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CHAPTER

18 Egalitarian Justice, Population Size, and Parents' Responsibility for the Costs of Children

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Abstract

Theorists of egalitarian justice generally assume that the principles they formulate apply to a group of individuals whose creation and size is taken as given. Yet many of the policies egalitarians favor distribute the costs and benefits of children in different ways, and, by so doing, affect people's procreative choices and a society's population size. How do considerations of egalitarian justice bear on how the costs and benefits of children should be distributed and on what the population size should be in a just society? This chapter argues for the importance of addressing these questions within an egalitarian theory of justice and critically examines one revisionary way of answering them.

Keywords: [egalitarian justice](#), [population size](#), [procreative externalities](#), [intergenerational justice](#), [obligations of parents](#)

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1. Introduction

MANY policies egalitarians favor distribute the costs and benefits of children in different ways between parents and society at large. Two examples include parental leave programmes defended in the name of gender justice and the provision of publicly funded schools justified by equal opportunity for children. By so doing, these policies influence people's choices of whether to have children and how many to have, and so, indirectly, a society's population size. The latter, in turn, affects the way and the extent to which a society can provide benefits for its citizens, as a society's socio-economic and political institutions can, under different conditions, gain or conversely be put under strain depending on how large its population is and as a result of changes in both the overall size and the age-distribution of its population.

In light of these facts, egalitarian theorists of justice need to address some questions they have thus far mostly neglected by assuming that the principles they formulate apply to a group of individuals whose creation and size are taken as given.¹ This chapter identifies and discusses two such questions, which I call the *Numbers Question* and the *Parental Justice Question*. These are, respectively, the question of what egalitarian justice has to say about how large the population size of a just society may or should be, and the question of what egalitarian justice requires vis-à-vis the distribution of the costs and benefits of children between parents and non-parents. More specifically, this chapter asks whether we should adopt a view about parental justice that can, under certain conditions, help provide an answer to the Numbers Question. On this view, under certain conditions, people's choices to have children are, in one important respect, on a par with consumption choices and other lifestyle choices which egalitarian justice requires individuals to internalize the costs of. Egalitarian justice may then have implications for how many children individuals may have compatibly with justice.

To be sure, the Parental Justice Question is not the only question egalitarian theorists of justice face if they are to address the Numbers Question satisfactorily. Since factors other than fertility rates directly affect a society's population size—most importantly, longevity and migration—a complete account of egalitarian justice and population size should also include a treatment of what egalitarian justice requires vis-à-vis the distribution of the costs and benefits of longevity among different individuals and age-groups, and with regard to migration. What is more, such an account should consider how the answers it provides to these sets of questions as well as to the question of parental justice fit with each other. While egalitarian theorists have paid plenty of attention in recent years to questions of justice and migration, these discussions do not ask, for example, whether the available justifications of a state's right to exclude potential immigrants are consistent with the endorsement of pro-natalist policies or even merely of the widely held view that citizens have a duty to not only include, but to share the costs of, new members added through procreation.² Yet such an analysis is needed and promises to cast fresh light on the ethics of migration.³ Similarly, a complete account of egalitarian justice and population size must ask how parental justice considerations are related to the view egalitarians should take about paying for the costs of an increasingly ageing population—another question that has received scanty attention among philosophers.⁴ Egalitarians should ask, for example, whether their views on who should pay for the growing costs of the pension system in ageing societies are consistent with their stance on who should pay for the costs of children. Holding that all elderly citizens are entitled to the same pension benefits regardless of whether they are parents or not may commit us to a system in which the costs of children are shared among all citizens, regardless of whether they are parents or not: since a universal pension system socializes the benefits of children, justice to parents may demand that the costs of children be socialized, too.⁵ While this chapter's discussion does not tackle these questions head on, it is hoped that it can help lay the bases for addressing them by advancing debates on parental justice and bringing to view the connection between those and an account of egalitarian justice and population size.

There are two further main sets of questions that a full account of egalitarian justice and population size must take a stance on, and which the discussion that follows makes some assumptions about. So, before proceeding, it is important to mention them.

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The first set of questions concerns procreative or reproductive rights and duties, that is, questions about the grounds, nature, and scope of individuals' rights and duties concerning their creation of new persons. There is a wealth of contributions in various areas of ethics on the vast array of complex issues regarding procreative rights and duties.⁶ Some political philosophers who take an interest in the family, too, have recently contributed to these debates, focusing especially on whether individuals' interests in parenting ground their right to parent their own biological child and the right to bring new children into the world.⁷ While this chapter does not take up directly questions about procreative rights and duties, any treatment of either parental justice or of justice and population size must make some assumptions about, and can have implications for, individuals' procreative rights and duties, so it is appropriate to spell out here three things the discussion that follows assumes in this regard. The first is that individuals have a moral right to choose whether or not to procreate, where the right in question includes at least both a liberty right and a claim right against interference.⁸ Second, this chapter also assumes that individuals' right to procreative choice (at least the liberty right) is, like all other rights, not unrestricted or unlimited. In particular, it is constrained by the duties that would-be procreators have toward those whom they would bring into existence, and by some rights of third parties, including at least the equal procreative choice rights of all others. Third, the discussion that follows is open to the possibility, that, additionally, the liberty right to procreative choice is also constrained, specifically, by the considerations of egalitarian justice that are under discussion, that is, of parental justice, and concerning population size. Indeed, the view of parental justice this chapter spends most time scrutinizing makes precisely that claim, and this chapter's criticism of that view does not take it to task on that score. But, it bears emphasizing here, people's procreative rights are supposed to have independent justification from those considerations, even if the latter were thought to justifiably constrain them.⁹

There is a second set of questions which the discussion of this chapter has implications for and makes some assumptions about. These are questions concerning justice between generations, both overlapping and non-overlapping. The question of parental justice has necessarily an intergenerational dimension insofar as it asks how the costs of the creation and rearing of successive generation(s) should be distributed among members of each preceding generations and/or across different generations. As for the Numbers Question, it is especially salient in an intergenerational context, as many of the costs of changes in population size are borne by later generations (Dworkin 2004). Inevitably, then, in answering the Parental Justice Question and the Numbers Question, we are also taking a stance on some issues concerning justice between generations. This chapter's discussion assumes that members of earlier generations do have obligations of justice vis-à-vis individuals of later, both overlapping and non-overlapping, generations. It is agnostic, however, on whether these are obligations to ensure that they are equally well off as members of earlier generations, or merely above a specified threshold of advantage. Similarly, this chapter does not make assumptions outright on whether all ways in which members of earlier generations affect the level of advantage of members of later generations are morally on a par. Indeed, whether earlier generations' consumption, production, and procreative choices could be said to be similarly unjust when they result in worsening the situation of later generations is one of the questions which this chapter's discussion shows needs addressing and contributes to answering.

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This chapter proceeds as follows. After making a case for the importance of addressing the Numbers and the Parental Justice Questions (in Sections 2 and 3, respectively), the chapter introduces an answer to the Parental Justice question, the Parental Provision view, that can have implications for the Numbers Question (Section 4). It then subjects that view to close critical scrutiny (Sections 5 and 6). While the chapter argues that Parental Provision is ultimately indefensible and that it cannot offer a plausible answer to the Numbers Question, this chapter's discussion of the Parental Justice Question and its relation to the Numbers Question, as well as the critique of Parental Provision, allow us to learn some important lessons about the responsibility of parents and population size.

2. The Numbers Question

Over the last half-century concerns about overpopulation or population pressure have been voiced, now and again and with varying degrees of urgency, by several moral philosophers; more recently, in light of a more widely acknowledged awareness of the pressing challenges presented by climate change and the threat which a growing population presents for meeting those challenges, the case for viewing population policies and procreative decisions as the proper object of ethical evaluation has gained new currency.¹⁰ While during this same period of time a small but thriving area of moral philosophy has identified and grappled with a wealth of complex questions that arise around our moral evaluation of states of affairs once we acknowledge that how many people will exist (and their identity) depends on choices we make and the policies we adopt,¹¹ political philosophers, including theorists of egalitarian justice, have mostly abstained from addressing questions about population size.

To better understand both the possible reasons for this neglect and why this neglect is unjustified, it is helpful to distinguish between three different ways in which questions about population size might be thought to be relevant from the standpoint of egalitarian justice.

Questions of population size arise, first of all, in the context of attempts to determine what the *optimum population size* is; where the idea of an optimum population size, though in principle susceptible to different understandings, is most readily associated with that of a population size that is *best* from the point of view of impersonal goodness; and, more specifically still, from the point of view of (total or average) utility maximization.¹² Since theorists of egalitarian justice are not committed to utility maximization, discussions of optimum population size thus understood need not exercise them. However, some egalitarians could take interest in *distribution-sensitive* variants of this idea of optimum population size. In particular, *maximizing egalitarians* could view the maximization of *equal* utility or welfare as desirable, and hence ask what the population size is for which maximal equally distributed welfare can be secured.¹³ Alternatively, or additionally, some egalitarians—*telic egalitarians*—view equality as being itself impersonally valuable, thus regarding equal states of affairs as (at least in one way) better than unequal ones; they may also view equal states of affairs with more equally well-off ↵ people and hence a greater number of relationships of equality as (at least in one way) better than other equal states of affairs with fewer people and fewer relationships of equality. Telic egalitarians would then think of the optimum population size (or range of population sizes) as the size(s) of the population at which equality is realized and its value is best promoted.¹⁴

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While some contemporary egalitarians are telic egalitarians and/or maximizing egalitarians, many of them are neither of these things.¹⁵ Instead, many egalitarian theorists of justice think of equality's demands as grounded in, and arising only in the context of, certain kinds of actual or potential relations between individuals who make reciprocal claims on one another, where these claims do not include that to being maximally well off. These theorists of egalitarian justice will then conceive of concerns about optimum population size of the kind just identified as extraneous to their views and may be tempted to conclude that insofar as we are committed to satisfying the demands of distributive justice—as opposed to promoting the impersonal values of utility and/or equality—questions about population size do not arise at all. (For an explicit endorsement of this sort of position, see Roemer 1996, 153.)

This conclusion, however, would be unjustified. Even assuming, as this chapter will do from now on, that egalitarian theorists need not be concerned with questions of optimum population size as identified above, there are two reasons why they should address the Numbers Question. (These correspond to the remaining two of the three different ways, announced earlier in this section, in which questions about population size are significant from the standpoint of egalitarian justice.)

Before mentioning these reasons, it is worth emphasizing that these are reasons, not merely to take population size into account when fleshing out the implications of determinate principles of justice in given contexts—as

it is obvious enough that we must do in order to work out, for example, what constitutes a person's fair share of resources given that she is one of x many claimants, or in order to know how much the current generation must save in order to satisfy the requirements of the just savings principles. The considerations that follow are, more fundamentally, reasons to take population size into account *when formulating the principles of justice themselves*, and, more specifically, so as to be able to formulate *determinate* principles of egalitarian justice.¹⁶ It is also worth noting here that the reasons provided below why egalitarian theorists should address the Numbers Question are reasons to address a dynamic version of that question, that is, one which asks what egalitarian justice has to say about how large the population size of a just society may or should *come to be*. In other words, as far as egalitarian justice is concerned, the proper object of egalitarian justice considerations are population size *changes*.

With these remarks in mind, here are the two reasons why the Numbers Questions is important—indeed, unavoidable—for egalitarian theorists: while the first points to the fact that egalitarian justice considerations have a bearing on *how we should respond to population size changes*, the second points to the fact that egalitarian justice considerations may bear on *whether we should bring about* some rather than other population size changes.¹⁷

p. 412 First, all theorists of justice, including egalitarian ones, need to take a stance on how justice requires that the costs and benefits of population size changes be distributed across different generations, both overlapping and non-overlapping. Does justice between members of overlapping generations require that they share equally the costs and benefits of increases or decreases in population size, or should those costs and benefits be distributed so that the less well-off generation is benefited more, for example? Moreover, we must ask: Are earlier generations' obligations to save for non-overlapping future generations fixed assuming a steady-state population size, or do they fluctuate in line with whatever decreasing or increasing population size would be necessary to secure future individuals' ability to maintain the same level of advantage as members of the earlier generation? An answer to these questions is an integral part of a theory of intergenerational justice and is needed in order for the principles of justice between age groups and those of justice toward future generations to be complete; without an answer to these questions, we could not fully spell out, even in principle, what the obligations of intergenerational justice are.

Second, since population size changes are ones which we have some (collective) control over, and since how large the population is affects what claims of egalitarian justice everyone has, or the size of individuals' fair shares, the question arises whether egalitarian justice considerations tell in favor of the population size being smaller or greater. To take the simplest case as illustration: if justice demands that everyone who will ever live receive $1/n$ th of the value of the external resources (including natural resources and some of the resources societies produce), the—relative and, in many cases, absolute—size of each person's share of resources varies depending, among other things, on how large the n is. Other things being equal—in particular, holding constant the amount of resources available—the larger that n , the smaller each person's share, both relative and absolute. When things are not equal, an increase in the number of people, while it decreases a person's relative share, can increase the size of each person's absolute share—as happens for example if a larger number of people, through cooperation, by innovating and through their productive activities, results in a larger overall stock of resources becoming available for distribution. The question arises, then, whether egalitarians think that the n may be as large, or as small, as it *in fact happens* to be at any given time, and that accordingly, the size of people's egalitarian shares may fluctuate freely in line with changes in the fertility rate; or whether, by contrast, considerations of egalitarian justice tell in favor of constraints or targets on the size of people's fair shares, and therefore, on how large the pool of claimants of fair shares should be. By way of analogy, consider our views about production, saving, or consumption: we may think that egalitarian justice tells in favor of increasing (sustainable) productive activities so that everyone's shares are improved, at least up to a certain point; that it places us under some duties to save; and that it condemns engaging in consumption activities that

result in the worsening of others' shares of a valuable resource (for example, their share of clean air). Shouldn't egalitarians think the same about procreation?

3. The Parental Justice Question

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Just as egalitarian theories of justice are incomplete without addressing the Numbers Question, so they are incomplete without an answer to the Parental Justice Question, or the question of how the costs and benefits of children should be distributed between parents and society at large, and whether parents, by virtue of having and/or rearing children, should bear special liability for their costs.¹⁸ To see this, it is helpful to keep in mind two important distinctions regarding what the costs of children include.¹⁹ First, the "costs of children" include the costs of *care* (the time, energy and material resources needed to bring up children from needy infants into increasingly less dependent and more autonomous persons) and the costs of added (adult) members (added members, for short), that is, the costs people will create as adults, including the costs involved in meeting whatever claims of justice the new persons will make *once they are grown up*. (Of course, some the costs of children could be seen as a part of each individual's lifetime share. But the relevant point here is that the costs of children go beyond the costs of care.) Second, the costs of children (both of care and of added members) include the "justice-based costs of children," that is, costs that must be borne in order to fulfil the justice-based claims of children both as children and as adults. That is, they include the costs required to provide the care that children as children have a claim to (according to our favored account of what rights children have) and the costs needed to meet the claims to a fair share which adults are entitled to.

With these points in mind, we can formulate the Parental Justice Question that is of interest here with greater precision: What does egalitarian justice have to say about the distribution of *at least* the *justice-based* costs of children, both of care and of added adult members? Specifically, should those costs be shared equally among all citizens, including non-parents, or should parents internalize (some, most or all of) them? With these points in mind we can also appreciate the centrality of the question of parental justice to our theory of justice: without an answer to the question of parental justice, a theory is incomplete in two crucial ways that are of interest here. (It is incomplete, and it matters, in other ways, too. See Olsaretti 2013; 2017; 2018.)

First, because the question of parental justice is also a question about who should bear the costs of added members, theories of distributive justice, including egalitarians ones, that do not address the question of parental justice fail to specify who, as a matter of justice, owes any of the benefits that our theory of justice says people are entitled to. In other words, we need an answer to the Parental Justice Question in order to know *who bears the obligation* to provide individuals with their fair shares: do all citizens bear these obligations, and do so equally, or do these obligations fall only, or mostly, on each person's parents?

Second, and less obviously, the answer to the Parental Justice Question informs *what* people's claims of egalitarian justice are claims to, or *what constitutes* individuals' *fair shares*. This is because our view of Parental Justice informs who and how many others are legitimate bearers of competing claims on given resources, such that heeding their claim to a fair share is *constitutive of what our fair share is*. Consider this simple case: if we believe that egalitarian justice requires that the costs of children be fully shared among fellow citizens, we may view as compatible with justice a situation in which people's relative and absolute fair lifetime shares decrease as parents add new members to the initial population (see Table 18.1²⁰). By contrast, if we hold a view of Parental Justice (*Parental Provision*) on which individuals other than parents²¹ have an immunity against having their fair lifetime shares *worsened* as a result of others' choices to add new members to the population, then everyone's lifetime fair shares, including that of newcomers, would not, compatibly with justice, diminish in line with an expansion in the numbers of new members; if it did so, this would be an *unjust* encroachment on or infringement of people's claims to their fair lifetime shares (see Table 18.2). Parents alone, on this view, bear liability for the costs of children; in this simple example, they must, in the name of justice, pass on all their

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resources to their children in order to meet children's claims of justice *and* respect non-parents' claims to their fair share.

Table 18.1 Socialization (with no positive externalities)

Time	Total	NP	P	C	GC
t_1	60	30	30		
t_2	60	20	20	20	
t_3	60	15	15	15	15

Table 18.2 Parental Provision (with no positive externalities)

Time	Total	NP	P	C	GC
t_1	60	30	30		
t_2	60	30	0	30	
t_3	60	30	0	0	30

Defenders of Parental Provision²² have formulated this view of parental justice as part and parcel of a certain kind of egalitarian theory of justice, namely, one which recognizes that under certain conditions people's claims of egalitarian justice should reflect their responsibility for their choices and ambitions, and that such claims must not be justified by reference to conceptions of the good that not all reasonable people share. Given these assumptions, the case for Parental Provision seems straightforward. With reference to the simple example above, two defenders of Parental Provision, Hillel Steiner and Peter Vallentyne, remark:

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Suppose that one agent, A, ... intentionally uses up 20 of his units of value, and is left with 10 units. He cannot now plausibly claim that each person has a right to an equal share of the remaining 40 units—that is, that he, like his contemporary, is now entitled to 20 (40/20) units. The right to an equal share is not, after all, a right to an ongoing equal share. It is a right to an equal initial share ... Suppose now that, instead of using up 20 units, A intentionally procreates an additional (adult) agent. Again, it would be implausible for A to claim that he, like the two others, is now entitled to 20 (60/3) units).

(Steiner and Vallentyne 2009: 67–68)

So, the reasoning goes, since egalitarian justice requires that, generally, people be held responsible for the negative consequences, for others, of their choices, and since we may not invoke, as a reason for exempting parenting from this responsibility requirement, considerations about the special value of parenting as opposed to other lifestyle choices people make, it seems fair to the non-parent to require the parent to internalize all the costs of having the child. Non-parents should be, so to speak, buffered from the net negative effects of others' procreative choices.²³

4. The Relevance of Parental Justice for the Numbers Question

Just like theorists of egalitarian justice have mostly neglected the Numbers Question, so they have, with only a few exceptions just mentioned and to be discussed shortly, also ignored the Parental Justice Question. It is noteworthy here that how we answer the Parental Justice Question can have implications for our evaluation of population size changes, so addressing this question can—and, arguably, it should—provide egalitarian theorists with at least part of an answer to the Numbers Question.

To see the connection between the two questions under discussion, it is important to bear in mind that, while the Parental Justice question is a question about how justice requires that the costs and benefits of children be distributed, it can have implications for whether (procreative) parents may bring children into existence in the first place, and hence, for how large the population is, on the assumption that we are asking what justice ideally requires, that is, assuming strict compliance with the demands of parental justice under discussion, as well as the satisfaction of other just background conditions. In particular, we assume, crucially, that those who choose to parent can do so freely; and that they are not at the short end of independently unjust, for example, gender or socio-economic, inequalities. Because the focus is on what justice ideally requires, we ask what parental justice demands not only regarding the distribution of the costs and benefits of children who already exist, but also about whether those costs (and benefits) may (or should) be created in the first place, and assuming that prospective parents may not act contrary to, and would generally not be excused if they failed to act in line with, the demands of parental justice.

p. 416 With this point in mind, it should be apparent how a certain view of parental justice—the Parental Provision view mentioned above—can have implications about population size changes. On the Parental Provision view, as already mentioned, egalitarian justice requires that people's fair shares not be negatively affected as a result of others' free choices, including the choice to have children; under certain conditions, that is, those under which socializing or externalizing the costs of children (including the justice-based costs of added members) would result in a net worsening of non-parents' fair shares, parents would either have to fully internalize those costs or refrain from having children. The conditions under which children would constitute net negative externalities for non-parents include conditions in which resources are essentially scarce, that is, it is impossible to increase their supply, and/or increasing their supply would have morally adverse consequences such as, for example, disastrous consequences for our ecosystem. Under these conditions, according to Parental Provision, justice demands of parents that they internalize the costs of children; given that they would be unlikely to be able to do so compatibly with fulfilling their children's claims to their fair shares, prospective parents would be bound by justice to not have children.²⁴

So, although in principle Parental Provision is compatible with population growth, even substantial population growth, in reality, given certain empirical assumptions, it can recommend limited population growth, and arguably, in the world as we know it, an endorsement of Parental Provision would provide support for anti-natalism.²⁵ Environmentalists who are concerned about overpopulation may be drawn to some version of Parental Provision for this reason. So, for example, Thomas Young endorses a version of Parental Provision on which prospective parents, in order to procreate permissibly, would have to fully internalize their children's lifetime carbon footprint, and other environmentalists' arguments to the effect that procreation is morally on a par with conspicuous consumption, and hence impermissible, share with Parental Provision commitment to the claim that it is impermissible foreseeably to worsen others' situation by bringing new people into existence. Procreation is not special in this regard; it is a form of harmful and wrongful activity by dint of its (unintended but foreseeable) negative effects on third parties.²⁶

The version of Parental Provision egalitarian theorists of justice offer and under discussion in what follows is different from these environmentalist variants of it along at least two dimensions which it is important to notice. First, environmentalists do not necessarily commit to Parental Provision on the grounds of *egalitarian*

justice, or even *justice tout court*: it is possible to view children as net negative externalities, and procreation as harmful, by reference to a view of what third parties are owed that makes no reference to claims over resources (for example, by reference to a commitment not to breach their rights to bodily integrity, or their interest in solitude), or by reference to impersonal standards (so, for example, if we were average utilitarians, we could think of procreators as acting wrongly if they are responsible for bringing into the existence either too few or too many children relative to the optimum population size as identified by average utilitarianism).²⁷ Second, environmentalists' versions of Parental Provision appeal to the interests or rights or justice-based claims of not only procreators' contemporaries but also—and in fact, mainly—future people's. By contrast, the version of Parental Provision defended by egalitarian theorists of justice appeals to the claims of egalitarian justice of the procreators' contemporaries. It is important to notice these points, since these different versions of Parental Provision face different challenges and have different strengths. It is an advantage of the egalitarian justice Parental Provision view under discussion here, for example, that it eschews appeal both to what is owed to future people and to the axiological commitments involved in discussions of optimum population size mentioned earlier, which have been shown to lead to hard-to-escape paradoxes.²⁸

The egalitarian justice version of Parental Provision should also be distinguished from a structurally analogous argument which appeals to considerations of justice not between parents and non-parents, but between different states or peoples. On the latter view, under certain conditions, states are held liable for the costs of the fertility policies they support, as it would be unjust to other states which have adopted different demographic policies to share those costs (Rawls 1999; see also Barry 2005). So, for example, John Rawls notes, suppose two peoples start off with equal resources and an equal population size, and one of them chooses to support extensive female market participation, resulting in smaller families and a zero-growth population which make possible a higher level of wealth, while the other adopts generous parental leave policies and does not promote female market participation, ending up with large families and a fast growing population, which leads to a lower level of wealth. It would be unjust to the now wealthier, less populous people to redistribute some of their wealth to the less well-off state, just as it would be unjust to redistribute wealth from a more productive state to one that is less wealthy as a result of its operating more leisure-supporting norms and institutions.

This justice-based argument for states' duties to internalize the costs of their demographic policies may, like the Parental Provision view, also attract environmentalists' support.²⁹ Here, again, procreation is not special, in the sense that an actor's (in this case, a state's) worsening others' situation by creating larger numbers of individuals is deemed to be no different from its negatively affecting others in other ways: given just background conditions, whether a country pollutes more because it is more populous or because it uses fossil fuels to produce energy, for example, are to be treated on a par in terms of the country's liability for being above its fair share of emissions targets. Although some of the considerations that support Parental Provision may also figure in this argument for states' liabilities for their demographic trends, the analysis of Parental Provision that follows does not straightforwardly extend to this argument, as Parental Provision is concerned with the obligations of *egalitarian* justice that bind *individuals* to one another, and the state-focused argument at stake is committed neither to egalitarian justice nor to individuals as the bearers of claims and obligations of justice.

Parental Provision, then, while being a view about parental justice, can provide a crucial normative premise in an argument for constraints on population growth. The possibility of extrapolating our answer, or part of it, to the Numbers Question from our answer to the Parental Justice Question is a hitherto underexplored possibility, and one that is of interest for two reasons. First, as was mentioned earlier, the appeal to Parental Provision allows us to generate limits to permissible procreation by appealing to *considerations of justice toward our contemporaries*, that is, to contemporary non-parents, who have claims to having their fair shares respected, or not negatively affected, by other people's procreative choices. If Parental Provision were defensible, it would provide a way of generating some conclusions about population size that seem intuitively plausible in an intergenerational context, but without appealing to the rights of, or the duties toward, future generations.³⁰

Second, Parental Provision allows us to accommodate an important conviction about the normative significance of responsibility for our view of what justice requires regarding constraints on population size. Since under just background conditions specific people—parents—are responsible for the population size's being what it is, it seems appropriate that our view about what egalitarian justice requires concerning population size take account of that fact, rather than viewing parents' rights and obligations as fully derivative of independent considerations about the desirable population size.

5. Assessing Parental Provision: Obligations of Justice

Despite its apparent credentials, the Parental Provision view is not, I now argue, the right way for us to address questions about population size.³¹ By way of preamble, recall, from Section 3, how assumptions about the fair distribution of the costs and benefits of children undergird both claims we ordinarily make about who bears *obligations of justice*, and about *what counts as people's fair shares*. (It is in virtue of these facts, it was noted, that the question of parental justice is central to the formulation of a theory of egalitarian justice.) This section and the next show that the Parental Provision view has implausible implications about both these central aspects of a theory of egalitarian justice that incorporated Parental Provision as an answer to the question of parental justice.

Consider, first, what Parental Provision entails about who has *obligations of egalitarian justice*, including obligations of intergenerational justice, that is, who has the obligations to confer fair shares on contemporary and future citizens. Given that, as was mentioned earlier, Parental Provision is committed to buffering non-parents from the net negative effects of people's choices to have children, and given that asking non-parents to help provide newcomers with their fair share, both as children and as adults, can, under some conditions, constitute such a net negative effect, an implication of Parental Provision, applied consistently, is that, *as a matter of ideal justice*, each one of us has a claim to being provided with our fair share, not against her fellow citizens, but against only her own parents. Correlatively, each one of us does not have obligations of justice to provide for any fellow citizens' fair share, but only for our own children's: respect for justice does not require that we share our fate with fellow citizens by sharing our resources with them, ↵ but on the contrary, it is thought to require that our share not be diminished in order to give our fellow citizens *their* fair share.

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To be clear, it is important to distinguish the claim just made from two other claims which I am *not* making. I do not suggest that the Parental Provision view does not hold that everyone has *some* justice-relevant obligations. For notice, first, that it is consistent with Parental Provision to hold that we all have duties to uphold and support institutions that ensure that those who bear obligations of justice discharge them. Proponents of Parental Provision can hold that we have a duty to support the institutions that ensure that those who owe our fellow citizens their fair shares (i.e., our fellow citizens' parents), fulfil those obligations. But notice that these duties, like the duties we have to uphold institutions that enforce the private law or the criminal law, are not themselves obligations of egalitarian justice. So, to point to the fact that all citizens of a society governed by the demands of Parental Provision do have these duties does not contradict the point I am making.

Nor, secondly, am I suggesting that the Parental Provision view can be accused of *harshness* or *neglect of children*, in the sense that it must deny that we have *any* obligations to our fellow citizens, both while they are children and once they are adults, to meet their claims of justice under any conditions. The Parental provision view is consistent with holding that we do have those obligations under *non-ideal* conditions, that is, when the parents of our fellow citizens are unable to internalize the costs of having children. In these cases, proponents of Parental Provision can argue that everyone, including non-parents, have obligations (owed to the children involved) to step in to discharge those obligations. But note that these obligations are a last, undesirable resort

that are triggered in a non-ideal context: they amount to an injustice to non-parents that arises in order to avoid what is presumed to be an even greater injustice to children.³²

My claim, then, is that a society governed by Parental Provision is not a society in which citizens are bound by obligations of egalitarian justice to one another. Parental provision implies that the contrary is true—that non-parents must *not be* held, ideally, to any such obligations. Moreover, note that this would be true not only of the obligations toward their contemporary fellow citizens, but also toward future citizens: Parental Provision seems to commit us to the view that future citizens are not the responsibility of non-parents, but ideally, only the responsibility of their parents. To see this, imagine a scenario in which successive generations do not overlap, but instead, as soon as the parent and the non-parent die, the child that the parent decided to procreate is born, fully formed, and that the child lays a claim, at that point, to his fair share of resources. Here, just like in the normal case in which parents and children overlap, according to Parental Provision, the obligation to provide the new person with her fair share falls on the parent: the non-parent should not see his share disturbed by the new person's coming into existence. In other words, future generations are, in an important sense, negative externalities for *today's non-parents*, so non-parents can justifiably claim that only parents should bear the costs of future persons. The sense in which future generations are a negative externality for previous generations' non-parents is the following: non-parents' having to forgo depleting today's resources *for the sake of future persons* ↪ leaves today's non-parents worse off *on balance*, as a result of the fact that there will be future persons, than they would be if future generations did not come into existence.³³ Table 18.3 illustrates this.

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Table 18.3 Socialization (with no positive externalities) of future generations' claims (Note: S1 and S2 here represent different possible scenarios, not two consecutive time periods)

Time	Total	NP1	P1	C
S1—No next generation	60	30	30	
S2—Next generation	60	20	20	20

So, Parental Provision implies that—once again, ideally—only parents have obligations of distributive justice toward future people, such as the obligation to leave enough and as good for others, or to contribute toward just savings. That Parental Provision has these implications regarding the bearers of justice obligations is problematic for two reasons.

First, this seems like an intuitively unappealing consequence of taking the commitment to holding individuals responsible for the consequences of their choices too far. The Parental Provision view starts with a claim that seems eminently plausible in other contexts, for example, in contexts in which people incur avoidable gambles in order to pursue gain or consume expensive goods. In these contexts, it seems reasonable that others should not have to bear the net negative externalities of people's choices. But applying this principle to the choice of having and rearing children leads us to a view that abandons a core commitment of egalitarian justice, namely, the commitment that citizens should share each other's fate (Rawls 1972, 102).

Second, these implications of Parental Provision seem particularly troubling if our reasons for endorsing the view in the first place are, at least in part, that we are moved by a concern with intergenerational justice. In the context of a concern with intergenerational justice, we have especially strong reasons to want to be able to say that it is incumbent on all of us today—not just on those of us who contribute, by having children, to *there being* future generations—to bear some costs so that future generations' life prospects are either no worse than ours or at least not below a specified threshold. Meeting the challenges we face when we consider the prospects of future generations, such as, crucially, the challenge to halt climate change, the cooperation of all, non-parents

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as well as parents, is needed. The defender of Parental Provision who is concerned with climate change now faces a curious problem: his target is to show that procreation is morally on a par (at least in the respects the environmentalist is interested in) with conspicuous consumption, or “eco-gluttony”, so if we want to condemn the latter—as he assumes we should—then we should also condemn the former (Young 2001). But what he ends up committing to is the claim that there is nothing wrong with ↪ eco-gluttony if those indulging in it are non-parents. This seems like too high a price to pay for being able to justify limits on population growth.

6. Assessing Parental Provision: Fair shares

The Parental Provision view also yields implausible implications with regard to what constitutes individuals’ fair shares. Here, as with the question of who holds obligations of justice, Parental Provision defenders have wrongly assumed that it is possible to adopt it while retaining standardly held views about people’s fair share claims: they have failed to notice that adopting Parental Provision has more far-reaching implications than first appears, and, in particular, that taking seriously the rationale behind Parental Provision—namely, that justice requires that we be buffered from the net negative costs of others’ procreative choices—commits us to a radical rethinking of what constitutes people’s fair shares.

To see this, it is helpful to note that any account of fair shares presupposes a view about what are the *objects* of people’s fair shares. These are *what* people lay claims to—for example, raw natural resources, opportunities to obtain positions of advantage, or income and wealth. Now, notice what egalitarian theorists of justice standardly assume with regard to the object of people’s fair shares. Most or all of what is up for distribution is not manna from heaven, or raw natural resources whose value is not dependent on others’ labour; instead, they are the fruits of *on-going social cooperation*. Moreover, as many people have pointed out (Anderson 1999; Bubeck 1995; Folbre 1994; 2008; Rawls 2005), social cooperation is a process which requires *social reproduction*, that is, people’s having and rearing new generations so as to sustain that society’s socio-economic and political institutions. Since the object of people’s fair shares are largely fruits of social cooperation, which in turns requires social reproduction, people’s claims to their fair shares is effectively a claim to sharing the benefits of children, or what some people refer to as the “public goods” produced by parents’ having and rearing children (Folbre 1994; George 1987). Theories of egalitarian justice assume, in other words, that individuals have claims of justice to sharing the benefits of children.

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This assumption is intuitively plausible, but notice, now, what the defender of Parental Provision would be affirming if he endorsed it: where the object of people’s fair shares are the fruits of social cooperation, non-parents’ complaint is a complaint that the non-parents are entitled to internalizing the benefits of people’s having and rearing children. Accordingly, non-parents’ complaint that children constitute “negative externalities” is really a complaint that parents’ contributing *this number* (and/or quality) *of children* is not as *beneficial* as their contributing a lower number (and/or better quality) of children. This complaint is importantly different from that which Parental Provision defenders offer support for: when they motivate their view using examples like the one mentioned ↪ earlier (see Tables 18.1 and 18.2), which make it appear as though the object of people’s fair shares are given in the absence of people’s having and rearing children, the case for Parental Provision appears to be a strong one. After all, if what non-parents lay a claim to is what they had prior to anyone’s having children, or would have but for the fact that someone chooses to have children,³⁴ then non-parents’ case against sharing the costs of the new arrivals may seem defensible. But this case for Parental Provision does not carry over to cases where the object of people’s fair shares are the fruits of social cooperation. Non-parents have no claim to being benefited by others’ having and raising children, and no complaint against being benefited less rather than more by parents. Whether or not children are negative externalities relative to a situation in which children are positive externalities—or, as we should now reformulate the point, *greater* positive externalities than they are under the scenario in question—may then not be what grounds the complaint of non-parents.

Parental Provision defenders, then, may only make the complaint they want to make on non-parents' behalf—that is, that it would be unjust to non-parents to allow parents to make create net negative externalities for them—if parents' having and rearing children worsened the share which non-parents would have in *the absence of* parents' having and rearing children. The relevant baseline for evaluating non-parents' claims, then, is a situation in which non-parents reap neither the benefits nor the costs of parents' having and rearing children. But now notice that the view of people's (including non-parents') fair shares that is compatible with this is excessively undemanding: parents would rarely contribute a net negative externality by adding new members to the population, compared to a situation in which non-parents do not internalize any of the benefits of children. Far from providing an intuitively compelling answer to the Numbers Question, the Parental Provision view would thus likely license relatively unconstrained population growth.

So, while egalitarian theorists of justice have good reasons to address both the Numbers Question and the Parental Justice Question, and also have good reasons to address them together, they should resist the Parental Provision view. While it is undeniable that procreative choices, like consumption and savings choices, can greatly affect third parties, and involve the production of benefits and burdens which can be shared in different ways between parents and society at large, thus being susceptible to moral evaluation and giving rise to questions of justice, there are also some important ways in which procreation is different from these other ways of affecting others. Parents affect others by creating the very bearers of claims and obligations of egalitarian justice. As this chapter has shown, this means that our views about what claims and obligations people have and our view of parental justice are intimately related. More specifically, it means that any complaint which third parties may move against parents' producing too many or too few children presupposes that everyone is entitled to share the benefits of children. An altogether different view of parental justice from Parental Provision—one which viewed parents and non-parents as engaged in a cooperative scheme—could justify the sharing of the benefits of children, but it would also justify the sharing of their costs, at least under many conditions, as demanded by justice.

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Notes

1. This chapter talks about liberal egalitarian justice, or egalitarian justice for short, to refer to the family of views defended by contemporary political philosophers who affirm that individuals have claims both to equal liberties and to a fair share of socio-economic goods. Except where indicated, the discussion that follows remains agnostic over whether a principle of comparative or non-comparative equality (priority) determines what counts as a fair share of socio-economic goods, and over what the currency of egalitarian justice is (welfare, resources, capabilities, or some combination of these). Some of the points raised in the following discussion may apply to some non-egalitarian theories, but this possibility is not explored here.
2. An exception is Michael Blake's brief discussion of this issue in his article on the state's right to exclude. See Blake (2013).

3. For brief treatments of the relation between our views on parental justice and on migration, see Casal (1999) and George (1993). There has been more discussion of the relation between the morality of procreation and that of immigration, especially by environmentalist philosophers and social scientists. Some discussions of overpopulation and climate change by environmentalists and social scientists are concerned with the challenges raised by migration as well as of high fertility rates. See, for example, Bayles (1980); Cafaro (2012); de la Croix and Gosseries (2006); Heyward (2012); and McKibben (1998); for a brief mention of pro-natalist and pro-immigration policies as being potentially on a par, see also Mulgan (2006, 98). Recently, a few political philosophers have started paying attention to the potential similarities of the ethical issues raised by procreation and migration. See Bou-Habib (2019); Brezger and Cassee (2016); Ferracioli (2018); and Meijers (2016).
4. See Longman (2004) for the challenges raised by the increasing age-dependency ratio. For some philosophical treatment of this issue, see Daniels (1988) and McKerlie (2012). With regard to sharing the costs of pensions, specifically, see Schoakkert and Van Parijs (2003).
5. Olsaretti (2013). Some arguments for this conclusion are found in George (1987). These philosophical arguments may give some support to, but are importantly different from, ↵ actual public policy proposals for a special pension system for parents. For the latter, see Burgraff (1993) and Sinn (2005).
6. Three important book-length treatments of some of these issues are those by Allen Buchanan et al. (2000); David Heyd (1992); and Melinda Roberts (1998). Central edited collections include Archard and Benatar (2010); Baylis and McLeod (2016); Hannan, Brennan, and Vernon (2015); and Harris and Holm (2000). See also chapters 25 and 26 of this volume.
7. For example, Brake (2010) and Gheaus (2012).
8. What counts as interference is not discussed here, but it is clear that it includes at least coercive interference and interference aimed at making it prohibitively costly or difficult for people to have children. For discussion of the ethical aspects of different types of population controls, see Bayles (1979) and Hickey, Rieder, and Earl (2016). It is a further question whether individuals have claims to access assisted reproductive technologies, and to having them be subsidized. On this issue see Burley (1998).
9. The position assumed here, then, is fundamentally different from that defended by utilitarians. For a defence of a sophisticated utilitarian position on procreative rights, see Mulgan (2006).
10. See Bayles (1980); Barry (1989); Casal and Williams (1995); Ehrlich (1968); Hardin (1993); Heyd (1992); and Sen (1976). More recent contributions include Conly (2015); Dasgupta (2004); Kates (2004); MacIver (2016); Overall (2012). The concern is not new, and in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century, in particular, worries about population animated Thomas Malthus's (1798) and John Stuart Mill's (1848) work on the subject.
11. The work of Derek Parfit (1984) has sparked off and contributed greatly to this area of moral philosophy, which is the subject of most chapters of this volume. For an early, important discussion of utilitarianism and population size, see Narveson (1973).
12. See Atkinson (2012) and Dasgupta (2005). As Heyd (1992) argues, the idea of optimum population can be interpreted in other ways, as it can be understood, abstractly, as referring to "the population size and/or density at which the value of some other normatively selected variable is maximized" (146). That variable can but need not be utility.
13. A view of this kind is perhaps held by Christiano (2007).
14. See Arrhenius (2013) and Temkin (1993). On Arrhenius's positive egalitarianism, it matters *how many relations of equality* exist, and a larger equal population is better, from the point of view of equality, than a smaller equal population. Mosquera (2017) critically examines different versions of telic egalitarianism and argues that the pattern of relations of equality and inequality, not only their aggregation, matters.
15. For discussion of telic and non-telic egalitarianism, see Nagel (1991); O'Neill (2008); and Parfit (1997).
16. In other words, to say that egalitarian theorists of justice have reasons to address the Numbers Question is not to say merely that they need assumptions about population size as empirical premises of arguments about public policies in which egalitarian principles provide the normative premise (or, as Heyd puts it, "relevant background data"; 1992, 42).

Instead, addressing the Numbers Question, so it is argued in what follows, is necessary for developing the normative premises themselves.

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17. So, in principle, the first question could arise *even if* and independently of whether we can affect population size changes ourselves. Others have noted that theorists of justice should address the Numbers Question. See Gosseries (2009); Heyd (1992); and Meijers (2017). Barry 1998 is one of the few contributions by theorists of justice that explicitly takes $\hookrightarrow$ a stance on, but does not defend, the view that justice has implications about how large the population of the just society should be.
 18. Three things should be noticed here. First, “parents” here refers to “procreative parents”, and the fact that parents create children whose costs need meeting is of crucial importance in the discussion that follows. Second, although parents’ having and rearing children also generally produces benefits, since the focus in what follows is on cases where they produce *net* costs, the just distribution of those costs is what is at stake. Third, it bears noticing that the discussion of parental justice is not over *whether* the costs of children should be met, but, over assuming they *must be met*, *who* should bear them. It is assumed throughout, then, that children’s claims will be met, and the focus is on who should, in the name of justice, bear the costs of meeting them.
 19. What the costs of children include depends on what our normative concerns are. See Olsaretti (2018).
 20. In these tables, t_1 t_2 , and t_3 refer to different time periods (each coinciding with a new generation’s coming into existence); the letters P, NP, and C refer to parent, nonparent, and child; the numbers refer to the value of resources that justice regulates the distribution of, and express the lifetime share of individuals *as identified at a particular time*. (For simplicity’s sake, the tables assume that a person has only one parent.)
 21. We could think that this immunity is shared by *some* parents whose reproductive choices are not net negative externalities—for example, parents who choose to have one child. The discussion that follows, however, assumes that we are focusing on the claims of all non-parents against all parents. For further discussion of this issue see Olsaretti (2013).
 22. Defenders of different versions of Parental Provision include Ackerman (1980); Casal and Williams (1995; 2004); Rakowski (1993); and Steiner and Vallentyne (2009). Robert Taylor (2009) also seems to endorse a version of it. The term “Parental Provision” is Casal’s and Williams.
 23. Notice that *net* negative effects are what non-parents would have a claim of justice to be buffered from. A view that held parents to the obligation to non-parents to internalize the costs of children, even when non-parents are benefited overall by parents’ having and raising children, would lack plausibility. For development of this point, see Olsaretti (2017).
 24. Depending on what the costs of children are which parents would be required to internalize, the scenario under which these conditions obtain would be different. It may be impossible for parents to accumulate, during their lifetimes, enough material resources to give their children their fair lifetime children; similarly, assuming the costs of children include their lifetime environmental costs, it would be impossible for parents to restrict their own lifetime carbon footprint to the requisite level. See Young (2001).
 25. As Bruce Ackerman remarks, “‘Harmony’ does not require any particular quantitative limit on the size of the next generation. If, for example, there are a million people on our spaceship and a million grains of manna in our new world, we may, if we think it good, have *two* million children so long as we embark upon an investment strategy that will yield at least two million grains of manna for distribution at the time when our children come of age. Harmony is not the same thing as zero population growth” (1980, 218).
 26. Young (2001). Casal (1999) rejects the socialization view on environmentalist grounds. See also Hickey, Rieder, and Earl (2016) and MacIver (2015) for arguments that procreation under certain conditions should be considered harmful to third parties.
 - p. 426 27. Arguably, John Stuart Mill’s was of this kind. In *On Liberty*, he seemed to endorse a version of Parental Provision when he noted that “[I]n a country either over-peopled or threatened with being so, to produce children, beyond a very small number, with the effect of reducing the reward of labour by their competition, is a serious offence against all who live by the remuneration of their labour.... The laws which ... forbid marriage unless the parties can show that they have the means of supporting a family, do not exceed the legitimate powers of the State ... Such laws are interferences of the State to prohibit a mischievous act—an act injurious to others” (Mill 1978, 107).

28. These are the subject of Part I of this volume.
29. This argument should be distinguished from a purely forward-looking argument for state liability for its population policy, which could, like with some environmentalist versions of Parental Provision, be grounded in impersonalist standards of value. See the discussion of these views by Heyward (2012).
30. In this respect, the argument at hand resembles arguments like those of Anca Gheaus (2016) and Joseph Mazor (2010), which attempt to generate duties to confer benefits on future generations and (in Gheaus case) constrain population growth by appeal to duties toward contemporaries (one's own children, in Gheaus case and one's fellow citizens, in Mazor's case).
31. The discussion in this and the next section draws on Olsaretti (2017). That paper also focuses on critically assessing the claim that allowing for parents to worsen others' situation would be wrongful because it would reflect, or create, a distributive *inequality* between contemporary parents and non-parents.
32. Casal and Williams (1995, Section 7) explicitly endorse this position.
33. That future generations cannot benefit earlier ones is a point often made in discussions of intergenerational justice. See, for example, Barry (1977).
34. Proponents of Parental Provision do not make it clear whether they use a historical or a counterfactual baseline, perhaps because the examples they use to motivate their views are ones in which these two baselines coincide.

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