

# Here's the Philosophy Essay Vox Found Too Upsetting to Publish



*Vox.com recently commissioned an essay from Torbjörn Tännsjö, a professor of practical philosophy at*

*Stockholm University, on the “the repugnant conclusion,” a belief that asserts our moral duty to increase the population size because, according to the argument, more humans means more happiness.*

*But after Tännsjö submitted the piece to Vox—and “[after a period of silence](#)”—Vox decided not to publish the essay, with the assigning editor telling him that several editors were uncomfortable with running it and “the concern is that people will misinterpret it as implying opposition to abortion rights and birth control, which, while I know it’s not your intent, is a real concern.” Vox editor-in-chief Ezra Klein published [an explanation](#) of why the piece hadn’t run, blaming it in part on the demise of a planned “new section for unusual, provocative arguments,” and stating that “Vox doesn’t have a policy against publishing pieces that are pro-life.”*

*With Tännsjö’s permission, here is the essay in full.*

You should have kids. Not because it’s fun, or rewarding, or in your evolutionary self-interest. You should have kids because it’s your moral duty to do so.

My argument is simple. Most people live lives that are, on net, happy. For them to never exist, then, would be to deny them that happiness. And because I think we have a moral duty to maximize the amount of happiness in the world, that means that we all have an obligation to make the world as populated as can be.

Of course, we should see to it that we do not overpopulate the planet in a manner that threatens the future existence of mankind. But we’re nowhere near that point yet, at least not if we also see to it that we solve pressing problems such as the one with global warming. In the mean time, we’re ethically obligated to make as many people as possible.

This idea, that having children is a moral obligation, is controversial, so much so that it’s known in philosophy as the “repugnant conclusion.” But I don’t think it’s repugnant at all.

### **We have obligations to people who don’t exist yet**

You might be thinking at this point, “Sure, more happiness sounds good. But morality is about helping people, and creating more people helps ‘people’ who don’t exist, not yet anyway.” This view is known as actualism. Only actual individuals have rights. We have not done anything wrong, unless there is an actual person who has a legitimate complaint to make against our action.

This means that, if I do not create a happy individual, even if I can do so, I do nothing wrong. A merely hypothetical individual has no legitimate complaint to make. This is the great appeal of actualism: it means that people have total freedom in choosing whether to reproduce or not. My view suggests that we

have a moral obligation to keep having children; actualism let's people do as they like.

I can't help finding all this problematic. Imagine for a second that the Genesis story is actually true. Under the actualist view, Adam and Eve could have morally refrained from having children, even if, had they decided differently, billions of billions of happy persons would have been around!

Here is another consequence of the theory. Suppose I have a choice as to whether to have a baby at 15 or at 35. If I have the baby at 15, I'll earn much less money in my career, the baby will go to worse schools and live in a worse neighborhood, and generally her life will be much tougher. If I have her at 35, I'll be able to adequately provide for the baby, pay for college, and so forth. If I have the baby at 15, then, did I do anything wrong? I did not, by actualist reasoning. There is no one there to complain about what I did. The baby is, after all, happy to be around. By creating her, I did not violate her rights. And the hypothetical baby I would've had at 35 isn't around to complain. But this cannot be right. If these are the options I have, I ought to wait. The world where I have a baby at 35 is just happier than the one where I have a baby at 15.

### **Why a world with many more people wouldn't be so bad**

The idea that people are morally obliged to have as many children as possible has some radical implications. The biggest is that a world in which many people—20, 50, even 100 billion—are alive, but each has a life that's only barely worth living, is preferable to a world where only, say, 10 billion people are extremely happy. Let's call these Big Bad World and Small Happy World, respectively.

This conclusion may seem ludicrous. Of course you'd rather live in a world where everyone's happy than one where people are just scraping by! But this intuition is wrong.

Imagine that the end of Small Happy World is the end of humankind. Everyone's as happy as can be, and then they all die. Meanwhile, in Big Bad World, the human race continues on for billions of years, at a level where life is worth living, but not spectacular. Would we not then feel that the Small Happy World people are doing selfish? Rather than going on with the human race, and accept the sacrifice that this means, they're living high and not letting anyone succeed them. This is clearly wrong.

Furthermore, it's difficult to get a grasp of what Big Bad World would be like. But the way people live there may be similar to the way we live. There are ups and downs in our lives. Perhaps a typical human life often ends up with only a little happiness as its net sum. Perhaps many lives end up with a negative sum. But then, is the Big Bad World so bad as one may at first have thought? It's quite possible that people in Big Bad World aren't living in abject poverty and misery, but instead have lives similar those of many affluent people living in rich, developed countries today.

Similarly, it’s difficult to imagine what it would be like to live an extremely happy life, containing much more happiness than our lives do now. It could be that the gap between a barely-worthwhile life and the happiest life possible is quite small.

**Have more kids!**

We have an obligation to go on with humanity, as long as we can, and as long as we create future individuals who live lives worth living. Procreative decisions are moral decisions, and we ought to see to it that, by our procreative decisions, we maximize the sum total of happiness. The popular idea that we may do as we see fit when we conceive children, as long as there is no one there who can make a legitimate complaint against us, is mistaken.

We ought to take all easy measures to procreate, such as signing up for sperm banks, having another child when we can take care of it, and so forth. Of course, we should see to it that we do not by our procreative choices make existing lives worth not living nor make lives worth not living. In the individual case, it is hard to know where to draw the line. But in many cases, having more kids is clearly better.

*Torbjörn Tännsjö is Professor of Practical Philosophy at Stockholm University. He has published extensively in moral philosophy, political philosophy and applied ethics. Among his most recent books are [Understanding Ethics](#) and [Taking Life: Three Theories on the Ethics of Killing](#), both available in the US from Oxford University Press. This article draws on a chapter in Taking Life.*

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