

Contributing to Overpopulation

The human population has risen dramatically over the past century and it shows no signs of slowing down. In the 19th century there were less than a billion people on the planet. Now, about 200 years later, there are more than seven billion people on the planet. Population experts predict that this number will keep rising until it reaches nine or ten billion by 2050 and, possibly, ten or eleven billion by 2100.¹

Many people believe that this increase in human population is a problem for our planet. We will consume too many natural resources, emit too many greenhouse gases, and generally speaking make the world a worse place for people in future generations.

Not everybody agrees that current population trends are unsustainable. But suppose that they are. In that case we have to ask: What if anything does this mean for our own individual procreative choices? In particular, do we have a moral duty to limit how many children we have as a way of addressing overpopulation?

Many people feel the pull of two different, seemingly conflicting thoughts when they think about these questions. The first thought is that if it would be bad for *all of us* to have, say, more than one child, then it would also be bad for *each of us* to have more than one child. And this makes sense: After all, is it really fair for me to have, say, two or three or four children if I know that it would be unsustainable for everyone who also wanted that many children to have them?

The other, seemingly conflicting thought is that while it might be bad for *all of us* to have, say, more than one child, it is not necessarily bad for *one person in particular* to do so. And this makes sense too: After all, we might think that whereas a lot depends on how many children we all have, not all that much depends on how many children you or I have in particular. And if you or I care a great deal about having a large family, we might find it implausible that morality could require us to sacrifice that goal whether or not our individual procreative choices make a difference.

Then again, maybe our procreative choices do make a difference. And of course, we may or may not think that making a difference is all that matters in this kind of case. Still, the intuition remains that having only one child (or no children at all) is an awfully high price to pay for what might seem to be a merely symbolic gesture.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Do our individual procreative choices make a difference when it comes to global issues like overpopulation? Why or why not?
2. Does the ethics of limiting how many children we have depend on whether or not our individual procreative choices make a difference? Why or why not?
3. Are there other cases where we seem to make a difference collectively but not individually? If so, what are they, and how if at all should our thinking about this case extend to those cases?

¹ <http://www.unfpa.org/world-population-trends#>

