A colleague tells a story about a graduate student who was passionate about the environment. Upon learning that his brother was considering having a third child, the student threatened never to talk to the brother again if he did have the third child because of the foreseeable detrimental environmental impact of that child’s life. Surely the student would be wrong to cut off communication with his sibling. But was he correct in thinking that we ought to have small families for environmental reasons? I will argue that he was wrong on both counts.

For our purposes here, I will make two relatively uncontroversial assumptions. First, environmental degradation caused by human beings currently harms a very large number of human beings and threatens substantially to decrease the well-being and life chances of future human beings and other sentient beings. Second, among the many moral obligations that affluent individuals have, the obligation to protect the environment, prevent future environmental destruction, and when possible reverse past environmental destruction should be a high priority.

The Argument for Limiting Family Size

Bill McKibben has been a widely respected and prominent environmentalist for over three decades. He, more than any other individual, has provided a sustained defense of the argument for limiting family size for environmental reasons. In his book Maybe One: A Case for Smaller Families, McKibben makes the argument that individuals ought to consider having small families for environmental reasons.
smaller families. He writes, “but if we averaged 1.5 children per woman—if, that is, many more people decided to stop at one child, nudging the birthrate down toward the current European level—and if we simultaneously reduced immigration somewhat, then in the year 2050 our population would be about 230 million, or what it was when Ronald Reagan was elected.” While McKibben is not saying that everyone should stop at one child, he claims “that if many more of us did so, it would help. That gap of as many as 170 million Americans could be crucial, I think, in reducing our environmental damage. By itself it would not solve the problem, for our fierce appetites and our old fashioned fossil-fuel technologies also account for much of our dilemma. But it would make a difference.”

McKibben specifically sets aside a number of considerations that would prevent us from accepting the small families argument. First, he rejects the idea that we ought to impose any kind of restrictions on individuals’ choices about reproduction. Second, he focuses specifically on western populations (and perhaps on affluent western populations). Third, he rejects draconian restrictions on immigration to affluent nations although he does endorse some immigration restrictions. McKibben also recognizes that curbing population growth is only one of many steps needed to address environmental degradation.

It is not entirely clear what McKibben believes the moral status of his claim is. At a minimum he is arguing that at least some individuals who are considering having more children ought to limit the size of their families for environmental reasons.

A generalized argument for the moral obligation to limit family size for environmental reasons can be reconstructed as follows. Individuals have a standing moral obligation not to cause environmental destruction. Affluent people living in developed countries cause excessive environmental destruction. Successful environmental activism must be political in nature, changing existing institutions and creating new institutions to steward our use of global resources.

Pressuring consumers to change behavior to mitigate the impacts of their consumption on the environment does have significant benefits. Individual choices that affect the environment do matter. But only so much can be accomplished by focusing on individual responsibility for environmental reform, and for social and global justice more broadly.

First, consumers are limited in their ability to have the relevant knowledge regarding all of the environmental impacts of even a single product. Many products come from multiple sources, multiple countries, multiple corporations, and multiple divisions within a corporation, making it a monumental if not impossible task to be aware of all of the social and environmental impacts of a product. Consumer-driven activism will also fail to engage certain products that consumers don’t have access to information about, such as the steel beams used in high-rise buildings.

Successful environmental activism must be political in nature, changing existing institutions and creating new institutions to steward our use of global resources.

Second, consumer-driven activism is unreliable. Even the best intentioned, environmentally responsible consumers will sometimes make environmentally irresponsible choices even when they know and have access to environmentally responsible options. Weakness of will strikes us all; we choose the wine imported from Chile over a local option, buy a bottle of water on a hot day, or drive a car because the
weather is poor even though we could bundle up and ride a bike.

Third, many people will not choose to make the environmentally responsible choice. It’s not just that some people won’t always make the environmentally responsible choice—some people will never even consider making the environmentally responsible choice.

Fourth, consumer-driven activism can relieve the pressure for states and other governing institutions to take action to stop environmental degradation; if it is the consumer’s sole responsibility to buy coffee at fair prices or consume less oil, then it might appear that states, corporations, and other institutions do not need to take action to ensure stable coffee prices or reduce oil consumption.

Arguing that individuals are responsible for combating environmental destruction through family planning choices mistakenly treats environmental problems as solely consumer-based problems, obscuring the political nature of environmental crises and the necessary political action needed to address these problems.

The Connection between Population Size and Environmental Destruction

There are at least three reasons that we ought to be skeptical of claims that increasing population size will necessarily increase environmental destruction. First, Malthusian claims about the dangers of population growth have repeatedly been proved false since Malthus first proposed them in the 18th century. Perhaps the most well-known of these neo-Malthusians is Paul Ehrlich, who wrote in 1970 that the earth was “filled to capacity and beyond and running out of food.” Ehrlich predicted that millions of humans would starve as the human population grew beyond the means to feed itself, most notably in his book The Population Bomb. At the time of Ehrlich’s predictions, the world’s population was 3.5 billion people. Today the population stands at around 6.5 billion people. Yet we do not see half of the world’s population starving. In fact, most people go hungry not from an absence of food, but from the absence of the capability to purchase or secure that food. While this does not show that Malthusian predictions about environmental degradation might not be correct at some point, it does give reason to be skeptical of fears of population growth.

Second, evidence also suggests that in some cases increased population sizes have actually led to increases in environmental stewardship and preservation of natural resources. One can imagine that as population size and density increase, it becomes necessary to maintain more sustainable stewardship of global public goods. William Adams argues that “empirical research in Africa in the 1990s has started to challenge neo-Malthusian assumptions about the inevitability of environmental degradation as population density rises.” For example, examining rural population growth outside Nairobi in Machakos, Kenya, a series of studies led by Mary Tiffen concluded that population growth actually contributed to environmental conservation. “The Machakos experience between 1930 and 1980 lends no support to the view that rapid population growth leads inexorably to environmental degradation. It is impossible to show that a reduced rate of population growth might have had a more beneficial effect on the environment. On the contrary, it might have made less labour available for conservation technologies, resulted in less market demand and incentives for development, and reduced the speed at which new land was demarcated, cleared, and conserved.”

Thus, increases in population size need not necessarily increase environmental destruction, and in fact growing populations can decrease both absolutely and per capita their impact on the natural environment. McKibben writes, “Recycling your cans subtracts a tiny number from the equation; reproducing less fervently subtracts a much larger number. If we can cut the birthrate, that’s 50 or 100 million fewer cars and furnaces; 50 or 100 million fewer dinners to serve and thermostats to set each day; 50 or 100 million fewer giant balloons hovering above the landscape.” It is implied that increased population sizes necessarily increase environmental degradation, and that individuals are not capable of preventing their contributions to these problems.

However, population growth alone does not necessarily cause environmental degradation. Population growth combined with practices of consumption and production causes environmental destruction. Consider Arturo Escobar’s assessment of global consumption: “The industrialized countries, with 26 percent of the population, account for 78 percent of world production of goods and services, 81 percent of energy consumption, 70 percent of chemical fertilizers, and 87 percent of world armaments. One U.S. resident spends as much energy as 7 Mexicans, 55 Indians, 168 Tanzanians, and 900 Nepalis.” It’s not that the industrialized countries are growing faster than other countries (they are not)—it’s that they are consuming and producing in such a way that excessive contributions are made to environ-
mental destruction. It is how we live, not how many of us live, that is the primary determinant of our impact on the environment.

Third, acceptance of the argument for limiting family size might actually weaken the environmental movement. Suppose the small families argument began to gain steam and became a powerful cultural norm. Individuals who would be responsive to such an argument are those individuals who are already trying to act so as to improve the state of the natural world—those people who are already purchasing organic, locally grown food while driving low fuel consumption vehicles or riding public transportation while calling or writing their elected representatives to protect the environment. Individuals who would not be responsive to the small families argument are not trying to improve the state of the environment—those people who are purchasing mass-produced, environmentally irresponsible foods while driving gas-guzzling cars and supporting elected representatives opposed to protecting the environment. Assuming that children adopt many of the beliefs and practices of their parents, if the small families argument were changing population growth patterns, we would expect that the population of environmentally concerned people would decrease while the population of people who are not concerned about the environment would increase and become disproportionately large.

If the power of consumer-driven environmental activism is limited and institutional intervention is required to prevent further depletion of the earth’s resources, it would be deeply problematic for the size of the constituency of environmentally concerned citizens to decrease. A strong, global, intergenerational movement is needed to deal with issues like climate change, biodiversity loss, depletion of the world’s fisheries, conflicts over potable water, and other pressing environmental problems. The minimal environmental benefits of environmentally concerned individuals having fewer children are certainly outweighed by the significant costs of decreasing the number of environmental activists who will carry out the environmental movement in the 21st century. In fact, if parents use environmentally responsible methods of child rearing, it is likely that most children of parents who would be receptive to the small families argument would have had a net positive impact on the environment. Therefore, individuals concerned about the environment might well have a greater positive impact on the environment by having more children, not fewer.

**Understanding the Moral Relationship to Potential Future Children**

The argument for limiting family size for environmental reasons also distorts the moral relationship we have to our potential future children. As I noted above, for at least some families, we might actually think that individuals ought to have larger families for environmental reasons. But both arguments instrumentalize what should be a more robust, complex, and deep moral relationship to potential future children. While it is certainly prudentially and morally appropriate for parents to think about whether they will be able adequately to care for and provide for future children, whether the children will have a life worth living, and what impact the children will have on their community and world, it shouldn’t be the primary way in which we make decisions about children.

Our love for our existing family members, our love for our future children, and the desire to have a large, fun, supportive family are more morally appropriate ways to think about our future children. The special relationship that parents have to children can and should be formed even before the children are born, and decisions about future children should be made in
Feminist and Anti-Racist Reflections on Limiting Family Size

The argument that we ought to limit family size for environmental reasons doesn’t necessarily imply anything about women or people of color that is morally objectionable. But debates and practices regarding child rearing and population control have been sites at which feminists and anti-racists have contested both theory and practice.

Feminists have long recognized that child bearing and rearing place substantial and disproportionate burdens on women. Many feminists might thereby be inclined indirectly to support small families as a means of relieving disproportionate burdens borne by women.

At the same time, feminists have long opposed both legal and normative structures that attempt to control women’s sexuality and have worked to increase women’s control over their bodies, and in particular their access to a variety of contraceptive and reproductive technologies. More generally, birthrates decline when gender equity increases. Given these commitments, feminists might be inclined indirectly to oppose the small families argument for fear that it might place normative or legal restrictions on a woman’s right to make choices regarding reproduction.

Anti-racist opposition to a) draconian immigration reforms that disproportionately target people of color and b) policies that try to prevent population survival and growth among people of color are long established. Although McKibben has resisted a number of the concerns I will present, there have been and continue to be groups that have attempted to control reproduction through the bodies of women, particularly women of color, in order to control the population size. It is worth considering some of the possible dangerous (even though non-logical) implications of the small families argument.

McKibben himself notes that one of the largest contributions to the population growth in the United States is immigration, and he suggests that we ought to control immigration to preserve natural resources. Since the United States uses more resources per capita than any country in the world, this country is a primary target for population growth reductions. In fact, Steve Sirota, Director of Research at the Center for Immigration Studies, argued before Congress that the primary contribution to population growth is immigration and this will contribute to an increase in global warming. He argued that immigration would inevitably lead to increases in U.S. pollution and that this connection was unavoidable, given that most immigrants were coming from low per capita carbon emitting countries to a high per capita carbon emitting country.

But what might be legitimate concerns about the environmental impact of immigration can be and have been exploited by xenophobic white supremacist groups to push for more radical immigration reforms. For example, a recent Sierra Club board election was plagued by the issue of immigration and the potential influence of white supremacy groups. According to the San Francisco Chronicle, “A club spokeswoman said about 20 racist groups have urged their members to join the club and participate in the club’s board elections, including VDare.org, named after Virginia Dare, the first white child reputedly born in a U.S. colony; Overthrow.com; and the National Coalition of White Writers.”

Although McKibben doesn’t advocate draconian measures to restrict immigration or prevent births by women of color, it is worth reflecting on the ways in which the state has intervened into the bodies of women of color in the past in the name of lowering costs to the larger society. Andrea Smith writes, “the notion that communities of color, including Native communities, pollute the body politic continues to inform the contemporary population control movement. People of color are scapegoated for environmental destruction, poverty, and war. Women of color are particularly threatening, as they have the ability to reproduce the next generations of women of color.”

There has been a long history of forced and coerced sterilizations among women of color, unequal distribution of abortions in communities of color, testing of experimental birth control on women of color, and generally engaging in polices that treat women of color as “better dead than pregnant.” Policy and practice seeking to control the bodies of women of color have often been waged under the banner of concerns about population growth and environmental protection. This is not a logical implication of the view that we ought to
have smaller families for environmental reasons. But it is one we ought to guard against when considering arguments based on the threat of population growth.

Conclusion
Although parents certainly do have obligations to consider the environmental impact of their families as producers, consumers, and citizens, it is not true that individuals ought to have smaller families for strictly environmental reasons. Parents ought to make decisions regarding future children out of their love for both existing and potential future family members. From a public policy perspective, there are many good reasons to promote gender equity and increase women’s control over their reproductive choices, which may in some cases result in smaller family sizes. But these policies should be pursued independent of environmental concerns, and individuals should not let environmental concerns shape their family planning choices.

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