

Children or Migrants as Public Goods?

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Abstract

Why, and to what extent, must taxpayers share the costs of raising children with parents? The most influential argument over this question has been the *public goods argument*: Taxpayers must share costs with parents because and to the extent that child-rearing contributes toward public goods by helping to develop valuable human capital. However, political theorists have not examined the public goods argument in a context in which replacement migration is available: If replacement migration can provide valuable human capital more efficiently than child-rearing, can the public goods argument still justify a taxpayer obligation to share the costs of child-rearing? This article argues that there are importantly different versions of the public goods argument, and that on a plausible version of that argument, it can withstand the replacement migration challenge under most circumstances.

Keywords

family policies, public goods, immigration, fairness, cost-sharing

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A central question in the normative debate over the welfare state concerns the fair division of the costs of child-rearing between taxpayers and the family. All sides in this debate agree that taxpayers must support the basic needs of children whenever families are unable to do so. The question is whether families ought to meet a greater share of the costs of child-rearing than they currently do, assuming they are able to do so. The most influential and frequently invoked argument in this debate is the *public goods argument*, most fully elaborated by Nancy Folbre (1994a, 1994b, 2001, 2008) and Rolf George (1987, 1993) and endorsed by a number of other scholars (Alstott, 2005; Anderson, 1999; Engster, 2007; Esping-Andersen, 2009; Rose, 2016; Shelby, 2016; Strober, 2004). It maintains that child-rearing costs must be shared between taxpayers and the family in a way that

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reflects the fact that child-rearing generates human capital from which all citizens benefit, regardless of whether they have children themselves.¹ The public goods argument plays an important role both in determining the extent to which the state should support individuals in founding and raising a family and as a component of the feminist case for sharing some of the costs of children, given that women do the lion's share of the work in raising children.

Although the public goods argument has been criticised (Casal, 1999; Casal and Williams, 1995; Rakowski, 1991) and defended against criticisms (Gál et al., 2018; Olsaretti, 2013), it has not been closely examined against the assumption that states are able to receive human capital from skilled immigration or 'replacement migration' (UN, 2001).² Replacement migration raises two important questions for the public goods argument. First, if the state benefits from the human capital of immigrants, does the public goods argument imply that taxpayers must share costs with the parents of immigrants? An affirmative answer to this question, with which we are broadly sympathetic, has recently been defended in the literature.³ The scope of the public goods argument, on this view, is wider than generally assumed.

Our focus is on a second question that replacement migration raises for the public goods argument, which arises regardless of the answer we give to the first question.⁴ To the extent that replacement migration provides a less expensive source of human capital than local child-rearing, can the public goods argument still justify taxpayers' obligations to local parents?⁵ On the public goods argument, it would seem that taxpayers are *not* obliged to share costs with persons who provide public goods if others are able to provide those same goods more inexpensively. This second question is likely to become more pressing, given two demographic contexts that will condition the evolution of the welfare state in the foreseeable future. The first is population ageing and the fiscal challenges it poses for the welfare state. The ratio of elderly persons to persons of working age is expected to double across most OECD states by 2060, using 2015 as a baseline (OECD, 2019: 10). The second is the fact that reversing this ratio by encouraging a growth in the fertility rate is increasingly questioned as a defensible strategy, given the environmental pressures of population growth (Conly, 2016; McKibben, 1998). These demographic contexts make it important to evaluate the implications of resorting to replacement migration as a source of human capital.

By bringing to view and examining a number of nuances in the public goods argument, we argue that the support the public goods argument provides for cost-sharing between taxpayers and parents is not undermined by the availability of replacement migration under most circumstances. This defence is significant, we believe, not only because it improves our understanding of an increasingly important policy controversy – that is, the extent of public support for families – but also because it improves our understanding of public good arguments in general.

To be sure, our defence of the public goods argument, if successful, will be of practical relevance for supporting families in welfare states that are characterised by a declining fertility rate and that are potential seekers of replacement migration. These welfare states are typically at the higher end of global inequalities between states (e.g. European states). Evaluating the normative basis for family policies in these is nevertheless an important task, even if those who have claims to the support these policies confer are not among the globally worst off. Consider this parallel. Evaluating the case for policies that promote gender justice in European welfare states matters even if the women whose claims they address are not among the globally worst off; we think the same is true about evaluating

policies that address the claims that women and men in relatively wealthy states have by dint of having children.⁶ Note, finally, that although the public goods argument we defend provides support for family policies in well-off states, that argument, we show, is not a pro-natalist argument and is consistent with supporting replacement migration. Endorsement of the public goods argument, therefore, should not be confused with ‘favouring’ local procreation over migration.

We begin by clarifying the family policies we focus on. We next explain what replacement migration is and why it poses a challenge for the public goods argument in favour of family policies. The remainder of the article analyses this challenge through a close discussion of the public goods argument. We distinguish between three different versions of the public goods argument and argue that only one version of it – the *pro-natalist* version – is undermined by the availability of replacement migration. Two other versions of the argument – which we call the *pro-investment* and the *fairness* versions – can largely withstand the challenge. The article thus shows that, under most circumstances, the case for family policies can still be made despite the availability of replacement migration in a context of demographic change.

Family Policies

Family policies are public policies that ensure the ‘collective provision’ (Lewis, 2003) or the ‘socialisation’ of the *morally required* costs of raising children. These are the costs that must be incurred by *someone* (whether by parents⁷ or society at large) in order to give children what they have a right to.⁸ Examples of family policies include (1) publicly funded parental leave, (2) free or subsidised pre-school childcare and public schools and (3) child tax credits or family allowances. We assume that these policies ought to be generous enough to meet certain recognised benchmarks of children’s and parents’ needs (e.g. UNICEF, 2017).⁹

Note that the family policies we focus on do not distribute certain further costs that are generated when people have and raise children. These further costs include *non-financial* costs, of which some may be morally required, for example, the cost of forgone free time which parents incur in order to care for their children (Folbre and Bittman, 2004; Gál et al., 2018; Rose, 2016), or the loss in personal autonomy parents incur in order to provide their children with continuity of care and stability (Alstott, 2005). Another further cost is the lifetime environmental cost of an added child, which figures prominently in debates over whether the choice to procreate accords with climate justice (Casal, 1999; Conly, 2016; Cripps, 2017; Heyward, 2012; Hickey et al., 2016; Meijers, 2016; Overall, 2012; Pinkert and Sticker, 2020; Young, 2001). While our discussion does not aim to settle questions concerning the measurement and distribution of these further costs, we briefly consider the environmental costs of children towards the end of this article, since – as mentioned earlier – a concern with environmental costs may strengthen the replacement migration challenge.

Our discussion also sets aside the question of what form, exactly, family policies should take. It does not examine whether family policies should aim at the defamilialisation of care (e.g. subsidised daycare for babies and toddlers) or supported familialism (e.g. longer and/or more generous parental leaves) (Saraceno, 2010). We also do not discuss further ways in which parents might be supported by the taxpayer – for example, through a pro-parenthood-adjusted public pension system (Gál et al., 2018; Sinn, 2005).

In sum, we focus on family policies that have an intended and substantial impact on the distribution of the financial costs that are morally required for adequate child-rearing between parents and non-parents. These policies currently divide a large proportion of those costs equally between all citizens, regardless of whether they are parents or not, and yet seem primarily to benefit parents and children. This asymmetry is of practical and theoretical significance. Practically, it makes it important to justify these policies in the face of a perceived 'backlash' against them from non-parents (Burkett, 2000; Fineman, 2004; Wolf et al., 2011). Theoretically, the justification of these policies raises a special challenge, because while many welfare state policies do not benefit all taxpayers equally, this is typically in order to meet needs people are not responsible for having (e.g. most medical needs). By contrast, it seems harder to justify policies which, while paid for by all citizens, appear to benefit only some of them and not in order to meet unchosen needs, thereby favouring conceptions of the good life that only some and not others embrace. For example, people disagree about how valuable it is to become a parent; about the value of large families; about how populated the planet should be. Family policies thus seem to be under pressure from what political theorists refer to as the challenges of *personal responsibility* and *neutrality* (Casal and Williams, 1995; Clayton, 2006; Rakowski, 1991).

The public goods argument is well placed to meet these challenges. Nancy Folbre (2001: 50) states the argument's core idea as follows:

Parents who raise happy, healthy, and successful children create an especially important public good. Children themselves are not the only beneficiaries. Employers profit from access to productive workers. The elderly benefit from Social Security taxes paid by the younger generation . . . Fellow citizens gain from having productive and law-abiding neighbours.¹⁰

By emphasising the benefits parents create, the public goods argument promises to meet head-on the challenges of personal responsibility and neutrality. In response to the former, it can say that people are required to bear the costs of their choices only if these would otherwise generate costs for others, as is the case, for example, when an imprudent motorcyclist prefers to ride without a helmet and risks creating avoidable medical care costs for others (Fleurbaey, 1995). Because parents' having and raising children benefits society, the challenge from personal responsibility is mistargeted when directed against parents (Casal and Williams, 1995).

In response to the neutrality challenge, the public goods argument can say that because the basis for sharing child-rearing costs with parents is the contribution they make, cost-sharing does not presume any controversial judgement that parenting is an intrinsic part of a good life. The concern with neutrality certainly has implications regarding which of the various benefits parents create are relevant for justifying cost-sharing with them. Cost-sharing with parents could not be justified, compatibly with neutrality, if child-rearing generated benefits that are regarded as such only from the perspective of one or another controversial conception of the good life. It is important to observe, therefore, that child-rearing creates benefits which all or most members of society can reasonably be presumed to want (John Rawls (1999: 54) famously calls these 'social primary goods'). One of the central benefits of demographic renewal – the maintenance of the tax base – is an uncontroversial benefit from the perspective of most conceptions of the good life; indeed, we could say that parents' having and raising

children is a socially necessary activity, that is, one without which society could not exist as an ongoing just scheme of social cooperation (Rawls, 2001: 162).¹¹

The Challenge of Replacement Migration

Replacement migration can contribute some of the very same public goods that parents contribute by having and rearing children. This raises a challenge to the public goods argument: *assuming* that replacement migration does provide the same public goods that figure in the public goods argument for sharing the costs of children with parents, can that argument still justify family policies? This section explains the challenge in detail.

To begin with, it is important to clarify what is meant by ‘replacement migration’.¹² It refers to immigration that makes up for a demographic deficit, where this is a deficit in a country’s population as a whole or in a particular group within its population (e.g. working-age adults). Different kinds of replacement migration are thus possible, depending on the demographic deficit it makes up for (Gosseries and Zwarthoed, 2017). We focus on replacement migration that aims to replace a deficit in skilled workers as this form of migration is especially attractive to host states for reasons we explain shortly, and potentially constitutes the most serious challenge to the public goods argument. To facilitate this kind of replacement migration, countries can adopt a points-based system that gives immigrants visas according to their skills (e.g. Australia) or an employer-based system that issues visas to immigrants who have accepted job-offers at certain occupations (e.g. United States). These policies can be adjusted in order to attract immigrants of certain age-groups, and can vary in their specific provisions, for example, whether they permit immigrants to bring relatives with them (Gosseries and Zwarthoed, 2017).

To think about how the availability of replacement migration might affect the public goods argument, a simple example will help. In 1996, some 254,000 children were born in Australia (Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1996: 10). In 2014, when this cohort turned 18 years of age, Australia admitted around 125,000 skilled immigrants (DIBP, 2014: 4). The Australian government could have influenced the sizes of these two groups of persons through various policies. It could have offered less public support for families prior to 1996 and it could have adjusted its immigration policy to increase the number of skilled immigrants entering in 2014. Stated more generally, the government could have shifted in various degrees from relying on procreation to relying on immigration as a source of human capital. This is, of course, a recurring possibility: the Australian government, like many other governments, can affect the balance between these two sources of human capital today and in the future. Now assume that the cost for Australian taxpayers of obtaining human capital via replacement migration is lower than the cost of obtaining human capital via procreation. This assumption is plausible: replacement migration is certainly not costless, but it is doubtful that the average public cost, in financial terms,¹³ of integrating a skilled migrant into the labour force, plus compensating the migrants’ parents and/or home state, exceeds the average public cost involved in rearing a child to adulthood in the receiving state (Bou-Habib, 2019). This is the case, at least, if the sending state is considerably poorer than the receiving state, for the funds that will have been devoted to raising the migrant will likely have been smaller than those devoted to rearing a child to adulthood in the receiving state.

Granting this assumption, the public goods argument seems to imply that funding for family policies may be reduced. In particular, it seems to imply that taxpayers are obliged to bear only those costs they would need to bear if Australia relied on replacement

migration instead. This conclusion rests on a deeper claim that appears plausible at first sight: for any public good, taxpayers owe its producers only the amount taxpayers would have to pay for the least expensive way of producing it (cf. Shields, 2021). If correct, the replacement migration challenge shows that the family policies the public goods argument is able to justify are far less generous than might otherwise be supposed. In particular, instead of justifying providing all local parents with the standard package of family policies mentioned at the start of this article, the public goods argument might justify only providing minimal support for a small number of local children, reflecting the limited net benefits which local parents produce.

The replacement migration challenge applies regardless of whether or not there are environmental concerns about overpopulation, but it is worth noting that these concerns reinforce it. As one writer notes, '[i]n an age of actual or prospective overpopulation..... the suggestion that an allowance for children is justified by parents "serving a societal function" is entirely unpersuasive' (Brazier, 1977, cited in George, 1993: 216). Indeed, in such a context, parents may be said to produce, instead of a public good, a negative externality or a public *bad* (Casal, 1999).¹⁴ We believe our defence of the public goods argument against the replacement migration challenge holds, even once that challenge is reinforced by concerns about overpopulation. We explain why in the last section of this article.

Three Versions of the Public Goods Argument

To assess the replacement migration challenge, we now distinguish between three different versions of the public goods argument which are generally collapsed in the literature.¹⁵ Disaggregating the public goods argument is important because it enables us to determine whether it is vulnerable to the replacement migration challenge in any or all of its possible versions.

On the first, *pro-natalist* version of the public goods argument, family policies are justified insofar as they are necessary means for *incentivising* people *to have* children. If families produce the important public goods mentioned earlier by having children, and if it is true that, absent public support for the costs of child-rearing, people have too few children, then family policies can be justified by appealing to their role in boosting the fertility rate.

A second, *pro-investment* version of the public goods argument emphasises the importance of parental investment in children. Here, unlike the pro-natalist argument, it is assumed that adults will have enough children (fertility rates are not what is in question), both with and without family policies in place. What justifies such policies is, instead, the fact that they are necessary for ensuring that children are raised to become productive and law-abiding citizens. In short, the pro-investment version differs from the pro-natalist version in that its aim is to ensure *effective upbringing* rather than a higher fertility rate (see Heckman, 2013; Heckman and Masterov, 2007; Putnam, 2015).

Both the pro-natalist and the pro-investment versions of the public goods argument are *forward-looking*: they point to consequences that sharing the costs of children is predicted to produce, although they focus on different consequences (namely, the optimal quantity (pro-natalist) and optimal quality (pro-investment) of children).¹⁶ By contrast, the third version of the public goods argument is *backward-looking*: it justifies sharing the costs of children by reference to what we owe parents. We call this the *fairness version* of the public goods argument. It states that family policies are justified as a way of achieving a fair distribution of the burdens and benefits of child-rearing between parents and others.

The argument rests on two key premises. The first, now familiar, empirical premise is that by having and raising children parents generate benefits for all citizens.¹⁷ The second, normative premise is a principle of fairness.¹⁸ This demands that some of the burdens, as well as the benefits, of at least socially necessary activities, be shared between those who undertake them and their beneficiaries so that no unfair freeriding takes place. Here we do not elaborate or defend this normative premise; this brief description of the argument should serve our purposes.¹⁹

We are now in a position to assess the replacement migration challenge. Consider, first, the two forward-looking versions of the public goods argument. (The fairness version of the argument requires a more detailed discussion, reserved for the following section)

It is relatively clear that the *pro-natalist* version of the public goods argument is undermined by the possibility of replacement migration. As Bou-Habib (2019) argues, if the inclusion in our societies of migrant adults, including those who come with children, can offset the need to increase the local fertility rate, the pro-natalist case for sharing the costs of child-rearing fails.

By contrast, the *pro-investment* version of the public goods argument survives in the face of replacement migration. This is so as long as three things are true: (1) local adults will continue to have at least some children, with or without the support of family policies; (2) there are reasons to ensure that children are raised in certain ways (e.g. as productive members of society); and (3) public support for parents is necessary for ensuring that most or all children are raised in these ways.²⁰

While the pro-investment version of the public goods argument is not threatened by replacement migration, we believe it is also important to defend the fairness version of the public goods argument against that challenge. This is because the latter is needed to capture the underlying convictions that move many people to embrace the public goods argument. To see why, imagine that those who have children go to great lengths, even in the absence of family policies, to ensure that their children are cared for, have adequate healthcare and receive a good education; and that in so doing they help to produce essential public goods for others in society. (In other words, imagine that family policies are not *necessary* to induce parents to have or invest in children) A society in which parents are made to pay mostly or fully for the costs of children, while at the same time ensuring that those public goods are shared among everyone, seems to distribute the burdens and benefits of social cooperation unfairly, to the detriment of parents (Olsaretti, 2013). It is thus important to consider whether the replacement migration challenge threatens the fairness version of the public goods argument.

Fairness and Public Goods: A Question of Baselines

As defenders of the fairness version of the public goods argument (or ‘the fairness argument’) emphasise, for beneficiaries to be obligated to share costs with benefits-producers, it is not enough that they obtain a benefit: it is also necessary that they obtain benefits that are ‘worth their costs’ (Arneson, 1982: 623).²¹ In this section, we show that how we understand this condition matters crucially for how we interpret the fairness argument, and bears directly on whether it is threatened by the availability of replacement migration: when replacement migration can provide the same public goods that local parents provide, but more cost-effectively, it could be said that the benefits which local parents produce are not worth their costs and that, therefore, fairness does not require sharing the

costs of children with local parents. As Rolf George (1993: 216) (who opposes this line of thinking) puts it, in a deliberately blunt way: 'Why should one pay for locally produced children if they can be obtained so much more cheaply by import?'

In what follows we argue that this reasoning is flawed. We proceed in three steps. First, we explain that the fairness argument seems vulnerable to the replacement migration challenge only if we adopt one particular view of when the benefits of productive activity are worth their costs, that is by reference to an *optimal* baseline. Second, we introduce an alternative possible view of when benefits are worth their costs, which uses what we call a *no-production* baseline. If the fairness argument adopted the no-production baseline, it would offer almost unconstrained support for family policies for local parents. In a third step, we suggest that neither the *optimal* nor the *no-production* baseline is defensible and propose a third alternative, which we call the *interest-sensitive* baseline for determining when benefits are worth their costs. A fairness argument that adopts this baseline supports family policies for local parents even if replacement migration is a less costly source of human capital, but – it bears emphasising – the obligations it justifies are constrained, in ways we identify. What emerges from this discussion is both a defence of the fairness argument against the replacement migration challenge and a more nuanced understanding of public goods arguments.

We begin by unpacking a central claim of the public goods argument, namely, that those who receive benefits acquire obligations to share costs of production with producers only if the benefits are worth their costs. Merely obtaining benefits, regardless of what amount of cost beneficiaries are asked to share, is not enough to justify fairness obligations. As a well-known critic of the fairness argument, Robert Nozick (1974: 93), remarks, even though you may derive some benefit from your neighbours' taking turns at running a local radio station, you are not obligated to do your turn when the time comes if '...you would rather not have any of it and not give up a day than have it all and spend one of your days at it'.

Note, however, that what exactly it means for benefits to be worth their costs is something that can be specified in different ways, with different implications for the demands of the fairness argument. In particular, it can have implications regarding *how much* of the public good beneficiaries have obligations to share the costs, and *at what price*, since these factors affect the cost-benefit relation.²² Different ways of specifying the claim that benefits must be worth their costs rely on adopting different baselines.²³ The challenge from replacement migration assumes that the relevant baseline is an *optimal* baseline: Here, a productive activity only provides benefits that are worth their costs if it brings the beneficiaries closer to the point at which they can optimally benefit from it. This is the point beyond which the cost of obtaining an extra unit of the relevant public good is greater than the benefit that the extra unit contributes.²⁴ The optimal baseline view appears intuitively plausible in some cases. Consider a paradigmatic case of public good provision: national defence. If weapons factories were to produce military equipment in excess of the optimal amount needed by a society, it seems right that taxpayers do not have an obligation to share the costs of producing the oversupply.²⁵

With regard to children, a fairness argument that adopts the optimal baseline would say the following: suppose that N_o is the optimal number of children for a given society, in the sense that, for any child over and above N_o , this child's contribution in terms of public goods would be smaller than the cost of provision for that child. (Accordingly, the net total public goods yielded by parents' having more than children N_o children is smaller than the net total public goods yielded by parents' having N_o children.) A fairness

argument that adopts the optimal baseline would say that the benefits of children in excess of N_o are not worth their costs and conclude that funding for family policies is not owed to parents for that excess number of children. Consider, again, our earlier example of Australia. Suppose that the number of new working-age persons added to Australia in 2014 – that is 379,000 persons – was optimal in the sense mentioned above. (These new persons comprised 254,000 local children born in 1996, and 125,000 skilled immigrants admitted in 2014.) Now suppose that, back in 1996, the Australian government knew it would be able to admit 225,000 rather than 125,000 skilled migrants in 2014, and that the financial costs of admitting the extra 100,000 migrants would be smaller than the costs of family policies supporting 100,000 local children. Under these circumstances, the benefits which Australian parents would contribute by having those 100,000 extra children would not be worth their cost according to the optimal baseline. The fairness argument would then imply that Australian parents in 1996 were entitled to family policies that shared the costs of only 154,000, not 254,000, children. As a result, either fewer Australian families should receive support from family policies or all Australian families should receive less generous support. Either way, replacement migration challenges the funding of standard family policies for all Australian parents if the fairness argument uses the optimal baseline.

Notice, next, that the replacement migration challenge is unlikely to arise if we adopt the *no-production* baseline – that is, if we maintain that benefits are worth their costs so long as the beneficiaries gain, by receiving and paying for the benefits, compared to a scenario in which no benefits are produced at all. This is true in the scenario we believe is realistic for most states in which replacement migration cannot fully supplant a society's reliance on local child-rearing.²⁶ Under these circumstances, within a certain range, local production of children is better for non-parents than no-production. So, if we adopt the no-production baseline, non-parents will have obligations of fairness to share the costs of children within that range, that is, up to the point when, if more local children were produced, non-parents would be worse off than if zero local children had been produced.

The no-production baseline is a rather undemanding standard: it is satisfied whenever the total benefits of children outweigh their total costs, and regardless of whether there are feasible and permissible alternative schemes for producing greater net total benefits (and relatedly, regardless of whether the marginal benefit of each additional child is greater or smaller than the marginal cost of that child).²⁷ Take again the example of Australia: assuming that parents' having 254,000 children in 1996, or even many more, made non-parents better off than if there had been no local children born in 1996, the benefits produced by all 254,000 or more children would be worth their costs, and family policies supporting all of them would be justified.

Which of these two baselines should the fairness argument use – the optimal or the no-production baseline? We believe that neither is defensible, and for the same reason: both are unreasonably one-sided in the manner in which they balance the claims of the producers and beneficiaries of public goods. The optimal baseline view favours beneficiaries unreasonably, whereas the no-production view favours producers unreasonably. After explaining this, we propose an alternative baseline view that we believe properly balances the claims of beneficiaries and producers.²⁸

To see why the optimal baseline view is one-sided, recall that it says that beneficiaries must share costs with the producers only if the producers produce in a manner that approaches or achieves the optimal degree to which the beneficiaries can benefit from

their production. This, however, overlooks the relevance of the fact that the manner in which public goods are produced affects also the interests of the producers. By way of illustration, suppose that a public good can be produced either through work performed during night-time or during the day, and that the costs of night-time production are lower, for example, because transport that no one uses at night-time can be used by the public goods producers. The beneficiaries and producers of this public good would benefit, even once the costs are taken into account, both if the public good were produced at night and if it were produced during the day; however they would obtain greater net benefits if the public good were produced at night, as they would have to share lower production costs for the same amount of public good produced. Yet night-time production would deprive those who produce the public good of a range of fundamental goods which are accessible only on a day-time schedule, such as opportunities to share quality time with friends and family. Suppose that, for this reason, those who produce the public good decide to produce it during the day rather than during the night. The optimal baseline view tells us that the beneficiaries in this case do not have a duty to share the costs of daytime transportation with the producers. This is because an alternative manner of producing the public good is available that could leave the beneficiaries still better off: the public goods could be produced during the night. Given this, beneficiaries have a duty to share the costs of producing this public good only to the extent that they, the beneficiaries, end up as well as off as they would have been had the producers produced it at night. Another way of putting this would be to say that the optimal baseline view makes producers exclusively liable for the shortfall in total net benefits they produce that results from their decision to work during day-time as opposed to night-time. This, we submit, is unreasonably one-sided: the optimal baseline view settles the question of which costs of producing a public good must be shared only from the perspective of beneficiaries; it fails to give appropriate weight to the interests that producers have in the manner in which a public good is produced.

Consider, next, the no-production baseline view. It maintains that beneficiaries must share costs with producers equally so long as the beneficiaries are made better off than they would have been in the absence of production. This view would allow producers to shift onto beneficiaries costs which the producers choose to incur in producing a public good that many will regard as unjustified.²⁹ The no-production baseline view implies, for example, that beneficiaries must share equally with producers the costs of their choosing to travel to work by private cars, for example, even when more inexpensive and convenient public transportation is available, at least assuming that, despite these additional costs, the beneficiaries are still made better off, overall, than had the public good not been produced at all. Just as the optimal baseline view is insensitive to the interests of producers, the no-production baseline is insensitive to the interests of beneficiaries, making beneficiaries liable for the shortfall in optimal production regardless of whether the producers can offer the beneficiaries an adequate justification for that shortfall. (We assume that 'this is how we like to produce the good' is no justification). One could say that the no-production baseline view grants producers too much liberty in determining what the costs are that should be shared.³⁰

The view we propose attempts to avoid these problems by invoking, as a yardstick for settling which costs should be shared, an idea familiar from Rawls' theory of justice. This is the idea that certain interests are of central importance to all citizens despite their having different conceptions of the good life. We will call these *compelling interests*. The interests that Rawls identifies – including freedom of speech, conscience, and

occupational choice – are ones that all individuals have in virtue of being ‘moral persons’, that is, persons with the capacity to develop and pursue their own plans of life and a sense of justice (Rawls, 1996: 293). Crucially, for our purposes, we contend that the interest in procreative choice counts as a compelling interest by the same standard Rawls adopts: to be able to realise *any* conception of the good we must be able to decide whether or not to procreate.³¹ This seems defensible once we see this as the interest in being able to choose whether or not to have a child and is not reducible to an interest in procreating, because it protects the option of not procreating as well. That interest thus counts as exercised when one chooses to *not* procreate as well as when one chooses to procreate.³²

Appealing to the idea of compelling interests, the alternative we propose to the optimal baseline view and the no production view is what call the *interest-sensitive* baseline view. It maintains that benefits are worth the costs of production, and hence that beneficiaries have an obligation to share costs with producers, if (1) beneficiaries are benefitted relative to the absence of the productive activity and (2) beneficiaries are brought as close as possible to the optimal baseline as is compatible with securing the producers’ compelling interests. If beneficiaries do not derive any net benefit relative to the absence of that activity, fairness does not generate an obligation to share costs with producers at all; if the productive activity departs from the optimal baseline in a way that is not necessary for securing a compelling interest, there is no fairness obligation to share in the costs of the suboptimal production.

To see what adopting the interest-sensitive baseline implies, consider the example of Australia one last time. Suppose that the compelling interest in procreative choice protects the choice to have more children per family than Australian parents in fact had in 1996, and assume that even with the non-optimal ‘extra’ 100,000 local children added, non-parents still benefit compared to a situation in which no new local children were added. In that case, the fairness argument would justify funding family policies also for the non-optimal ‘extra’ 100,000 children, or, in other words, for all 254,000 children.

We believe the interest-sensitive baseline will justify undiminished family policies, as in the Australia case just mentioned, despite the availability of replacement migration, under most even if not under all circumstances. There are two exceptions, in particular, that we should note.

First, in all states, large and small, there is no obligation for taxpayers to share the costs of child-rearing with parents who have a very large number of children because, we assume, the compelling interest in procreative choice does not protect the choice to have just *any* number of children. To be sure, whether we have a compelling interest to choose to have more than one child is a complex question. Compelling interests are especially weighty interests that everyone has equally. Given today’s global population size and concerns about climate justice, it is implausible that we have a compelling interest to choose to have as many children as we like. Accordingly, it is likely that obligations of fairness to share the costs of children in wealthy states, where individuals’ lifetime environmental impact is exceedingly high, run out after the first child.³³ We return to the issue of the environmental costs of children later, but we would like to emphasise, for now, that it is compatible with our view to say that, in situations in which some people have children over and above the number that would be justified by their compelling interest, or where not everyone can exercise their compelling interests compatibly with our collective climate justice obligations, those who choose to not procreate in order to not contribute to the climate crisis may themselves have claims to some form of compensation.³⁴

Second, under some circumstances, in very small states, it is possible that taxpayers are *not* benefitted by local parents' having children relative to the no-production baseline, that is compared to an alternative arrangement when no new local children are created. It is possible that a state like San Marino, for example, could rely fully on immigration in order to meet its needs for human capital.³⁵ Suppose, however, that local adults in San Marino still choose to have children. Unless it can be successfully argued that at least some local procreation is necessary to produce a *distinctive* public good, that is, to maintain the cultural continuity necessary for just local institutions to continue functioning, then the case for sharing the costs of local children cannot be grounded in fairness owed to parents. Instead, the case would have to be made on the basis of a different, purely interest-based argument.

To see how an interest-based argument differs from the interest-sensitive fairness argument, note that what *grounds* the obligation to fund family policies, according to an interest-based argument, is the fact that the fulfilment of the interest in procreative choice *benefits the parent*. To be sure, on a plausible version of the interest-based argument, how costly it is to fulfil parents' interests matters for whether there is an obligation to subsidise that interest: such an obligation is easier to justify if it is less costly to fulfil. In the case we are considering, parenting produces some benefits for others. Helping to fulfil the interest in parenting is, for that reason, less costly, on the whole, than it would be if parenting did not produce any benefits for others. This makes it easier to justify the obligation to promote parents' interests. But depending on the strength of the interest in parenting, and the costs of fulfilling it, the interest-based argument might also require non-parents to accept a net loss in order to support parents. On our interest-sensitive fairness argument, by contrast, what *grounds* the obligation to fund family policies is the fact that it is unfair to obtain benefits that others produce without bearing a fair share of the costs; the appeal to compelling interests only enters into the argument *by constraining* how much the beneficiaries may expect to gain from the production of others. By way of rough comparison, consider the difference between the argument that we should pay someone for his job as an engineer on the ground that he is making a socially productive contribution, on the one hand, and the argument that we should pay him on the ground that he has an interest in engaging in complex work, on the other. Just as it would be wrong, when people work at socially productive jobs, to claim that the only or main reason they should be paid is as a form of subsidy for the interests which those jobs help them realise, so it would be wrong, when parents produce public goods, to view sharing the costs of children as equivalent to a subsidy for an expensive project they have an interest in pursuing.³⁶

In conclusion, we would like to consider the suggestion that it would be more accurate to characterise the argument we defend as a 'hybrid' argument, rather than as a pure public goods argument. It might be suggested, that is, that our argument combines two different and independent sets of considerations, one regarding fairness obligations (which public goods arguments appeal to), and the other regarding an obligation to help fulfil each other's compelling interests (which an interests-based argument appeals to). In reply: we do not find the distinction between a hybrid and a pure public goods argument enlightening. This is because, we submit, no plausible public goods argument is 'pure' in the sense of being unconstrained by respect for the compelling interests of producers. Think again about our military equipment example. People lack a compelling interest to choose how many weapons to manufacture, and accordingly, it is plausible to think that taxpayers do not have an obligation to fund an over-supply of weapons just because it is

the result of that choice. But people who work in weapons factories do have *other* compelling interests (e.g. their interest in being able to take some time off work) and these do constrain how much we may expect to benefit from them. We maintain, then, that the correct baseline relative to which beneficiaries must gain before they owe obligations to producers is always, in the end, an interest-sensitive baseline. Accordingly, we see no reason for characterising our argument as a hybrid argument, rather than as the most plausible interpretation of the public goods argument.

The Environmental Costs of Children

The replacement migration challenge seems especially pressing once we take into account concerns about the environmental costs of local procreation. Local procreation contributes to human capital by adding a new person to the global population. Replacement migration, by contrast, admits to the state of a person who already exists. While the migration of persons from lower-emitting to higher-emitting states may increase carbon emissions (Cafaro, 2009), it is plausible to assume that local procreation in higher-emitting states increases carbon emissions even more, because it adds a whole lifetime's worth of especially high carbon emissions.³⁷ Considerations of climate justice thus seem to support replacement migration.³⁸

While we cannot fully explore these considerations, we now briefly explain why our version of the public goods argument remains defensible even when taking into account the environmental costs of children. To see this, notice that there are two distinct limits that climate justice imposes on the public goods argument.

First, the public goods argument cannot justify a taxpayer obligation to share costs with local parents if the carbon emissions of local procreation cause *impermissible harm* to *third parties*, or, in other words, if these emissions push the state beyond its 'sustainability frontier' (Caney, 2020). Proponents of the fairness argument fully acknowledge that there can be no obligation to share the costs of productive activities if these are morally impermissible.³⁹ The question, therefore, is whether there is nevertheless room for *some* amount of local procreation *within* the state's sustainability frontier. That is not only an empirical question but a normative one because different theories of climate justice will identify the sustainability frontier in more or less accommodating ways. However, we believe an affirmative answer to this question is plausible – that is, it is plausible that climate justice does not require that higher-emitting states cease local procreation *altogether*.⁴⁰

There is a second limit that climate justice may impose on the public goods argument. Even if local parents have children within the sustainability frontier, it may be that the emissions caused by local procreation threaten to render it a net cost to *non-parents* (e.g. because those emissions need to be offset by reducing consumption). In reply to this, we repeat the points made in the previous section. So long as parents produce benefits for non-parents that are worth their costs by reference to the interest-sensitive baseline, non-parents have an obligation to share the costs of children, including their environmental costs. This will mean, for example, that non-parents lack a complaint against sharing the costs of policies that invest in greener technologies in order to make individuals' per-capita lifetime environmental footprint smaller, so that a somewhat larger population can live within the sustainability frontier, as opposed to policies that foster economic growth and more per capita consumption that would be compatible with the sustainability frontier if a smaller population existed. It seems realistic to assume that a limited amount of local procreation (e.g. one child per family) is better for non-parents than no local

procreation, even taking into account the environmental costs of children that non-parents will have to share. The fact that non-parents could benefit even more if there were fewer local children constitutes no objection if the compelling interest in procreative choice protects the option of having one child.

Conclusion

The public goods argument is the most influential argument in the debate over whether the costs of child-rearing should be shared between the taxpayer and the family. Yet it has not been examined against the challenge that replacement migration is available as an alternative source of the public goods child-rearing provides. We have argued, through an in-depth analysis of that argument, that importantly different versions of it can be formulated, and that some plausible ones remain robust against this challenge. While improving our understanding of the normative underpinnings of family policies, this conclusion improves our understanding of the nature of the public goods argument itself, and may thus advance our ability to resolve other policy controversies in which it plays a role.

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Notes

1. The language used to convey the public goods argument may inadvertently suggest that children have only instrumental value. However, all proponents of the public goods argument assume, as we do, that children have intrinsic worth. Note that our focus throughout is on whether non-parents have tax obligations to share the costs of children with parents, but our discussion also applies to whether parents of fewer children have tax obligations to share the costs of larger families.
2. George (1993: 216) and Folbre (2008: 178) only briefly consider the relevance of immigration for the defensibility of family policies, and assume the public goods argument is not threatened. Casal (1999: 370–373) criticises George's stance.
3. Gosseries and Zwarthoed (2017: 299–301) argue that the public goods argument for a taxpayer obligation to share the costs of local children also justifies an obligation to share the costs of raising and educating immigrants that are borne by their families and the taxpayers of the sending state. Brock and Blake (2015: 68) and Bou-Habib (2019) argue, respectively, that a principle of fairness and a principle of non-exploitation justify compensating the taxpayers of the sending state on the assumption that they (like parents) bear

costs in educating fellow citizens who emigrate.

4. This question arises regardless of how we answer the first question because we assume that relying on replacement migration can be cost-effective even if the host state owes compensation to the migrants' sending state.
5. From now on, when referring to 'family policies', 'parents' and 'children', unless we say otherwise, we have in mind family policies for local parents or local children.
6. Note, moreover, that even in well-off states many individuals who stand to benefit from family policies are the less well-off. Still now, in Europe, the risk of poverty is higher for households with children. See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion&oldid=584082#Key_findings (accessed 7 June 2023).
7. By 'parents', we refer to adults who have children – typically although not necessarily through procreation—and who raise those children. Below we mention some issues concerning how the interests in procreating and parenting relate to each other and the possibility that parenting by adoption may have distinctive value (see footnotes 31 and 32).
8. These can be contrasted with the *morally optional* costs of raising children, for example, the cost of ensuring that children eat expensive food or travel widely. For a more detailed distinction between 'morally required' and 'morally optional' costs of child-rearing, see Olsaretti (2018).
9. For detailed analyses of how different welfare state regimes arrange these policies, see Gornick et al. (1999), Lewis (2003) and Saraceno (2010).
10. We do not explore here whether these goods are in fact *public* goods in the technical sense used by economists (i.e. non-excludable and non-rival), as opposed to normative public goods (White, 2003) or socialised goods (Olsaretti, 2013). Note, furthermore, that we assume that parents *collectively* produce the relevant public good (see Olsaretti, 2013 for discussion), and do not ask here whether there may be reasons to treat different parents unequally.
11. This also matters because where activities are socially necessary—or produce 'presumptive goods' (Klosko, 1987) or 'unconditional goods' (Casal, 1999)—there is more widespread agreement that their production creates obligations on the part of beneficiaries to share their costs, *pace* objections raised by sceptics like Nozick (1974).
12. The term originates in the UN (2001).
13. As noted above, the addition of new persons to a population also carries environmental costs. We discuss the environmental costs of procreation vs replacement migration in the last section of this article.
14. Folbre (1994a, 2008) also anticipates the concern with overpopulation as an objection to the public goods argument.
15. An exception is Casal and Williams (1995), who distinguish incentive-based and fairness-based public goods arguments (i.e. our first and third versions of the argument).
16. The quality-quantity trade-off in fertility choice suggests a tension between the pro-natalist and pro-investment versions of the public goods argument. For detailed explorations of this tension see De la Croix and Doepke (2003).
17. It is possible to formulate different variants of the fairness-based argument that view either only procreation (i.e. the mere creation of new persons) or only investment (i.e. raising new persons who are assumed to exist) as the relevant public good which fairness requires sharing the costs of. See Olsaretti (2013) on why the strongest version of the fairness argument takes both having and raising children as the relevant benefit.
18. Fully elaborating the fairness version of the public goods argument requires specifying what constitutes fair burden-sharing among producers and beneficiaries of a public good. Two main views here are (1) the *equal ratio* view – that is, the ratio of benefits to costs must be the same for producers and beneficiaries (Nagel and Murphy, 2004) and (2) the *equal net benefit* view – that is, beneficiaries must contribute so that they and the producers end up as equal net beneficiaries (Miller and Taylor, 2018). Which view one adopts does not affect our discussion below.
19. A frequently adduced defence of the normative premise is the 'principle of fair play' first formulated by Hart (1955) and Rawls (1999) and later elaborated by others (Cullity, 1995; Klosko, 1987).
20. A further condition may be necessary, namely, that policies that accord adults child-rearing rights conditionally upon proven ability to invest in children, such as a parental licencing scheme, are ineffective or unjustified. There is an ongoing debate on parental licencing; we believe the jury is still out on whether the latter is justified. See LaFollette (2010) and De Wispelaere and Weinstock (2012).
21. Other conditions may also need to be satisfied, for example, that the benefit is produced intentionally and that there is a cooperative scheme in place. There is a lively debate over these further conditions (Arneson, 1982; Klosko, 1987; Simmons, 2001: 27–42). Our focus is only on the benefitting condition; we assume the other necessary conditions are satisfied.

22. Which *producers*, which *public good* and what *quality* public goods taxpayers are obliged to share the costs of, also depend on what it means for benefits to be 'worth their costs'.
23. The question of the relevant 'baseline' for comparison arises in many discussions in political theory about the moral consequences that follow when some persons affect the situations of others, for example, discussions about the nature of harm (Bradley, 2012), coercion (Nozick, 1969), and exploitation (Wertheimer, 1999).
24. On this view, the optimal production of public goods is the point where the marginal cost of provision equals the marginal benefit.
25. At the end of this section, we revisit this claim, as we believe the optimal baseline does not yield all the correct judgements even in the military equipment case.
26. It may be possible for very small states to rely exclusively on immigration, rather than local procreation, for their human capital needs (e.g. San Marino). However, we assume most mid-size (e.g. Australia) and large states (e.g. United States) are not able to *continuously* rely *exclusively* on immigration, if only because there is an insufficient global pool of available immigrants who can be integrated into their labour forces. See Sinn (2005) and Docquier and Marchiori (2012).
27. Indeed, it is satisfied even when total costs outweigh total benefits, if, absent production, the beneficiaries' overall situation would be even worse. For example, suppose that if the last generation (L) produces no children, everyone's welfare will be negative; in these circumstances, parents in the L generation can be said to produce benefits that are worth their costs if they bring into the world an enormous number of children, so long as this results in non-parents' net welfare level being only slightly less bad. The implications of adopting the no-production baseline resemble the Repugnant Conclusion in population ethics (Parfit, 1987), which results if total utility is the standard for determining the desirable population size. Notice an important difference, however: adopting the no-production baseline only commits us to saying that beneficiaries have obligations of fairness to share the costs of a very large number of children, *if* these are brought into existence; total utilitarianism supports saying that there is an obligation to bring that very large number of children into existence.
28. The point at hand could be formulated as an *intrapersonal* one: each one of us is a potential producer and a potential beneficiary of public goods; a policy that requires us to share the costs of public goods production is justifiable to each one of us only if it balances both our interest in being treated fairly as producers and the interest we have in not being subjected to too wide a range of non-consented to obligations as beneficiaries.
29. For this important point, we are indebted to Shields (2021).
30. The problem of balancing the interests of producers and beneficiaries arises in stark form in the case of public goods production because alternative mechanisms for balancing those interests are unavailable. More specifically, assuming that public goods are non-excludable and non-avoidable, reliance on a market for balancing the interests of producers and beneficiaries is not possible.
31. The interest in procreative choice is understood to include, under most circumstances, an interest in parenting the child one has procreated. The nature of this interest and whether it is strong enough to ground a right (e.g. whether biological connection to the child one procreates, or the fact that one is morally responsible for that child's existence, play a role in grounding that interest, or whether that interest consists mainly in the value of the parent-child-relationship one establishes) are some of the many questions in the ethics of parenthood that we cannot treat here. For discussion, see Archard (2010), Brake (2010) and Liao (2015).
32. Saying that we all have an interest in procreative choice does not imply that parenting by adoption is any less valuable than by procreation. A crucial part of the interest that is protected by procreative choice, the interest in the goods of a parent-child relationship, can be realised just as well in adoptive families (see Macleod, 2002). For the view that, from the perspective of children's interests, being parented by adoptive parents is as valuable as being parented by one's procreators, see Haslanger (2009), who responds to Velleman's (2005) case for the relevance of genetic connectedness. Some argue that adoptive parent-child relationships realise *additional* values (Rulli, 2014).
33. For arguments to the effect that we lack a right to more than one child, see McKibben (1998), Conly (2016), Meijers (2016).
34. We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point. While we think that non-parents of this kind – 'Birth Strikers' – have claims to compensation, it does not straightforwardly follow that the compensation should come in the form of an exemption from sharing the costs of family policies which are justified by our version of the public goods argument.
35. See footnote 26.
36. It may be true in a range of cases that both the interest-based and fairness-based argument is in favour of sharing the costs of children and rewarding socially valuable jobs. This is not a problem: it seems right

to say that, for example, if A's and B's interests in discharging complex work can be equally satisfied either by taking up a socially productive job or by carrying out a hobby that does not benefit others, and A chooses the former while B chooses the latter, then there are weightier reasons for rewarding A than for subsidising B.

37. On the unequal environmental costs of children, see Casal (1999) and Caney (2020).
38. That wealthier states should rely on replacement migration also seems supported by global justice, insofar as the possibility of migration expands economic opportunities for citizens from less wealthy states. We cannot address this important issue, but our approach to it would parallel the approach we briefly set out regarding climate justice.
39. Rawls' formulation of the principle of fairness assumes there are just background conditions. On whether the principle can, *pace* Rawls, create obligations even when there is background injustice, see Shelby (2016) and Pasternak (2017). We are assuming a less demanding and uncontroversial requirement, that is, that the benefit-producing activity not be rights-violating.
40. See Pinkert and Sticker (2020) for a review of much recent work on the environmental costs of procreation, which they argue overestimates those costs.

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