to support different, and incompatible, views concerning procreation and parenthood. On the one hand, there is the view that we ought to drastically limit procreation. Some philosophers argue that procreation is on par with consumption;¹ indeed, recent empirical research indicates that procreation is disproportionately related to one's carbon footprint.² In this vein, some defend the claim that individuals lack a moral right to parent more than one child,³ while others argue that although individuals don't have a duty to limit themselves to having small families, there is nevertheless a strong moral presumption in favor of doing so.⁴

On the other hand, there is the view that there cannot be any legitimate restrictions—not even moral, and even less legal—on procreation. This, I take it, is the view supported by common morality and legislation alike. International legislation codifies an individual right to decide the number of children one has: *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* proclaims a right, for adults, to marry and found a family—that is, to procreate and raise children. *The Proclamation of Teheran* states that “parents have a basic human right to determine freely and responsibly the number and the spacing of their children.” Similarly, *The Cairo Programme of Action* recommends that governments prioritize

¹ Starting with Thomas Young, “Overconsumption and Procreation: Are They Morally Equivalent?” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 18, part 2 (2001): 183–92.

² See Seth Wynes and Kimberly A. Nicholas, “The Climate Mitigation Gap: Education and Government Recommendations Miss the Most Effective Individual Actions.” *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 7 (2017): 074024.

³ Christine Overall, *Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Sara Conly, *One Child: Do We Have a Right to More?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Tim Meijers, “Climate Change and the Right to One Child,” in *Human Rights and Sustainability*, ed. Gerhard Bos and Marcus Duwell (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), 181–94.

⁴ Travis Rieder, *Towards a Small Family Ethic: How Overpopulation and Climate Change Are Affecting the Morality of Procreation*. (New York: Springer, 2016).

individuals' reproductive freedoms over demographic targets.⁵ Further, to the best of my knowledge, almost no legislation directly limits the number of children one can parent. (As I elaborate below, there are indirect limitations on the moral right to parent, having to do with ensuring a standard of sufficient well-being to children, meaning that, in practice, there is a limit to how many children one can permissibly bring up.) The notorious exception to this is the Chinese state, which for decades has implemented a law limiting the right to rear to one child, but this policy has been justified by appeal to considerations of internal Chinese politics rather than by appeal to the aim of avoiding worldwide overpopulation.

My contribution to the debate about procreation in an overpopulated world is to show that both beliefs—that we are near the point where world population is unsustainable and that we ought to respect and protect adults' interest in parenting—will, when supplemented by a distributive concern, support the same practical conclusion: each generation has a duty of justice to limit its birth rates such that all those who wish to parent—and who would be able to do so adequately—can do so without restricting the same ability for those in generations to come. Depending on particular circumstances, this will entail a more or less drastic reduction in procreation.

The focus of my discussion will be on how it is possible to satisfy the interest in parenting in cases in which justice requires a steep downsizing of the population. I argue that multiparenting—that is, three, four, or possibly more adults co-raising the same child or children—is a desirable solution. Moreover, in cases where each individual or couple parenting one child would not result in sufficiently steep downsizing, multiparenting may be morally required. In such circumstances, the moral duty to transition to multiparenting is owed to children qua future adults, because it protects their own interest in legitimate parenting; it is also one (possibly the best) way to discharge a duty to rear children in ways that minimize monopolies of care over them. Therefore, a legal reform would also be, in principle and under particular circumstances that I shall specify, justified. But such a reform faces serious implementation issues. The legal status of multiparenting ought to depend on whether there are permissible ways to enforce such a policy. This turns on answers to other questions, which I will flag at the end of the paper without aiming to answer them.

⁵ See United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948, available at: <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>; United Nations, *The Proclamation of Teheran*, 1968, available at: <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instree/12ptichr.htm>; United Nations, *Programme of Action*, adopted at The International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 1994, available at: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/programme_of_action_Web%20ENGLISH.pdf.

A few further clarifications: I reserve the term *parenting* to talk about child-rearing. Most parenting is procreative parenting—that is, procreators rearing their children—but, as we shall see, procreation and parenting have different normative standing. Unqualified, “right” refers to moral rights.

Drawing on previous work, I explain in the next section why people who would make adequate parents have a morally weighty interest in an opportunity to parent and why this entails principled limits to how many children it is permissible to bring into existence during any period of time—I refer, by stipulation, to “generations.” The third section explains how multiparenting can be good for children relative to the status quo in which children have at most two parents. In addition, multiparenting is one way to dismantle a monopoly of care over children which, as I have argued elsewhere, is morally objectionable in itself. Further, multiparenting distributes fairly opportunities to fulfill the interest in close, long-lasting, and protected relationships with children. In the fourth section I elaborate on the circumstances in which multiparenting is morally required, and in the fifth section I address a few worries concerning multiparenting as a possible default way of raising children, including implementation difficulties.

Parenting and Overpopulation

As noted already, legislations and common-sense morality grant a right to unlimited procreation. Yet the right cannot be unqualified: to permissibly bring someone into existence, procreators must at least give their offspring lives worth living.⁶ But, more likely, procreators are to be held to higher moral standards, requiring them to provide at least adequate lives for the children they bring into the world⁷—at least, assuming that nobody else capable of adequate parenting is willing to raise these children. Here I don’t commit to a particular standard of permissible procreation.

But why are adults who can meet the relevant standard free to beget and raise children? On a traditional view, this is by virtue of other generally recognized rights. As a human right proclaimed by international documents, the right to parent—conflating reproduction and child-rearing—is justifiable by appeal to the right to bodily autonomy and rights

⁶ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

⁷ See Onora O’Neill, “Begetting, Bearing, and Rearing,” in *Having Children: Philosophical and Legal Reflections on Parenthood*, ed. Onora O’Neill and William Ruddick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 25–38; and David Archard, “The Obligations and Responsibilities of Parenthood,” in *Procreation and Parenthood*, ed. David Archard and David Benatar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103–27.

that protect individuals' freedom to form and maintain intimate relationships. The likely normative story behind this understanding of the right to parent goes like this: adults have a right to do as they please with their bodies, as long as they do not inflict harm on others; hence, they should not in general be prevented from engaging in consensual sexual activities, from which children may result. Causal responsibility for the existence of these children then results in moral responsibility for the children's welfare. This is the causal account of parental rights and duties: procreative parents owe duties to their children and, in order to be able to discharge these duties properly, they have a right to parent. The right to parent, thus understood, is a right to be free from third parties' interference with one's procreative and child-rearing activities. If understood as an interest-protecting right, it protects the interests in bodily autonomy, association, and ability to discharge one's duties. It is not necessarily a *sui generis* right because it does not rely directly on a fundamental interest to parent. In very impoverished circumstances, the unlimited exercise of procreative powers can result in a large number of children, some of whom will inevitably come to harm.⁸ Our rights to use our bodies as we wish, and to associate with others, are conditional on our not harming third parties. In conditions of severe scarcity, an increasing number of people shall cease having a right to procreate as understood in this traditional way—namely, all those lacking the resources to ensure the flourishing of their offspring.⁹ If so, a right to bodily autonomy and free association are unstable grounds for a right to parent. A universally held right to procreate ceases to exist if and when further procreation puts enough individuals at high risk of misery—whether “misery” is understood (depending on the correct theory of permissible procreation) as having a life not worth living or as “mere” insufficiency.

Yet there is another account of the right to parent, one that I argue is not as immediately vulnerable to objections pointing to imminent world overpopulation. Recently, several philosophers defended a way to understand parenting that amounts to a *sui generis*

⁸ That is, whether harming one's offspring is defined here as having a life below the threshold that makes it worth living or merely an insufficiently good childhood.

⁹ Here I present two important observations: (1) It is plausible that privately owned resources are not enough to ensure sufficiently good lives; for this, one also needs to live in societies that provide various collective goods, including just, or at least decent, institutions and peace. These goods may be the first to be eroded in cases of extreme climate events and, relatedly, increased scarcity. (2) Depending on who has the duty to shoulder the costs of children—parents alone or parents and nonparents together—it may be the case that in such circumstances nobody would have a right to procreate and parent that is derivative from a right to bodily autonomy and freedom of association. On the question of who should pay for the costs of children, see Serena Olsaretti, “The Costs of Rearing Children,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Childhood and Children*, ed. Anca Gheaus, Gideon Calder, and Jurgen De Wispelaere (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018), 339–50.

right. According to this account, the most elaborate version of which was developed by Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift,¹⁰ being able to parent is a good that can greatly enrich people's lives, the loss of which cannot be compensated easily, if at all. For these reasons, denying would-be adequate parents an opportunity to parent may present an injustice.¹¹ Brighouse and Swift defend a right to parent that has several important characteristics. First, it is grounded simultaneously in children's interest in having adequate parents and in would-be parents' interest in being the ones serving the children's interest. Since the parents' interest is to be the person in charge with satisfying the children's interest, it is the latter interest that is most fundamental; this is why the right to parent is conditional on the parenting ability of the right-holder. Second, it is an interest-protecting right; this is why, if the interest cannot be fulfilled for whatever reason—say, due to universal infertility—this significantly sets back the flourishing of the individuals who have the interest and, as such, raises a serious moral concern. Third, the relevant interest is in the unique goods generated by the combination of two features of parenting: the unparalleled intimate and trustful quality of the parent-child relationship on the one hand, and on the other hand the fact that it gives adults the opportunity to live up to the moral challenge of being a good parent, and thus a path to unique self-knowledge and personal growth. Both sets of features are present in adoptive as well as in procreative parenthood; Brighouse and Swift's is an account of why some people have a right to parent, but not necessarily a right to procreate, or indeed a right to rear the children they procreate.

I find the Brighouse-Swift account persuasive, although with a twist (as I have argued elsewhere¹²): I think that the interest in child-rearing lies mostly in having a long-term, caring relationship with a child, one that is immune to arbitrary interference from third parties. That is, most if not all of what makes the interest in parenting so weighty concerns the goods that accrue to people in virtue of their spending substantial periods of time with a child whom they love, who loves them back and for whom they are beneficial. Someone whose relationship with a child has these characteristics, and who cannot be separated from the child against her will, can enjoy the unique intimacy and spontaneity

¹⁰ In Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, *Family Values: The Ethics of the Parent-Child Relationship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹¹ Other philosophers who hold this view, while disagreeing with Brighouse and Swift over many issues concerning the right to parent, are Colin MacLeod, "Conceptions of Parental Autonomy," *Politics and Society* 25, no. 1 (1997): 117–40; Matthew Clayton, *Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Liam Shields, "Parental Rights and the Importance of Being Parents," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1080/013698230.2016.1262316>.

¹² Anca Gheaus, "Is There a Right to Parent?" *Law, Ethics, and Philosophy*, no. 3 (2015): 193–204.

of loving a child. They can also enjoy the special responsibility of having a significant impact on a child's present and future—and with this responsibility, the self-knowledge and personal growth that are part and parcel of good parenting. This is because adults who are emotionally close to children over a long time make a strong impact on their children's personality even when they lack the decision-making power of a parent. Think, for instance, of closely involved grandparents, long-term nannies, and other de facto child-rearers who become parental figures. This twist on the Brighthouse-Swift account is significant to the present discussion because it indicates that the satisfaction of the morally relevant interest in bringing up children does not require a freedom to bring up one's child all by oneself, but is compatible with a few adults sharing the rearing of the same child.

If the interest in rearing children that is the cornerstone of this account is powerful enough to generate a right,¹³ then it is plausible that adequate parents will have a duty to do their best to ensure that their children, too, will be able to raise children if they wish to. This is, in a concise form, an argument that I have defended in previous work:¹⁴ Since only adequate parents have the right to raise children, according to this theory, today's parents ought to ensure that they pass on to their children enough resources such that the latter will also have access to legitimate parenting. But to justly raise these prospective children, today's children will also need to be able to give their children sufficient resources to make it possible for them to engage in legitimate parenting, if they should wish to do so. And so on—this argument continues ad infinitum because it relies on the recurrent premise that the resources needed by one individual to justly raise children include the resources needed to provide one's children with enough resources to justly raise their own children. The premise can be reiterated for any number of future generations.

Let me put this more intuitively. Assume that, foreseeably and avoidably, a generation (G1) left behind a world so impoverished or dangerous that its own children (G2) would not be in a position to parent justly, because they (G2) couldn't be sufficiently confident that their own children (G3) would have an adequate life. G1 would obviously wrong

¹³ This appears to be well supported by empirical evidence. Consider, for instance, that many people are willing to spend enormous amounts of time, money, and energy in order to be in the position to rear a child. Note that the interest is not said to be universal: there are alternative ways of leading a flourishing life that are not compatible with being an adequate parent.

¹⁴ Anca Gheaus, "The Right to Parent and Duties Concerning Future Generations," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 24, no. 4 (2016): 487–508. Another philosopher who believes that appeal to parents' interests can serve as grounds for wanting to limit the population is Sarah Hannan. See her "Parent-Centered Reasons to Have Fewer Children" (unpublished manuscript; last modified in June 2013).

their children: even if the life of people in G2 would otherwise go well, people in G1 would deprive people in G2 of the opportunity to bring up children, an opportunity that people in G1 enjoy—and this is unjust. Now assume that G1 you were to leave behind (again, avoidably) a world that will become too impoverished or dangerous for child-rearing only a generation later. In this case, people from G2 could proceed with having children, but only in the knowledge that people in G3 would not have an opportunity to engage in permissible parenting. People in G1 effectively impose on their children a choice between bringing up children who would be deprived of the opportunity to parent—an opportunity that people in G1 and G2 enjoy—or else to forgo parenting entirely. This is a choice that is unjust to impose on one's children if one can avoid doing it at reasonable cost to oneself.

The conclusion is that each generation of parents acts unjustly toward their own children if they fail to leave to these children a world in which they, too, can bring up children permissibly. Given the conditions on permissible parenting—that children have adequate lives, including opportunities to satisfy their weighty interests—this amounts to a requirement of sustainability.

Sustainability itself depends on three factors: affluence (that is, level of consumption), technology, and population.¹⁵ It may be the case that, with enough technological progress and/or with much lower consumption, it would be possible to sustain a population much larger than the current one at an adequate quality of life. If so, the current preoccupation with reducing population growth (or advocating population de-growth) imminently may be overshooting the target.

Yet there are several reasons to be skeptical of this response, and to want to direct some efforts into limiting the future population. These are reasons that should also speak to those who endorse the first, traditional, view of the right to parent that I sketched above. But if the Brighouse-Swift account of the right to parent—or something like it—is correct, and if my view about what it entails for justice concerning future generations is correct, these reasons are particularly compelling and urgent.

A first consideration is that low-consuming populations from poor parts of the world aspire to higher levels of affluence—and legitimately so, especially as long as people in the rich parts of the world fail to scale down their own consumption. As affluence in at least some of the traditionally poor, and also highly populated, parts of the world raises quickly, so do levels of worldwide consumption.

¹⁵ Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 1968.

Another consideration is that new technologies,¹⁶ and especially geoengineering—which could help most against climate change effects, if it works—carry very significant risks.¹⁷ If actualized, such risks would be devastating. This explains why some scientists believe that it is imperative to reduce CO₂ emissions in order to keep global warming at a minimum.¹⁸ It is in this context that one can best appreciate the relevance of how procreative decisions have an impact on CO₂ emissions: research indicates that procreating even one child contributes many dozens of times more to limiting CO₂ emissions than living car-free, avoiding plane travel, or eating a plant-based diet.¹⁹

This is not to endorse the claim that procreating is morally on a par with overconsumption. Having a certain, minimum, number of children seems to be morally required,²⁰ while most if not all other high consumption choices are morally optional. Besides, it appears flawed to say that, morally speaking, choosing to have one more child is consumption in the same way as, say, flying, because it is not the parent but the child who will make most consumption decisions concerning him- or herself. But even if procreation is not on par with consumption, the underlying normative problem remains: as a procreator, one is morally responsible for the bringing into existence of another individual with his or her own claims to resources. If one of these claims is to have enough to raise her own children adequately, as I argued above, then each procreative choice generates a potentially unlimited stream of future individuals with consumption entitlements.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to investigate legitimate ways of limiting the population is this: accelerated global warming is already happening, and even the most optimistic projections indicate that we are likely to face climate events that will as such reduce the pool of existing resources and cause significant migration from the poorer

¹⁶ For more discussion about the risks of relying too much on technological improvement in the fight against climate change, see Colin Hickey, Travis N. Rieder, and Jake Earl, “Population Engineering and the Fight against Climate Change,” *Social Theory and Practice* 42, no. 4 (2016): 845–70.

¹⁷ Vera Heck et al., “Biomass-Based Negative Emissions Difficult to Reconcile with Planetary Boundaries,” *Nature Climate Change* 8 (2018): 151–55. <http://nature.com/articles/doi:10.1038/s41558-017-0064-y>; Christopher C. Trisos et al. “Potentially Dangerous Consequences for Biodiversity of Solar Geoengineering Implementation and Termination,” *Nature Ecology and Evolution*, no. 2 (2018): 475–82. <http://nature.com/articles/doi:10.1038/s41559-017-0431-0>.

¹⁸ Heck, “Biomass-Based Negative Emissions.”

¹⁹ Wynes and Nicholas, “The Climate Mitigation Gap.”

²⁰ I have argued for this in Anca Gheaus, “Could There Ever Be a Duty to Have Children?” In *Permissible Progeny? The Morality of Procreation and Parenting*, ed. Sarah Hannan, Samatha Brennan, and Richard Vernon (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 87–106.

(or simply harder hit) regions of the world to the richer ones. So, even if the world as it is now could indeed sustain a population much larger than the current one at an adequate quality of life, it is not clear that this will still be the case in a few decades, when climate change events may have destroyed many of the world's resources. And even if rich countries today are not overpopulated, it is far from clear that they can permissibly remain so in the near to medium term.²¹

Multiparenting: Good, Anti-monopolistic and Fair

What are the implications of the reasoning above for permissible parenting under conditions of increasing scarcity? My argument indicates that each generation owes its own children a sustainable world by virtue of the moral importance of satisfying their interest in legitimate parenting. Stated like this, the claim does not fully specify the bearers of the duty. This is intentional: in one view, we all collectively bear duties toward children; in a different one, procreators alone are the primary duty-bearers in relation to their offspring, and third parties have backup, or remedial, duties in case procreators fail to live up to theirs.²² I do not commit to any of these views here because, whichever is correct, justice toward children requires some limiting of procreation and, hence, of child-rearing.²³

What if the population is already too large for our, or our children's, generation to procreate at the replacement rate in a sustainable way? In that case, our—or our children's—generation can live up to its duty toward the next generation if either some individuals allow their interest in parenting go unfulfilled, or else if all adequate prospective parents cooperate with other individuals by coparenting, such that everybody's interest in parenting is fulfilled.

The first possibility is a sacrifice that cannot be legitimately demanded of individuals

²¹ For instance, The World Bank has recently published a report saying that up to 143 million people may have to migrate by 2050 due to climate change. See Jocelyn Timperley, "Expect Tens of Millions of Internal Climate Migrants by 2050, Says World Bank," *Eco-Business*, March 20, 2018. <https://www.eco-business.com/news/expect-tens-of-millions-of-internal-climate-migrants-by-2050-says-world-bank/>.

²² See Olsaretti, "The Costs of Rearing Children."

²³ In this case, I assume, the relationship between the collective duty and the individual duties is the same as in the case of other scarce goods, opportunities to which should be distributed equally: if justice requires population reduction, such that not all individuals may parent alone, then it makes sense to talk about one's fair share of parenting. It is a difficult but general question whether individuals have a duty to refrain from appropriating more than their fair share in cases when there is no regulation specifying what that share is exactly and demanding individuals not to exceed it.

as long as an alternative, more fair solution exists, and individuals prefer this solution over remaining childless. To discharge the duty to pass on a sustainable world to the next generation, individuals who live in such circumstances ought to be ready to share child-rearing with several other adults—that is, to multiparent. Multiparenting is parenting of the same child or children by more than two parents—typically three or four. (Alternatively, ideal forms of multiparenting could include more adults bringing up several children, in case that having whole generations of single children is undesirable. I will not analyze this more complicated form of multiparenting here.)

The very few existing philosophical engagements with multiparenting have so far discussed cases of more than two adults *wanting* to parent the same child—and most often, wanting to legalize a de facto situation of multiparenting.²⁴ The practice is legally accepted in some countries, such as Canada and New Zealand, that confer the status of parent on all adults who raise the child. Attempts to make multiparenting a legally accepted form of child-rearing were initially motivated by the desire to protect already established caring relationships between a child and three or more adults.²⁵ Many such cases include same-sex families whose children are raised in common by the two biological parents, one of whom is part of the same-sex couple and the third a sperm donor or a surrogate mother. Other multiparent families consist of the child or children's legal parents who have at some point divorced, and their new partners. But, in some cases, legal multiparenting concerns the raising of children who are not yet attached to the (would-be) third or fourth parent because the child has not yet been conceived or born, but the adults who want to be involved have already applied for parental legal status. The adults' willingness to coparent, and existing relationships between children and several adults, are normatively significant facts—as I explain below—that don't necessarily apply to the kind of multiparenting that would be a legitimate response to the imperative need to downscale the population.

Nevertheless, some of the good-making features of previously analyzed cases of multiparenting apply to the large-scale, by-design multiparenting that I consider here. These features have to do with how multiparenting can serve children's interests, its potential to address morally objectionable monopolies of care in child-rearing, and the

²⁴ Daniela Cutas, "On Triparenting: Is Having Three Committed Parents Better Than Having Only Two?" *Journal of Medical Ethics* 37, no. 12 (2001): 735–38; Bill Cameron and Samantha Brennan, "How Many Parents Can a Child Have? Philosophical Reflections on the Three Parent Case," *Dialogue* 54, no. 1 (2015): 45–61.

²⁵ Cutas, "On Triparenting." Cameron and Brennan discuss some Canadian cases in detail in "How Many Parents."

way in which it satisfies adults' interest in an opportunity to rear children. I argue that multiparenting is a fair solution to the question of how to satisfy everybody's interest in an opportunity to rear children in conditions of increasing scarcity (but, as an aside, also in more regular circumstances).

First, as Daniela Cutas, Bill Cameron, and Samantha Brennan have noted,²⁶ having three or four parents is likely to be, in some important respects, better for children than having only two parents, much in the same way having two parents is better than having only one: with more committed adults in one's life, resources such as time, affection, and money multiply. Moreover, more parents means more security against the loss of one (or, in case of multiparenting, more) of them. And, when it comes to children conceived with the help of new reproductive technologies, multiparenting can be a good way of allowing children to enter and maintain close relationships with all biological parents (genetic and gestational) without thereby excluding the intending parents' stable partners from parenthood.²⁷ In other ways, more parents can make children worse off—again, in the same way in which having two parents can make the child worse off than having only one—as Cutas notes, by exposing children to higher risk of loss. There is also a worry that several involved parents means more potential for conflict, disagreement, and stalled decision making—although, on the brighter side, more than two people may also result in better decision-making, at least as long as all parents involved are willing to cooperate in serving the well-being of the child.²⁸ In previous work,²⁹ I have argued that having more than two adults closely involved in a child's life tends to be especially beneficial for those children who would otherwise be among the worst off in terms of access to good parenting. Exposure to different styles of caregiving can help correct the effects of more minor failings of care. Moreover, empirical research confirms that frequent and stable interaction with several caring adults is good for children's behavior and general resilience.³⁰ This could be, in part, because it improves the likelihood that all children

²⁶ See Gheaus, "Could There Ever Be a Duty."

²⁷ Cutas, "On Triparenting," too makes this point. The importance of this consideration depends on the importance, for a child, of having relationships with her biological parents—a very contentious issue in itself.

²⁸ As noted by Cutas in "On Triparenting."

²⁹ Anca Gheaus, "Arguments for Nonparental Care for Children," *Social Theory and Practice* 37, no. 3 (2011): 483–509; and "Children's Vulnerability and Legitimate Authority over Children," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35, no. S1 (2018): 60–75.

³⁰ Michael E. Lamb, "Effects of Nonparental Child Care on Child Development: An Update," *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 41, no. 6 (1996): 330–42; Carrie Rishel, Esther Sales, and Gary F. Koeske, "Relationships with Non-Parental Adults and Child Behavior," *Child and Adolescent Social Work*

have at least one competent caring adult in their lives.³¹ All things considered, then, multiparenting seems a lot more likely to serve, rather than detract from, children’s well-being.

Second, and independently from how multiparenting could further children’s interest in well-being, it has the virtue of undermining the existing monopoly of power that parents have over their children. In *Protecting the Vulnerable*, Robert Goodin has provided an account of objectionable dependency at the center of which is the *risk* of abusing power over the dependent.³² This risk, rather than dependency as such, is intrinsically objectionable. As long as parents can exclude other caring, beneficial adults from their children’s lives, the parent-child relationship exhibits the combination of four features that, together, makes children’s dependency on their rearers objectionable: the relationship is asymmetrical in terms of parties’ power over each other. Children, as the dependent party, have a vital need for the resources provided by the other party—which, too, is an unavoidable feature of upbringing. The superordinate party exercises discretionary control over those resources. Finally, the relationship in question is the only source of such resources for the dependent party.³³ Asymmetry of power between children and parents, and children’s vital need for care, cannot be eliminated from child-rearing. Nor can the discretionary nature of child-rearing be abolished: if children are to be brought up in intimate relationships, which impose strict limits on monitoring by outsiders, some level of discretion in the exercise of child-rearer’s power over children is also unavoidable. As I and others have argued,³⁴ the objectionable aspect of children’s dependency on their caregivers can be eliminated by multiplying the sources of care for children. If, alongside well-being interests, children also have an interest in being reared in morally nonobjectionable ways, then we ought to dismantle monopolies of care over them.

Journal 22, no. 1 (2005): 19–34.

³¹ A similar point is made in Cameron and Brennan, “How Many Parents.”

³² Robert Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 1985.

³³ This is particularly true, and hence particularly objectionable, in the case of single parents or of children who only have one parent who is truly involved in decision-making. But to the extent to which a parenting couple can be seen as having a unity of interest the monopolistic feature seems, to a lesser extent, also true of parenting couples.

³⁴ Gheaus, “Arguments for Nonparental Care,” Gheaus, “Children’s Vulnerability,” and Mianna Lotz, “The Vulnerable Child,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Childhood and Children*, ed. Anca Gheaus, Gideon Calder, and Jurgen De Wispelaere (New York: Routledge, 2018), 304–314.

In past work,³⁵ I explored the possibility of providing all children with robust access to nonparental institutional-based caregivers, as well as the possibility of a universalized secular form of godparenting, whereby an individual or couple become official parental figures willing to stay involved in their godchildren's life throughout their entire childhood. Multiparenting could take the form of the latter, or could involve, in addition, closer relationships between all the parents—as is the case with already existing multiparenting. Note that in case multiparenting is the only, or the best, feasible way to minimize monopolies of care in child-rearing, and if children have a right to be raised non-monopolistically, then there is a deontic requirement to embrace some form of multiparenting whether or not we also ought to downsize the population. It would take a lot more work to argue for such a bold conclusion, but even if multiparenting is not morally mandatory as such, its monopoly-reducing feature counts as a reason in its favor.

Third, multiparenting is a fair way of allowing all would-be adequate parents to engage in child-rearing in circumstances when the population ought to be steeply reduced. As others have argued, raising one child can satisfy the interest in child-rearing.³⁶ Further, the interest in parenting, as described by Brighouse and Swift, is amenable to this interpretation:³⁷ as such, it doesn't privilege procreators over nonprocreators and doesn't entail a right of procreators to raise their biological children at the exclusion of others. And while Brighouse and Swift's account rules out child-rearing in large institutions such as the orphanage, it doesn't, as they note, rule out small groups of parents raising children together. If, as I have suggested, the core of the interest in parenting lies in an interest in associating with children rather than controlling their lives, multiparenting appears unproblematically capable of satisfying the interest.³⁸ An interesting question, which I will not discuss here, concerns the maximum number of adults that can coparent

³⁵ Gheaus, "Arguments for Nonparental Care."

³⁶ Meijers, "Climate Change." But as I noted above, there may be child-centered reasons for having multifamilies in which several adults raise together two children.

³⁷ For this, see also Cameron and Brennan, "How Many Parents."

³⁸ It is worth noting that one kind of multiparenting, which desegregates some of the of rights and responsibilities that are currently bundled together as "parental rights," qualifies as a fair way of satisfying the interest in child-rearing of individuals who are unequally able to raise children, or who simply have different child-rearing competencies. (For desegregation of parental rights, see for instance Melanie B. Jacobs, "Why Just Two? Disaggregating Traditional Parental Rights and Responsibilities to Recognize Multiple Parents," *Journal of Law and Family Studies* 309, no. 9 (2007): 309–39. In particular, this model of multiparenting could include adults unable or unwilling to assume full responsibility for a child (or even responsibility shared with only one other coparent) but who could be what we, under current circumstances, might call an "honorary uncle" in a way that is beneficial for the child and for the adult alike. If so, this is a general argument for multiparenting.

a child while retaining the distinctive character of the parenting relationship discussed above. The relevant condition for establishing this is that the number of coparents is not as high as to prevent intimacy.

When Is Multiparenting Morally Required?

Assuming that we have reached the point where it is imperative to downsize the population, there is a wide range of interventions that can be considered before or, alongside multiparenting. Educating women and providing (especially poor) individuals with free access to contraception has been shown to significantly reduce birth rates. And there are good independent moral grounds that support such interventions. Other interventions for lowering birth rates by incentivizing, nudging, or persuading people to have smaller families have also been advocated,³⁹ and many of them may be indeed desirable. The present question, however, is what to do at the point when reducing family size to one or two children is not enough to reach a sustainable population. Particularly relevant here is the question of what to do when it is impossible to reach a sustainable population size if all would-be adequate parents (or couples) have only one child.⁴⁰ But it is possible for multiparenting to be morally required for the sake of downsizing the population in less extreme cases: that is, if being part of an entire generation of single children, can, for whatever reason, seriously set back the well-being interests of the individuals in that generation.

One possibility in such cases would be to have an equal lottery decide who may, and who may not, engage in procreation and child-rearing. Another option is to create policies that incentivize individuals to forgo parenting in the reasonable hope that those people who become parents for frivolous reasons can be easily dissuaded from parenting. Yes, as I noted above, assuming that multiparenting is in children's interest and can satisfy the adults' interest in being child-rearers, both lotteries and incentives, nudges, or message campaigns are suboptimal. It would be illegitimate to demand that some would-be adequate parents abstain from parenting if we can instead find a child-rearing scheme that allows all of them to parent. Even dissuading some would-be adequate parents would wrong them. Perhaps it is true that many, possibly even most, individuals decide

³⁹ See Hickey, Rieder, and Earl, "Population Engineering."

⁴⁰ There is a worry that such a drastically steep reduction in the population may entail very serious harm, especially for the transitional generations. Bad as such harm—and the rights-violations it would surely entail in societies that fail at distributive justice—may be, the harm of failing to reduce the population could be even greater. I must bracket, for the purpose of this paper, this very complex question. But I am thankful to a referee for flagging it to me.

to have children for frivolous reasons,⁴¹ which may in itself be morally objectionable. But, to establish the moral desirability of becoming a parent, what matters most is whether child-rearing really will make a very significant and nonsubstitutable contribution to the flourishing of the individuals in question. And this turns not on their reasons for procreating, but on their ability to discharge well their fiduciary parental duties, and to enjoy the goods of parenting. On this view, people motivated to have children for misguided reasons, but who would nevertheless would parent well, are wronged by policies that intentionally dissuade them from parenting.

To conclude, multiparenting is morally desirable, and can be a morally required reform, at least in conditions in which it is imperative to quickly scale down the number of people brought into existence and doing so is incompatible with all adequate parents (or couples) raising a child by themselves.⁴² It is a separate question, however, whether legitimate ways of implementing such a reform exist.

The Difficulties of Multiparenting

Especially if proposed as a legally required default way of raising children, multiparenting would surely raise many objections. Before concluding, I note a few that appear most obvious, and note the limits of my proposal—the most important of which being that I do not address implementation issues. Like many other reforms, one way of implementing multiparenting would be via “soft” measures—that is, by incentivizing would-be parents to set up multiparenting arrangements. I take these to be less objectionable than making multiparenting legally required.

An immediate worry is that multiparenting would significantly dilute authority over children, or else (if it involves the disaggregation of parental rights) would relegate different sorts of authority and responsibility to different parents. Many people who want to raise children would find this unappealing, and hence strongly object to being legally required to multiparent. I said a few words in defense of the view that we ought to value child-rearing not primarily because parents have the authority to decide on the conditions of their children’s outer life—what kind of education they receive, or when

⁴¹ Overall, in *Why Have Children?*, lists a large number of bad, yet very popular, reasons to have children.

⁴² Another important complication that I cannot address here is whether multiparenting is morally required uniformly of all prospective parents worldwide or whether more of its burdens ought to be carried by people rearing children in countries that are (historically) high consumers. To answer this, one needs to first establish what constitutes a just distribution of the costs of minimizing the harm of climate change.

they go to bed—but because they can exert over the child’s inner life the influence that any loving adult who is a constant presence during a child’s childhood can have. Yet there is a widespread belief that prospective parents seek more than that: namely, they prefer a more extensive level of authority over the child that they can exercise alone or together with their chosen romantic partner, and to the exclusion of all others. But even under normal circumstances, there are good reasons against acting on such preferences, if and to the extent to which doing so is suboptimal for children.⁴³ In the context under consideration, bringing enough children into the world, such that everybody can parent one, will, by stipulation, make it impossible for at least some people in the next generation to engage in permissible procreation and parenting. Therefore, even if the adults’ acting on their preference for traditional, nuclear parenting, and for a power to exclude all others, could serve the overall interest of children in other circumstances, in the case at hand they conflict with the children’s future interest in permissibly parenting their own children. Therefore, the fact that multiparenting could go against many—or most—prospective parents’ preferences is not in itself a reason not to seek its implementation in those circumstances when it is a morally required reform.

The more substantial worries concerning the implementation of such a reform concern (1) the availability of implementation means that do not violate adults’ rights to bodily integrity and (2) the likely negative impact on the interests of children. On the first count, as in the case of other reforms that seek to restrict parental freedoms, and which are in principle justified—such as policies aiming to establish a parental licensing scheme—it is difficult to identify a permissible way to deal with noncompliers. It would be objectionable to try to prevent excessive procreation by forced sterilization or abortion. But once procreation does take place, all existing children are owed parents.

Even if adults were to comply with very strict requirements on procreation, and engaged in multiparenting but only very reluctantly, the effects on children may be bad. The already existing cases of multiparenting involve adults who very much desire to raise together a child, and who, in most situations, have already formed a strong bond with the child. Making multiparenting legal in those cases is a matter of merely recognizing a new form of family rather than enforcing, or even nudging people into, such a child-rearing model. If not embraced only reluctantly, multiparenting may or may not work well for children, and one way of not working is by failing to secure enough cooperation

⁴³ In general, by child-centered accounts of child-rearing as well as by dual-interest accounts, such as Brighouse and Swift’s, which let the adults’ interests play a justificatory role only to the extent to which they are anchored in the child’s own interest—such as the interest of serving the child. See Brighouse and Swift, *Family Values*, and Gheaus, “Is There a Right to Parent?”

between coparents. Therefore, generalized multiparenting would require a change in ethos consisting of would-be parents' willingness to commit to long-term cooperation with other adults, cooperation that would require more coordination and put more limits on parents' authority over their children than it is the case with parenting by couples or single-parent families.

These worries, however, need not be fatal to attempts to implement a multiparenting reform, which could take various shapes: several adults identifying each other as potential coparents, or else children being assigned "secondary parents," or secular "godparents" who are entitled to spend time caring for the child regularly. Some arrangements may be more successful than others in securing compliance. Legitimate implementation of any particular multiparenting policy should be constrained by the well-being of the children and involve a fine balancing of the different interests at stake, including children's interest in accessing various resources and their need for stability. Finally, another reason for optimism is that multiparenting can also serve some important interests of coparents, by increasing their material and time resources, and therefore their autonomy. The ability to divide the work of parenting with more than one other adult is in itself a great advantage that can make a legal reform easier.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Drawing on recent work in the philosophy of child-rearing, I have argued that people who would make adequate parents have a powerful moral interest in raising at least a child, and that the most substantial part of that interest can be realized in long-term relationship with the child, even if a few other adults have a similar relationship with that child. Moreover, the interest can be realized even if one is not the main decision-maker concerning how the child's life goes. Further, I argued that multiparenting, understood as three or four adults bringing up a child, is the fair way to enable all adults to fulfill their interest in raising children if it is impossible for everybody to parent as a single parent or as part of a couple without compromising sustainability. At the same time, I drew on several independent arguments to explain why multiparenting is attractive by appealing to children's interest in well-being and to the importance of minimizing monopolies of care in children's lives. I believe that, together, these arguments support the conclusion that multiparenting is desirable as soon as justice demands the reduction of the population, and can become morally required under conditions of extreme scarcity. Since legitimate implementation largely depends on people's willingness to embrace such a reform, it is worthwhile to start considering its merits closely.

⁴⁴ See Gheaus, "Arguments for Nonparental Care"; and Cameron and Brennan, "How Many Parents."

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