

Having Children is a Morally Significant Choice:

An Interview with Serena Olsaretti*

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For the Catalan version, see <https://valors.org/tema/serena-olsaretti/>)

Q: Children do not ask to be born: What does this imply for the permissibility of bringing them into existence?

A: Bringing a person into existence is a decision that has enormous moral significance. This is so for three main reasons: one is that, as you note, children do not (and cannot) consent to being created; but this is not all. We must also note, secondly, that coming into existence, being alive, means that we are at risk of harm, including serious harm, as well as that we can enjoy the possibility of flourishing. It also matters, thirdly, that no one is harmed by *not* coming into existence. These three facts, which we hardly ever notice, are hard to deny. Together, they mean that when someone brings a new life into being, they are choosing, on someone else's behalf, to expose that person to a risk of harm, and they cannot be said to be doing this in order to save that person from a greater harm. This makes it hard – not impossible, I believe, but hard – to morally justify bringing new persons into existence.

We all believe that, even without someone's consent, it is permissible to impose risks of harm on that person in order to save her from a greater danger: think of a doctor who performs an emergency life-saving operation on someone unconscious, deciding on his behalf that the risks of the anesthetic are worth incurring. But this is different from the procreation case, because here the doctor is saving a person from another harm or risk of harm, that of dying if the operation is not undertaken. But as we saw, not coming into existence at all is not a harm for the person who does not come into existence. This is something most of us do not think about – but it would, I think, be implausible to deny it. If we believed that we harm someone by not bringing her into existence, we would have to believe that each one of us who is able to procreate harms very many people by not having as many children as we could. This is not plausible. We have not harmed, let alone wronged, the children we have never conceived. Even if we believe, as many do, that procreators *benefit* those who come into existence, it still seems hard to justify imposing a risk of harm on someone, without her consent, in order to benefit her – to see this, think of the doctor again. Suppose a doctor sees a patient of hers, who is temporarily unconscious after fainting, and the doctor judges her patient will wake up spontaneously and in decent health; suppose the doctor also knows that her patient would benefit from undergoing a knee operation, and thinks it would be convenient to have the surgery now. The doctor is not permitted, we believe, to undertake the knee surgery without the patient's consent, even though she knows the patient would be benefited by it.

But here is where we may find two differences from the procreation case which can help us argue for the moral permissibility of bringing people into existence. In the doctor-patient case, the benefit seems relatively trivial; by contrast, the benefit of living is or can be very great. Moreover, under some conditions, when it is impossible to wait for someone to consent in order to benefit her, we can rely on her *hypothetical* or *retroactive* consent. So we can argue that where the benefit we can confer is great, and we can *only* confer it without consent (this is what is necessarily true with the benefits conferred by procreation), we can be justified in conferring it, even if doing so involves

a risk of harm, *if* it is justified to think that the person on whom we confer these risks and benefits would retroactively or hypothetically consent to our doing so. I believe that we can justifiably think this – but that for us to be confident that the retroactive consent we hope to obtain is normatively significant, and not just the product of adaptive preferences our children come to form, or manufactured by us, the procreators, who also typically raise our children – we have weighty obligations as procreators. In particular, we have the obligation to assist our children in rising up to the challenge of living well, so that we can be confident enough the risk of harm was worth taking. This is where I would differ from some philosophers who believe we are *never* justified in imposing an unchosen risk of harm on someone in order to benefit them, and that it is always morally wrong to procreate. But, as I said, procreation is a morally weighty choice, and it should not be taken lightly, and here I differ from other philosophers who think that, provided we know that the lives we bring into existence are not abject, then *that is enough* to make it permissible to procreate. This view has, I believe, implausible implications – it would imply that procreators have very few and minimal obligations towards their children, i.e., just to ensure their lives are barely worth living, even when they are able to benefit their children at little cost to themselves.

Q: Why – for what motives – do people have children?

A: There are clearly many different motives which lead individuals to have children. Some are attracted to the idea of raising a human being and of discharging the role of parents, with all its challenges and rewards; others cherish the project of founding a family unit with a person they love; others may do it to meet expectations of their parents, or under the pressure of social norms, or so as to continue the family line, or even to sustain the number of members of their ethnic or national group; others to save a relationship that feels incomplete or may flounder without this new, supposedly shared commitment; or to try and find meaning in what is generally depicted, culturally, as a uniquely valuable project; some have children so as to have support in their old age, whether emotional, material, or both; some have children to give their first born a sibling. No doubt there are other motives why people have had and have children, but these are the common ones. I think that in most cases these motives are mixed, in the sense that more than one of these motives moves us; moreover, I think, our motives are typically not transparent to us, at least not fully so. Some people say they “have always known” they wanted children, but they often do not elaborate on why, or only cite vague thoughts such as that it felt like the right thing for them to do; others say they did not know whether they wanted children, until they reached the age when everyone around them was having children, or after which it’d be too late to make the choice, and they knew then they wanted to have a child themselves.

I do not think that these two facts – that we often act out of mixed motives when we choose to have children, and that these motives are, even while they are operative and they actually lead us to act, often not transparent to us – are necessarily a problem,

morally speaking. This is partly because there is a difference between the *motives* people act out of, and the *reasons* they have to act, or not act, that way. At the same time, I believe it would be desirable for procreators and parents, their prospective children, and for our society at large, if we did encourage a more reflective attitude towards what *reasons* we have to procreate. Since this position may seem inconsistent at first sight, let me elaborate it and explain why in my view it is not.

In response to the question of *why* we do what we do, we can cite what *moved* us to act in a certain way, or what *justified* our acting that way. We often use the language of “reasons” to refer to both of these things, but they are importantly different – we can talk of these two things as motives and reasons, respectively. (Philosophers sometimes talk of motivating vs. justifying reasons.) We recognise this when we say that we acted out of a motive that we recognise as unjustified (for example, when we were moved by resentment to offend someone, and we know we overreacted) or notice that we do what we have reason to do, but we do it for inappropriate motives (for example, we act with civility towards our neighbours, but only because we think it serves our interest to be on good terms with that).

Since - as the examples I have just mentioned show – reasons and motives are not one and the same thing, and since I believe that we do not *necessarily* have to have the “correct motives” for us to be justified to act as we do, this means that we may be acting justifiably even if our motives for doing so are not the “correct ones”. Going back to the case of neighbours: we are behaving in the right way - we are conforming with the reasons we have - when we behave with civility towards our neighbours, even though our motives are misguided: we are not morally praiseworthy, given the motives we act out of, whereas we would be morally praiseworthy if we were moved to behave with civility out of the respect we recognise we owe to our neighbours.

Back, then, to our procreative choices. We may have reasons for having children – our having children may be justified – even if the motives that move us to have children are, in some sense, inappropriate – because they are superficial, misplaced, or even morally dubious. To be sure, this does not mean that the *motives* people have children are completely irrelevant – as I said, they may be relevant for our evaluation of the quality of our wills as moral agents, and moreover, motives matter *instrumentally*, in the sense that, insofar as our motives are well aligned with the reasons we have, we are more likely to act as we in fact have reason to act. If we have children out of a desire to save a failing romantic relationship, for example, we will likely be disappointed because our relationship is more likely to fail than to succeed as a result, and may end up not enjoying the important goods which we do have reason to find in having a child, i.e. that of a valuable relationship with a child who needs our care and love to thrive. We may even end up failing the child we have brought into existence, because we have not paid sufficient attention, in our decision to have and raise her, to thinking about what we owe to her. It is important, then, to know what *reasons* we have to have children; if we do, we are more likely to do well by our children and by ourselves. As a society, we should

encourage a healthy and open debate about whether the facts which I mentioned earlier, which often *motivate* people to have children, are in fact good *reasons* for doing so.

Q: Is having children on a par with giving a gift or a selfish act?

A: Here we should distinguish, in my view, between *having* children (procreating) and *raising* children (parenting). Often these two things go hand in hand, but they clearly need not – there are procreators who do not parent the children they create, from JJ Rousseau who famously “exposed” five children to surrogate mothers and, arguably, gamete donors – and parents who did not procreate the children they raise – adoptive parents, or step-parents who informally help raise their partners’ biological children. Insofar as we keep these two things separate, I believe it is easier to think of procreation than of parenthood as a potentially selfish act, and harder to deny of parenthood than of procreation that it involves altruism. However, even this is a qualified claim, for reasons I will explain. (I would like to go further and question the dichotomy between egoism and altruism on which our thinking in this and other domains rests – but I don’t think space allows for this!)

Considering first of all the idea of procreation as such as either being the conferral of a gift or a selfish choice, here I can draw on some of the things I have said in reply to the first question above. Contrary to the idea that procreators confer the “gift of life” on the children they bring into the world, as I have said, procreation is, morally speaking, much more complex than that. “Merely” creating someone, regardless of what one does for that person, or what may become of that person, is a failure to recognise the great responsibility that procreators have and the value of the person that they might create and which requires to respond to in the right way – by acknowledging the risks they are imposing and their obligations to minimise them and help ensure that the life they have created has the opportunity to flourish. Procreation as such, moreover, might show insufficient regard not only for the child one creates, but also for other parties who are affected by it – for example, previously existing siblings of an increasingly large family that struggles economically. (I hasten to add, here, that is essential to not slide into a reproachable kind of moralism here – as many people who have children and cannot look after them are those who are underprivileged and unjustly poor, so their being unable to parent is a double injustice.)

When we turn to parenting, by contrast, the situation is different. Here I assume we are focusing on parenting adequately, i.e. meeting the various needs of a growing child as best as one can and sufficiently well to allow this child to grow into a functioning and sufficiently autonomous adult; parenting, so understood, necessarily involves being attentive and responding to the needs of another person, and taking what is in that child’s interest as a guide of one’s actions. Parenting a child then is other-oriented, and aims at the good of another person. In this sense, we may say that parenting as such is altruistic.

Once we keep in mind, however, that procreation typically is a means for parenting, and once we take into account some other aspects of procreation and parenting, the picture appears more complex. Most procreators are also parents; *if* they meet the obligations they have created, both to their children and to third parties, there is no reason why they should qualify as selfish. True enough, the question arises here whether, in the world we live in, parenting one's own biological child, as opposed to adopting a child who already exists and needs a family, shows a lack of altruism. Like others, I believe there are good reasons to want to parent one's own biological child –although I agree with those who have argued that some of these are contingent and due to the fact that the existing adoption system and current norms strengthen a bias in favour of biological parenthood. I also do not think that these reasons have invariable weight, regardless of how many biological children one has.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that there are some dimensions of the *actual* practice of parenting in our society which exhibit a disregard for those others who are not one's children. The tendency, especially by economically privileged parents, to favour one's own child over others, and to advantage them in every way possible within the boundaries allowed by the law, is morally problematic, and it can be all the more pernicious because it can seem justified by “the love of one's child”, which sounds like a perfectly commendable motive. We must be careful, then, to disentangle the aspects of parenting that display a healthy form of caring for another particular person one is responsible for – a justified parental partiality -, from those that exhibit a disrespect for others – elevating every interest of oneself and one's close family over even the most important interests of others.

Q: In light of the state of today's world, is it morally permissible to procreate?

By “the world as it is today”, I take it we have in mind a world in which, whatever socio-political and economic progress might have been made over the last several decades (for example, the global reduction of poverty; the creation of international institutions that sanction and help enforce human rights; the growth in the number of countries that are democracies), humanity now faces a new wave of challenges. These include, primarily, the challenge posed by climate change; the widespread and rapid rise of authoritarian and xenophobic political forces in established democracies; the flaws of an economic system that has allowed deepening income and wealth inequalities in almost all countries and has led even defenders of free market capitalism to suggest that today's capitalism no longer serves the interests of all.

Now, when we ask the question of whether in the world as it is today it is immoral to have children, it is important to bear in mind two general things. The first is that we could be asking this question thinking of the interests of one's potential children, of the interests of other persons (both living and future), or of how having children affects other, non-human interests. The second is that, here like with other important choices,

individuals who face it are unequally placed in morally significant ways, so we should be careful to not make blanket judgements that we assume apply to everyone equally.

Focusing on the perspective of potential procreators who are among the world's privileged – the well-off citizens of advanced economies –, and on whether their procreating may be immoral because of the prospects of their future children, I hope I am not wrong in saying that, right now, we are still in time to rise up to the challenges I have mentioned above, so that we can still live up to the obligations we have to our (prospective) children which, as I said above, we must meet for our choice to bring them into existence to be justified. If this is right, then procreation need not be immoral, even in the world as it is today. In saying this I do not mean to suggest that the next generation of parents has no reason to worry; quite the contrary: *all* of today's parents face, in addition to their obligation as citizens, further obligations, to their children, to work tenaciously so as to help ensure that their children's rights will be met in the future. There is another reason why well-off parents and prospective parents in advanced economies have greater and more demanding obligations than other parents and non-parents to ensure that the rights of future generations are met by reversing climate change: this is because their children, though they are economically well-looked-after, will have a much greater lifetime environmental impact than children of less well-off families. So, while having children need not be morally impermissible, it brings important moral responsibilities.

Q: In your work you talk of “parental justice”. What is this?

A: By “parental justice” I refer to how it is just for a society to distribute the costs and benefits of children, because of what is owed to parents, specifically. When others and I talk about parental justice, because it is a type of *justice*, what concerns us are not considerations about what incentives or disincentives are needed to bring about some desirable consequences. So, for example, suppose we believe (I do not believe this, but this argument is often made) that we should boost fertility, which in turn we believe is needed to slow population ageing – a difficulty many societies face. We would then defend policies that are supposed to induce more people to have children, such as, for example, child tax credit or child benefits and generous publicly funded parental leave or accessible high quality childcare. These policies, which I think of as “pro-natalist” in the sense that they aim at incentivising people to have children, do not appeal to considerations about *justice*, i.e. about what citizens *owe to one another*, or, as some social scientists prefer to put it, about what policies are equitable.

But note also that by parental justice, we refer to what is owed to parents, specifically, *qua* parents, insofar as they have interests in discharging and do discharge the role of parents (i.e. the role of raising a child, with all the responsibilities and rights that our socially and partly legally defined practices ascribe to adults who undertake this role). We may think parents ought to be supported, not because society owes this *to them*, but because society owes it to the children they will raise – and, so long as children are raised in families, we can only ensure that these children are raised as they need to be

raised by helping their parents. Or we may think that society does owe it to parents to support parenting – but not because they are parents as such, but because they are mostly women who suffer gender injustice by being steered into performing the lion's share of unpaid domestic work, and suffer discrimination on the job market and domination within the household. The question of parental justice is: does justice *to parents* require that the costs and benefits of children be shared between parents and society at large – independently of concerns about gender justice and childhood justice, and independently of whether we have reasons to incentivise or discourage procreation?

Q: Is it not unfair that citizens who are not parents should share the costs of children with those who choose to have them?

A: I do not think it is. Believing that it is the product of two ideas that, while initially tempting, we should resist. The first is that nonparents – indeed anyone – has a complaint *merely* if their shares are diminished or their situation is worsened as a result of choices others make. This seems plausible initially – much contemporary thinking in political philosophy, and to some degree in our public culture, as well – lays emphasis on the importance of holding people responsible for the choices they make. Why should *others* bear the consequences of our choices? Surely, if we made those choices freely, we should internalise their costs. But thus understood, this idea is too simplistic and implausible. The mere fact that someone worsens my condition is not enough to ground a complaint. As economic agents, we can be made worse off by a competitor appearing on the market; in our private lives, we can be made worse off as a result of a close friend relocating to a distant place. In neither of these cases does it seem that we have suffered an injustice. A second idea that motivates the claim that nonparents could complain of injustice, which we should resist, is the thought that what they lay a claim to in the absence of having to share the costs of children is rightfully theirs; they are benefits they have a right to get, *independently* of any obligations to share the costs of children. But this appears to be a dubious claim, once we notice that nonparents' fair shares (for example, their claims to publicly funded services and to any welfare benefits) is in fact made possible thanks to parents' work – since parents' work has gone into raising economically productive citizens who contribute through their tax contribution to the ongoing scheme of society. What nonparents say is their fair share is constituted by the benefits of children. Insofar as this is true, nonparents cannot complain about having to share the costs of children: doing so amounts to saying that justice requires that they nonparents reap only the benefits but not the costs of children, and there is no plausible basis for supporting this claim.

Q: If children are a society's investment for its future, shouldn't we be worried that in Catalunya fertility is at 1,3 children?

A: All ageing societies – and there are increasingly many, in Europe first and foremost but also elsewhere, with Japan being a glaring example - face serious difficulties. As fertility rates drop, and at the same time, life expectancy grows, the old age-dependency ratio grows (i.e., the ratio of people who are 65 years old or more, and the number of people of working age, i.e. between 15-64). The increase old age-dependency ratio puts tremendous strain on our pension systems. As the working age population keeps shrinking, today's adults will have fewer young people contributing to supporting them as they turn old. In light of this problem, societies need to think of how to restructure their pension systems. The main possibilities include extending the retirement age, so people are economically active for a higher number of years, and draw out fewer pension benefits over their lifetimes, even as they live longer; and increasing the number of younger economically active people, either by immigration or by procreation. Neither of the latter two solutions is unproblematic from a climate justice perspective; the rich, more polluting countries need to reduce their carbon emissions, and doing so while not *expanding* their numbers is extremely difficult. So, while all ageing societies face a challenge here, we should not rush to the conclusion that the solution is to have more children.

There is another reason why we should not rush to that conclusion – this one having to do with childhood poverty. Around 23% of Catalunya's children are at risk of poverty, living in very low income households. Spending on education in the whole of Spain remains below EU average levels. Private spending on education, by parents, has increased – but arguably increasing inequities between poorer and better off children, as parents who can afford it have spent more on extracurricular and enrichment activities. These are trends that should worry us; we should try and make spending on high quality universal education a priority, and we should be concerned first and foremost about *how much we invest* in our children.

Q: When we think about procreation should we think more about the future than about the present?

A: This sounds very much like the opposite of what we currently do. In many discussions of the moral issues raised by procreation, we often focus on a single slice-time perspective, focusing on a rather narrow temporal horizon, involving a generation of adults in procreating age, their children and perhaps their grandchildren. We also tend, generally, to be short-termists, and even our democratic institutions have an in-built bias in favour of the present and the near future: representatives have a few years to implement political programmes and agendas with a long-term horizon will not pay off. Economists have often proceeded on the assumption that a discount rate – assigning less weight to interests of people, the further off in the future they are. This is an explicit preference for the present and the near future.

In philosophy, a lot of work has been done over the last three decades on intergenerational justice, making the idea of what we owe to future persons more central

to our thinking. As public discussions of climate justice are now quickly picking pace, I think and hope that the idea that we owe it to posterity to justify the choices we make here and now will become more familiar and more acceptable. Among these choices are the ones we make, as societies, about population policies, and as individuals regarding how many children to have. This is a sobering thought, but this does not mean that we should reject it as false.

Q: There are increasingly more anti-natalist movements, such as #BirthStrike, for example. Do you endorse these initiatives?

A: There are different movements with different views of the morality of procreation that motivate their members. BirthStrike (unlike VHEMT, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement) is not anti-natalist as such – it does not, going back to the first question, express the view that it is always impermissible to procreate, nor even the view that it is impermissible to procreate now, in the world as it is. Instead, BirthStrike endorsers think that the threat posed by climate change for future children is reason enough for many people to decide to not procreate and mention this as a further reason to call for immediate action to tackle the environmental crisis. I think their position is entirely reasonable – although, as I said above, I believe it is still morally permissible to have children now, I also think that having children now is a morally riskier choice than it could and should be. So I do agree with the spirit and message of BirthStrike, for the sake of our children and future people and, for the sake of those who, younger adults than me, are deciding now whether to have children and rightly perceive this is a burdensome choice to make.

There is another aim which some other associations like Population Matters as well as BirthStrike have, which is to raise awareness about the vital importance of reversing population growth for our ability to create a just and safe future for all. We know that there are effective noncoercive means of controlling population growth – indeed, policies that are desirable for independent reasons, as they rely on empowering women and educating girls. Our commitment to overcome gender injustice, to eliminate childhood poverty, to reduce the massive global inequalities between the global poor and the rich, to reverse climate change and ensure our planet remains inhabitable for future persons and non-human animals – all of these goals become unmanageable, even further away from our reach than they are now, with continuous population expansion. As we head towards what is an inevitable 11 billion people (and perhaps more) by 2100, we can at least aim to have the 2100 population be the peak.

Q: Which society is more just: a society that limits procreation so as to achieve equality of wellbeing for everyone, or one that is pro-natalist but with a lower level of wellbeing?

A: We are here imagining circumstances in which, because of environmental factors, say, a population size increase cannot be accompanied by an increase in the overall

resources to be shared. In these circumstances, a society can make three different kinds of choices: the first is to aim to have a steady population – neither expansion nor decline of the population, and to maintain both intergenerational equality and the initial generation’s standard of living; the second is to allow for, or even to encourage, population growth, while allowing for marked intergenerational inequality, as the members of previous generations do not make sacrifices to adjust for the population increase; the third scenario is, like the second, one of population growth, but with adjustments made by the earlier generation to maintain intergenerational equality as much as possible – but of course, at a lower per capita level of well-being than that of the first society.

The second society, sacrificing as it does intergenerational equality, seems more unjust than the other two societies. As far as the first and the second are concerned, within a range, neither is more just than the other: if people are well off in both, and assuming that the population size is sustainable, the fact that members of the more populous society are less well off than they could be is not, by itself, an injustice. Think of another example: under very different conditions – where adding members to the population will *increase* the net overall amount of resources that can be produced – if some people choose to not have children, so that everyone’s standard of living, while still equal and while still high, is not as good as it might be, no injustice is done by those who choose to remain childless, or to have fewer rather than more children.

Q: Should the decision to have fewer children be a personal one, or should it be a collective one, since it affects everyone?

A: Most of what we do has some third-party effects. This does not mean that everything we do must be decided by everyone, and that it is a “collective” decision in this sense. The aim of the “liberal” tradition in political philosophy, broadly conceived, to include Kantian and Millian varieties of liberalism – is to find a way of dividing up the moral space *in response* to the recognition that we all have reasons to want to be protected from the unwanted effects of others’ action but at the same time also have reasons to have some freedom of action protected ourselves. We confer on individuals the largest possible sphere of basic freedoms, which is compatible with everyone’s having the same liberties. Procreative freedom is a basic freedom, and the rights it comprises – to bodily integrity and the integrity of the person – should not be invaded.

At the same time, the choice to have children is not personal in the sense that, morally speaking, it may be made without regard to how it affects anyone. Instead, we have an obligation to exercise our freedoms responsibly. To have freedoms, and the burden of having to use our freedoms carefully, are both part of the same package, so to speak: they are a privilege and a burden of being recognized as a rights-bearer among other rights-bearers.

Q: Should we reduce the number of children for the sake of the planet, or should we ensure the new generations understand the importance of sustainability, however large they are?

A: Both, most definitely. As the 2018 IPPC report made clear, population growth is a “key impediment” to reaching the climate targets which we must reach. The need to stabilise and ideally reverse population growth has been reaffirmed unequivocally in the paper “World Scientists’ Warning of a Climate Emergency”, published recently in *Bioscience* (5 November) and signed by 11,000 scientists. As these documents make clear, there are other actions we must also take here and now. As well as having fewer children, and educating our children to be environmentally responsible, what we cultivate and eat, what sources of energy we use, whether and how we travel, and our very economy, have to change. It is natural to not like thinking of ourselves as constrained by these constraints – but not liking the moral constraints we are under has never been a reason to deny they apply to us.

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