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SYMPOSIUM ARTICLE

Population Reduction is Our Best Hope

Sarah Conly

Department of Philosophy, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, USA
Email: sconly@bowdoin.edu

Abstract
We can avoid severe environmental degradation only if we reduce our population numbers. While some believe that reduction in individual consumption could be sufficient to stop climate change, water shortages, habitat destruction, and other environmental problems, evidence shows that that is not a successful strategy. We can, however, accomplish population reduction and without destroying the economy or infringing on human rights.

Keywords: population; resource depletion; post-growth economy; obligation not to harm; system justification

The best news for the environment, perhaps the only good news, is that the fertility rate has been falling in many countries, especially in those with large carbon footprints. As we know, our current patterns of consumption are unsustainable. We already have shortages of drinkable water, of arable soil, of fish, even of sand (Beiser, 2019). Forest depletion has not diminished, despite the fact that we are at last paying attention to it (Andreoni, 2024). Ironically, the metals critical to the creation of many "green" technologies, such as electric cars and solar panels, are in short supply (Cooban, 2024). And those green technologies that have been successful have not had a significant impact: David Samways writes of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that "the IPCC's own data shows that, between 1990 and 2019, emissions due to economic growth and population growth eclipsed reductions from technical improvements" (Samways, 2026). Specifically, more growth in emissions due to population canceled out more than three-quarters of the reductions in emissions produced by greener technology (Chaurasia, 2020). And, of course, the need for fossil fuels, a finite resource we are apparently using up as fast as we can, has a huge impact on international politics and international conflict. We need to have fewer children (Bradshaw et al., 2026).

There are, generally, two sorts of arguments for having fewer children. Some authors argue that we should have fewer, or no, children because the lives of those children would be of unacceptably poor quality, given the suffering such children would undergo. Jade Sasser, for example, reports at length on the concerns of minority parents in particular, who question whether they should have children, given that their children will suffer, and suffer more than others, from poor environmental conditions (Sasser, 2024). Some authors, most notably David Benatar, have argued that even in the best of circumstances we should never have children, since life inevitably involves suffering, and others have echoed his thought in calling for the extinction of humanity for humanity's sake, no matter what the environment may be (Benatar, 2006).

That is not the position that will be addressed here, however. On the contrary, the second argument for reducing the number of children, far from proposing that we end humanity, is that we should have fewer children precisely because we want the human race to continue and want those

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who are born to have a good quality of life. We want our children to have lives free from extreme resource shortages and the conflicts those shortages typically produce. Thus, we want to produce a better environment for the sake of those, human and non-human alike, who will be born into it.[1] "Human societies, or the world as a whole, are overpopulated when their populations are too large to preserve the ecosystem services necessary for future people's wellbeing or to share the landscape with other species" (Cafaro, 2026, 29).

It may seem contradictory to argue that for the sake of humanity we should produce fewer humans, but at this point that is where all the evidence points. If we sufficiently harm our environment, no one will be able to live well. There is no doubt that the unsustainable consumption of resources and the destructive production of greenhouse gases are tied to population growth.

Some, of course, argue that we simply need to reduce consumption. Unfortunately, all the evidence is, first, that we are not willing to reduce per capita consumption.[2] Greenhouse gases continue to rise, despite our knowledge of their contribution to climate change (World Meteorological Organization, 2023, 2026). Even if we were willing to reduce our consumption to some extent, which apparently we are not, the truth is that we would need a radical reduction in lifestyle to maintain sustainable use of resources with a growing population. People need food and water, and they want computers and transportation and well-heated homes. The only answer is to have fewer people. How many fewer is something of a question. It depends, not surprisingly, on what sort of lifestyle we would insist on having, since that determines how many resources we would use. For example, it has been estimated that we could in fact survive with our present population and even some growth, if we were, globally, to become completely vegan but without additional cropland conversion, and if we would furthermore give up all fossil fuel use. There would be no ecological space for luxuries; indeed, it would be necessary "that rich nations dramatically reduce their biophysical footprints by 40–50%" (Hickel, 2019, 18).

Again, the evidence is that we are unwilling to do this. Even a relatively slight change in consumption, like the adoption of a vegan diet, seems to be unpopular: globally we are consuming more and more meat, not less and less, even in places that have easy vegan protein sources to take the place of meat, and even where giving up meat would enhance individual health (Blaustein-Rejto & Smith, 2021). And, as noted above, while we have improved in our use of renewables, we continue to use more and more fossil fuels each year, despite widespread concern over climate change (Global Carbon Project, 2024; Poynting & McGrath, 2025).

However, we do show signs of adopting the alternative strategy—reducing our numbers—so that we can continue to live comfortably without eventually destroying the environment and bringing about the human suffering that would entail. Whether we will lower our numbers enough, of course, depends on what we do. On the one hand, the fertility rate is falling: the global fertility rate was 2.2 in 2024, down from 5 in the 1960s (United Nations, 2025). On the other hand, there are so many of us now that even if we have fewer children per person, the overall population number will continue to go up. It is estimated that even with our current reduced fertility rate, we expect the population to reach 10.3 billion by sometime in the mid-2080s (United Nations, 2024). That is more than the Earth has ever had, and while we have many shortages now, it is clear that we will have many more shortages when we reach this unprecedented number, and the damage we will do may

[1]Connor Leak rightly points out that those who want to preserve the environment want that preservation for the sake of future generations, and thus the desire for environmental preservation is incompatible with the desire for extinction (Leak, 2025).

[2]Sasser (2024) argues that the fact that we produced fewer greenhouse gases during the COVID pandemic shows that an adequate reduction in production without a smaller population is quite possible. Obviously, however, that does not follow: the fact that some people, faced with the immediate threat of a fatal disease, slightly reduced their consumption does not in any way imply that people who are not faced with an immediate threat of fatal disease will make the huge per capita reductions necessary to avoid climate change and other environmental depredations.

be irreparable. We need to reduce the fertility rate even further in order to avoid disastrous consequences.

Despite this, many governments are encouraging their citizens to have more children, not fewer. In China, for example: "Officials are not just going door to door to ask women about their plans. They have partnered with universities to develop courses on having a 'positive view of marriage and childbearing.' At high-profile political gatherings, officials are spreading the message wherever they can" (United Nations, 2024). The central government has also announced several times that it intends to reduce "medically unnecessary" abortions, those not considered therapeutic. A "therapeutic" abortion is one that is undergone out of concern for the mother's health or because the fetus is not developing properly. An abortion a woman undergoes because she has personal, familial, or economic reasons not to have another child is considered non-therapeutic. At least in the United States, most abortions are non-therapeutic, and while statistics are uncertain, it is thought that most abortions worldwide are similarly elective (Finer et al., 2005). Limiting non-therapeutic abortions would thus greatly reduce the number of abortions, and presumably would increase the number of births.

Other countries have similarly encouraged greater population growth. Most recently, Donald Trump has called on women to have more children, and his staff in the White House are assessing ways to promote pregnancy (and with it, what they consider to be conservative family values). One of the options being considered is the payment of a $5000 bonus for each child; another is the bestowal of a National Medal for Motherhood (Kitchener, 2025). In Russia, Putin has told women that they should have "many children" and has introduced a cash award for women having more than 10 children (Mehrara, 2024).[3] In Japan, the government has taken steps to make it easier to have children, including subsidies for child-rearing (Yamaguchi, 2023). Across Europe, East Asia and North America, many governments are, like Japan, introducing measures such as paid parental leave, child care subsidies, and direct cash transfers. According to the U.N., the number of countries deliberately targeting birthrates with the intention of increasing them rose from 19 in 1986 to 55 by 2015 (Rich, 2024).

Nandita Bajaj and Kirsten Stade have demonstrated that while policies to discourage having children were widely castigated as coercive, most were not, but recent pronatalist policies are increasingly designed to push people into having children, sometimes against their will. Prominent among these are laws restricting access to abortion: "Globally, 26 countries—impacting 5% of women of reproductive age—restrict abortion altogether, while another 95 countries—impacting 36% of women of reproductive age—allow abortion only to save the life or health of the mother" (Bajaj & Stade, 2023, 54). Making it illegal for a woman to end her pregnancy is certainly coercive. Many in the West objected vociferously against China's one-child policy, on the grounds that restricting births to one infringed on the mother's right to self-determination. The push for more children, however, has met with much less attention and much, much less in the way of protest, even though a woman's body is at least as impacted by an unwanted pregnancy as by having only one child when you might have wanted more.

In addition to coercive legal measures, stress placed publicly on the supposed need for more children has resulted in insult and opprobrium for those who do not have children. Even before Trump's most recent pronouncement, the U.S. then-candidate for Vice President, J.D. Vance, castigated supporters of presidential candidate Kamala Harris's as "childless cat ladies," and earlier stated that childless people should have fewer voting rights than those with children (Jones, 2024; Treisman, 2024). While Vance was condemned by many for his remarks, it is noteworthy that both Harris and Pete Buttigieg, specifically mentioned by Vance, responded by saying that they already had or intended to have children. Harris was lauded as a great stepmother by her defenders, and Buttigieg announced that he and his partner were trying to adopt. This suggests that they believed

[3]Mehrara (2024).

the charge of childlessness might have weight if it were in fact true. And while disassociating herself from negative judgments about childless people, Harris herself proposed a $6,000 tax credit for parents with infants (Rich, 2024).

1. Economics

Why do governments push for more children? Given the connection of large populations to unsustainable resource use and the simultaneous production of carbon outputs that result in climate change, why try to raise the fertility rate? As Bill Clinton (or at least his advisor James Carville) once said, it is the economy, stupid. The fear by those in government is that even if potential parents are content with very few or no children, the economy of the country needs a constantly growing number. The widely received idea is that the economy needs to grow to be successful, and that for the economy to grow we need more and more consumers to whom more and more products and services may be sold (The Economist, 2024). Some governments also worry that a declining number of younger workers will not be able to support the financial needs of older retirees, which in turn leaves a class of people either unsupported or supported by a government with fewer financial resources as its workforce shrinks. All of this is accompanied, of course, by the widely accepted idea that politicians will be voted out of office if an economy is not doing well.

The assumptions that a successful economy is a growing economy, and that a growing economy needs an increasing population, are widely taught, and many of the governments cited earlier as encouraging a greater fertility rate tie that support explicitly to the need for more people to drive the economy. It is true that potential parents do not have children in order to support the economy, any more than they buy cars and refrigerators to support the economy. But there is no doubt that people want a good economy, and it is also true that personal finances affect people's willingness to have children. We know that the expense of children is one thing that currently discourages potential parents from having more children, and we know that historically times of economic recession have resulted in a lowered fertility rate, a rate that typically rebounds once the recession ends (Caron, 2024; Livingston & Cohn, 2010; Percheski & Kimbro, 2013). Thus, government efforts to make it financially more feasible to have children seem likely to have an effect if the incentives offered are significant. If this in turn does drive the economy up, it may seem that some needs of both individual citizens and those in government will be met by a pro-population growth policy.

However, this, as said, bodes extremely ill for those who will be alive in the future, including those who are alive now and who will foreseeably live to reach the mid-2080s. The economic gain for adults now is the loss of untold future generations. "Anthropogenic pressures now exceed six of the nine identified planetary boundaries—those related to carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, land-system change, freshwater change, biogeochemical flows, and novel pollutants" (Kallis et al., 2025, 64). These planetary boundaries "typically represent levels beyond which environmental stress could lead to large-scale systemic and potentially irreversible environmental degradation. The most recent assessment shows that six of the nine planetary boundaries have already been transgressed." (van Vuuren et al., 2025). There appears, then, to be a conflict between the interests of those currently doing the shopping and procreating and those who, in the future, will be hit by greatly diminished resources and cataclysmic climate change. How should such a conflict of interests be resolved?

First, we should note some problems with the pro-growth argument. While these ideas, that economies must grow to be healthy and that a growing population is necessary for the economy to grow, are widely accepted, they are not universally accepted. There are a number of reasons to think that popular economic thinking is outdated, or that indeed it was always false:

1. The growth model may look disturbingly like a Ponzi scheme. A Ponzi scheme, we remember, is "an investment swindle in which some early investors are paid off with money put up by

later ones in order to encourage more and bigger risks" (Merriam-Webster). The risks in this case are to the planet and to the investors, that is human beings, who rely on that planet. Or, it may be defined as "a form of fraud in which belief in the success of a non-existent enterprise is fostered by the payment of quick returns to the first investors from money invested by later investors." In the case of an economy bolstered up only by a constantly growing population, the number of "investors," that is people, may continue to grow, but they will eventually have nothing to invest. Ponzi schemes eventually go bust, and an economic plan destined to go bust is not one that we should endorse. We do not have an infinite number of resources. Some resources are sustainable, but only if they are used at a much slower rate than an ever-increasing population would allow. Some resources are not sustainable: they are finite, and we will inevitably use them all up. We will need to develop alternative technologies, ways to heat houses or fuel cars that do not depend on oil, for example. Using finite resources at a slower rate will help give us time to develop these needed alternatives. Without this, the pursuit of a healthy economy through growth will lead to an absolutely failed economy. The very growth intended to preserve the economy will destroy it.

2. Furthermore, even in the short term, the supposed correlation between a growing population and economic health may be false. First, it is clear that even a rapidly increasing population is not sufficient to produce a healthy economy. Sub-Saharan African countries have some of the highest population growth in the world, but do not have the most robust economies. Norway, for example, has a much lower fertility rate than does Nigeria, but a much healthier economy. There is no one-to-one correlation between numbers of people and economic success.

   And, in some cases, an economy can be healthy even if the population in it does not grow at all. Japan, for example, has increased its productivity even while its population declined. Nor need increased productivity necessarily result in greater carbon emissions: under some scenarios, "1% slower population growth could be accompanied by an increase in income per capita of nearly 7% while still lowering carbon emissions" (Casey & Galor, 2017).
3. More radically, some argue that an economy can be healthy, and indeed, superior to growth economies, when it does not increase productivity. John Stuart Mill wrote with some prescience in 1848 that a stationary state might better fulfill our needs than one of growth:

> The density of population necessary to enable to obtain, in the greatest degree, all the advantages of both cooperation and social intercourse, has, in all the most populous countries, been attained … If the earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to thing that unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it, for the mere purpose of enabling it to support, a larger, but not a better of happier population, I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it (Mill & Robson, 1965, 756).

Contemporary interest in post-growth economic systems is burgeoning. Many argue that rather than stressing GDP, post-growth economies can focus on improvements in human welfare. Herman Daly has argued extensively that an exclusive interest in continued growth misses what it is to have an economy that is truly healthy. Rather than increasing monetary wealth or the number of goods, a country could instead work to promote quality of life, which does not necessarily correlate with economic gain (Daly, 1997). More recently, Jason Hickel has endorsed degrowth, and argues that while degrowth will entail giving up capitalism, it will lead to increased justice, happiness, and appreciation for the natural world (Hickel, 2021). These and other economists argue that the point of an economy should be to contribute to the welfare of those within in it, including greater economic equality, better health, and improved quality of life in general, rather than to focus on monetary growth which may have limited benefit (Feldstein, 2023). "There is

accumulating evidence on policies that could secure wellbeing without growth in high-income countries (e.g., universal access to essential goods and services, working-time reduction, and carbon and wealth taxes)" (Kallis et al., 2025, 73).

So, there are arguments that basing a healthy economy on constant population growth is neither necessary at present nor practicable in the long run.

Obviously, however, there are those who believe in the constant growth model of a healthy economy and in the need for a growing population to support that. Even the argument that such a system will inevitably fail in the future may not move them. Failure based on a lack of resources or on a steady-state population is not going to occur immediately, and probably will not occur during the lifetime of those now in their prime. If they prefer to maintain their affluent lifestyle at the cost of great harm to those who will later suffer from lack of resources, what can we say? This brings us to moral questions. Can we require that people give up what they want for the sake of other people? What obligations are involved here?

2. Morality

Say that to achieve environmental health, some of us in affluent countries would have to sacrifice what we want—lots of kids with lots of money and goods—so that those who will live in the future, or those living now in areas that suffer from poverty, can have better lives. Described this way, such a sacrifice may appear to be a matter of altruism, and the question arises as to whether altruism can be morally required. Some believe that there is an obligation to engage in some degree of altruism; that is, they believe we have an obligation to help those in need. To what extent we need to help them, and how much we are obligated to sacrifice in order to help them, are questions which engender debate. Others, however, seem to think that we have no obligation to help other people—that altruism is always supererogatory. Still others seem to think that the strength of our obligation to help others is a function of propinquity: we have an obligation to help our family, our neighbors, or our fellow citizens, but not to help those with whom we have no connection.

However, focusing on altruism ignores the fact that we are actually causing the harm that others will suffer. It is not a question of whether innocent people must give up something they want in order to make others' lives better, which is what altruism is about. It is a question of perpetrators of harm having an obligation to stop perpetrating that harm. This is not altruism, but simply a duty which is generally recognized: do not hurt other people if you do not need to. Of course, those who now over-consume and create more children than the planet can sustain do not intend to do harm. They may not even be aware that today's lifestyle endangers others. But even someone who innocently poses a threat to others can be stopped, at least if that threat is severe and the action required to prevent that harm is not disproportionate.

We know, for example, that we already feel entitled to constrain consumption in various ways. We have many laws and regulations as to what products can be produced, how they may be produced, and who may buy them. We have laws as to minimum wage and workplace safety. We have laws regarding product safety, which make things like cars much less affordable than they would be if their producers did not have to make them relatively safe (cars made of heavy-duty cardboard would be immensely affordable, but their drivers would be much more prone to instant death). We have environmental laws. We have laws about truth in advertising, and laws that prevent certain sorts of advertising. We tax people on what they spend, judging often on whether something is a mere luxury or a necessity and making the acquisition of some things that much more difficult. Granted, many people object to at least some of these laws, but by and large the regulation of the economy, including occasional restrictions, is regarded as legitimate government business. We want a healthy economy, but balance that against the need for healthy people and, at least in some cases, the need for a healthy environment. We recognize a duty to give up some things you might like to do for the sake of others' welfare.

However, if the only way to regulate consumption and its accompanying carbon production is to intervene in procreation, that may seem very different. Some may feel that interference with the body is quite a different thing from a luxury tax on a yacht or requiring cars to meet safety standards. We do interfere with the body in some ways, of course, at least indirectly. We make some drugs illegal. We regulate food safety in a way that is intended to prevent us from ingesting *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, and so forth. We tax cigarettes in a way that is intended to reduce the amount that people smoke. And we directly interfere with the body when we place people in jail, or draft them to fight in a war. However, to interfere with procreation may seem very different.

But how different is it? Imagine that I am pregnant, and we know with 100% certainty that if this child is born, it will destroy the world. Perhaps we can foresee that it will be a new Hitler, except more malicious and armed with an infinite number of nuclear weapons. Or perhaps we know that it carries an infection with a 100% mortality rate for both humans and animals and an unbelievably fast rate of contagion, which it will proceed to spread no matter what we do. I nonetheless insist on going through with the pregnancy. Maybe I do not believe the evidence I am given, no matter how definitive. Maybe I just refuse to think about it because it distresses me. Maybe I do not care—I want to have this child and will not end the pregnancy no matter what incentives I am given. None of these things can happen, but if the fate of humanity hung in the balance, it would be ok to prevent me from bringing little Damien into the world. It is a matter of self-defense.

However, it can rightfully be objected that the case of creating a population whose size is not compatible with sustaining a healthy planet certainly is not exactly the same as destruction wrought by a devil baby. No one person will destroy the environment. Like most environmental harms, overpopulation is a function of many people, each of whom contributes only a small increment to what is, in the aggregate, a devastating effect. I have said earlier that we may stop perpetrators from doing harm to others, but this depends on how great that harm to others is and how great a harm to the perpetrators is needed to prevent their dangerous action.

For example, we agree that theft is wrong, and that it is permissible to take some steps to stop someone from stealing. However, consider a person who is dying of hunger. Let us say that he sees a house that belongs to rich people who routinely let their food rot in their overcrowded refrigerator, forgetting what is in the back of the refrigerator until the smell reminds them that they should throw it out. Suppose that the starving guy can get into the house while they are out and steal some cans of broth that would keep him alive. Most would forgive a person who stole under these circumstances, even if he inadvertently stole the very broth that was needed for a sauce at that night's sumptuous banquet. The starving man will suffer death if he does not steal. He does harm the rightful owners of the food, interfering with their plans for that night's entertainment. But we generally allow people to harm others in order to save their own lives, at least if the harm they do is not dire.

If, then, a population that now consumes unsustainably and who have more children than the planet can bear must do that in order to maintain their own lives, or, perhaps indirectly, the goods it needs in order to maintain their own lives, some might argue that this is permissible, just as it is permissible for the starving man to steal from the excess of the overfed. However, those who produce an unsustainable number of children are not like the starving man.

It is clearly not the case that consuming less and having fewer children will cause the deaths of those who are restricted in these ways. What if, however, having fewer children than they might ideally have, perhaps having only one child, interferes with their idea of a happy family life? It might —perhaps they have grown up planning to have a big, happy Walton family (a fictional family of seven children living in harmony in an idyllic, bucolic setting). Can we interfere with a life plan simply because engaging in it contributes to a great harm?

Of course we can. Life plans are interfered with all the time, and unless that change is too dire or we are too neurotic, we adjust and make new plans according to circumstance. Most people who dreamed of becoming star athletes and worked for that all through high school and college do not get drafted to a team. They have to do something else. People fall in love and want to marry, and then the beloved leaves them. People have to leave a place they love in order to find work in some

strange city. Even when it comes to children, many people already find that their initial plans will have to be changed. Some people decide to have fewer children than they might have liked because they cannot afford more. Some have fewer because they do not want to disrupt their careers for the amount of time childbearing and child-rearing takes. Some people find that they cannot have any children at all, and yet these childless people go on and live happy and productive lives. Anne Boleyn may have lost her life because she did not give birth to a male heir, but those times are not these times: value in life may be derived from many sources. Here the proposal is not that people should be childless, since we do not want the human race to die out, but that people should only have as many children as is compatible with a sustainable planet. Many life plans are more greatly interfered with than this every day.

But what about the right to bodily integrity? As we have said earlier, many people objected to the Chinese one-child policy on the grounds that it infringed on very important rights. That policy was put in place in order to avoid overpopulation and the famine that the state feared would accompany it. The danger in that case was not the overpopulation of the globe but the overpopulation of the nation of China. These fears were not unrealistic. Yet, it was thought by many that the Chinese policy, which sometimes included forced abortion, was not acceptable.

This is a reasonable criticism. While I have argued that a forced abortion would be acceptable in the case of the impossible Devil Baby who will single-handedly destroy the world, it is not something we could easily accept as a widespread social policy, and certainly not for mothers whose children are not devil babies but simply beings whose existence might innocently contribute an increment to a great harm in the form of famine.

Fortunately, we need not invade people's bodies to discourage excess procreation. Most programs designed to reduce the number of children born were not coercive: on the contrary, they focused on making contraception available to people who wanted it, which allows people to choose rather than preventing them from choosing. The fact that 257 million women globally face an unmet need for contraception means that supplying contraception is not only not coercive, but in fact increases their autonomy (United Nations Population Fund, 2022).

The first thing to do then is to make contraception cheap and readily available. In richer countries, contraception is available but may be too expensive or difficult to access. Many have long recommended that birth control pills should be available over the counter, rather than by prescription, to make access easier and cheaper, and in the United States the FDA has recently recommended a new kind of contraceptive pill which is accessible without prescription (Committee on Gynecologic Practice, 2012; Tomiyoshi, 2024). Some high schools and junior high schools already keep the day-after pill on hand, and this should be the policy in all school districts. We know from experience that easy accessibility of contraception increases its use.[4]

Most of the highest fertility rates in the world are found in places where medical care is difficult to come by, for example in sub-Saharan Africa. Where countries do not have the wherewithal to provide medical care, those in the developed world could supply contraception to places that do not have it. The cost of supplying this basic form of health care would be minimal compared to the cost of preventing the war, illegal immigration, and environmental destruction that unsustainable growth will bring.

As well as making the avoidance of procreation easy and cheap, we could provide financial incentives. The Trump administration, as said, is considering paying parents $5,000 per child as an incentive to bear children. We could just as easily pay money to those who refrain from having more children than we think the environment can bear. Without any coercive measures in place, the fertility rate is, as said, already falling. The reasons for this are complex but include a greater social acceptance of childlessness, concerns for environmental dangers from overpopulation, concern for

[4]For example, in Indonesia, where the creation of local clinics dispensing contraception contributed greatly to a significant drop in the fertility rate (Frederick et al., 2011).

the welfare of any child a person might have, given environmental deterioration, and, for many, the financial cost of having children. The last is the one we can most easily affect if we want to further reduce the fertility rate. We know that in times of recession fertility rates drop and that when recessions come to an end the fertility rate picks up again. People want fewer children when that will take a greater proportion of their income, either because they have less income or because the cost of having a child rises. We do not want to bring about a recession in order to reduce the fertility rate, and we would not need to. Just as the administration plans financial incentives to raise the fertility rate, we could provide incentives to do the opposite, with tax breaks, for example, for those who have only one child.

Or, we could provide financial disincentives, such as a fine or a tax penalty for those who have more than one child. Even if a disincentive has no more financial effect than an incentive of the same amount, it is likely to have a different psychological effect. An incentive may convey the message that you have been especially good and should be rewarded when you have only the recommended number of children. A disincentive suggests that you are doing something wrong when you exceed the recommended number. Which of these is more effective sometimes depends on circumstances, but both have an effect on behavior. To make financial incentives and disincentives equitable, we would need to introduce them on a sliding scale, where the costs to rich people are significantly greater than the costs to those who have less money. This, though, can perhaps be done, especially through a tax penalty where financial information is already available.[5]

There is, then, no reason to think we need forced abortions or sterilizations. It is true that those might be the only way to literally stop someone from having a child, but they are unnecessarily intrusive. There will no doubt be people who do not yield to financial rewards, but we do not typically gear sanctions toward preventing literally everyone from engaging the behavior we want to discourage. We never do. We do not want people to speed, for example, but it might be that the only way to prevent anyone at all from speeding would be to station policemen with machine guns by the side of the road, ready to shoot out the tires of speeders. We do not do that. We fine people for speeding, and people are persuaded by this to keep their speed to what is safer for themselves and others. Vietnam has recently attempted to control its madcap traffic and to do so they have introduced very large fines. The biggest tickets now are for $1,500, which is greater than a month's salary for most people. The result is that many fewer people now ignore red lights, drive on the sidewalk, and so forth (Cave, 2025). For Vietnam, this will be a huge cultural change, and people complain that driving now takes much more time, but even so, being hit in the pocketbook has had a significant effect. No one needed to stand by the road with a machine gun.

The same is true for having children. Some people will do what they want no matter what the repercussions, just as some people will murder even in states where there is a death penalty. When it comes to population, we need enough people to limit the number of children we have so that we avoid breaking the planetary limits, and we do not need to use coercion to do that.

3. Psychology

Lastly, we may consider what it is that we really want. I have put this as a conflict between what older people want and what those who will live in the future (again, some of whom are now alive) want or will want. But there is some ambiguity about what those who consume and procreate in excess now actually want or would want if they had other options.

Psychologists write that we are widely subject to a mental operation they call system justification: "a process by which existing social, economic, and political arrangements are preserved in spite of the evident harm they entail for disadvantaged individuals and groups" (Jost, 2020, 83). It is perhaps not surprising that we would seek to justify systems that disadvantage others if they are to our own

[5]Sliding scale fines for offenses have been introduced in a few places (Henley, 2023; Pinker, 2015).

advantage, but what psychologists find is that even those who are oppressed by the system seek to see it as justified. Those who work hard and remain poor, for example, may still believe that the system in place rewards hard work and thus that those who are rich and those who are poor each deserve to be.

The explanation for this appears to be the need for ease of mind. Especially if people cannot see a way to change the system, they feel better if they see it as justified: "Engaging in system justification serves the palliative function of increasing satisfaction with the status quo and addresses underlying epistemic, existential, and relational needs to reduce uncertainty, threat, and social discord" (Jost, 2020, 276).

So, our acceptance of a system with foreseeably dire effects on the future is not necessarily a function of a belief that we are more important than those who will come, or even of a deep love of consumerism or a heartfelt love of a particular family size. Rather, it may be an acceptance that simply arises from an unfortunate system's being the present system. Some authors specifically cite the fact that the current predominant economic system, capitalism, requires growth, and growth seems to be incompatible with taking steps to improve the environment. Given this, they argue, those who defend capitalism are compelled to deny that the environment is suffering harm in a way that requires the loss of capitalism: they do not want to do away with or even limit capitalism (Busk and Krieger, 2024; Collomb, 2014; Gunderson, 2017; Petersen et al., 2019). Their denial, it is argued, need not simply consist in a claim that no change is occurring, which, as time goes by and change becomes more obvious, is increasingly difficult to maintain. Rather, they may simply deny that the change is a problem or may argue that while it is a problem, no radical economic change is required to address it; they may argue that the problem is neither severe nor immediate or may promote the idea that technology will somehow fix the problem, or that growth may be "green," or that individual efforts rather than economic change will be sufficient to address the problem. All of these, some argue, are designed to protect the current capitalist system.[6]

Related to system justification is the fact that we typically resist change in general, even when it is beneficial. Sociologist Thorsten Veblen wrote, in 1899, that "all change in habit of life or thought is irksome," and there is no reason to think that we have changed in this regard. "For better or worse, people find it much easier, for social psychological reasons, to support and defend that which is part of the established status quo—as opposed to that which seems to question or upend it" (Jost, 2015, 627). Of course, change happens, but typically it is gradual. So, even when it improves our situation, we can see that an adherence to destructive practices is not really a reflection of an unchangeable preference.

It is not surprising, then, that the idea of changing our behavior in order to do what is better environmentally meets resistance. This is the system we have, and we tend to resist any change, and we particularly resist change that is deep or far-reaching. Since the economy as we now run it seems to be inimical to environmental preservation, it makes sense that we would either reject that causal relationship or decide that environmental preservation is not important. As Jost puts it:

> To defend the environment is therefore to challenge the legitimacy of common business practices and, at this point, perhaps even the foundations of the free market system. Furthermore, to acknowledge the problem of anthropogenic climate change is tantamount to embracing the need for governmental regulation, which is ideologically unacceptable to many economic conservatives (Jost, 2020, 238).

As we know, however, change is nonetheless possible. Laws requiring seat belts and laws calling for strict prosecution of drunk driving were resisted at first as unjustified incursions into personal liberty. Workplace safety laws were resisted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce as unjustified

[6]In particular see Busk and Krieger (2024) and Petersen et al. (2019).

government overreach. Now we regard them as common sense. This is not to say there are not people who drive drunk or businesses who do not live up to employee safety standards, but in response to both legal sanctions and social disapproval of these things the number has greatly dropped, and very few, if any, people think they should be legal (Center for Disease Control, 2025; Foundation for Advancing Alcohol Responsibility, 2025). More significantly, laws against segregation in the United States aroused violent resistance, but of course now people feel that they are obviously correct.

Which needs to come first, laws or social acceptance? Both the chicken and the egg develop together. We obviously need some degree of social acceptance for a law to be passed, but once passed, laws very often influence social acceptance. Ideally, when it comes to reducing the fertility rate, we would never need laws, as people will see the advantage of that themselves. But laws providing incentives and disincentives could help, where that is called for. And obviously laws that provide incentives to raise the fertility rate may have the effect of raising it, which is why we need to avoid them at all costs.

4. Conclusion

We do not like to lose our liberty. But we are losing liberty, and we will lose liberty, as long as the population grows. We need to remember that there are different ways of losing liberty. Sometimes it is lost through the intentional act of a governing body, but sometimes it is lost through the unintended effect of widespread social practice. There is no reason to think that the first of these will always cause a greater deprivation than the second. It depends on the actions in question and the circumstances. A social practice that leads to all the losses discussed earlier is one that means we will not be able to do many things that we like to do, and that will be an unimaginable loss of liberty. We need to pay attention to both governmental actions and the effects of social practice, and we need for each to rein in the other when that is appropriate.

Sarah Conly is the author of *Against Autonomy: Justifying Coercive Paternalism and One Child: Do We Have a Right to More?* She is Professor Emerita of Philosophy at Bowdoin College.

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