



Global Horrendous Evil: A Cautionary Tale Against Procreation

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Abstract

The philosophical debate over whether procreation is morally justified, given the sufferings of procreated humans, finds renewed significance amidst global crises. In this paper, I argue that procreation as a collective human endeavour inevitably perpetuates horrendous, life-ruining evil on a global scale. I also show that horrendous evil is unavoidable even under optimistic assumptions about the prospect of the progress of civilisation. Moreover, I argue that such evil cannot be outweighed by the favourable outcomes experienced by the procreated humans. This makes procreation pro tanto morally wrong. Since much of the literature focuses on individual procreative acts and non-life-ruining evil, my argument makes a novel contribution by drawing the focus of the debate to (1) humans' collective procreative practice and (2) how it sustains horrendous evil across the globe. This analysis invites further reflection on the ethics of bringing life into a world fraught with profound suffering and encourages consideration of antinatalism as a serious philosophical proposition.

Keywords Procreation · Moral enhancement · Antinatalism · Horrendous evil

Introduction

The ethics of procreation have increasingly attracted scholarly interest, prompting philosophers to examine the circumstances under which the act of bringing life into existence can be ethically defensible (Benatar and Wasserman 2015; Marsh 2014; McMahan 2009; Smuts 2014; Weinberg 2016). At the forefront of this discourse is antinatalism, a philosophical stance positing that procreation is usually or always morally wrong. The growing attention toward antinatalism is driven not only by the looming threat of global crises but also by a profound contemplation of the human

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condition, which is inherently susceptible to suffering (Zandbergen 2021). Existing literature has predominantly focused on the moral evaluation of individual reproductive choices. In this paper, I seek to contribute to this debate by arguing that procreation by humanity *as a whole* (“procreation” for short) perpetuates horrendous evil, and the favourable outcomes¹ enjoyed by procreated individuals cannot outweigh such evil. This means, insofar as the favourable and unfavourable outcomes experienced by procreated individuals are concerned, procreation is morally wrong. Though this only shows that procreation is *pro tanto* rather than finally (all-things-considered) wrong, I argue that it still tells a strong cautionary tale against procreation.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section “[Theoretical Background](#)” provides the theoretical background. Section “[Impermissible Beneficence and Procreation](#)” presents my main argument, that procreation perpetuates horrendous evil which cannot be outweighed by the favourable outcomes enjoyed by those who are born. Section “[Objection and Replies](#)” discusses the parity between the hypothetical scenario used in my argument and procreation in real life. It also explains why some commonly raised justifications for procreation may not succeed. Section “[Conclusion](#)” concludes.

Two brief notes are necessary here. First, it is beyond the scope of this paper to participate in the debate over whether coming into existence is in itself a favourable outcome. Instead, I assume that it is not, which means my argument holds insofar as this assumption holds. Second, since the focus of this paper is on the procreation by humanity as a whole, I am agnostic about whether this argument implies that individual acts of procreation are wrong, *pro tanto* or final. There is much debate on whether and how moral duty percolates to individuals when unfavourable outcomes arise at a collective level from many people’s decisions (Nefsky 2019), and it is, again, beyond the scope of this paper to review the literature in sufficient detail to do justice to the debate.

Theoretical Background

Horrendous Evil

Existing academic discussions on horrendous evil largely revolve around the philosophy of (monotheist) religion. Based on the review by Ooi (2022), there are two popular ways to understand horrendous evil in the literature. It may be defined as events that are products of “human cruelty and wickedness”, which are morally bad independent of individuals’ perspectives (Plantinga 2007). It may also be defined as *life-ruining* events for the people involved, where life-ruining means constituting a “prima facie reason” to doubt whether their life could be “a great good to them on the whole” (Adams 2013, 162). Such evil may be produced by “dramatic” events

¹ “Favourable outcomes” can refer to personal benefits or impersonal goods in this paper. Similarly, “unfavourable outcomes” can refer to personal harms or impersonal bads.

that affect many concurrently (e.g. concentration camps, genocide) or “domestic” events that affect one person or one family at a time (e.g. having serious mental diseases, being subject to grievous bullying). In this paper, I adopt Adams’ understanding of horrendous evil (life-ruining events) though my arguments should hold with either definition.

Two points of clarification are necessary here. First, I do not provide the specific criteria for determining when something is bad enough to constitute horrendous evil, though I offer some heuristics that should be reasonably intuitive. A broken arm in itself is plausibly not a horrendous evil. Some people who go through severe multiple sclerosis, clinical depression, Alzheimer’s disease, bullying and abuse (examples given by Adams (2013)) can be said to suffer horrendous evil. Many people who experience prolonged incarceration with physical or psychological torture can be said to suffer horrendous evil. Trafficking of slave labour or sex slaves, massacre, genocidal raping and refugee deaths at sea almost certainly produce horrendous evil.²

Second, I also suspend judgement on whether horrendous evil is subjective or objective. Instead, I assume that a substantial proportion of people who undergo severe suffering, such as that described in the examples above, either fulfil the objective criteria of suffering horrendous evil or subjectively feel that they suffer horrendous evil (and therefore do). With the above assumption, I can talk about horrendous evil arising from those types of events without committing to either the subjectivity or objectivity of the concept.

Though there are antinatalist arguments that appeal to the suffering that procreation leads to (including what Häyry (2005) terms “worst possible outcome”), there is limited discussion in moral philosophy that directly links horrendous evil with procreation. Marsh (2015) argues that horrendous evil undermines the justifiability of procreation. Quoting Ken Taylor, Marsh points out that “an extraordinary percentage” of people in history have lived in substantial “material, political, spiritual deprivation”, which is expected continue for millennia (p. 70). Quoting Adams, Marsh further suggests that it may not be rational to think that “life is worth living with high purposes” given the ubiquity of horrendous evil and the ever-present risk that it could befall anyone “tomorrow, even in the next half hour” (p. 71). Marsh argues that the pessimistic outlook of people like Adams has *prima facie* antinatalist implications. Specifically, people who do not believe in the “defeat” of horrendous evil by God cannot reasonably expect the goods in their children’s lives to significantly outweigh the bads, which makes their procreation unjustified. Mogensen (2024) also argues for the possibility that some suffering is so bad (“tortured” lives) that it cannot be outweighed by any number of happy lives. Mogensen does so by combining two plausible premises. First, there exists a level of suffering such that adding any number of mildly non-worth-living lives are preferable to adding a few “tortured” lives. Second, adding some worth-living and non-worth-living lives together can be morally worse than not adding them at all if the non-worth-living lives are

² I am agnostic about whether horrendous evil comes in degrees (i.e. whether some cases of horrendous evil are worse than others) since my argument in this paper does not rely on this distinction.

sufficiently numerous. Mogensen derives a position termed “lexical threshold negative utilitarianism” from these premises, that no “additional happy lives can compensate for... a single additional ‘tortured’ life” (p. 339).

The above works should provide confidence that the prevalence of horrendous evil weighs against procreation. Nevertheless, Marsh’s argument, like that of antinatalists like Häyry (2024), Shiffrin (1999) and Teo (2024), concerns *individual* cases of procreation. It may be vulnerable to existing critiques of antinatalism, such as the argument against the necessity of net harm of coming into existence (Magnusson 2019). Thus, my strategy of criticising procreation at a collective level, which will be laid out below, may constitute an improvement over existing antinatalist arguments. Meanwhile, Mogensen is not fully committed to antinatalism (nor is Marsh). My arguments in this paper may, in turn, offer stronger reasons for agreeing with antinatalism for those who are already convinced by Mogensen or Marsh.

Impermissible Beneficence and Procreation

This section provides my main argument against procreation. As indicated earlier, my argument focuses on the procreation by humanity as a whole. Given the large base number of humans, it is statistically guaranteed that a substantial number of people who are born will suffer horrendous evil. This provides the basis for my position that procreation inevitably perpetuates horrendous evil.

Not Worth Such a Price

My argument is partly inspired by Ursula Le Guin’s story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (Le Guin 1993). Le Guin depicts the city of Omelas, where every citizen except one has a very happy life. Nevertheless, the happiness of Omelasians is completely reliant on the suffering of a child perpetually imprisoned in abject conditions. It can be said that this child suffers horrendous evil—specifically, incarceration with torture.

It is reasonable to assume that some if not most of us would react to the Omelas scenario with a strong moral disapprobation. Intuitively, the wellness of Omelasians cannot morally justify or outweigh the horrendous evil suffered by this child. This intuition is central to my argument in this paper. Although I cannot conclusively prove that this is *the* right intuition (and I doubt anyone can), I offer two explanations for why we have very good reason to take seriously the moral intuition that the favourable outcomes enjoyed by other Omelasians cannot outweigh or justify the horrendous evil the child suffers.

First, this intuition coheres with our intuitions in other scenarios involving trade-offs between grave harms for fewer people and benefits (or the prevention of minor harms) for more people, in that we tend to be reluctant to invoke the latter to justify the former. Sen (1982), for example, develops a scenario where some bullies plan to bully one person. Sen appeals to the intuition that the harm of bullying cannot be outweighed by the bullies’ pleasure even if there are many of them. Sen then argues

that higher weights should be assigned to more important rights, such as the right to safety. Scanlon (1998) also develops a scenario where a worker is struck by electric equipment and suffers extreme pain, but rescuing this worker requires pausing the transmission of a World Cup match. Based on the intuition that continuing the transmission is morally wrong even if many are watching the match, Scanlon argues that only harms of a similar degree of moral seriousness can be aggregated in a trade-off. Here, I do not intend to portray the moral intuition about the Omelas case as incompatible with the aggregation of utility. Instead, I only wish to show that these works do affirm our intuitive reluctance to allow major harms in order to confer benefits (or prevent minor harms) to others, and are consistent with the moral judgement of the Omelas case that I advocate for.

Second, this intuition can be assumed to be felt by pronatalists, which means that it can serve as a common ground between pro- and antinatalists when discussing the issue of horrendous evil. Moreover, this intuition can also be compatible with certain justifications of pronatalism, which means that it is not a mere product of antinatalists' grim view of the human condition but instead can *possibly* be accepted by all sides. For example, Harman (2009) defends procreation by arguing that the higher-order pleasures in many people's lives make their lives worth living. Marsh (2014) seconds this and argues that the "very best goods" in life, such as a fulfilling relationship, may outweigh most of the bads in life. A similar line of thinking can also be adopted to justify the intuition in the Omelas case. Horrendous evil *may* be understood as qualitatively different from minor mishaps. Moreover, it is also plausible to understand such evil as being of a higher order than, and thus able to outweigh, the goods that people can realistically enjoy. This can be seen in the Omelas story: while the perpetual torture the child suffers can be deemed life-ruining, it is not clear that the perpetual joy of other Omelasians alone suffices to make their lives worthwhile. Borrowing Adams' (2013, 26) words, horrendous evil can "engulf" all possible goods in one's life. In contrast, it is not plausible that the joy of Omelasians can engulf all possible bads in their lives (though they may not experience any), suggesting that the horrendous evil experienced by the child may indeed be of a higher order than the joy of Omelasians. Though, again, I do not necessarily endorse qualitative differences in pain and pleasure, the compatibility of the Omelas intuition with the above justification of pronatalism suggests that pronatalists at least have some reasons to take this intuition seriously. If this intuition can indeed support my argument against procreation, then it also shows that pro- and antinatalism share more common ground than is popularly portrayed.

Clarifying the Intuition: Omelas vs. Omegas

Before proceeding to my antinatalist argument, two features of the Omelas story should be clarified. First, the story implies that the child's misery is the means to the flourishing of other Omelasians. Those who subscribe to the doctrine of double effect may judge unfavourable outcomes used as means to an end more harshly than those regarded as mere side effects. Second, the story implies that the child cannot be rescued. Mogensen (2024) argues, based on these features,

that the Omelas story only shows that Omelasians' actions are wrong but not that the child's suffering outweighs Omelasians' happiness, and dismisses the Omelasians' departure from Omelas as merely avoiding complicity in wrongdoing. Thus, I develop a revised scenario, termed *Omeegas*, that can avoid Mogensen's concerns.

Omeegas In the city of Omeegas, there is a machine that controls the physical structure and operation of the city, such that all Omeegasians are guaranteed a high level of happiness and are spared from any suffering. On Jan 1, 2026, however, a 365-day countdown timer appeared on the machine. Omeegasians checked the technical manual left by the ancient architects of Omeegas, which is known to be completely accurate. It turns out that those architects noticed a bug in the machine design, such that one random child born in 2027 will perpetually experience extreme suffering. The only way to prevent this from happening is to *permanently* stop the machine. If the machine stops, future Omeegasians will only enjoy very mild happiness, though they will still be spared from any suffering, and existing Omeegasians will not be directly affected. The only way to stop the machine is for more than a certain percentage of Omeegasians to agree to the stoppage by scanning their fingerprint on a portal on the machine, and the ancient architects added this countdown timer so that Omeegasians have a year to deliberate whether to stop the machine. After all Omeegasians had learned about this, fewer than the threshold percentage of them agreed to stop the machine. Thus, as 2027 drew near, Omeegasians anticipated the new year knowing that there would soon be a child in extreme, perpetual suffering.

In Omeegas, the child's misery is a mere side effect of the machine's operation—it is a product of a mistake rather than intentional design. It is, thus, not the means to the flourishing of other Omeegasians. Also worth noting is that the *direct* impact of the decision of whether to stop the machine concerns prospective rather than existing Omeegasians. This is a point of parity between the Omeegas scenario and procreation, in that the identity of the person(s) suffering horrendous evil is unknown *ex ante*. I assume here that people's moral intuition is the same for the Omelas and Omeegas scenarios—that the high level of happiness enjoyed by Omeegasians cannot justify or outweigh the horrendous evil the child suffers. I do not attempt to justify this assumption, though I believe it is reasonable, since the key elements remain the same between the two scenarios (suffering child and happy people). Moreover, we can generalise the intuition to a rule applicable to a wider range of situations. In less precise terms, we can say that it is pro tanto wrong to cause or allow horrendous evil to happen to some people to bring favourable outcomes for other people, even if the favourable outcomes concern many people.

It is worth clarifying, however, what “many people” means in this context. It is reasonable to assume that for some, the intuition is that the favourable outcomes enjoyed by Omeegasians (or Omelasians) can *never* outweigh or justify the torture suffered by the child, regardless of the population size. This is also consistent with Harman's (2004) confession that it is possible for some evil to be so extreme

that no favourable outcomes could justify it. Nevertheless, as explained earlier, I wish to distance my argument from an anti-aggregationist position. Thus, I appeal to a weaker claim to support my argument, that in scenarios *that can be reasonably deemed as analogous to or worse than Omelas*, the favourable outcomes cannot outweigh or justify the horrendous evil.

Since Omelas is a city with only one person suffering horrendous evil, a scenario can be reasonably deemed as analogous to or worse than Omelas if the ratio (number of people enjoying favourable outcomes) to (number of people suffering horrendous evil) is similar to or lower than $n:1$, where n is the realistic population of an average city. I term this ratio the “enjoyer-to-victim ratio”. Conversely, I assume that when the enjoyer-to-victim ratio is higher than $n:1$, the favourable outcomes *can* outweigh the horrendous evil for the purposes of this paper. For conciseness, I refer to an enjoyer-to-victim ratio higher than $n:1$ as an “excusable” level of horrendous evil. From this, we may derive a rule in more precise terms for this paper:

Rule of Impermissible Beneficence: it is pro tanto wrong to take action A which inevitably perpetuates horrendous evil for some favourable outcomes, unless the level of horrendous evil is excusable.

What *inevitable perpetuation* means is that horrendous evil will inevitably exist (be perpetuated) unless action A is not taken—so, horrendous evil can realistically be ended only if action A is not taken. The non-context-specific meaning of *pro tanto* is “to such an extent”, and since the context here is weighing favourable outcomes against horrendous evil, we may define it here as *to the extent that the favourable and unfavourable outcomes for the procreated people are concerned*. I refer to the above rule as “Rule 1”, for conciseness. Note, again, that the wrongness here only concerns humans’ collective endeavour to procreate rather than individuals’ procreative decisions. Note also that the term “beneficence” presents procreation as altruistic, which is charitable towards procreation. Conversely, if I can argue that altruistic procreation is (pro tanto) wrong according to Rule 1, then my argument serves as an even stronger caution against procreation in real life, which is often *not* altruistic.

Procreation and Horrendous Evil: A Global Challenge

With Rule 1 laid out, I will proceed to argue that procreation violates this rule and is thus (pro tanto) wrong. The key to my argument is to establish that procreation *inevitably* perpetuates horrendous evil at a level that is not excusable. Nevertheless, before proceeding with my main argument, I should first establish the fact that horrendous evil is currently widespread in the world, and we do not need to look far into history to do so. At the time of writing this paper, over 1.8 million people in Gaza face extreme hunger (UN News 2024), over a million in Ethiopia are at risk of starvation with 600,000 to 800,000 killed in a war that witnesses widespread, systematic mass killings and genocidal rape of civilians (Omna Tigray 2023, 2024). In 2023 alone, there were a total of 59 active armed conflicts involving states (PRIO 2024). Besides these

dramatic events that produce horrendous evil, there are even more widespread domestic horrendous evil (in Adams' term). Globally, 400,000 children develop cancer every year. Over a billion people suffer from neglected tropical diseases, which kill 200,000 every year and inflict severe suffering on those who survive (WHO 2021; Masterson and Geldard 2024). One in five women and one in seven men have been subjected to sexual abuse as a child (WHO 2024). The school bullying rate is around 20% across countries (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2022; National Center for Education Statistics 2019; Shah and Tang 2024), which can lead to suicide ideation and attempt for over 20% and 10% of the victims, respectively (Borowsky et al. 2013). The above figures only show the tip of the iceberg of the evil in the world. Even if not all those cases constitute horrendous evil, a substantial portion do.

Given that I do not provide the specific criteria for distinguishing between horrendous and non-horrendous evil, we cannot determine the exact number of victims of horrendous evil today. Nevertheless, even if we make an *extremely conservative* estimate by assuming that horrendous evil *only* arises from the types of events reviewed above and *only* 0.01% ~ 1% of such victims actually suffer from horrendous evil, there are still at least 265,000³ victims of horrendous evil worldwide. This gives an enjoyer-to-victim ratio of about 30,000:1. As explained earlier, the level of horrendous evil is excusable if the ratio is higher than or equal to $n:1$ where n is the realistic population of an average city. If we use the population of a medium-sized urban area based on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) definition to estimate n , n should range from 200,000 to 500,000 (OECD 2012). This means that 30,000:1 is much lower than $n:1$. Put in simpler terms, the level of horrendous evil is excusable if there is only one case of horrendous evil on average per city, which is far too tall an order today even if we estimate the cases of horrendous evil *extremely conservatively*.

Given the level of horrendous evil in the world today, there are, broadly speaking, two ways to avoid violating Rule 1. The first is for humans to continue procreating and progressing civilisation until a point is reached where such a small proportion of humans suffer from horrendous evil that an excusable level of horrendous evil is achieved. The second is for humans to stop procreating and go extinct,⁴ in which case horrendous evil is not perpetuated. I bracket far-fetched possibilities such as ending horrendous evil with a *deus ex machina*. In what follows, I will argue that the first option is not realistic, which means as long as humans continue procreating, horrendous evil in the world will not reach an excusable level, and thus procreation violates Rule 1.

³ Assume the following: for all war-related evil reviewed in the above paragraph, only 1% of the victims suffer horrendous evil; for all disease and child sexual abuse cases reviewed, only 0.01% constitute horrendous evil; school bullying is bracketed; world population is 8 billion. We then have $(1 \text{ million} + 1.8 \text{ million}) * 1\% + (400,000 + 1 \text{ billion}) * 0.01\% + \frac{1}{2} * (\frac{1}{5} + \frac{1}{7}) * 0.01\% * 8 \text{ billion} \approx 265,000$. We are also assuming here that anyone who does not suffer horrendous evil enjoys favourable outcomes, which is (unrealistically) favourable to procreation, since it is plausible that even if one does not suffer horrendous evil, one's life can still be barely or not at all worth living, in which case one enjoys no favourable outcome.

⁴ I do not, of course, argue here that humans *should* go extinct, all things considered. That said, human extinction may not be as outlandish a proposal as it is popularly imagined (Crisp 2021; Knutsson 2019).

Antinatalism from Humanistic Realism

In this subsection, I will justify the claim that civilisation will not realistically progress to a stage where horrendous evil in the world is reduced to an excusable level. I term this claim “Humanistic Realism”. My justification of this claim starts with a simple induction. It is reasonable to believe that there has always been more than an excusable level of horrendous evil among humans ever since *Homo sapiens* emerged. This provides a prima facie reason to believe that an inexcusable level of horrendous evil will pervade human societies. This induction is not absolute—we do not have to believe that something which has always occurred will always continue to occur, as long as we can identify mechanisms that stand a realistic chance of preventing it. Arguably, the most plausible—and probably the only—mechanism that can prevent horrendous evil in the future would be the progress of civilisation. In what follows, I will argue that such progress cannot realistically reduce horrendous evil to an excusable level. I do so from two angles: techno-economic and social-ethical. If my argument holds, then realistically, an inexcusable level of horrendous evil will pervade among humans.

I first examine techno-economic progress. Specifically, if technological progress and economic growth continue, there may be a future of hyper-abundance where people no longer need to resort to violence to compete for resources. By then, the age of exploitative capitalism would have ended. Moreover, cures and therapies for illnesses and injuries would also become much more readily available and affordable. To make the scenario more plausible, I assume that such a future *can* coexist with scarcity and finite resources.

Is this hyper-abundant utopia sufficient for the achievement of an excusable level of horrendous evil? I argue that it is not, for three reasons. First, a large proportion of horrendous evil does not happen due to the shortage of resources. Some people bully and abuse others for ideological reasons, or out of plain spite. Causes of political violence often cannot be reduced to mere competition for resources (Besley and Persson 2011). Put simply, no amount of resources can render the level of horrendous evil excusable if people use such resources to hurt each other.

Second, it is also not feasible to achieve an excusable level of horrendous evil by allocating more resources to its prevention. This is because doing so likely requires widespread surveillance that pervades every corner of society, which in turn means little privacy. This is usually seen as dystopian, and for good reason: it is plausible that people in a police state like this will live in fear, which may increase rather than reduce the incidence of horrendous evil.

Third, setting aside horrendous evil arising from human agency, it is also unrealistic to render the level of horrendous evil arising from disease and injuries excusable if resources are finite. I do not deny that humans can reduce horrendous evil in the world with finite resources—vile diseases like smallpox have been eradicated, for example. However, we must acknowledge that finite resources mean finite cures and therapies. Meanwhile, it is highly plausible (though not provable) that there are infinite ways for the human body and psychology to go wrong. Thus, there will always be a substantial number of cases of incurable diseases and injuries, a non-negligible proportion of which will be serious enough to constitute horrendous evil. Overall, it

is not realistic to achieve an excusable level of horrendous evil with hyper-abundance alone.

This naturally leads to the other aspect of progress to be accounted for: social-ethical progress. This refers to the prospect of more people becoming better moral agents. It is not hard to see how this can at least solve the problem of abuse, violence and discrimination, which cannot be solved by economic progress alone. If humans are so ethical that they have no abusive predispositions or prejudices and always resolve conflicts peacefully, then together with hyper-abundance, it may be possible to reduce horrendous evil arising from such causes to an excusable level.

I argue, again, that this is infeasible. It is arguably not realistic to expect people to have no prejudice towards any social groups or individuals, or to always act with virtue and wisdom when dealing with conflicts.⁵ Moreover, some people conceal their prejudices or abusive predispositions in public while manipulating and abusing others in their private relationships, and to detect and deter horrendous evil arising from such sources would, again, require a dystopian level of surveillance. Thus, the combination of social-ethical and techno-economic progress is also far from sufficient for reducing horrendous evil arising from discrimination, abuse, and violence to an excusable level, let alone that from illnesses and injuries.

Yet, it may be asked, could techno-economic progress turn the table around by *facilitating* social-ethical progress? Specifically, some bioethicists propose moral enhancement, where technologies can be used to expand people's moral concern beyond their social circle, help people overcome weaknesses of will, enhance their empathy, sense of justice, reasoning ability, and so on (Persson and Savulescu 2012; Schaefer 2015; Giubilini et al. 2024). If people can indeed become better moral agents through technological means, then there is at least hope for reducing horrendous evil caused by moral failures, including those arising from abuse, discrimination, and violence.

I, in principle, do not object to moral enhancement. Advocates of moral enhancement and antinatalists should have much ground in common, since they *can* agree on the badness of the baseline human condition (Moen 2021). However, below I offer two arguments against the prospect of achieving an excusable level of horrendous evil through moral enhancement.

First, technology is often touted by industries and neoliberal governments as the key to solving social and environmental problems today (Alexander and Rutherford 2019; McKeown 2018). In reality, however, technological solutions often fail to provide the promised benefits and/or create new problems (Johnston 2020). This criticism is especially popular today among environmentalists, who point to the environmental problems as evidence of humans' inability to foresee and control the

⁵ Again, I do not deny that some forms of prejudice have abated over the past few centuries, as illustrated in progress made in racial and gender equality in some countries. This does not conflict with my claim that horrendous evil arising from prejudices cannot be lowered to an excusable level. Moreover, any attempt to invoke such progress to justify pronatalism must explain away the frustrating entrenchment of sexism, racism, xenophobia, speciesism (et cetera), as well as the unabated recurrence of wars and genocide around the world today. These phenomena testify the persistence of abuse, discrimination and violence despite centuries (if not millennia) of arduous struggle against them. I doubt any pronatalists can confidently say that "those *will* go away".

devastating impacts of technology.⁶ Key to the criticism is the notion of hubris: we think that we can manipulate the world to our liking with technology, while in reality, the negative impacts of such technology are often beyond our control. This critique of techno-optimism is also consistent with people's increasing scepticism of the fantasy of "inevitable progress" and the "cumulative expansion of human power" that was once popular in the nineteenth century, both within and outside academia.⁷ Though the bad track record of technology cannot *prove* that its prospects in solving social problems will be bad, it should still raise caution against the constant hype over the assumed benefits of technological advancements in capitalist society (Birch 2017).

The second argument provides *reason not to believe* that moral enhancement can reduce horrendous evil to an excusable level. The key point here is that moral enhancement, if it can improve human morality at all, is not a cure for moral evil. Take, for example, enhancing empathy. As Ray and de Castillo (2019) point out, even though empathy correlates with altruism, enhancing empathy may not reduce bias or apathy because humans can choose to be more empathic towards the in-group and less so towards the out-group. This is consistent with findings in psychology suggesting that people can redirect empathy by modifying their interpretation of others' emotional states to align with personal biases (Zaki 2014). This issue also applies to Schaefer's (2015) proposal to enhance people's reasoning ability. Even though better reasoning presumably helps people make better moral decisions if they want to be moral, it does not help if they do not want to let go of their prejudices. It is also worth noting that proponents of moral enhancement generally do not explicitly regard it as a solution to horrendous evil. As Persson and Savulescu (2015, 52) admit, it does not assist people to know "the morally right thing to do in every situation". Thus, even if moral enhancement becomes viable, it is not clear whether it can reduce horrendous evil, and it is plausibly very far from sufficient for the goal of reducing such evil to an excusable level.

I have argued that we have good reasons to believe that horrendous evil will not be reduced to an excusable level, even with techno-economic and social-ethical progress. This means that we should adopt Humanistic Realism. If so, then my claim that procreation inevitably perpetuates a higher-than-excusable level of horrendous evil holds. This, in turn, means that procreation violates Rule 1 and is thus pro tanto wrong.

Antinatalism from Bullish Outlook

My argument for antinatalism is not strictly contingent on Humanistic Realism. In this section, I will show that I can argue for antinatalism with a more optimistic assumption, with the help of expected utility theory. The aim here is to present antinatalism to those

⁶ (Nightingale et al. 2020; Sadler-Smith and Akstinaite 2022; Washington et al. 2021). Along a different line of reasoning, Bostrom (2019) also cautions against the enthusiasm towards technology by arguing that, at *some* level of development, there will "almost certainly" be technologies with devastating impacts on the civilisation.

⁷ (Segal 1994). It is worth noting that Le Guin's work is also often interpreted as questioning such optimism towards capitalist and technological progress (Burgmann 2016; Baggesen 1987).

who reject Humanistic Realism—i.e. those who believe that it is possible for future people to, despite the odds, reduce horrendous evil to an excusable level.

To convince this group of people, I need to modify my argument by assuming instead that there is a realistic chance of achieving an excusable level of horrendous evil among humans in the future. Here, to make my argument clearer, I will suppose that the chance of achieving this is 50%. Since I have shown in the previous subsection that we have good reasons to adopt Humanistic Realism, 50% is a gross overestimation of the chance of success. If I can argue against procreation with an assumption so favourable to procreation, then the reason for believing in antinatalism is even stronger. I spell out this optimistic assumption as:

- **Bullish Outlook:** There is a 50% chance of achieving an excusable level of horrendous evil among humans before humans' extinction.

If Bullish Outlook is true, then procreation does not inevitably perpetuate horrendous evil since there are realistic alternative ways to achieve an excusable level of horrendous evil. Procreation, in turn, may not violate Rule 1. However, Rule 1 is not the only way to critique procreation. From the perspective of expected utility theory, having k people with a 50% chance of suffering horrendous evil is just as bad as having $0.5 k$ people with a 100% chance of suffering horrendous evil, since the expected disutility from horrendous evil is the same. Thus, according to expected utility theory, the following also holds if Rule 1 holds:

- It is pro tanto wrong to take action B which has a 50% chance to perpetuate⁸ horrendous evil for some favourable outcomes, unless the level of horrendous evil is semi-excusable.

A “semi-excusable” level of horrendous evil means the enjoyer-to-victim (of horrendous evil) ratio is higher than $0.5n: 1$, where n is the realistic population of an average city. Call this Rule 2. A ratio of $0.5n: 1$ means having *at most two* cases of horrendous evil on average in an average city. Intuitively, this is still a very strict condition. Since, as argued in Section “[Antinatalism from Humanistic Realism](#)”, the progress of civilisation is *far from enough* to achieve one case of horrendous evil per city, it is plausible that two cases of horrendous evil per city are not feasible either. The infeasibility of a semi-excusable level of horrendous evil, in turn, means that procreation violates Rule 2 under Bullish Outlook and is thus pro tanto wrong.

The bottom line: our moral intuition about Omelas is inconsistent with allowing the continued existence of horrendous evil in the world, and realistically, the level of horrendous evil will remain inexcusable as long as we continue to procreate.

⁸ “50% chance to perpetuate horrendous evil” means if action B is not taken, horrendous evil will end, and if action B is taken, there is a 50% chance that horrendous evil will end.

Objection and Replies

I have argued from Rule 1 and Rule 2 that, insofar as the favourable and unfavourable outcomes experienced by the procreated humans are concerned, procreation is morally wrong. Given that those rules are derived from moral intuition on the Omegas scenario, the natural question is, then, how does the hypothetical nature of the scenario affect its parity with procreation in real life? Specifically, this question may be understood as mirroring Machery's (2011) criticisms that (1) some scenarios in thought experiments are so far-fetched that our psychological capacity developed from everyday experience cannot reliably analyse them, and (2) descriptive details in thought experiments can bias judgements. In what follows, I argue that Machery's critique does not cast doubt on the Omegas scenario's parity with procreation.

First, based on Machery's reasoning, the Omegas scenario is *not* so removed from daily life such that our competence in judging it is undermined. It is true that the Omegas scenario involves fanciful elements like a machine that is almost magical by today's standards. However, what Machery is concerned about is not the realism of the *setting* of the story, but the realism of the moral issue at stake. Indeed, Machery concedes that even scenarios akin to science fiction can produce reliable intuitions. The key decision in the Omegas scenario—a quasi-political process to choose between sparing some from horrendous evil and conferring favourable outcomes to others—is realistic. Indeed, many people face such choices in real life. For example, issues like peacekeeping commitment, foreign aid, state-sponsored torture of prisoners, and invasions (e.g. Guantanamo Prison, US invasion of Iraq) do emerge in the elections of various countries. Even though the weighing of favourable and unfavourable outcomes in those cases differs from the Omegas scenario, both involve political decisions that directly decide whether someone will (continue to) suffer horrendous evil. Given such similarities, it is reasonable to say that Machery's (2011, 202) concern that our "psychological capacities are used beyond their proper domain" when judging the hypothetical scenario does not apply to this paper.

What about the second criticism, that details in thought experiments can bias judgements? On the surface, there is indeed a possible way for Machery to argue that the readers' moral judgement is biased in the Omegas scenario. The outcome in the Omegas scenario (whether a child will suffer horrendous evil) emerges soon after the decision of whether to stop the machine. In contrast, procreation produces, broadly speaking, the "next generation" of humans, some of whom may not be born until 10–20 years later. Machery may point to this difference and argue that, since people have a stronger tendency to discount the moral importance of more distant future outcome, readers may have discounted horrendous evil in the Omegas scenario less than that suffered by people being procreated in real life, resulting in a lack of parity between the Omegas scenario and procreation.

I argue that the (almost) absence of future discounting does not bias judgement in the Omegas case; instead, its presence biases judgement on procreation in real life. As Greene (2024) points out, *intergenerational* time discount is driven by *social* discounting rather than pure time preference. The former refers to "diminishing concern for the welfare of others based on perceived social distance" (p. 101). Even if pure time preference is morally legitimate, it is less plausible that social discounting

is equally so, and highly implausible that it is morally legitimate in the context of horrendous evil. It would wildly offend our intuition, for example, if someone justifies a diminished moral concern about the Holocaust just because one is, say, a Chinese rather than a Jew. If we take our commitment to the slogan “Never Again” seriously, then we should naturally maintain a consistent, negative evaluation of horrendous evil regardless of how socially distant the victims are from us. If social discounting is not morally legitimate in the context of horrendous evil, then horrendous evil for the next generation should not be significantly less bad than that happening now. This then means the immediacy of the outcome of the decision in the Omega scenario cannot be said to “bias” readers’ judgement.

But perhaps the issue of (the lack of) parity does not arise from biases or limitations of our psychological capacity as Machery worries, but from the roles played by Omegasians in the story. As indicated earlier, the decision of whether to stop the machine in Omega is akin to a referendum. Those Omegasians thus play the role of voters in a political decision. In contrast, parents’ decisions about whether to have children are usually private and intimate. Pronatalists like Wasserman (2005) and Overall (2012) argue that it is morally legitimate for the desire to have an intimate and respectful relationship with a child to weigh heavily in the procreative decisions of prospective parents. In contrast, it *may* be argued that it is less morally legitimate for personal desires regarding private relationships to weigh heavily in voting decisions. This means it may be morally legitimate for the prospect of horrendous evil to weigh less heavily in parents’ decisions in real life than in Omegasians’ decisions, resulting in a lack of parity between the Omega case and procreation.

I first clarify here that my argument is not undermined by Wasserman’s position because what I argue for is the wrongness of procreation by humanity *as a whole*. It cannot be concluded based on the argument in this paper alone that *individual* parents act wrongfully by choosing to procreate. Moreover, as emphasised earlier, my critique of procreation in this paper is limited in ambition: I only argue that it is wrong *insofar as the favourable and unfavourable outcomes experienced by the procreated humans are concerned*. It is thus compatible with this paper to posit that some cases of procreation can be all-things-considered right because other concerns like the desire to have a parent–child relationship (if it is morally legitimate at all) outweigh the concern about favourable and unfavourable outcomes that accrue to the next generation.⁹

⁹ A similar objection can be raised: if an action is wrong for resulting in horrendous evil when carried out by many people, then even daily activities—such as using a toaster—are also wrong, since with enough people doing so, someone will inevitably trigger an accidental electrical fire that leads to horrendous evil. Again, I do not suggest that such activities are all-things-considered wrong, since there are many potential moral justifications for one’s decisions beyond the favourable and unfavourable outcomes—justifications that this paper cannot review in detail. One may, for instance, invoke the notion of “permissible degree of self-concern” (Voorhoeve 2014) and justify using a toaster despite the risks it entails. That said, there can still be moral responsibility attached to carrying out daily activities that impose risks on others. One can, in fact, be liable to defensive harm if the risk materialises to threatened harm (Otsuka 2016).

A Cautionary Tale Against Procreation

Before ending this paper, I wish to provide a brief critique of some of the reasons raised in the literature that purportedly weigh in favour of procreation. As explained earlier, both Wasserman and Overall suggest that the desire for intimate and respectful relationships serves as a moral reason for procreation. Nevertheless, neither provides a detailed, positive justification of this view. It may be assumed that it arises from some parents' subjective evaluation that having such a relationship is essential for a good life, as Overall (2012, 218) briefly alludes to. However, this is not a firm basis for their pronatalism. As Vance (2024) points out, if one cannot have a good life unless driving a Porsche, our intuition would be to suggest therapy to this person rather than to agree that a Porsche is indeed essential for a good life. If it cannot be shown that a parent–child relationship is essential for a good life, then it is not clear that it weighs strongly in favour of procreation, since many other routes to a good life are available.

Moreover, from a virtue ethical perspective, if fulfilling one's preferences contributes—discernibly or not—to some unfavourable outcomes at a collective level, then one has a moral reason to change one's preferences. For example, in the context of environmental ethics, Jamieson (2007) argues that given the environmental crises today, one should cultivate the virtue of mindfulness. This allows one to appreciate the consequences of one's purchasing decisions and “take on the moral weight” of the environmental impacts of such decisions, which naturally changes one's consumption preferences. Sandler (2010) similarly argues that, given the harms of materialism to oneself and to the environment, one should cultivate one's virtue such that one is less desirous to possess or emotionally invested in material goods. A similar line of reasoning applies to procreation: given that it inevitably perpetuates horrendous evil, one should cultivate one's virtues to moderate, rather than to pander to, the desire to have children.

Other than the desire for parent–child relationships, Overall (2012) also posits that the self-transformation that people undergo when they become parents can be a morally legitimate reason for procreation. The problem here is that, given that the option to adopt is available, parents do not always need to procreate to experience this transformation (Brake 2013), at least in today's age when many orphans are still desirous of a family. It is worth noting that it is implausible that having *biological* children is essential for this self-transformation and thus a morally legitimate reason for procreation. Philosophers have argued that, morally speaking, biological considerations are irrelevant in parental love, and the preference for a parent–child genetic link may arise from and reinforce proprietarian attitudes towards children and deterministic beliefs about genetics (Levy and Lotz 2005; Nucci 2018). Overall also agrees with this position. Thus, it is doubtful that the (desire for) self-transformation provides a strong justification for procreation, at least for now.

Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued that, insofar as the favourable and unfavourable outcomes of the people being born are concerned, procreation is wrong because it perpetuates horrendous evil. The argument is made based on the rule of Impermissible Beneficence derived from our moral intuition regarding the story of Omelas, which stipulates that it is morally wrong to allow horrendous evil even if doing so results in favourable outcomes, unless such evil occurs at an excusable level. I also show that my argument holds even with a more optimistic assumption about the future of humanity. I do not aim to provide a definitive argument against procreation in all circumstances in this paper. Instead, this paper should serve as an invitation for further reflection and dialogue on the ethics of bringing life into a world fraught with life-ruining evil. I also invite ethicists concerned about the inexcusable level of evil in the world to take seriously unconventional ways to eliminate such evil. Antinatalism is a cause that works towards its own obsolescence, and I hope for a day when the progress of humanity proves my argument wrong.

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