A Risk-Based Argument For Anti-Natalism

1. The Risk-Based Argument: Begin with a case:

> **Life Extension Biohacker** In a world where everyone lives to the age of 40, and without anyone's consent, Barry releases a gene-edit into the world that extends life expectancy from 40 to 120.

Some will already find this action morally objectionable, *even though* it only benefits billions of people, because there are moral reasons against altering other's lives and DNA without consent. (Just recall how resistant many people were to vaccine mandates, despite the fact that vaccines only boost immune systems rather than altering DNA, and such mandates were proposed by governments, not vigilantes!) But, now add:

> **Life Extension Biohacker, Continued** Oh, and also, the gene-edit causes 25% of the population to develop one of several horrors; such as severe, debilitating diseases (e.g., MS); Severe, debilitating chronic pain; Dispositions which result in them committing rape, murder, domestic violence, or suicide; And a 100% chance that those who reach 120 will experience the horrors of aging.

Many will deem this action immoral, *even though* it is STILL an overall benefit to everyone, as it *imposes an unacceptably high risk of severe pro tanto harms without consent*, in order to secure larger benefits. [By 'pro tanto' harm it is meant, a condition which is a harm *in some respect*, even if the circumstance is an *overall benefit*. For example, 80 years of life with multiple sclerosis can be overall good—though the disease itself is clearly a harm, and detracts from the good of life.]

But now consider some statistics: A child born in the U.S. has a…

- 1.5% chance of developing one of many (typically) *very seriously* **debilitating diseases** (e.g., multiple sclerosis).
- 8.5% chance of developing "high-impact" **debilitating chronic pain** (i.e., pain so severe that it interferes with daily life, typically rendering one incapable of working)
- 1.6% chance of committing **suicide** (4%, including accidental drug overdoses)
- 12% chance of being **raped**
- 0.7% chance of being **murdered**
- 29% chance of being a victim of severe physical **domestic violence**
- 6.75% chance of being a victim of severe physical or sexual **child abuse**
- 3% chance of **being a rapist**
- 0.5% chance of **being a murderer**

- 3% chance of physically or sexually **abusing a child**
- 14% chance of physically **abusing their partner**
- 0.65% chance of dying before their 5th birthday
- 100% chance of *either* personally experiencing the relentless deterioration of aging, or else dying tragically young.

In short, being *very* conservative, every child born in the U.S. has roughly a 25% chance of living a life that is truly harrowing, or tragically short, or both. In light of this fact, I contend that, like Barry's release of the cure, procreation is immoral—DESPITE the fact that the overwhelming majority of children born in the U.S. have lives that are overall worth living (such that their lives are an overall BENEFIT). Why?

First, just like Barry's action:

(1) It violates our **duty not to impose a high *risk* of severe pro tanto harms without consent**. Doing so **violates the rights** of the resulting child.

> *E.g., Seana Shiffrin* writes, "procreation violates the consent rights of the child who results. … In every case it involves a person imposing a risk upon another where the imposition is not necessitated by the need to avert greater harm."

But, now consider two cases: First, consider someone with **Huntington's Disease**. If they procreate, there is a 50% chance that their child will inherit the disease—which results in the onset of a horrific neurological degeneration, beginning around the age of 30 or 40, until their death by around 50. Is it immoral for this person to procreate? Many say yes.

Second, imagine that you are at the IVF clinic and you are told that, if you proceed, you will give birth to **Legless Linda**, a child who will be born without legs. Is it permissible to proceed? Many say no.

Note that we might state these verdicts DESPITE the fact that life with Huntington's Disease, or life without legs is (generally) overall good. Why? Because, I suggest, some lives can be **worth living, but not worth initiating**. That is, some lives that are good contain horrors or hardships which are such that no loving parent would ever wish them, or impose the risk of them, upon their child. In such cases, having a child:

(2) It violates our **duty of parental care**, to ensure to the best of our ability that our children will have (or very likely will have) a minimally decent life; i.e., as I have put it here, a life worth initiating.

E.g., Laura Purdy writes, "we ought to try to provide every child with something like a minimally satisfying life."

(3) It is particularly **callous** to bring a child into existence whose life is **not worth initiating**.

E.g., *David Benatar* writes, "It does not follow … that if a life is worth continuing it is worth beginning … For instance, while most people think that living life without a limb does not make life so bad that it is worth ending, most (of the same) people also think that it is better not to bring into existence somebody who will lack a limb."

But now, imagine that someone knows in advance that if they conceive a child, their child is 90% certain to go on to murder or rape someone, or abuse their partner or child. Is it permissible to proceed? Many say no. But then, where is the threshold? After all, EVERY parent has a 20% chance of creating a rapist/murderer/child/spouse abuser! In my view, performing an action which creates conditions such that it becomes 20% likely that a rape, murder, or violent crime will occur still violates the following duty:

(4) It violates our **duty not to be complicit in** the **victimization** of innocent people.

E.g., *Chad Vance* writes, "not only [do] we have strong moral reasons to refrain from causing harm *personally*, but that we *also* have strong moral reasons to refrain from those actions which we *reasonably foresee* or *expect* will *result* in harm. Furthermore, this is true *even when* the resulting harm will ultimately flow most immediately from the agency of other individuals. … Otherwise, the very concept of there being a moral prohibition against *enabling* the wrongdoings of others, or being *complicit* in those wrongdoings, would be an incoherent one. … What is more, note that parents are not *mere* enablers of these later harms. Rather, they *create the very conditions* which ultimately result in those harms. The latter seems much worse. (Compare: Someone who merely *hands* a murderer his weapon, versus someone who *creates* both the murderer and his weapon!)"

Thus, I conclude, for these four reasons, procreation is immoral.

2. Objections: Let's consider some objections:

(a) **Prospective Children Give Hypothetical Consent to Exist.** For example, it seems permissible to resuscitate someone who has not explicitly consented to being revived, because know that they WOULD consent to resuscitation IF we could ask them. Similarly, we can assume that our would-be child WOULD consent to being born, despite the risks stated above, IF we could ask them.

*Reply: First, there is **explicit dissent** for some (e.g., those who commit suicide). Also, we can only clearly assume hypothetical consent to a HARM when (i) The pro tanto harm **prevents a much greater harm**, (ii) is **minor**, (iii) and **temporary**, (iv) and the **subject's values/attitudes** toward life are known and taken into account. E.g., imagine that, to save a drowning child's life, you must yank them so forcibly out of a stream that you break their arm. This seems permissible, because it meets all four of the above conditions. But, none of these are present in procreation.*

Furthermore, merely PREFERRING one's present state does NOT entail consent, or the absence of a rights violation. For example, Elizabeth Harman describes a case where a woman finds herself pregnant after being sexually assaulted. Though she may love her child dearly, and PREFER that this horrific event happened to her (since otherwise her child would never have been born), this does NOT entail that she consented to being sexually assaulted, or that the assault was not a rights violation. That said, the MERE fact that most people, when asked, will report that they prefer to exist does NOT entail consent to being born, or no rights violation.

(b) **Paternalism (Parents Harming Children "For Their Own Good") is Justified.**

Reply: Sure, it's permissible for parents to force their child to eat veggies or do their homework "for their own good". But it is NOT permissible to impose upon one's child a 25% chance of a horror "for their own good".

(c) **We Have a Right to Reproduce (or a right to bodily autonomy, or liberty).**

Reply: Rights do not extend in cases where exercising them would cause serious harm, or even a RISK of serious harm. (For example, my right to liberty and the use of my property does NOT give me a right to drive drunk.)

(d) **This Thesis Is Ableist.** For example, if two people with dwarfism procreate, there is a 25% chance that the child will have homozygous achondroplasia ("double-dwarfism"), a horrific condition that typically results in death during infancy. Any thesis which entails that dwarves ought not breed is disgustingly ableist.

Reply: This thesis entails that ALL procreation is immoral. Being disabled is neither sufficient (e.g., if the disability is non-inheritable) for imposing a risk of pro tanto harms upon the child, nor necessary (since non-disabled parents ALSO impose such risks upon their child). The moral prohibition against procreation MERELY follows from a general duty not to impose a risk of severe pro tanto harms upon one's child. (Though, admittedly, dwarves DO impose a GREATER risk of such harms.)

3. Bonus Objections: Some objections we likely did not discuss in class.

(e) **You Can't Violate the Rights of the Non-Existent.**

Reply: What procreators do is bring someone into existence whose right is LATER violated by their past action. (For example, imagine planting a ticking time bomb under pre-school, which explodes five years later.)

(f) **A Duty to Refrain from Procreation is Too Demanding**

Reply: Demandingness considerations typically only dissolve one's duty to BENEFIT others. (For example, most believe that we have no moral duty to donate our entire savings to charity, or our spare kidney to someone in need of a transplant.) But, it is generally thought that we DO have a strong duty to make large sacrifices in order to avoid HARMING others, or increasing the risk of harm to others.

(g) **Imposing Risk of "Harms" is Permissible When it is the Norm.** For example, it seems permissible to bring a child into existence who will be born wingless, since EVERY child is born wingless. Similarly, EVERY child is born into a world where the harms cited above are the norm.

Reply: Imagine that EVERY child born was like Miserable Meg; i.e., they would merely live in agony and then die. In such a world, it seems immoral to procreate, EVEN IF such misery is "normal". Why? Because suffering is inherently bad—REGARDLESS of whether it is the "norm" or not! It is not inherently bad to be wingless. But it IS inherently bad to live in chronic pain, or be sexually assaulted, or live with MS. For this reason, procreation remains immoral, despite the fact that it is "normal" for human beings to experience such horrors.

(h) **Extinction is Very Bad.** If we ceased to exist altogether, just think of all of the Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and Happiness that would be lost! How awful!

Reply: I agree. Eradicating the pro tanto harms of existence would be a much better alternative to extinction. So, we have a VERY strong moral duty to work toward such a world while we slowly go extinct—in the hopes of creating a world where procreation is no longer impermissible.

4. Moral Caution: If one has two options, A and B, and A is clearly permissible, but B *might* be seriously immoral, then one is obligated to do A and not B. For example, imagine that one is working at the junkyard crushing cars, and you are 10% certain that

you have just seen a blur which MIGHT have been a child climbing into the next car. You may now EITHER stop what you're doing (A), or crush the next car anyway (B). Clearly, A is permissible. But B has a 10% chance of killing a child. In this case, you ought to do A.

Therefore, even if one is only SORT OF convinced by my argument, such that you believe there is a 10% chance that I'm correct about the impermissibility of procreation, then if your options are (A) Refrain from procreating, or (B) procreate, you STILL ought to do A—since B *might* be seriously immoral, while A is clearly permissible. <Mic drop!>

5. Conclusion: There are two lessons that I think we can ALL agree on here:

First, at the very least, we should all admit that there are **strong prima facie moral reasons against procreating**—i.e., reasons which might end up being overridden by competing considerations, but which nevertheless ought to be taken very seriously. At the very least, creating a child is NOT a decision to be made lightly.

Second, we seem to have VERY strong moral reasons to make the world a better place. If we took an all-hands-on-deck approach, surely we could cure these horrific diseases, alleviate chronic pain, eradicate child abuse, and the epidemic of sexual assault, and so on. Come on, people! Let's freaking DO THIS already!!