1. Introduction

In this paper, we defend a contingent form of anti-natalism (hereafter, CAN): namely, that it’s impermissible to procreate for the foreseeable future.\(^1\) Our defense of CAN is novel because it’s grounded in duties owed to existing, vulnerable children.\(^2\)

We make a few background assumptions in the paper. First, we assume that there are moral duties, and in particular that there are duties to aid others. Although some philosophers deny that we have these duties, most philosophers (and most people generally) think we’re at least sometimes obligated to help others. This is especially true in cases where we’re responsible for harms others face. Second, we assume that we have duties of assistance both to human children and to nonhuman animals. The latter claim is more controversial than the former, but it’s plausible. If a dog suffers from malnourishment and you can reasonably prevent them from starving, you ought to do so.\(^3\) Third, we assume that there are many human children and nonhuman animals whose basic needs aren’t being met. By ‘basic needs’, we have in mind things like clean drinking water, food, routine vaccinations, shelter, and the conditions for healthy social development (e.g., family, friendships, conversation, and the like). Clearly many human children and nonhuman animals worldwide don’t have their basic needs met, at least not regularly.\(^4\)

Our argument proceeds as follows. The first premise in our argument is what we call the Responsible Parenting Principle. According to this principle, you shouldn’t be a parent if you can’t ensure that your child’s basic needs will be met. We think this is a basic duty of parents and that parents who can’t reliably provide clean drinking water, shelter, and the like for their children shouldn’t procreate or adopt. Our second premise, the Extended Caretakers Principle, says that if parents can’t care for their child’s basic needs, then you should.\(^5\) This is somewhat controversial, but it follows from a basic duty to assistance. If we have duties of assistance to others, the strength of our duties will correspond to the strength of the need. Where basic needs are at risk, the

---

\(^1\) This is distinct from more principled kinds of anti-natalism that say procreation is necessarily impermissible, such as David Benatar’s. See Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2006). While we also endorse stronger forms of anti-natalism, our present argument neither commits us to, nor depends on commitments to, any stronger form of anti-natalism.


\(^3\) Even if you disagree with us about duties of assistance to nonhumans, you should at least agree that we have such duties to human children. That’s sufficient for our argument.

\(^4\) Those who defend a duty to adopt over a permission to procreate sometimes meet the following objection: Since there aren’t enough individuals to adopt, procreation is permissible for the ‘extra’ prospective parents. Setting aside other worries about this objection, we think our inclusion of nonhuman animals makes this objection implausible: There are literally billions of domesticated animals whose basic needs aren’t being met, and their number very likely outweighs the number of adult humans capable of properly supporting them.

\(^5\) This can be rephrased as a group obligation: If procreators can’t care for their child’s basic needs, then we should.
corresponding duty of assistance is very strong. Our third premise, the Prior Duty Principle, says you shouldn’t accept new duties that conflict with prior duties you have. Our fourth premise is a disjunction: Either you’re positioned to meet a child’s unmet basic needs or a nonhuman animal’s unmet basic needs, or you’re not positioned to meet either. Since there are millions—and billions, if we count domesticated animals like cats and dogs—of children whose basic needs are insufficiently cared for, we shouldn’t procreate unless and until all of them are taken care of. Our position, in a phrase, is “real kids first”: We should prioritize caring for existing children before making more.

2. The Adoption Argument

2.1. The Responsible Parenting Principle

Our first moral principle is uncontroversial: You shouldn’t be a parent if you wouldn’t be able to ensure that your child’s basic needs are met. Call this the Responsible Parenting Principle. This premise is widely defended in the procreation ethics literature.

The principle has at least two immediate applications. First, if you’re not yet a parent and you’re considering becoming one, then you shouldn’t become one if you are unable to ensure that your child’s basic needs are met. Second, if you are already a parent and you’re considering becoming a parent of an additional child, then you shouldn’t become the parent if an additional child if you’re unable to ensure that your existing child’s needs are met. To see the plausibility of this principle, consider two cases:

**New Dad:** Dad has never had a child to care for, but he’s considering adopting one. He knows he can’t afford to care for a child and that any child he adopts will be dangerously malnourished. Dad adopts anyway.

**Old Dad:** Dad has three children and is considering procreating a fourth child. He knows he can barely afford to care for the three children he has and that a fourth child would be even worse off. Dad procreates anyway.

We think the actions of Dad in both cases are morally wrong. In the New Dad case, Dad isn’t positioned to make a child better off and, worse, will only make a child worse off. We typically think that children should receive at least a minimal standard of care and that those unable to provide that care shouldn’t become parents. The Old Dad case is descriptively different because Dad is already a parent and prefers procreation to adoption. But these descriptive differences don’t make moral differences. If Dad can’t adequately care for the children he has, then he

---

6 This premise doesn’t distinguish between being able to care for your (created) child or some other child.

7 One objection sometimes given to the Responsible Parenting Principle is that, if followed consistently, only the privileged (e.g., rich, white, North Americans and Europeans) are permitted to have children. For example, see Bernice Hausman, “Contamination and Contagion: Environmental Toxins, HIV/AIDS, and the Problem of the Maternal Body,” *Hypatia*, Vol. 21, No. 1: 137–156. But, as we argue below, this isn’t an implication of the Responsible Parenting Principle when it’s coupled with another plausible moral principle. We’ll introduce that principle in our second premise.

8 Assume, for the sake of argument, that the adopted child would be made worse off by being under Dad’s care. We grant that there are possible adoption cases in which adoption makes the child better off than they were, but still insufficiently well off. In those cases, we maintain that prospective parents ought to adopt.
shouldn’t have more. Indeed, as we’ll discuss below in section 2.3, Dad’s existing children are wronged if Dad procreates because he thereby devotes resources to the morally optional cause of creating a fourth child instead of the morally obligatory cause of feeding his three existing children, and therefore wrongs his three children.

As we’ve explained it, the Responsible Parenting Principle is an intuitive and uncontroversial principle. It requires only that prospective parents ensure adequate care for any child they take under their wing. It’s not necessary that prospective parents themselves provide this care. If, for example, they have partners, family, or friends who will provide this care, that satisfies the Responsible Parenting Principle.

2.2. The Extended Caretakers Principle

Our second premise is the Extended Caretakers Principle, which says that if parents can’t care for their child’s basic needs, then you should. This follows from a basic duty to assistance. If we have duties of assistance to others, the strength of our duties will correspond to the strength of the need. Where basic needs are at risk, the corresponding duty of assistance is very strong. Moreover, since those to whom we have these duties are human children, we can dismiss concerns about whether the individuals are morally responsible for their plights, since children don’t bear that kind of responsibility. They are moral patients but not moral agents.

What’s initially controversial about the Extended Caretakers Principle is that it appears to entail a duty of adoption, and that this obligation is equally strong for everyone in the position to care for others. Some, such as Daniel Friedrich, have defended a duty to adopt. Others, like Tina Rulli, have maintained that the unique value of adoption provides moral reason to adopt. This is a strong interpretation of the Extended Caretakers Principle, which we can rephrase as follows: Whether or not you intend to become a parent, you ought to become one if there are children whose basic needs aren’t being met that you can meet. So understood, adoption is morally obligatory. A significant upshot of this view is that the Extended Caretakers Principle makes us moral analogs of procreators: We are, so to speak, the ‘backup parents’ with a duty to care for children if their parents can’t. If parents are unable to feed their children or prevent them from drowning, then we should.

However, we needn’t agree with this view to accept the Extended Caretakers Principle for two reasons. First, because a duty to care for a child’s basic needs doesn’t itself entail a duty to adopt that child. Many people think that if a parent can’t adequately provide for their child, then the duty falls to someone in the family, such as an aunt or a sibling, to adopt the child. Nor is this merely or always a duty to adopt: It’s a duty to assist. Adoption is one form of assistance, but so are fostering and providing financial assistance. There are also more immediate forms of rescue: providing shelter during dangerous weather or saving a child from drowning in a pond when the child’s parents can’t swim. This obligation also assumes an ability to care for others’ children in various ways: If you can’t provide for someone else’s child, then you’re not obligated to do so. But nor are you permitted to procreate a child of your own, since you would thereby violate the Responsible Parenting Principle.

---

9 This can be rephrased as a group obligation: If procreators can’t care for their child’s basic needs, then we should.
12 If you don’t accept the Extended Caretakers Principle, there’s an alternative moral principle, which we’ll simply call the Optional Caretakers Principle: If you choose to spend your resources beneficently, then you should prioritize helping those with needs over those without needs. Since existing children and nonhuman animals have needs and uncreated
The second reason we might avoid a general duty to adopt is because we could understand the Extended Caretakers Principle conditionally: *If you intend to become a parent, you ought to prioritize existing children whose basic needs aren’t being met over merely possible children who have no needs.* Understood this way, it’s morally optional whether someone becomes a parent; but once they make the choice to become one, they’re morally obligated to prioritize the worst off. Since existing persons are necessarily worse off than merely possible persons, they ought to be prioritized. That entails a conditional duty to adopt over procreating.

The most obvious objection to the Extended Caretakers Principle is the Burdensomeness Objection: It’s unreasonably burdensome to require persons to forego procreation in order to care for existing children. Here’s a case to motivate the objection:

*Water:* Child is drowning in a shallow pond and will die unless Passerby jumps into the water to save him. Unfortunately, the pond’s water is a runoff from a nearby chemical plant that makes people infertile. If Passerby jumps in, he will never be able to procreate.

Given the threat of infertility, the cost of saving Child is high. Because of this, it might appear to some that Passerby could reasonably reject the Extended Caretakers Principle, which requires that one sacrifice one’s procreative potential in order to improve the lives of existing children. However, if we accept the stronger interpretation of the Extended Caretakers Principle on which all of us are ‘parents in waiting’, this objection appears to fall flat. Under the stronger interpretation, non-parents acquire parental duties when parents are unable to reasonably discharge them. If Passerby were Child’s biological parent in *Water*, they would clearly be obligated to risk infertility and save Child. So, under the stronger interpretation of the Extended Caretakers Principle, Passerby should do likewise.

Even under the weaker interpretation, however, the choice of Passerby to forego saving Child in order to procreate is wrong. For despite the fact that Child isn’t theirs, they remain strongly obligated to protect Child from unjust harms and this responsibility is only weakly mitigated by the fact that they aren’t the biological parent. The fact that the biological parent is clearly obligated to save Child, combined with the fact that Passerby is at best only slightly less obligated, suggests that Passerby is obligated to save Child as well. Another reason for thinking that Passerby is obligated to save Child, even at the cost of infertility, becomes apparent when considering the case of

*Skipper:* Passerby foregoes saving Child from the shallow pond in order to avoid infertility. “If I save Child, I shall never have children of my own, which is quite a cost to impose on anyone,” he reasons. Child dies and Passerby lives his life, but he never has any children whatsoever.

---

individuals don’t, your resources should be prioritized to help the former over the latter. That means helping and not procreating.

13 John Martin Fischer defends the view that not only early deaths, but also late births, can be bad for us. However, he thinks we have reason to be indifferent towards our late births. If that’s true, we suspect we also have reason to be indifferent towards preventing late births (i.e., by procreating sooner), but we don’t have any such reason to be indifferent to helping existing children. That’s good reason to prioritize helping the latter over the former. See Fischer, “Earlier Birth and Later Death: Symmetry Through Thick and Thin,” in *Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death, and Free Will* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63-78.

14 Indeed, it’s plainly wrong for parents to forego saving their current children in order to create more. Such parents are, in our view, morally unfit to procreate.
The cost of foregoing procreation might excuse Passerby from saving Child. But even if it does, the cost of foregoing the mere possibility of procreation doesn’t excuse him. In other words, if Passerby doesn’t save Child in order to have children of his own, then he ought to have children of his own. But this contradicts the intuitive view that procreation is generally, if not necessarily, no more than morally optional. Since Passerby isn’t obligated to have children but would be if he were permitted not to save Child, it follows that Passerby isn’t permitted not to save Child.

2.3. The Prior Duty Principle

Our third principle is the Prior Duty Principle according to which you shouldn’t accept new duties that conflict with prior duties you have. The application, in this case, is that if you have a prior duty (conditional or otherwise) to care for an existing child and if creating another child would make it impermissible to care for the existing child, then you shouldn’t create another child. When persons procreate, they arguably create special obligations to their children—obligations that can conflict with the obligation to care for someone else’s child. For example, if you can save either your child from drowning or someone else’s child, many people think you should save your child over the other child. If that’s true, and if you don’t yet have a child but you do (per the Extended Caretakers Principle) have a duty to care for existing children, then you would violate an existing obligation you have by procreating. Said another way: Since you’re under no obligation to create a child, procreating is morally optional, and since those resources are already morally owed to existing children, their use for a morally optional pursuit is morally impermissible.

Here’s a possible counterexample to this principle: I have a duty to treat the interests of others equally, but this becomes impermissible if I take on special relationships since then I have a duty to prioritize their interests over the interests of strangers. But it’s hardly impermissible to take on special relationships for this reason, and thus the Prior Duty Principle is false. However, the objection fails on several counts. First, agent-relative duties are arguably best explained by the creation of special interests. If you and I become partners, then each of us develops a special interest in being specially cared for by each other—an interest others don’t share. If we treat each other differently on this basis, then we don’t violate the egalitarian duty to treat everyone’s interests equally. Second, rejecting the Prior Duty Principle leaves us with little explanation for cases like the following:

Promises: Mom promises Kid to visit Disney Land next summer. However, Friend asks Mom to promise her a trip to Bangkok next summer. Mom knows she can’t do both, so she promises Friend to visit Bangkok. Later, Mom tells Kid that they can’t visit Disney Land next summer because she made a conflicting promise to Friend.

If Kid replied that Mom shouldn’t have made that promise to Friend given Mom’s prior, conflicting promise to Kid, then Kid would be right. In general, one shouldn’t make promises that conflict with other promises one has made. The reason why is because promise-making generates moral

---

15 Our anti-natalist view is compatible with the received view that procreation is no more than morally optional, since this merely entails that procreation is not morally obligatory. Given that we think procreation is morally wrong, we of course hold that it isn’t obligatory.
16 One might also argue that Mom shouldn’t have made the initial promise to Kid, such that there’s no particular reason to think it’s the initial instance of promise-making that’s inculpated. In other words, Mom should think, “Either I shouldn’t have made my promise to Kid, or I shouldn’t make this promise to Friend,” and it’s then open to
duties, and one shouldn’t take on new duties that conflict with existing duties. Even if there were some exceptions to the Prior Duty Principle, it’s incumbent on defenders of procreation to tell us what they are. Perhaps the best defense of an exception is that procreation is the kind of personal project that is too important or meaningful to require people to abandon, and thus it’s permissible for them to generate new duties (through procreation) that are incompatible with their prior duty to care for existing children. But this isn’t an issue with the Prior Duty Principle; it’s an issue with the Extended Caretakers Principle because it disputes a duty to care for others’ children in the place of one’s own biological children, given the significance of the latter project and the burdens associated with foregoing it.17

2.4. A Disjunction

In this section we present our fourth and final premise which is a disjunctive statement. We claim that either you’re positioned to meet a child’s unmet basic needs or a nonhuman animal’s unmet basic needs, or you’re not positioned to meet either. If the latter is the case, then one should not procreate or adopt.

First, there are many children whose basic needs go unmet on a daily basis. Children all over the globe suffer from malnourishment, lack of clean drinking water, and lack access to education and adequate health care. They are in abusive homes or no homes at all. They are unloved or insufficiently loved. To make matters worse, many or perhaps most of their deaths are also preventable. What’s, it seems that given extreme resource discrepancies between developed and non-developed nations, these problems could be addressed (at least in theory) by more affluent prospective adoptive parents alongside state intervention. According to UNESCO, there are roughly 153 million children worldwide who are orphaned. According to the World Bank, there are roughly 69 million children worldwide who suffer from malnutrition.18 And according to UNICEF, while children account for only about a third of the global population, they make up about half of those living in extreme poverty. There are plenty of children whose needs are clearly not being met

Perhaps an even stronger, and more depressing case can be made on behalf of animals. The use of animals for human consumption, entertainment, husbandry, and other purposes deserves its own treatment. But for our purposes, we highlight the staggering number of companion animals who are euthanized before being placed with caretakers. According to the ASPCA, roughly 6.5 million animals are brought into shelters in the United States alone. Of those, some 1.5 million animals (mostly dogs and cats) who are brought to animal shelters and are euthanized.19 Even though, thankfully, roughly 3.2 million shelter animals are adopted every year, what seems obvious is that many nonhuman animals also have basic needs that go unmet.

We believe that in order to meet a child’s or a nonhuman animal’s basic needs, avoiding the harms above is at least necessary, though doubtfully sufficient. Prospective parents should in principle provide relatively stable and adequate sheltering, access to nutritious food, clean drinking water, and in the case of human children, access to some level of health care and education. The converse of this would be to deny access to these resources either deliberately or otherwise. Prospective parents should, at the very least, be able to provide adequate food, water,

her which duty to discharge (and which to violate). But this position is implausible. Mom wouldn’t have to violate any of her duties if she foreswore the second promise, and there’s a clear (presumptive) moral duty to avoid circumstances where you will unavoidably fail to discharge one of your duties.

17 See section 2.2 for a reply to the burdensomeness worries.
and shelter for any child or animal (relative to their need). What follows is that if any of these requirements are not satisfied, then a prospective parent is not positioned to meet either a child’s or an animal’s basic needs. Since every possible parent is either positioned to provide for basic needs or not, our disjunction is true.

3. Conclusion

We believe that what follows from the above premises is CAN, or contingent anti-natalism. If you’re positioned to meet a child’s unmet basic needs, then you should (per the Extended Caretakers Principle). And you shouldn’t instead use those resources on an as-yet-nonexistent child you could procreate (per the Prior Duty Principle). If, on the other hand, you’re not positioned to meet either a child’s unmet basic needs or a nonhuman animal’s unmet basic needs, then you shouldn’t create them. Since both disjuncts entail a duty not to procreate, CAN is true. Given our empirical speculation that there are uncountably many human children and nonhuman animals whose basic needs aren’t currently being met, people shouldn’t be having children for a very long time—perhaps for so long that humanity will become extinct. Thus, our argument vindicates a very strong version of CAN.