

Should we have children?

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Part 1: Do we have an obligation to *not have* children?

Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich, *The population bomb* (1968)

pages 66–67

The causal chain of the deterioration [of the planet] is easily followed to its source. Too many cars, too many factories, too much detergent, too much pesticide, multiplying contrails, inadequate sewage treatment plants, too little water, too much carbon dioxide — all can be traced easily to *too many people*.

- Paul and Anne Ehrlich use “parataxis” — a string of clauses or words without conjunctions (e.g. “and”) — in their description of environmental deterioration. How does this stylistic choice impact your reading?
- The authors state that there’s a direct “causal chain” between the size of human populations and environmental destruction. What are the other implied steps in that chain?
- Having listed the other steps in the authors’ argument, do you agree with their conclusion that the problem is “too many people”? Why or why not?

Paul A. Murtaugh and Michael G. Schlax, “Reproduction and the carbon legacies of individuals” (2009)

Global Environmental Change 19:1, 14–20

Clearly, the potential savings from reduced reproduction are huge compared to the savings that can be achieved by changes in lifestyle. For example, a woman in the United States who adopted the six non-reproductive changes [see Table 3 below] would save about 486 tons of CO₂ emissions during her lifetime, but, if she were to have two children, this would eventually add nearly 40 times that amount of CO₂ (18,882 t) to the earth’s atmosphere. . . .

Table 3. For the United States, lifetime emissions of CO₂ that are saved by different actions, based on the EPA's Personal Emissions Calculator (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2007), and average emissions caused by having one additional child, from Table 2. Totals were obtained by multiplying the EPA's annual figures by 80, the current life expectancy of a female in the United States.

Action	CO ₂ saved (metric tons ^a)
Increase car's fuel economy from 20 to 30 mpg	148
Reduce miles driven from 231 to 155 per week	147
Replace single-glazed windows with energy-efficient windows	121
Replace ten 75-w incandescent bulbs with 25-w energy-efficient lights	36
Replace old refrigerator with energy-efficient model	19
Recycle newspaper, magazines, glass, plastic, aluminum, and steel cans	17
Reduce number of children by one	
Constant-emission scenario	9,441
Optimistic scenario	562
Pessimistic scenario	12,730

^a One metric ton equals 2205 pounds.

It is important to remember that these analyses focus on the carbon legacies of individuals, not populations. For example, under the constant-emission scenario, an extra child born to a woman in the United States ultimately increases her carbon legacy by an amount (9441 metric tons) that is nearly seven times the analogous quantity for a woman in China (1384 tons), but, because of China's enormous population size, its total carbon emissions currently exceed those of the United States (Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, 2008).

Clearly, an individual's reproductive choices can have a dramatic effect on the total carbon emissions ultimately attributable to his or her genetic lineage.

- What do you think about comparing the decision to have fewer or no children to behaviors such as buying a fuel-efficient car?
- Paul Murtaugh and Michael Schlax note that their analysis is based on the carbon footprints of individuals (such as you or me), not of populations (such as the U.S. or China). What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

- The authors' analysis depends on how we address climate change. As the bottom of Table 3 notes, if you "Reduce the number of children by one" the reduction in emissions varies depending on whether we continue current practices, emissions get worse, or get better. How should the uncertainty of these future possibilities impact the decision to have children?

Part 2: Do we have an obligation to *have* children?

Daniel M. Berry and Karljorgen G. Feuerherm, "Does God command birth control?" (2016)

CCAR Journal 63:2, 96–109

The authors discuss Genesis 1:28, which they translate as "Be fruitful and multiply until you fill the earth and subdue it." The text below has been divided into two parts.

We need to marvel at the foresight and wisdom of the Torah that placed the natural limit on being fruitful and multiplying, namely when the earth is filled and subdued, even if we humans did not see and understand until recently that filling and subduing the earth is indeed possible.

We humans that live on the earth need to have a general discussion addressing the following issues:

1. Are we filling and subduing the earth?
2. Are we about to fill and subdue the earth?
3. Have we already filled and subdued the earth?

If the answer to any of these questions is "Yes," then we need to have a discussion to decide what to do with the commandment of Genesis 1:28, that is to decide how fruitful and multiplying to be and how limiting of these to be. That is we need to decide on a balance between procreation and birth control that is appropriate given our answers to Questions 1, 2, and 3. Some possible balances include:

1. achieving a much slower population growth
2. achieving a steady state in which births match deaths, and the population does not change
3. achieving a population reduction.

- Daniel Berry and Karljürgen Feuerherm invite us to consider whether or not humans have filled and subdued the earth. How are “filling” and “subduing” the Earth connected? How should we determine whether humans have filled and subdued the Earth?
- What do you think of the authors’ proposed balances between procreation and birth control? Which of their solutions seems more fair and just?
- The authors focus on overall population growth and reduction. How do you think this should translate to individual action?

An important issue for Jews to consider is that, more so than other peoples, they have been the target of extermination attempts, the most recent attempt succeeding to decimate 6 million of them. Should Jews exempt themselves from the balancing birth control, at least temporarily, until they have achieved the population that they would have had they not been the target of extermination efforts? On the other hand, as observed by Rabbi Lori Cohen, Deuteronomy 7:7 says, “It is not because you are the most numerous of people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you.” This would suggest that Jews are destined to be a small part of the world population anyway. Still on the same other hand, Jews have always been at the forefront of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) efforts. Balanced procreation and birth control are certainly aimed at repairing the world, repairing it from being filled and subdued. So, to set a proper example, maybe Jews should not exempt themselves.

- Berry and Feuerherm complicate their own interpretation of Genesis 1:28 by noting how genocide has impacted the Jewish population. How should such histories shape the decision to reproduce?
- Should other group-specific considerations — historically high or low reproduction rates, histories of colonization, resource abundance or scarcity — determine which populations should focus on population growth or reduction?

Ruby Harrison-Stock, “Why I chose to have children despite the climate crisis” (2025)

Save the Children

Allowing a narrative to propagate that we as individuals must stop having children in order to help prevent catastrophic global temperature rise when research shows that 57 companies are responsible for 80% of fossil fuel emissions since 2016 is a bit like being concerned your shed is on fire as the house burns down behind you.

- Ruby Harrison-Stock shifts our focus from individual decision making and population size to the question of corporate responsibility. How does this argument impact the way that you’ve thought about the previous questions?
- The author offers a provocative analogy about having children when we can identify the corporations responsible for the majority of climate emissions. What do you think of this analogy?
- What would it mean in practical terms to focus on corporate actors instead of individual decision-making?

Part 3: Should humans continue to exist at all?

Todd May, “Would human extinction be a tragedy?”

The New York Times, December 17, 2018

Would human extinction be a tragedy? ... I want to suggest, at least tentatively, both that it would be a tragedy and that it might just be a good thing. ...

Human beings are destroying large parts of the inhabitable earth and causing unimaginable suffering to many of the animals that inhabit it. This is happening through at least three means. First, human contribution to climate change is devastating ecosystems, ... Second, increasing human population is encroaching on ecosystems that would otherwise be intact. Third, factory farming fosters the creation of millions upon millions of animals for whom it offers nothing but suffering and misery before slaughtering them in often barbaric ways. There is no reason to think that those practices are going to diminish any time soon. Quite the opposite.

Humanity, then, is the source of devastation of the lives of conscious animals on a scale that is difficult to comprehend. ...

It may well be, then, that the extinction of humanity would make the world better off and yet would be a tragedy. I don't want to say this for sure, since the issue is quite complex. But it certainly seems a live possibility, and that by itself disturbs me.

- Should we consider the lives of nonhuman animals when we consider whether to have children? If the answer is “yes,” how do we determine which animal lives we should consider?
- Todd May suggests that current trends of human “devastation” on nonhuman life is likely to continue or accelerate. If that were the case, how would it shape your thoughts about whether humans should continue to exist?
- Why might the extinction of humans be a tragedy?

Emily Zanotti, “Why have kids? Because they can help solve the world’s scariest problems” (2024)

National Catholic Register

[Many fail to consider the] value of *human* capital. When a life is not welcomed into the world, it is one fewer life charged with facing a crisis head-on. When generations have been faced with life-altering challenges, they’ve risen to meet them, and it rarely matters whether they’ve had a privileged upbringing. Every fewer child is one fewer scientist, one fewer engineer, one fewer teacher, one fewer mother — one fewer human to solve, not shy from, a crisis.

When considering whether to take a leap into a sustainable life, my husband and I did, in fact, consider whether our kids might be faced with a crisis in their lifetimes. The world is, after all, a scary place, and while we live in a time of great blessings, we live in a time of great danger, too.

- Should the possibility of future crises influence the decision to have children?
- Emily Zanotti’s argument relies on histories of generational challenges that humans have responded to collectively. What are historical examples that might help put climate change into perspective?
- The author suggests that children are essential to directly confront the ongoing crises. How should this impact the way in which children are taught and raised?
- How might we measure the balance of “great blessings” and “great danger” when thinking about whether we should have children?

Part 4: Small-Group Discussion

Many of the texts we've discussed this evening ask us to consider possible futures when contemplating whether we should have children, whether certain populations should increase, or whether the human species should continue to exist. To conclude our time together, I would like you to speculate together the possible futures — at both the communal and planetary scales — that you might help bring into existence.

Instructions:

1. In groups of three, consider the text below in which Meehan Crist argues that having children is “a commitment to the possibilities of a human future on this warming planet.” Do you agree?
2. Take five minutes to write about the possible futures that you would like to see. How would you describe them? What do you hope to do to help make the planet a safer, more inhabitable, and more justice place for humans and nonhumans to live? What do you hope to do to create a more connected and intentional community?
3. After you have written these possible futures, take turns reading them aloud to your group.
4. Discuss the areas of tension and agreement between the ways in which you each imagine possible futures. One person from your group will summarize your conversation for the entire class.

Meehan Crist, “Is it OK to have a child?” (2020)

London Review of Books

I can understand why some people might see having a child as a turn towards death — a fatal complicity with the death spiral of global fossil capitalism. But, for me, having a child has been a commitment to life, and a commitment to the possibilities of a human future on this warming planet. It means giving up claims to moral purity, not because nothing matters, but because things do.