

Against Adoption Based Objections to Procreation

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Introduction

Many philosophers and members of the public think it is wrong to procreate. If one wants children, it is permissible to adopt. But procreation is impermissible because there is some respect in which adoption is better than procreation. Call any objection like this an ‘adoption based objection to procreation’. There are two common adoption based objections to procreation. One concerns our duties to the vulnerable. The other concerns climate change.

Regarding our duties to the vulnerable: Adoption helps a child that already exists and is in need of rescue. Procreation does not. So, according to proponents of this objection, if one wants children, then one should adopt rather than procreate. As Friedrich (2013, p. 25) puts it:

I will consider an argument for a duty to adopt rather than have biological children. The argument is based on two simple thoughts: If we can protect others from serious harm at little cost to ourselves we morally ought to do it. Moreover, we can protect parentless children from serious harm at little cost to ourselves by adopting them.

As Shpall (2023, p. 207) puts it:

If we are seriously interested in parenting, and capable of satisfying childrens basic emotional and material needs, then we are well suited to help them by becoming their parents. This is another strong reason to adoptively rather than procreatively parent.

Similar arguments are defended by Hannan (2015, p. 17) and Rulli (2014 a, p. 112).

Regarding climate change: the way in which inhabitants of wealthy nations overconsume resources contributes to climate change. Inhabitants of poor nations do not contribute nearly as much to climate change. So, according to proponents of this objection, if one wants children, one should adopt a child from a poor country rather than procreate. As Rieder (2014, p. 294-5) puts it:

there are real moral risks in procreating; however, by adopting we can... avoid those risks... The addition of each new person adds to the demand that is straining an already struggling environment... To take just one example: the carbon footprint of the average American is more than 120 times that of an average Bangladeshi.

As As Shpall (2023, p. 206-7) puts it:

Average patterns of consumption in wealthy nations... contribute to the warming of the planet. These harms ground strong reason to limit our greenhouse gas emissions. This suggests we have a strong reason to adoptively rather than procreatively parent...

Similar arguments are defended by MacIver (2015, pp. 115-119) and Young (2001, p. 183).

It is not just philosophers who are moved by adoption based objections to procreation. The public is similarly moved. Fleming (2018) reports that:

A 31-year-old woman said: “Climate change is the sole factor for me in deciding not to have biological children....”

Carrington (2020) reports that:

But if you’re not yet a parent and can’t suppress your parental instincts, says Münter, “my ask is that you consider adopting one of the 153m orphan children that are already on the planet and need a home.”

Scheinman (2019) reports that:

The couple is now likely to have children, she says, but may adopt since Pepino wouldn’t have a biological child until the world sees “true decarbonisation, which would have to go hand in hand with de-growth [and] the reduction of consumption and extraction and destruction of natural habitats”.

I think these objections to procreation are unsound. My case against the rescue based objection to procreation is this: familiar reasoning from Judith Jarvis Thomson reveals that we have no duty to rescue rather than procreate. My case against the climate based objection to procreation is this: adopting a child from a poor country does not score much better with respect to carbon emissions than having a child through procreation.

Vulnerable Children

Consider the objection that adoption is preferable to procreation because of our duties to the vulnerable. Adopting a child from a poor nation satisfies our duty to help others in need. Procreation does not. And so, we should adopt rather than procreate.

My criticism of this objection draws inspiration from Judith Jarvis Thomson. In her defense of abortion, she (1971, p. 55) says:

If I am sick unto death, and the only thing that will save my life is the touch of Henry Fonda's cool hand on my fevered brow, then all the same, I have no right to be given the touch of Henry Fonda's cool hand on my fevered brow. It would be frightfully nice of him to fly in from the West Coast to provide it. It would be less nice, though no doubt well meant, if my friends flew out to the West coast and brought Henry Fonda back with them. But I have no right at all against anybody that he should do this for me.

In this example, Thomson will die unless Henry Fonda flies over from the West Coast and touches her. But this, she says, does not entail that Henry Fonda is obligated to fly over from the West Coast and touch her. It would be permissible for him to refrain.

Assume Thomson is right about this. Now consider a woman who wishes to procreate rather than adopt. As we have seen, some people say it is wrong for her to procreate rather than adopt because in adopting she rescues someone who is vulnerable but in procreating she only creates someone.

It seems to me that if one agrees with what Thomson says about Henry Fonda, then one should also agree that the woman is permitted to procreate rather than adopt. Surely if it is permissible for Henry Fonda

to let someone die so that he may refrain from flying and touching her, then it is permissible for a woman to procreate even if in doing so she will refrain from improving someone's life.

We can make this point even stronger by imagining a variant¹ of Thomson's case in which Henry Fonda wishes to procreate. But he can do so only if he refrains from flying over from the West Coast and touching Thomson. It seems that the intuition that Fonda may remain on the West Coast and allow Thomson to die is even stronger than in Thomson's original example. If Henry Fonda can let Thomson die so that he may avoid flying and touching her, then surely a woman may refrain from improving a child's life so that she may procreate.

Climate Change

Now consider the objection that adopting is preferable to procreating because children in wealthy nations consume more resources than children in poor nations.

My criticism is this: An adopted child in a wealthy nation would not consume fewer resources than a biological child in a wealthy nation. If the child would have stayed in the poor country, she would have consumed far fewer resources. But once she is moved to a wealthy country and given wealthy adoptive parents, she will consume just as many resources as a biological child. What matters is her consumption. Her origins are not relevant. Adopting her will turn her into an overconsumer like everyone else in the wealthy nation. Adopted or biological, the child and her parents will behave in such a way that she consumes far more resources than a child left in a poor country would. So either way, whether one parents adoptively or procreatively, having a child in a wealthy nation constitutes overconsumption.

Of course, there is a small reduction in consumption that will come from taking the child out of the poor country. The resources the child would have consumed if she had remained in the poor country will no longer be consumed by her. But, using the numbers of proponents of the climate based objection, the difference between the adopted child and the child obtained through procreation is irrelevant. As MacIver (2015, p. 109) puts it:

It is a truism that ecological footprints vary enormously on the basis of affluence and lifestyle; in practical terms an average American and an average Bangladeshi (for example) are not even remotely ecologically interchangeable.

As Rieder (2014, p. 295) puts it:

To take just one example: the carbon footprint of the average American is more than 120 times that of an average Bangladeshi.

Assume that these numbers are correct and divide the carbon emissions of an average American into 120 units. Then consider:

	American Born Child	American Child Adopted From Bangladesh	Bangladeshi Child
Carbon Emissions	120 units	119 units	1 unit

¹ Thanks to Travis Timmerman for suggesting this variant.

120 units is a lot more than 1. But 120 is not relevantly different from 119. Thus, adoption does not score relevantly better with respect to carbon emissions than procreation.

Ritchie, Rosado, and Roser (2024) provide more recent numbers than Rieder's source. They give a ratio closer to 25 to 1. A bit of the change is due to an increase in Bangladeshi emissions. But the main source of change is due to a reduction in American emissions. This may be represented as:

	American Born Child	American Child Adopted From Bangladesh	Bangladeshi Child
Carbon Emissions	25 units	24 units	1 unit

Given this more recent data, the same argument applies. 25 units is a lot more than 1. But 25 units is not significantly different from 24 units. Thus, adoption does not score significantly better than procreation. If adding 25 units of carbon emissions is unacceptable, adding 24 units is unacceptable as well.

I could not trace down Rieder's source. However, Ritchie, Rosado, and Roser (2024) provide similar numbers from the 1970s through the early 2000s. For example, in 2021 the US emitted 21.3 tonnes per person while Bangladesh emitted .2 tonnes per person. This yields a ratio of about 106 to 1. And the ratio gets even closer to what Rieder reports in the 1970s. After steadily declining, by 2022 the US emitted 14.9 tonnes per person while Bangladesh emitted .6 tonnes per person yielding a ratio of about 25 to 1.

Notice how quickly these numbers have changed. This observation points to an even deeper problem with the climate change based objection to procreation. In particular, what matters is not what carbon emissions look like at an individual moment of time. What matters is the carbons emitted over the course of a life. But proponents of climate change based objections to procreation ignore factors that are relevant to determining future emissions. They simply take current emissions, and then assume that per capita emissions now will continue to be per capita emissions in the future. But this is not a plausible prediction.

One relevant factor is that carbon emissions in wealthy nations will continue to decline. Even on the least ambitious models of how we will tackle climate change, the near term is by far the highest site of emission intensive economic activity. Furthermore, even immediate changes in fertility rates have only small impacts on total population size in the near term. So the proponent of procreation may maintain that having biological children will not add much to per capita carbon emissions in the coming decades when it matters most (See Budolfson, et al. (2023), Budolfson and Spears (2021), and Bradshaw and Brook (2014)). Another relevant factor is that larger populations generate more innovation than smaller populations. So the proponent of procreation may maintain that increasing the population will promote innovation which will better combat climate change and increase the trend of lower carbon emissions. (See Simon (1981), MacAskill (2022), Greaves (2018), Yglesias (2020), Budolfson et al. (2023), and Budolfson and Spears (2021)). A third

relevant factor is that smaller populations have a retiree-heavy age structure that stresses economic resources² (See Budolfson et al. (2023), Budolfson and Spears (2021)).

Climate change based opponents of procreation, in making their case, cannot just assume a picture of the future according to which procreation will make climate change significantly worse. That is a substantive assumption that rests on questionable empirical claims. And such proponents certainly cannot just take a snapshot of present carbon emissions and extrapolate from that. Such proponents ignore declining carbon emissions, ignore the relevance of larger populations to innovation, and ignore the suffering caused by a retiree-heavy age structure. In doing so, they fail to provide significant evidence that procreation affects climate change in a way that is impermissible.

Other Forms of Anti-Natalism

There are other objections to procreation that are beyond the scope of my argument. Most notably, there is Benatar's important arguments for anti-natalism. Benatar's view has received a lot of attention. There is Benatar's work (See Benatar (2006), (2013), and (2022)). There is work by his critics (See Bradley (2010), Draper (2023), Harman (2006), and the papers in Metz (2023)). There is even a comic by Pete Mandik appearing on the main professional philosophy blog *Daily Nous*³. I don't have anything new to say about Benatar's important view. And that view has already received a lot of critical attention together with replies from Benatar. In contrast, adoption based objections to procreation, though widely endorsed, have received little critical attention. With this paper I aim to rectify that⁴.

Objections and Replies

Objection 1: Consider a variant of the Fonda case discussed by Thomson. She (1971, p. 61) says:

suppose [Fonda] isn't on the West Coast. Suppose he has only to walk across the room, place a hand briefly on my brow-and lo, my life is saved. Then surely he ought to do it, it would be indecent to refuse

In this case, she says, Fonda is obligated to save Thomson. The difference between the original variant and this variant is that in the original case it is difficult and costly for Fonda to save Thomson. But in this variant it is easy and costless for him to do so. Procreation, when adoption is available, is more like the case in which

² This issue was raised in a video widely shared on social media recently. In the video, Martha Nussbaum responds to the claim that a declining population is bad because a population with a retiree-heavy age structure will not be able to sustain social security and healthcare and that declining birth rates in India will soon cause serious problems for the country. Nussbaum responds to the worry by claiming that India does not have healthcare or social security, that there is widespread famine in India, that life expectancy in India is low, and that these problems are caused in part by India having a population that is too large. The video was widely shared because all of these claims are false. India has healthcare and social security. There has not been famine in India since British rule. The life expectancy of India's population has steadily increased from the mid 40s in the 1960s to the late 60s now in 2024. This is a specific instance of the wider problem of opponents of procreation, even very intelligent opponents like Nussbaum, taking for granted empirical claims that, upon minimal investigation, are revealed to be false. (link: https://wisdomofcrowds.live/p/martha-nussbaum-on-justice-for-animals?r=3321w&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web)

³ https://dailynous.com/2019/12/24/mind-chunks-16/?fbclid=IwAR3ulr_9AziinmIKvz2s-6bqpowEBW83AFjxZ41CY8w1RZclcYxQizibbE

⁴ Another relevant body of literature concerns the idea that there are high opportunity costs to procreating. Instead of spending money on children, one could spend money on the poor. This view is defended by Rachels (2014) and draws on Peter Singer's argument about charitable giving. It is picked up and defended by Benatar (2020) as well. I endorse Timmerman's (2015) criticism of Singer's argument. Furthermore, Singer's argument, if sound, would imply that it is wrong for Henry Ford to refrain from saving Thomson. So, given that Thomson's diagnosis of the Fonda case in her defense of abortion is correct, Singer's argument is unsound. Finally, the Rachels/Benatar argument applies to adoption, as well as procreation. Having a child, whether through adoption or procreation costs a lot of money. That money could instead be spent on feeding the poor.

Fonda is obligated to save Thomson and less like the one in which he is permitted to let her die. So my criticism of the rescue objection is unsound.

Reply: Assume the objector is right that if everything else is as similar as possible, then there is no cost to adopt rather than procreate. Nevertheless, as an empirical matter, it actually is quite costly and difficult to adopt. This is a point that those who think there are weighty reasons to procreate rather than adopt carefully emphasize. As Shpall (2023) notes, the average age of an adopted child in some countries is 3 or older. In the United States, the average age of a child in foster care is 8 years old. One person Shpall (2023, p. 2016) cites reports that:

When I recently searched AdoptUSKids, the nationwide, government-funded website for foster-care adoptions, only about 40 kids under age 5, out of the 4,000 registered, appeared in my search. Many of those 40 had extensive medical needs or were part of a sibling group—a sign that the child is in even greater need of a stable family, but also a more challenging experience for their adoptive parents.

As Rulli (2014, p. 1-3), another important defender of the adoption challenge, points out:

Imagine that you have just decided to become a parent. You learn that the local fire station, a *safe haven*, has received a newborn in need of a family. You are aware of the research showing that early infant adoptions pose little risk regarding the infant's psychological health and potential for emotional attachment. The urgent need for placement and the lack of administrative costs allow for the baby's adoption with few additional hurdles or financial burdens. You can adopt this child, who will otherwise face a life of uncertainty in various institutions or foster homes. Or you can decline and bring a new child into the world instead. What does morality have to say about the choice in this *Safe Haven* case? Is there a duty to adopt rather than create a child? The real world is rarely like *Safe Haven*. Adoptions take time and they cost money. But even if these costs were not at issue, many people would prefer not to adopt.

Now, given this empirical information, contrast the difficulty and cost of Fonda saving Thomson with the difficulty and cost of a middle class couple adopting rather than procreating. Fonda is a millionaire. All it costs him to save Thomson are four hours of flying and a plane ticket which would be no more than a few thousand dollars. That amount of money is nothing to him. On the other hand, in order to adopt, the middle class couple must pay many thousands of dollars from their far more limited finances. And they must start raising an already partially developed child rather than a newborn as they would if they were to procreate. Furthermore, that child will have many medical and emotional barriers to flourishing that a child created through procreation would not. Finally, the couple will have to spend hours on administrative work and legal research. It seems to me that the cost and difficulty faced by the middle class couple is far greater than the cost and difficulty faced by Fonda. If we grant that it is permissible for Fonda to refrain from saving a life in order to avoid the (for him) small cost of time and money, then it seems to me we must grant that it is permissible for the middle class US couple to procreate rather than adopt.

Objection 2: Not every figure who discusses the adoption challenge articulates it in terms of procreation being impermissible. Rieder, for example, shares my view that adoption rather than procreation is not obligatory. But he thinks it is subject to alternative moral censure. Following Margaret O Little (2013), Rieder maintains that there are three classes of especially intimate acts: gestation, marriage, and sex. We do not have obligations to refrain from or engage in any of these activities. Nevertheless, acts belonging to these intimate categories are subject to other sorts of deontic evaluation and may be morally criticizable.

Similarly, Rulli (2014a) does not argue that we have an obligation to adopt rather than procreate. Instead, she seeks to highlight the distinct value of adoption. How do the considerations I raise apply to these variants of the adoption challenge?

Reply: Regarding Rulli, I am in complete agreement with her (2014a) paper. I accept her point that adoption is beautiful and good in ways that procreation is not. It is worth noting however, that Rulli (2011) does argue that adoption is obligatory. Rulli (2014b) proceeds from the assumption that adoption is obligatory and defends that view from various objections. And in a 2023 interview⁵ Rulli defends the idea that we are obligated to adopt rather than procreate.

Regarding Rieder, I again follow Thomson on Henry Fonda. Notice that the conclusion of Thomson's argument is not merely that Fonda's act is permissible. Thomson doesn't insist that Fonda's act is permissible but morally criticizable. Her conclusion is instead that Fonda would be a good samaritan by flying in and saving her life. Nor is Thomson's argument that unplugging from the violinist is permitted but morally criticizable. Her argument is instead that to expect someone to refrain from unplugging from the violinist is to expect them to be an absolute saint.

To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you." Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation? No doubt it would be very nice of you if you did, a great kindness.

Indeed, Thomson does employ the sort of moral criticisms Reider employs at some points in the paper. She criticizes some variants of the Violinist and Fonda cases as ones in which refraining is self centered and callous just as Rieder describes procreation as selfish. However, Thomson reserves such descriptions for variants of the cases in which it is exceedingly easy to save. It is only in the variant of the Fonda case where he merely has to walk across the room and only in the variant of the Violinist case in which you merely have to stay plugged in for an hour that she thinks you are morally criticizable. As she puts it:

we should say that if you refuse, you are, like the boy who owns all the chocolates and will give none away, self-centered and callous, indecent in fact, but not unjust. And similarly, that even supposing a case in which a woman pregnant due to rape ought to allow the unborn person to use her body for the hour he needs, we should not conclude that he has a right to do so; we should say that she is self-centered, callous, indecent, but not unjust, if she refuses.

And so the difference between Rieder's position and mine is this: While we agree that procreation is permissible, Reider thinks it is still morally criticizable. My view, following Thomson on Henry Fonda and the Violinist case, is that procreation is permissible, not morally criticizable at all, and to expect someone to adopt rather than procreate is to expect them to be a saint. On the other hand, I think following Thomson does have the result that procreation rather than adoption is morally criticizable in the way Rieder suggests in Rulli's *Safe Haven* case. But as Rulli and Shpall point out, *Safe Haven* is the exception rather than the rule. In real life adoption is costly.

Objection 3: There is a disanalogy between the Fonda case and the adoption case. Thomson's case is intended to make the point that it is not obligatory for Fonda to save a life since it would be difficult and costly. But the view I am opposing is not that one is unconditionally obligated to adopt. Rather, it is the view

⁵<https://discoveringacademia.podbean.com/e/003-tina-rulli-moral-duty-to-adopt-race-genetics-pro-life-anti-vaxxers/>

that one is obligated to adopt rather than procreate. And, on this view, one is not permitted to procreate, but one is permitted to adopt.

Consider an example due to Frances Kamm (1985):

Suppose you are on your way to meet a friend for lunch. You promised you would attend. But you would prefer not to. On your way, you come across a burning building. You have the following alternatives: break your promise by going home for lunch; break your promise by entering the burning building at considerable risk and save someone inside; fulfill your promise by meeting your friend for lunch.

It seems wrong to break the promise by staying home and going to lunch. But it seems permissible to break your promise by entering the burning building and saving someone inside. The latter alternative is permissible even though it means breaking your promise to your friend. What makes it permissible is that you would save a life. This is enough to make it permissible, even though it wouldn't be enough to make it obligatory in a straight choice between meeting your friend for lunch and saving someone inside the burning building.

I, the objector may maintain, am overlooking an analogous possibility in the adoption case. The same sort of thing might be true of a choice between procreation, adoption, and childlessness. That is, having a child might ordinarily be impermissible because, for example, having a child, whether through procreation or adoption, contributes to climate change. Yet one might be permitted (and perhaps it might even be supererogatory) to adopt because doing so would make somebody much better off. If this understanding of adoption is correct, then my reply to the objection from vulnerability is unsound.

Reply: It is important to step back and look at the context in which these examples are embedded. The Fonda case shows that it is permissible to refrain from saving someone if doing so would be costly or difficult. And, for Fonda, the cost and difficulty are not very significant. To save a life, he need only spend a few hours flying and spend a few hundred of his millions of dollars on plane tickets. Adopting rather than procreating for a middle class woman is much more costly and difficult for her than flying over from the West Coast is for Fonda. So if it is not wrong for Fonda to stay on the West Coast, *merely in virtue of* the fact that by flying to MIT he could save someone, then it is not wrong for the woman who wishes to have a child to procreate, *merely in virtue of* the fact that by adopting instead she could save someone.

So far the objector agrees with me. But what the objector suggests is a problem for me is that *if* the opponent of procreation has an additional reason for thinking procreation is wrong, *then* the adoption case is more like Kamm's promise case than Thompson's Fonda case. For example, the opponent may maintain that having children is wrong because it contributes to climate change. And *if* it is wrong to have children because of climate change, *then* the adoption case is more like Kamm's promise case than the Thompson's Fonda case.

I agree with the conditional. But I think the truth of the conditional does not undermine my criticism of the vulnerability objection. In particular, considerations about rescuing the vulnerable were supposed to support *an independent* objection to procreation. The adoption case is only like the Kamm case rather than the Thompson case if we assume that having children is wrong because doing so contributes to climate change. But that is not something the friend of procreation needs to concede in this context. It is not dialectically appropriate to make that contested assumption when the objection to procreation in question was supposed to be that procreation is wrong *merely in virtue of* the fact that in adopting the woman who wishes to procreate would save someone. Of course, if we assume that procreation is wrong, then the adoption example looks more like Kamm's case. But the friend of procreation has no reason to share that assumption.

It is open to the friend of procreation to say this: Perhaps climate based considerations make procreation impermissible. That is an issue worth considering. But it is a different issue than the one at hand.

The issue at hand is whether procreation is impermissible *merely in virtue of* the fact that in procreating you fail to rescue someone that you could have rescued by adopting them. We both now agree that procreation is not impermissible for that reason. And that is sufficient to refute the rescue objection. If the rescue objection only works given the assumption that the climate based objection works, then the rescue objection doesn't work at all.

Objection 4: Regarding climate change. Adopting children from poor countries might not help. But one could adopt from one's wealthy home country. In that case, a child starts in a wealthy country and ends up in a wealthy country. She will overconsume either way. While the standard case which suggests that adopting from a poor country is better for climate change fails, this alternative, which suggests adopting from a rich country, succeeds.

Reply: At best, this only addresses the initial problem I raise. It doesn't help at all with the deeper problem. Recall, the deeper problem is that proponents of the climate change based objection to procreation just assume that current per capita carbon emissions will stay fixed. They ignore the empirical evidence that such emissions will continue to decrease. And they ignore the empirical evidence that a smaller population damages healthcare and social security and results in less innovation.

It is also unclear to what extent this objection addresses the initial problem. The objector assumes that potential adoptees who are left unadopted will generate the same number of carbon emissions as potential adoptees who are successfully adopted. But it is unclear what the evidence for that assumption is. I could not find good empirical information about this. But it is at least possible that those left unadopted emit far fewer carbons than those who are adopted. Perhaps, for example, those left unadopted are more likely to be poor. And poor people in a wealthy nation emit far fewer carbons than middle class and rich people in those nations. If this is the case, then I can run the same argument that I did with adopting children from poor nations. If the child is adopted, she will emit far more carbons than she would otherwise have.

Conclusion

Philosophers and members of the public have objected to procreation on the grounds that adoption is better in various respects. In adopting, but not in procreating, we rescue the vulnerable. In adopting, but not in procreation, we refrain from significantly contributing to climate change. I have argued that these sorts of objections are unsound. Familiar reasoning from Thomson shows that we are not always obligated to rescue the vulnerable. And adopting rather than procreating does not help with climate change.

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