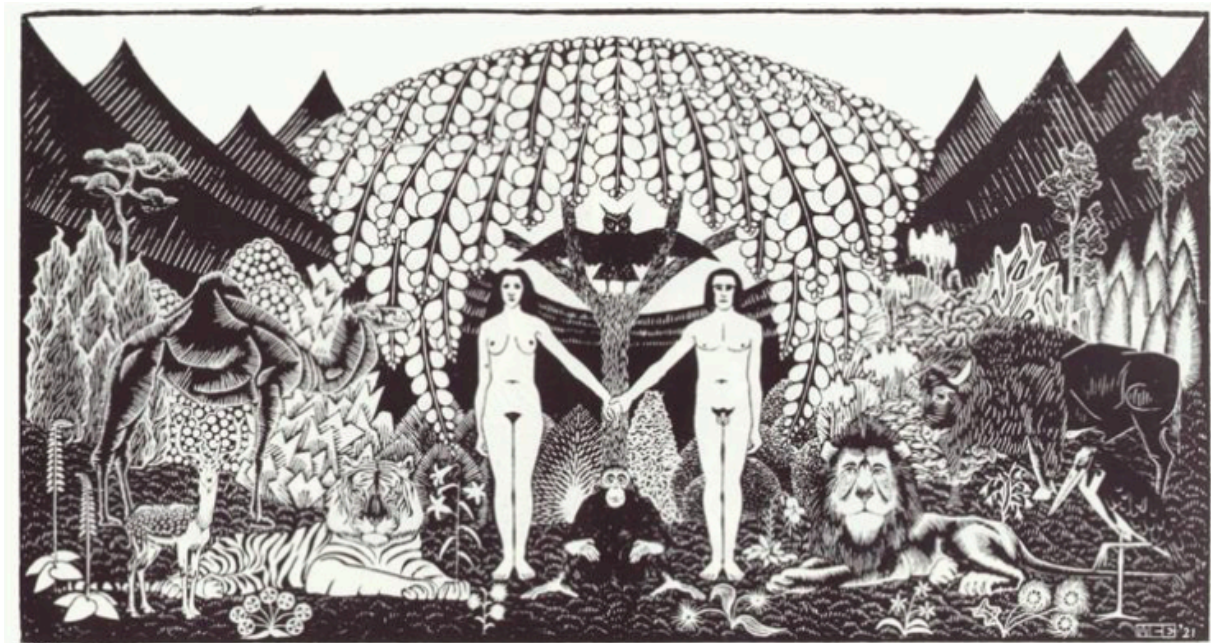


The right to have a future – having children and the environment



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Bachelor Thesis Philosophy 2017

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Abstract

In less than 45 years, the 10 billion people inhabiting this world will be reached. This lays a big pressure on the climate. A growing population and a finite earth are just logically incompatible. So, numbers should be reduced. But, having children is considered as a fundamental right. Is it possible to respect this right and at the same time 'rescue' the earth by reducing overpopulation? According to Anca Gheaus, every human being has the right to adequate life prospects. Adequate life prospects entail the right to have children. But to meet the demands of adequate life prospects, certain goods and resources are needed. If humanity arrives at the point that these demands cannot be met, people cannot engage in legitimate parenting. At that point, people should reduce their number of children, to provide their own children with these adequate life prospects, which include their right to have children, and these children should be provided with enough resources for adequate life prospects, and so on. (This is recurrent.) According to Sarah Conly, the right of having children does not mean the right of having as much children as one wants. The values that come with having children can be pursued with just having one child. Therefore, policy concerning child birth would not be unjust. Also not for our 'illusionary freedom': because governments are always in a way limiting freedom because the individual has to submit to its rules, which is in the interest of the greater good. I do not say that reducing child birth would solve all the environmental problems, but by showing that it would be just, it could be one of the measures, next to other measures, which could lift the pressure on the climate.

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Introduction

*'Anyone who believes exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or a economist.'*¹

The world has arrived in the Anthropocene: the Earth is leaving the current geological epoch, the Holocene. Human activity is predominantly responsible for this exit. Among other things this means: disappearance of pristine lands, urbanization, loss of biodiversity and organism modification. And, the most spectacular of all: climate change.² Environmental changes indicate that the Earth has entered a human-dominated era in which the relationship between humans and the Earth has fundamentally changed. The air, water, soil and even living things are marked by human influence. The climate problems which result from this influence are very serious. Finite resources are being used up, ecosystems are disappearing, the earth is warming, sea levels are rising and the poles are melting.³ The seas are overfished, forests are cut down and species go extinct.⁴

We certainly use the earth in the wrong way: too much carbon, too much consumption, too much plastic. This way of using nature's resources puts pressure on the natural world. Next to that, I believe we are simply with too many.⁵ Billions of years our numbers never outgrew 1 billion people. But due to hygiene, healthcare and technology, our population grew. Since the 1900's our numbers exploded. In a little more than a hundred years, we reached the seven billion people. And in about forty-five years, we will reach the ten billion.⁶

Although living standards for some of us have increased dramatically since the above mentioned developments, this is not the case for all of us. From this seven billion people, roughly one billion people live in extreme poverty, without access to healthcare, education, sanitary facilities and even without food or shelter (these people logically have lower consumer levels and lower carbon footprints).⁷

I would say, environmental degradation and poverty are the big problems of our world today. For the United Nations, reducing poverty and addressing climate problems have both priority indeed.⁸ But right now, humans are using 1,6 times the resources that the earth can sustainably provide. If we would want to have all people out of poverty and on average European consumer levels (which is half of the average American consumer level), the earth could provide just 2 billion people sustainably.⁹

The more the world population grows, the bigger the pressure on the climate and the earth. If we

¹ Attributed to Kenneth Boulding by John S. Steinhart. Aubrey Manning, "Population and Sustainability: the Most Inconvenient Truth," in: *Population and Sustainability, The Journal of Population Matters*, 1 (July 2016), 21

² Manuel Arias-Maldonado, "Spelling the End of Nature? Making sense of the Anthropocene," *Telos* (172, 2015), 84

³ IPCC, 2014: Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, R.K. Pachauri and L.A. Meyer (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, 2-5

⁴ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *The Millennium Development Goals 2015*, (New York: 2015) 8

⁵ IPCC, 2014: Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, R.K. Pachauri and L.A. Meyer (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, 2-5

⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2015). *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision, Volume II: Demographic Profiles (ST/ESA/SER.A/380)*. 3

⁷ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Rethinking Poverty. Report on the World Social Situation 2010, ST/ESA/324* (New York: 2009), 14

⁸ United Nations, Poverty Environment Partnership, *Getting to Zero*, (New York: 2016), 2

⁹ "Current Population is three times the sustainable level" accessed December 16, 2016, http://www.worldpopulationbalance.org/3_times_sustainable

continue in this way the earth will be an uninhabitable place. To me, a planet with ten billion people is like a nightmare. The three extra billion people need food, shelter, clothes etcetera. All of which will use up more land and more resources, of which we do not even have enough right now, and which the earth simply cannot provide, or can provide at cost of environmental disaster. A growing population and a finite earth are just logically incompatible.

As the quote above suggests: there is a restraint on physical expansion on a finite earth. We humans cannot be growing in numbers until eternity. So, trying to reduce child birth seems logical, to continue to live. (Next to other measures like reducing carbon, plastic and consuming in general) But the right to procreate is a sacred cow. The right to have children is implemented in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It describes the family as a natural and fundamental unit of society, therefore, one has the right to create a family. This ultimately shows that having children is extremely important to people: it is assumed a *sui generis*, irreplaceable value.¹⁰

In my thesis I will investigate this right to procreate. The main question is whether it is possible to respect this right and at the same time 'rescue' the earth by reducing overpopulation. I will defend the position that it is necessary to decrease our numbers in order to lift the pressure on the climate.

This thesis does not attempt to give a sufficient solution to the environmental problems. Birth control is just one measure which could be taken to address the problems. (Like there are so many other things we could do to lift the pressure on the climate) I am aware that presumably, reducing child birth alone will not do, just as presumably, lowering consumer levels alone will not solve the problem. But, this is an empirical question which I do not attempt to answer. I start by accepting the premise that having a lot of people on earth indeed does lay a big pressure on the climate. In this paper I am just investigating the right of having children, and how we should address this right in our time, in the light of environmental problems.

In my thesis, the arguments will predominantly derive from the philosophy of Anca Gheaus and Sarah Conly. I have chosen these two philosophers because they both consider having children a right, on which most of us agree. I have chosen to look at having children from a rights-perspective in the first place, because rights are, for most of us, very important and 'common sense.' Therefore this might be the most convincing 'story' for people to have less children.

First I will outline why having children is generally by all of us considered as a right. Second I will investigate the argument of Anca Gheaus in which she expresses a duty concerning children living here and now, and from which a theory of justice is developed concerning future generations. I will combine her argument with empirical evidence and draft an obligation of having fewer children. Last I will investigate the argument of Sarah Conly about government restrictions on child birth, which, according to her, do not violate any right. I will conclude that reducing child birth is necessary in order to rescue the earth and to lift the pressure on the climate, on which the very existence of humans is dependant.

¹⁰ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *Reproductive Rights*, 1966, <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/theme/rights/>

1. The right to have children. Why?

Why is, all over the world, having children regarded as a right? In this chapter I will explore the values that come with having a family.

It is argued that the values that come with having children are important and irreplaceable, and the family is the natural and fundamental unit of society. Therefore, having children is embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reflects the regarded importance.¹¹

The relationship one develops with her or his child, is a very special one. A relationship with a friend or a partner cannot replace this. A child is dependent on his parents, therefore the parents have a big responsibility to raise the children to turn them into autonomous individuals. The value of parenting entails the experience of unconditional and spontaneous love of the child, next to the moral responsibility which is also a unique experience of personal and moral development for the parent.¹²

Forming a family is categorized as a good thing, for society and personal life. The security, loving relationships and mutual support are seen as valuable things in life and in society. Through having children people give meaning to their lives, and leave something behind in this world. And of course, having a child can be of importance for a couple's expression of love or unity.¹³

Although of course lots of people value other things in life and find other ways to have meaningful lives in which they succeed in self-realization, for a lot of people having children is necessary for a flourishing life. Because raising children is such a special and irreplaceable thing, it can be called a *sui generis* value, a value which is built-in and irreplaceable.¹⁴

¹¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *Reproductive Rights*, 1966, <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/theme/rights/>

¹² Anca Gheaus, "The Right to Parent and Duties Concerning Future Generations," *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, (John Wiley & Sons: 2016), 495

¹³ Sarah Conly, "The right to procreation: Merits and Limits," *American Philosophical Quarterly* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 2005), 106

¹⁴ Gheaus, "The Right to Parent and Duties Concerning Future Generations," 496

2. The right to parent

In this chapter I will introduce the argument of the philosopher Anca Gheaus, in which she expresses a duty towards children living now. In her argument, she overcomes a very important problem within environmental ethics: the non-identity problem, which I will discuss first. In conclusion she says that her argument might lead to restricting our numbers, by having less children. I will show that her conclusions are too mild, and that her argument inevitably leads to the conclusion that humanity is obliged to reduce child birth.

2.1 Non-identity problem

One of the problems within environmental ethics, is that it is hard to develop a theory of justice because there are no clear victims and perpetrators. Everybody who lives now, is in fact both victim and perpetrator at the same time. The harm done is thinly spread amongst all world citizens. It is even more difficult to develop a theory of justice because victims who will suffer the most, are not yet born.

It is very hard to develop a theory of justice concerning not-yet existing people, because there is the non-identity problem. This problem is about when individuals appear to be wronged by decisions on which their existence depends. According to the philosopher Derek Parfit, who first developed the problem, at the moment of conception only this particular pair of cells forms the person who comes into existence. Had the conception happened a month later, it would be another pair of cells, and another person would come into existence.¹⁵ The choices people make nowadays, will affect which particular individuals come into existence.¹⁶ This is a very important problem within environmental ethics, because also the choices concerning environmental degradation or environmental upgrading will affect which people will come into existence. It is assumed, that if action is taken on the environmental problems, another world will come into existence than when less action will be taken, and that this will also determine which particular individuals will come into existence. So, different decisions that result in an environmentally downgraded world, will lead to particular future individuals. These future individuals appear to be wronged by decisions which have led to a environmentally downgraded world. But (as long as their lives are worth living), they will not have grounds to complain that the decisions taken in the past harm them, because if other decisions would have been taken, they would not even have existed.¹⁷

The theory of Anca Gheaus is developed in reaction to this problem.

¹⁵ Derek Parfit, *Persons and Reasons*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) 351-353

¹⁶ Parfit, *Persons and Reasons*, 356

¹⁷ "The Nonidentity Problem," Plato Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified September 25, 2015, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nonidentity-problem/>

2.2 The right to parent and the duties concerning future generations

In this chapter I will introduce the argument of Anca Gheaus concerning the right to procreate. I will base the next paragraphs fully on her article *The Right to Parent and Duties Concerning Future Generations*.¹⁸

Anca Gheaus sidesteps the non-identity problem by formulating a theory concerning already existing children. She too, does not see a way to logically overcome the identity problem: she does not see a way of formulating a theory of rights concerning people who may or may not exist. So she sidesteps the problem by formulating very fundamental rights concerning people and children who are living now. Gheaus considers rights as fundamental interests: all people have interests, if and when they exist. If somebody plants a bomb which will go off in thirty years, it is violating the rights of future people, no matter who they are. She begins her theory by accepting the following premises:

'P1: Each child has a right, against all, to adequate life prospects.'¹⁹

'P2: For each child who has the potential, as an adult, to be an adequate parent, adequate life prospects require enough resources to justly raise children.'²⁰

These premises are based on the agreement of all people on a few fundamental rights. Adequate life prospects are one of them. She does not elaborate on the exact empirical standards which would be set to make a life 'adequate', but she does reckon that every human being deserves some basic goods, from which point a person can start developing. She understands that having children is a very basic right, without this a lot of people would say they could not have a flourishing life. So, strictly speaking, the second premise is part of the first premise. And these children also have the same basic rights, which also includes having children. So this is recurrent: Each child has the right to justly raise children, these children have the right to justly raise children, etcetera. Justly raising children here means, raising them with meeting their demands for adequate life prospects.

What logically follows from these premises: to meet the demand of enough resources for every next generation, or every child born, a sustainable earth is needed.

If, at some point, one generation leaves the next generation with enough resources for an adequate life, but not enough resources for the third generation, the third generation has a choice to make. It has to sacrifice its fundamental right to parent, or failing in their duties as parents. In fact: the first generation failed already in its duty to the second generation, because it can not fulfil its duty in offering an adequate life to the second generation, because that would involve the right to justly raise children. Passing on to the next generation an unsustainable world, forces some people to choose between not satisfying their fundamental interest in parenthood or engaging in illegitimate parenting.

The conclusion of her argument is, that no generation is allowed to procreate at a rate so high that it will deprive their children from their rights. Given that the resources are finite, there logically is a maximum of individuals that could live together on the earth. If that maximum is reached, people should not procreate beyond replacement rate. If that level is already reached, people should procreate even beneath replacement rate. (The practical implications of procreation beneath replacement rate, such as if single parents could still be parents, or that should be opted for co-parenting are out of account here.)

¹⁸ Anca Gheaus, "The Right to Parent and Duties Concerning Future Generations," *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, (John Wiley & Sons: 2016)

¹⁹ Gheaus, "The Right to Parent and Duties Concerning Future Generations," 487

²⁰ Gheaus, "The Right to Parent and Duties Concerning Future Generations," 487

2.3 The obligation that follows

In this chapter I will explore the implications of the conclusions of Anca Gheaus' theory. I will show that her conclusions are too mild. I state that people are already procreating at a rate so high that it is depriving children of their rights. I state that the maximum of people on the earth has since long been reached. First I will show how empirical evidence combined with the premises of her theory leads inevitably to the obligation of having fewer children. Second, I will address the difficult question on who has the obligation of having fewer children.

The obligation of reducing child birth

Humanity has already arrived at the point that it forces some members to choose between not satisfying their rights to parent or engaging in illegitimate parenting. The extreme poverty a lot of people are living in right now, means that the demands for adequate life prospects, including the right to justly raising children, are not met.

The concept of adequate life prospects is, of course, open for interpretation. Gheaus herself states that the threshold of adequate life prospects is definitely higher than the threshold of 'a life worth living'.²¹ Where on this valuation of one's life can the situation of extreme poverty be placed? Extreme high poverty levels come together with malnutrition, infant mortality, and low school enrolment and completion rates.²² I do not know who can decide what a life not worth living is, but it seems clear that the mentioned indicators mean that children at the least do not have adequate life prospects, if facing these problems (suffering from hunger, not going to school, facing the threat of diseases and even death), and when environmental problems worsen, these vulnerable people are the first to face the consequences. In the introduction I stated that if all world citizens would have average European consumer levels, the earth could provide resources for 2 billion people. I will leave the empirical question, if having adequate life prospects would mean to have consumer levels as high as European standards. Fact is, that if poor people are to be taken out of poverty, their consumer levels will rise. It is clear that, having adequate life prospects would mean to be taken out of poverty. Reducing the world population to 2 billion and keeping European consumer standards is maybe not the ideal. But whatever exact standard will be set, if a sustainable earth is wanted, lowering consumer levels would have to be combined with reducing child birth. I assume that lowering consumer levels alone will not do, seen all the people that have to be taken out of poverty, from whom consumer levels will consequently rise. Looking at the problem combined with this empirical data logically leads to the conclusion that birth numbers should be reduced.

Who has to reduce its numbers?

In one of the last chapters of her paper, Anca Gheaus argues, 'It is an uncontroversial claim that adults owe a certain level of welfare (and/or resources) to their children.'²³ As I said before, the extreme poor circumstances some people are living in, already forces particular potential parents to choose between not satisfying their rights to parent or engaging in illegitimate parenting. It is likely that a western potential parent can provide her child with enough resources to justly raise children, and that this child can give this to the next generation and so on. While a potential parent in sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty is most severe and 41 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty, giving this to a child is almost impossible.²⁴ Does this mean that the parent in sub-Saharan Africa is engaging in illegitimate parenting, while for the Western parent it is legitimate? It seems a

²¹ Gheaus, "The Right to Parent and Duties Concerning Future Generations," 493

²² United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *The Millennium Development Goals 2015*, (New York: 2015), 11-14

²³ Gheaus, "The Right to Parent and Duties Concerning Future Generations," 493

²⁴ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Rethinking Poverty. Report on the World Social Situation 2010*, ST/ESA/324 (New York: 2009) 20

harsh conclusion: the poorest people, the people who are already vulnerable, are affected by it, and unlikely to be able to defend themselves. In the next paragraphs I will argue that Gheaus' theory logically leads to the conclusion that this level of welfare and access to resources is a responsibility from all adults to all children, and not only from parents to their own children.

The first argument I divert from Anca Gheaus' two premises. These premises are formulated as rights. This means that others can also violate these rights. Here I assume, having a particular right means, having this right if not violating other people's right by engaging in a this right.²⁵ If people want to engage in a right and thereby standing in the way of other people engaging in something they also have a right, there is a problem. As a right, it is valid for everybody. So, nobody can decide who has preference over others in engaging in this right. So, both premises are valid for every human being living. The argument is two-fold. If the people in the West engage in too much consuming, using up all resources, to which the people in sub-Saharan Africa also have rights, they violate indirectly the right of sub-Saharan people of adequate life prospects. Parents in the West, engaging in reproduction by parents in the West, using up all resources, and producing new descendants who will also use up these resources, these parents are standing in the way of the rights of children and parents in sub-Saharan Africa to have adequate life prospects, and providing their children with adequate life prospects and justly raise children. This shows that, given the fact that resources are finite and the environment is already rapidly downgrading, both rights (the second right is, as I said before, part of the first right) are violated by engaging in these rights too much by others.

The only difference is, that the parents in the West do have direct access to these resources, and the parents in sub-Saharan Africa do not. But being born in another place does not mean that they have less rights to the resources. (If one would say that people born on resource-rich soils have more right to access to these resources than other people, one is speaking of birth right, which I consider illegitimate.) Therefore, Western women do not have more rights to procreation than sub-Saharan women. Because the right applies to everybody, the people living in the West, who happen to be born in resource-rich countries, have a responsibility towards all children, including those who are not born in these privileged countries.

Second, throughout her theory, Gheaus often mentions the responsibility of generation A to generation B, generation B to generation C, and so on.²⁶ Although she uses these examples on an abstract level, I state that this implies that the people in the rich Western countries are also responsible for the adequate life prospects of the children in sub-Saharan Africa. Strictly speaking, a responsibility from one group towards another group means the whole group toward the whole other group: it would not mean, some individuals from one group have a responsibility towards some individuals from another group. So, if the responsibility from generation A (the adults living now) towards generation B (all the children living now) is understood in a global way, the responsibility does not only reach to one's own children but to all children. Therefore, if restraining numbers is needed to fulfil this responsibility, this applies to all adults from generation A. So all adults have the obligation to restrain their numbers: the adults in the West as well as the adults living in sub-Saharan countries.

I am aware that the people in the West already do have fairly small families. The birth rate of European women is around 1.6.²⁷ The decline of the birth rate came with the welfare of the European Countries. But before the extremely poor people of sub-Saharan Africa would have a bit of welfare, there would already be so much more people. Moreover, their consumer levels would rise

²⁵ Conly, "The right to procreation: Merits and Limits," 108-109

²⁶ Gheaus, "The Right to Parent and Duties Concerning Future Generations," 498-499

²⁷ Eurostat, statistics explained, File: Total fertility rate, 1960-2014 (live births per woman)

extremely, so the pressure on the climate would only be higher. And, if the West takes population growth and population control serious, it can also have influence on the underdeveloped countries to take the problem serious as well.²⁸ Moreover, maybe even the Western families should become smaller: just one child per couple.

²⁸ Aubrey Manning, "Population and Sustainability: the Most Inconvenient Truth," in: *Population and Sustainability, The Journal of Population Matters*, 1 (July 2016), 23

3 Government restrictions on birth numbers do not violate any right

As I have stated in the introduction, the right to have children is implemented in the Declaration of Universal Rights by the United Nations. It is stated that “any choice and decision with regard to the size of the family must inevitably rest with the family itself, and cannot be made by anyone else.”²⁹ This ultimately shows how the right to have children is a holy cow, and the subject on reducing child birth controversial.

Although I defend the right to have children, I have shown that this right results in the obligation of having fewer children, in order to *protect* this right. There is a moral obligation to have fewer children. In the next paragraphs I will outline Sarah Conly’s argument that our right to have children is in no way violated when the government would impose restrictions on the number of children one can have. Then I will offer some reflection on this.

3.1 Values and interests reflecting rights versus liberty

I will discuss the confusion on which the conviction is based that having as much children as one wants is a right. Because the right to something does not necessarily mean the right to as much as one wants from that thing. The conviction is falsely based on two things: the non-interference principle, and on the values a child gives. According to Conly, both do not create any base to the right to have as much children as one wants.

First the non-interference principle: having as much children as one wants is considered one of those liberties the government cannot touch on: it is about self-determination.³⁰ People want to live as they wish. And yes, it certainly is interference when the government imposes restrictions on how many children one can have. Freedom is recognized as essential to autonomous humans. But the government already interferes in other areas of life. That is logically the task of governments: would there be no interference, we would live in anarchy. In a society, freedom cannot be absolute. The government interferes in ‘the greater interest,’ because it is recognized that absolute liberty is incompatible with others having the same liberty. A government makes laws and rules, which reflect the rights and duties of its citizens.³¹ And these rights reflect the values and interests that come with these particular rights. Both philosophers agree on this: rights always reflect interests.³²

Second, the right to have children also reflects values and interests of having children. According to Sarah Conly, the values that derive from raising children can still be achieved with one child. The right to have children has long been confused with the right to have as many children as one wants, and here I will briefly outline that the values which validate the right to have children, do not validate the right to have as much children as one wants.

The unconditional and spontaneous love can still be experienced with one child, just as the responsibility one has towards a child, and the unique experience of personal and moral development. A couple’s love can be expressed through one child, and a parent can give meaning to his life and can face mortality with one child. The security, loving relationships and mutual support can be given by a small family as well as by a large one.³³

²⁹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *Reproductive Rights*, 1966, <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/theme/rights/>

³⁰ Conly, “The right to procreation: Merits and Limits,” 107-108

³¹ Conly, “The right to procreation: Merits and Limits,” 107

³² Conly, “The right to procreation: Merits and Limits,” 107 and Gheaus, “The Right to Parent and Duties Concerning Future Generations,” 487

³³ Conly, “The right to procreation: Merits and Limits,” 106

So: if we accept that the right of having children reflects the values and interests of having children, and if we accept that having one child can fulfil these values, then we do not necessarily have the right to have more than one child. That is, if a right to have more than one child does not really exist, a policy concerning reducing child birth and thereby imposing a maximum on the children parents can give birth to, does mean that no rights are violated.

3.2 Reflection

*"Justice is the first virtue of social institutions."*³⁴

This is, of course, easier said than done. There are some practical objections to this policy, like the favouring of baby boys and therefore killing new-born girls, as seen with the one-child policy in China. I will not address them here. Of course this practice is immoral but it is an effect that does not make the policy itself immoral. (Practical objections are not moral objections.)

I accept Conly's premises: I believe that just having one child can fulfil the values that come with having children, therefore one does not necessarily needs to have more than one child. So, the policy would not violate any right, would that mean the policy on restricting birth numbers would be just? And how would that policy look like? According to Conly, a government makes rules and laws which reflect rights, and rights reflect interests. But if we all say: we have interest in having as much children as we want? I believe that it is not in our own interest to have as many children as one wants because it puts pressure on the environment and it deprives our own children of their rights. So if we combine the two arguments I would say a policy concerning reducing childbirth would be just. How many children would be just? With the arguments of Gheaus we cannot answer this question. It is only shown that at the rate we are procreating right now, is already depriving children of their rights. In the argument of Conly, we have seen that in fact, people do not have the right to have as many children as one wants, and that one child can fulfil the parents' values and interests. So, I would opt for one child per couple. In that way, it would have the best outcome for the environment, and pressure would be lifted. Would it be just to implement or force this on people? it might be better if people themselves live up to their moral duty. But if this will not happen, politicians and other leaders can achieve the goal for inhabiting the world with fewer people and an upgraded environment.

³⁴ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press Cambridge, 1971), 3

4 Conclusions

“There is no technological change we can make that will permit growth in either human numbers or material affluence to continue to expand.”³⁵

4.1 Conclusions

I believe that through the arguments of Anca Gheaus and Sarah Conly we have gained insight in the solution of having fewer children as one answer to environmental problems. The right to have children leaves us with the obligation of having fewer children, in order to protect this right itself. If there is no other way, governmental measures could help with reaching this goal, and would not be a violation of our rights. Not of our value-laden right to have children, because these values can still be pursued. And not of our illusionary freedom: because governments are always in a way limiting freedom because the individual has to submit to its rules, which is in the interest of the human race. I believe these are valid and very strong arguments. So: yes, I think it is possible to rescue the earth and at the same time respect the right of having children. In fact, by having fewer children we pay respect to this right, and by having as much children as we want, we do not.

I do not say that when we restrain our numbers, this is sufficient to solve all environmental problems. We also have to make the shift towards renewable energy and sustainable agriculture, and towards lower consumer levels in the West, so that everything humans take from the earth, will be given back. That is the only way the human race can survive, because the earth and her resources are needed to provide us with food, shelter and everything else. Next to that, I am aware of the fact that making policy in order to reduce child birth is not easy. In democratic societies, people have to vote for governments who are going to implement this kind of policy, but as I have shown, the right to have children is a sacred cow, and parties might not make themselves popular by campaigning government limits on child birth. Maybe even more so in poor countries where people have big families for many reasons. But even though it would be very hard to implement, there is no avoiding of the necessity. My proposal is to make a global shift in thinking, wherein our numbers are acknowledged, and recognized as too many. In this thinking the environmental problems are recognized, and in order to solve them we should simply be with fewer people.

4.2 Not only good for ‘us’

Our own future is not the only future to think of. I am aware that my thesis is written from a highly anthropocentric point of view. I have only spoken about nature in terms of resources, problems and solutions, a really mechanic approach. It left me thinking about the question ‘If another planet could provide us with everything we need, in all our enormous numbers and before we would have the technology to live there we could first completely destroy the planet and all other life on earth, would that be morally just?’ My gut feeling tells me no, of course not. There has to be intrinsic value in nature, intrinsic value in all life-forms. And maybe it is time for us to wake up and recognize the beauty of nature itself, and try to preserve it as much as we can, not for us, but for the cause of nature itself. There are so many species that go extinct because we use their habitats for our own purposes, just as a lot of biodiversity gets lost because soils are just used as monotonous agriculture, after all the forests are cut down. The good thing about the human race cutting down its numbers would be the space given back to nature. Imagine how the world would look like if we could give some of these soils back to the earth. Biodiversity could recover itself, species could flourish, and nature would thrive again.

³⁵ Paul R. Ehrlich, “Too many people, too much consumption.” Yale Environment 360

4.3 Further research

The research I have done for this thesis is limited, seen the space and time given. Thereby, the subject, which is about the very existence of humanity, is almost too big to handle. But I do feel I have touched on some very important problems and solutions. But of course, this is not enough. A lot more research must be done on the relationship between human population growth and environmental degradation. An exact standard must be set in which a balance is found between our numbers, consumption and the preservation of the environment and nature. If the research is thorough and the conclusions valid, it is time for action. Hopefully further research will contribute to the knowledge about the environment and overpopulation, which hopefully will soon lead to policy concerning birth ratio control. And the most important thing is, hopefully it will reach the hearts and minds of the people, before it is too late.

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