

Children as Negative Externalities?
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Abstract

Egalitarian theories assume, without defending it, the view that the costs of children should be shared between non-parents and parents. This standard position is called into question by the Parental Provision view. Drawing on the familiar idea that people should be held responsible for the consequences of their choices, the Parental Provision view holds that under certain conditions egalitarian justice requires parents to pay for the full costs of their children, as it would be unfair for non-parents to bear the negative externalities of others' choices to have children. This paper examines closely the Parental Provision view and argues that various possible justifications for it are unsuccessful. In so doing, it brings to light respects in which the choice to have and rear children is special and may not be treated as being on a par with other choices for which we think people should be held responsible.

Keywords:

Family justice; parental justice; procreation; costs of children; overpopulation; egalitarian justice and children; Parental Provision; responsibility for children

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Introduction

Bringing new people into existence creates both benefits and burdens for those who have and raise them (whom I will refer to as their parents¹), for third parties (e.g. other family members, fellow citizens, all contemporaries, future people), and for the newcomers themselves. What these costs and benefits are for the various parties involved depends on a great number of factors, and their creation and distribution give rise to various moral questions, including questions of justice.

In this paper I will not be concerned directly with any of the moral questions surrounding the benefits and burdens of coming into existence, and of continuing to exist, for the new people themselves. I will focus instead on a subset of the moral questions concerning the distribution of the costs and benefits of creating and raising new persons between parents and non-parents (that is, between parents and a particular subset of third parties). The question I am concerned with, which I refer to as *the question of parental justice*, is whether parents, in virtue of having and rearing children, should or may internalise some or all the costs and/or benefits of children. This question is of central importance, yet few people have addressed it.²

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¹ Throughout, by “parents”, I refer to those people who are both morally responsible (through procreation or otherwise) for children’s existence, and who have and exercise the set of moral and legal duties and rights accorded to children’s primary carers. My discussion does not therefore apply to most current adoptive parents, who are not (causally and morally) responsible for the creation of new persons.

² Among political philosophers, the seminal discussions include those by Rakowski (1991), Casal and Williams (1995, 2004, 2008), Vallentyne (2002) and George (1987, 1993). The question is acknowledged and briefly discussed also by Ackerman (1990); Clayton (2006); Anderson (1999),

More specifically, in what follows I examine closely one answer to it formulated by several liberal egalitarian thinkers (some of whom are left-libertarians) whose theories accommodate a commitment to holding people responsible for some of the consequences of their choices. According to the view I examine, the Parental Provision view,³ under certain conditions most or all of the costs of children, even when they are adults, should be borne primarily by those responsible for their existence, namely, their parents. This is because, under certain conditions, those who bring new people into existence would be harming others by externalising the costs that these new people would impose, even as adults, by dint of being fellow claimants of fair shares (which may include using up depletable resources). So egalitarian justice requires that, at least if they intentionally and avoidably create new persons that foreseeably create costs for others, parents internalise those costs. One way of expressing the key claim of the Parental Provision view is this: under certain conditions children constitute negative externalities – unintended but foreseeable negative side effects of the ambition to parent – and justice requires that parents internalise those externalities.

What are we to make of this view? In what follows I argue that we should not endorse it. My aim is thus mostly critical, and is only part of a fuller exploration of the question of parental justice. In particular, separate arguments are needed to establish that parents have a claim of justice to having the costs of children be shared, rather than merely being permitted to externalise them.⁴ But I believe that subjecting the Parental Provision view to close critical scrutiny is an important endeavour, for three reasons.

First, the Parental Provision view is starkly at variance with the view which, as I suggest in what follows, liberal egalitarians standardly, albeit tacitly, assume about the fair distribution of the costs of children. So, if defenders of Parental Provision were right, this would have substantial revisionary implications for liberal egalitarian theories. Second, a close examination of the Parental Provision view helps bring to light the way in which our views about parental justice are

and Brighouse and Swift (2014). Other recent treatments of the question of parental justice include Alstott (2004), Bou-Habib (2012), Steiner and Vallentyne (2009), Tomlin (2014).

³ The term “parental provision” is Casal’s and Williams’.

⁴ I examine and defend some of these arguments elsewhere. See Olsaretti 2013; Bou-Habib and Olsaretti 2013.

more central than we have realised thus far for our theories of justice. Third and finally, the Parental Provision view, or a version of it, also commands the support of environmentalists who, in the face of the twin threats of resource depletion and overpopulation, hold that bringing new people into existence would be morally permissible only if those responsible for their existence fully internalised the additional environmental costs their children impose over their entire lifetime (Young 2001). Since the concerns that animate the environmentalists' position seem warranted, scrutinising the Parental Provision view to which those concerns supposedly commit us is of relevance beyond our interest in assessing the merits of certain liberal egalitarian theories of justice.

My discussion proceeds as follows. Section 1 introduces the discussion by explaining why and how the question of parental justice is a central one for theorists of justice; it also identifies, in broad brush strokes, both an answer to it that is commonly assumed, which tells in favour of non-parents and parents sharing the costs of children, and the opposite view, namely, Parental Provision. Section 2 outlines the case for the Parental Provision view. Section 3 cautions against a certain way of setting up the discussion around it, and sections 4-6 examine the view closely.

1. The Relevance of Parental Justice and the Standard View

To see why the question of parental justice is of importance, and to shed light on some possible reasons why few people have addressed it, it is helpful to bear in mind two distinctions concerning the different types of costs of children.

The first distinction is between the costs of care and the costs of adult added members (or added members, for short).⁵ The costs of care are the costs of raising children: they include the time, energy and material resources needed to bring up children from needy infants into increasingly less dependent and more autonomous persons. The costs of care are what readily springs to mind when we

⁵ The costs I mention here do not exhaust the costs of creating new persons. There are also procreation costs (e.g. the costs of pre-conception care and screening, of infertility treatment, and of surrogacy practices) and pre-natal care costs (i.e. the physical and material burdens incurred as a result of gestating a child, e.g. the costs of pre-natal screenings, of complying with special dietary and exercise requirements, and of pre-birth leave) the just distribution of which I do not address here. For an examination of the implications of Ronald Dworkin's liberal egalitarian view about the costs of fertility treatment, see Burley 1998.

think of the “costs of children”. But the creation of new persons also creates another type of costs for others, which we could call the costs of added members, that is, the costs which new people create, as adults, ranging from their contribution to overcrowding and polluting to the costs involved in meeting whatever claims of justice they will have.

The second distinction, which cuts across the first one, is between costs that are morally required and those that are not. Morally required costs include, centrally, the costs that must be borne in order to fulfil the justice-based claims of children both as children and as adults.⁶ They thus include the costs required to provide the care that children while minors have a claim to (according to our favoured account of what rights children have), and the costs needed to meet the claims to a *fair* share that adults are entitled to, which, depending on our conception of justice, might include their claims to an equal share of (the value of) of natural resources, their claims to a basic minimum, or to an equal share of the fruits of social cooperation.

In what follows, I assume that the question of parental justice concerns the distribution of *only* the morally required costs of children (both of care and of added adult members), and, within those, of *at least* the costs of giving the newcomers, both as children and as adults, what justice requires that they get. I will not discuss, then, the distribution of costs that are not morally required, which include both morally optional and morally impermissible costs. Morally impermissible costs are costs that are deemed unjust by the lights of some other part of our theory of justice than the part under consideration (i.e. parental justice). An illustration may be the costs for others a parent creates by teaching his child the tricks of fiscal evasion. As far as these costs are concerned, justice could not require or permit that they be shared among non-parents as well as parents: parents are not permitted to create them at all. As far as morally optional costs are concerned - which could include the costs of ensuring that one’s child wear only organic cotton clothes, or that he or she be cared for exclusively by family members -, while it is not unfair for parents to create these costs, it also does not

⁶ There may be morally required costs beyond the costs that are necessary to meet children’s and adults’ justice-based claims. Parents may have duties to their children that are not grounded in a corresponding justice-based claim on the part of their children. Moreover, some costs may be required to heed impersonal moral demands.

seem generally unfair to parents to require *them* to internalise those costs. These costs, I assume here, may legitimately be seen as reflecting parents' preferences.

The question of parental justice, thus understood, is central to a theory of a justice, as without an answer to it such a theory is incomplete in three different ways.

First, and most obviously, it is incomplete in the sense that it does not provide an examination of the full range of cases to which its principles apply: principles of distributive justice regulate the fair distribution of various benefits and burdens, and without an answer to the question of parental justice, we do not know how these principles apply to one particular type of burden, i.e. the burden of children.

But when we keep in mind the costs of adult added members, too, we realise that theories that do not address the question of parental justice are also incomplete in a second, more fundamental, way: without an answer to this question, a theory fails to specify fully what its principles require about any particular case, since we do not know who has to pay for *any* of the benefits that our theory of justice says people are entitled to. In this sense, questions of justice that surround the creation of new persons constitute an interestingly special case. The creation of persons is an activity that creates costs the distribution of which raises questions of justice. But it creates (some of) those costs by creating the bearers of justice-based claims. So an answer to the question of parental justice is an integral part of the question of who, as a matter of justice, owes what to whom.

Third, a theory of justice that does not answer the question of parental justice cannot settle some crucial questions of intergenerational justice, including some questions concerning what the members of present generations owe to members of non-overlapping future generations.⁷

Now, the fact that without an answer to the question of parental justice, any theory of justice is incomplete in the second sense discussed above suggests a possible reason for why the question has been generally neglected. The question has not received explicit attention because an answer to it is in fact *embedded* in, and therefore tacitly assumed by, theories of justice, and I think it is fair to say that

⁷ Rakowski (1991) and Steiner and Vallentyne (2009), to my knowledge, are the only philosophers who acknowledge and briefly discuss this connection.

the following answer to the question of parental justice is assumed by nearly all theories of justice which uphold individuals' claims to some benefits – whether these are claims to an equal amount of resources, or the satisfaction of basic needs.

On the *standard view*, there is a clear division of moral labour between, on the one hand, parents, and, on the other, citizens at large (by which I mean to refer to all fellow human beings who are, on the theory at hand, endowed with obligations of distributive justice; on cosmopolitan theories of justice, this class of people will extend beyond a claimant's fellow citizens). On that view, the costs of added adult members are to be fully socialized, that is, shared equally among all citizens, parents and non-parents alike. We can conclude that this standard view is typically assumed, because typically theories of justice hold that people's tax liabilities do not increase in line with whether they have children. Moreover, many egalitarian theories of justice seem to defend a version of the standard view which favours the socialisation of some of the costs of care, too, namely, those costs of care that must be incurred in order to meet children's claims of justice. Theories of justice imply this version of the standard view by supporting publicly funded services that alleviate the costs of care, such as publicly funded schools, subsidised parental leave policies, subsidised pre-school childcare, publicly funded health workers, and free medical assistance for children.

Although often assumed, the standard view has received no sustained defence.⁸ Moreover, the few in-depth philosophical treatments of the question of parental justice offered over the last two decades challenge it. These challenges come from liberal egalitarian quarters, where, in the name of the importance of holding people responsible for some of the consequences of their choices, justice is said to require that, at least in some circumstances, parents should be held liable for the justice-based costs of both care and of added members. According to this line of argument, once we incorporate the demands of responsibility in our theories of justice, so that inequalities which track people's choices or reflect their ambitions under just background conditions are not unjust, we are forced to drop the standard view, and, under some circumstances, adopt in its place the Parental Provision view of parental justice, to which I now turn.

⁸ A familiar argument for the standard view is the "public goods" one, which appeals to the fact that having and rearing children creates benefits for non-parents, too, who by internalizing those benefits acquire certain obligations. I examine this argument in Olsaretti 2013.

2. Parental Provision

In a nutshell, the case for Parental Provision proceeds as follows.⁹ Assume there are several adults among whom resources (i.e. whatever resources justice regulates the distribution of: for example, natural resources, or all the fruits of social cooperation) are distributed justly, and that other requirements of justice (other than those under discussion) have been met. Suppose now that some of these individuals choose to have children, and that there are no extra resources to meet these new persons' claims to a just share. Should all adults contribute to meeting such claims? No: to require the adults who have not procreated to forgo some of their justly held resources is unfair to them, just as it would be unfair to require them to share their resources with other adults who, having voluntarily chosen to gamble with their fair share, ended up with less as a result.

As Erik Rakowski, a defender of Parental Provision, remarks:

With what right can two people force all the rest, through deliberate behavior rather than bad brute luck, to settle for less than their fair shares after resources have been divided justly? If the cultivation of expensive tastes, or silly gambles, or any other intentional action cannot give rise to redistributive claims, how can procreation? (...) (Rakowski 1991: 153)

Instead of telling in favour of socialising the costs of children, justice requires that

"(...) the obligation to provide each person born after the original auction (...) with a bundle of resources equal in value to that which each of the auction's participants received falls wholly or almost entirely on those responsible for his existence. (Rakowski 1991: 154)

In a more recent article, Hillel Steiner and Peter Vallentyne advance the same reasoning. Having asked us to suppose that we start with an initial two-people generation who have to share a total value of resources worth 60, they then note that:

Suppose that one agent, A, then 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 (40/2) 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. The right of his

⁹ The following is a reconstruction of lines of argument offered by Rakowski (1991), Casal and Williams (2004), by Steiner and Vallentyne (2009), and by Young (2001)- although the latter proceeds somewhat differently, in that he does always assume that the new person is entitled, as a matter of justice, to the *same* share as that which the parents and the non-parents started with.

contemporary is to a certain initial share and that is not affected (at least in the first instance) by A's decision to procreate (Steiner and Vallentyne 2009: 67-8)

The demands of Socialisation and of Parental Provision in this simple case can be illustrated with the following tables, in which *t1* and *t2* 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.)

Table 1 – Socialisation (with no positive externalities)

Time	Total	NP	P	C
<i>t1</i>	60	30	30	
<i>t2</i>	60	20	20	20

Table 2 – Parental Provision (with no positive externalities)

Time	Total	NP	P	C
<i>t1</i>	60	30	30	
<i>t2</i>	60	30	0	30

Before examining the merits of the case for Parental Provision, it is helpful to lay down three assumptions I make about it in the discussion that follows.

First, in what follows I focus on a version of Parental Provision, which I will refer to as Moderate Parental Provision, on which justice is said to require the internalisation of the costs of children *only when* children are - or would be, *unless* parents internalised their costs - *net* negative externalities on non-parents. This is not the only available version of the Parental Provision view. We could uphold a Radical Parental Provision view, on which justice requires parental provision when having and rearing children produces, on balance, positive externalities, as well as when it does not. This point has been highlighted by Paula Casal and Andrew Williams. In outlining their position and discussing Rakowski's, they point out that it is possible to distinguish between these two contexts as being relevantly different, and to delimit the purview of the demands of Parental Provision to the case where, by having children, parents produce *on balance* negative externalities.

In these cases, unless parents internalised the costs of children, non-parents' position would be *worsened overall* by parents' creation of new persons. (See Casal and Williams 1995:100.)

The difference between Moderate and Radical Parental Provision is illustrated in Tables 3 and 4. Suppose that, as a result of parents' having and rearing children, the total stock of resources first goes up (at t_2), and then remains constant (at t_3); so, while at t_2 children are positive externalities, at t_3 Moderate Parental Provision only requires parents to internalise the costs of children at t_3 . At t_2 , Moderate Parental Provision can permit (although it need not require¹⁰) the socialisation of the costs of children.

Table 3 – Moderate Parental Provision¹¹

<i>Time</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>NP</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>GC</i>
<i>t1</i>	60	30	30		
<i>t2</i>	96	32	32	32	
<i>t3</i>	96	32	32	0	32

By contrast, Radical Parental Provision would be harsher on parents, requiring them to internalise some (or all) the costs of children even when, by having and rearing them, parents create net positive externalities.

Table 4 – Radical Parental Provision

<i>Time</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>NP</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>GC</i>
<i>t1</i>	60	30	30		
<i>t2</i>	96	48	0	48	
<i>t3</i>	96	48	0	0	48

¹⁰ As Casal and Williams also note (1995, 2004), the view that justice demands parents' internalisation of the costs of children only where the latter would otherwise constitute negative externalities on non-parents does not commit one to the view that, where children are positive externalities, non-parents have obligations of justice to share the costs of children – but only that non-parents lack a complaint of justice against sharing those costs. So, focusing on what seems to be the strongest possible version of Parental Provision is compatible with either rejection or acceptance of the view that, when children are positive externalities, there are reasons of justice for sharing their costs.

¹¹ With tables like this one, with three different time periods and three generations, GC refers to "grandchild".

In support of Radical Parental Provision someone might enlist the conviction that it is impermissible to harm others in specified ways without their consent even if this benefits them overall.¹² This conviction is, however, controversial, especially once we bear in mind that, as I underlined above, the costs parents create which we are focusing on are morally permissible ones, i.e. they are not deemed impermissible by some other part of our theory of justice. Moreover, other motivating grounds for parental provision seems absent where parents' having and rearing children, while creating some costs, is *on balance* beneficial for others. If, given equal background conditions, someone makes a choice that, while costly in some ways, provides a net improvement in the situation of others, respect for equality does not seem to favour the conclusion that she bear those costs herself – but, arguably, the opposite conclusion.¹³ Nor is it likely that an endorsement of desert would justify holding parents liable for the consequences of their choices in such cases: it is not obvious what interpretation of desert would favour claiming that those who choose to procreate deserve to be less well off than people who choose to have no children.

So, I believe that the Parental Provision view is on strongest ground when having and rearing children does not produce, on balance, positive externalities. In any event, the objections I raise against the Moderate Parental Provision view also apply to the Radical view, whatever further objections the latter may face. So, like Casal and Williams, I think we have reason to focus on Moderate Parental Provision,¹⁴ and from now on, when talking about Parental Provision, *simpliciter*, Moderate Parental Provision is what I have in mind.

The second assumption I make in what follows is that Parental Provision is a view about the justice-based claims of *at least all non-parents*, whether or not it

¹² I thank Massimo Renzo for bringing this to my attention. For a view of this kind, see Shiffrin 1999.

¹³ This is likely to be true of John Rawls' liberal egalitarianism – whether or not his view would have this implication would depend on whether parents' creation of children improves the situation of the worst off. The point also applies, in my view, to Ronald Dworkin's egalitarianism, which he contrasts with other competing understanding of equality on which "people are meant to decide what sorts of life they want independently of information relevant to determining how much their choices will reduce *or enhance* the ability of others to have what they want" (Dworkin 1981b: 288, emphasis mine).

¹⁴ Casal and Williams remark that "if procreation always (...) [increased the stock of resources available for distribution to an extent which maintained its size per capita], then it would be less pressing to ask the extent to which some individuals can be required to bear the economic costs of others' children" (Casal and Williams 1995: 100).

also holds that some parents, too, by dint of making choices that are less costly than other parents (for example, by choosing to have one or two children as opposed to larger number of children), may have a complaint that is similar to that of non-parents. Relatedly, while I assume that Parental Provision holds *all parents* as liable for their procreative choices, I make no assumption about whether it holds them liable as a group (so that all parents should internalise the justice-based costs of all children), or individually (so that each parent, or set of parents, should internalise the justice-based costs of *their* child or children only). All that matters for my analysis of Parental Provision is its claim that all non-parents, under certain conditions, would have a complaint of justice against sharing the costs of children, and that all parents would, accordingly, be held under a demand of justice to internalise those costs. So in what follows I need not assume anything with regard to whether, if Parental Provision is right, all parents should share those costs *among* themselves, or bear them unequally, in line with how costly their individual decisions are.¹⁵

The third assumption I make about Parental Provision is that it may not be dismissed out of hand as irrelevant on the grounds that the conditions for its applicability clearly fail to obtain. Whether or not children can be deemed to be net negative externalities is of course a fact whose truth depends on complex empirical issues and on the answer to thorny normative questions such as whether we should adopt a local or global perspective (see Casal 1999). But in what follows I grant the empirical premise made by defenders of Parental Provision, which is that the view may well have application in circumstances like our own, given that population growth diminishes per capita resources available, and causes pollution and depletion of resources (Casal and Williams 1995:100). New children generate costs such as “increased demands on limited, common-access resources like our air, water, parks, fisheries, and freeways” (Taylor 2009: 566; see also Bayles 1979;

¹⁵ I believe that, where some of the unequal costs of children are concerned, there are reasons to favour holding parents as a group responsible, in that there are justice-based reasons for all parents to share the unequal costs and benefits of having children that arise because of an inequality in brute luck, such as the brute luck of having “unequally valuable” genes, or unequal parenting aptitude. (This rationale would not justify the sharing of the costs and benefits arising from the unequal choices parents make regarding how many children to have.)

Conly 2015). Once a welfare state exists, the creation of new persons may put a strain on the provision of public services, or negatively affect their quality.¹⁶

Fourth, the Parental Provision view I focus on is that it takes it as a fixed point that newcomers have claims of justice to a share that is at least *no worse than* the share of the members of the previous generation,¹⁷ and that these claims *must be met*. So, it holds that while ideal justice requires that parents meet those claims, and that it is morally impermissible for them to create children they cannot cover the costs of, it also holds that non-parents have an obligation, albeit a remedial or secondary one, to step in and cover for the costs needed to ensure that children get their just dues if these cannot or will not be covered by parents.¹⁸

3. Assessing Parental Provision: two invalid considerations

Suppose we grant that people should be held responsible for some consequences of their voluntary choices, and that we assume that the choice of parents to have children is a voluntary one and that there is no moral duty to have children.¹⁹ What are we to make of the contention that, where parents' having children would, if they did not fully internalise the costs of children, result in a net worsening of non-parents situation, then justice requires that parents internalise those costs? If parents did not do this, would non-parents have a complaint in the name of justice? The case seems relevantly like those in which we think that it would be unfair for people to externalise the costs of their choices. It would be unfair to tax non-gamblers in order to help gamblers recoup some of their losses; it would be unfair for a conspicuous consumer to receive subsidies for his habit. Is it not similarly unfair for non-parents to have to bear the costs of others' choices to create new persons?

¹⁶ In their discussion of the issue, Casal and Williams ask whether those who choose not to have children or have only one may should "...subsidize the education and health care for the larger family, bear the greater environmental costs they generate, and moreover, perhaps relinquish a portion of their wealth to ensure that each new inhabitant eventually enjoys an equal share of resources across his or her life" (Casal and Williams 2004: 160).

¹⁷ Casal and Williams 2004: 153; Rakowski: 152; Steiner and Vallentyne 2009: 67-8.

¹⁸ Casal and Williams 1995: 113; 2004: 163-4.

¹⁹ I assume this because, if we thought that people have a duty to have children, we may think that, even if their choice to have them counts as fully voluntary, they should not be held responsible for it. On the question of whether people should be held liable for the costs of acting as they are morally required to do, see Eyal 2007, Arneson 2003. On the duty to have children, see Smilansky 1995; Taylor 2009; Gheaus 2015.

Whether or not the Parental Provision View is ultimately tenable, we must notice at the outset that some ways of mounting a case for it are not defensible.

First, it is unjustified, and importantly misleading, to characterise the demand that non-parents share the costs of children as a demand that they “(...) settle *for less than their fair shares* after resources have been divided *justly* (...)” (emphasis added), as Rakowski claims in the passage quoted in the previous section. This way of setting things up is illicitly biased against socialisation. It is biased because, if the latter’s demands were, as the cited claim affirms, that people settle *for less than their fair share*, then those demands would clearly be unjustified. The bias is illicit, because it *assumes* what is in question, namely, that what constitutes a fair share for a person when a smaller number of fellow claimants are in existence constitutes a fair share of resources for that person even when more people are in existence, if the added members existence is not that person’s, but someone else’s, responsibility. This assumption is nothing other than the answer given by the Parental Provision view to the question of parental justice, so a case for Parental Provision that relies on it is circular. In order to avoid assuming what is in question, namely, the Parental Provision answer to the question of parental justice, any claim we make about the justice of the initial scenario at *t1* must be seen to have constrained application, that is, it can only be a claim about what justice requires, *absent an answer to the question of parental justice*. (We can bracket off the question of parental justice by assuming, for example, that *no one* is responsible for the existence of the two individuals in the initial generation, at *t1*, since defenders of Parental Provision and of Pro-Sharing views agree that in these cases, socialisation is defensible.)

The second preliminary point is that it is not enough, in order to show that the demand to share the costs of children is unfair, to point to the fact that the position of those who previously commanded more resources is *worsened* as a result of the creation of some new persons, relative to how it was before these new persons were created. Creating negative externalities for others, even net negative externalities, is not sufficient reason for complaint: for example, if someone woos my partner, thereby considerably worsening my situation relative to a state of

affairs prior to this competitor's appearance, I do not have a complaint of justice.²⁰ Similarly, if, after my quiet and friendly neighbour's decision to leave my building, a new rowdy person moves in, I am undeniably worse off as a result, but again, have no complaint of justice against either my old neighbour or my new one (though I may, of course, appeal to the latter to elicit his politeness and other neighbourly virtues). We often act in ways that negatively affect others, even on balance, and while doing so may call for justification, it is not necessarily unjust.

These two observations highlight two important points that are a useful preliminary to the discussion that follows. The first is that in order to establish the conclusion that non-parents' bearing the negative externalities created by parents' production of children is unfair, we cannot *just* appeal to the fact that non-parents' situation is worsened at *t2* relative to *t1* as a result of others' choice to have children. We need an argument for the claim that this worsening is unjust. The second point is that the argument we are looking for cannot be that the worsening of non-parents' situation at *t2* relative to *t1* is unjust because it deprives the non-parent, through no choice of his, of the share that at *t1* was said to be justly his. That argument would be circular, assuming what needs to be shown.

4. The comparative case for Parental Provision (I)

In this section and the next I examine two possible rationales for the charge of unfairness to non-parents that point to the comparative situation of non-parents relative to parents. I argue that neither establishes that egalitarian justice requires Parental Provision.

According to the first argument, under a system in which the costs of children are socialised, non-parents could complain that, while parents create costs which non-parents, too, must bear, *non-parents do not similarly burden anyone*. This argument has not been made in print by defenders of Parental Provision, but I think someone could advance it, and that we might be led to view as plausible its central claim, i.e. the italicised sentence in the previous sentence, by the reasoning which is used to motivate Parental Provision, and which I sketched at the start of the previous section. Socialisation, on the simple single-snapshot picture that is used to motivate Parental Provision, might seem to be

²⁰ I owe this example to Peter Vallentyne.

unfair to non-parents because their situation is worsened by parents' decisions, *while they, the non-parents, do not worsen anyone's situation*. This is what we are led to believe by the picture sketched in Table 1, which it is useful to consider again:

Table 1 – Socialisation (with no positive externalities) [repeated]

Time	Total	NP	P	C
<i>t1</i>	60	30	30	
<i>t2</i>	60	20	20	20

The picture sketched in Table 1 leads us to view the parent's choice as making everyone, including the non-parent, worse off, while non-parents do not, themselves, burden others in any way. However, this way of seeing things is misleading. To understand why it is misleading, we must introduce a consideration that, although entirely uncontroversial, is generally ignored in debates about parental justice. That consideration is that everyone, including the non-parents who are said to have complaints of fairness against sharing the costs of others' children, is someone's child. We overlook this fact because, for the sake of argument, we proceed by focusing on examples like the ones illustrated by the table, in which there is a given generation of adults (e.g. the generation at *t1*), some of whom become parents and some of whom become non-parents. Working with this simple, single-snapshot picture, we block from view the fact that everyone, including the non-parent individual in what is represented by the table as the given generation, is someone's child, so that whatever consideration we apply to evaluate the claims of those whose existence is the result of others' choices, would also apply to the assessment of the claims of non-parents.

So: non-parents, too, are someone's children, and under a system in which the costs of children are socialised, and in which non-parents, too, must pay in order to meet others' children's claims, the non-parents, too, are, and will be, a cost to others: others too can say, about non-parents' claims of justice, that they are having to pay in order to meet the non-parents' claims. In other words, in the scheme under which it is true that children are negative externalities for non-parents (i.e. a scheme in which the costs of added members are shared), it is also true that non-parents themselves constitute negative externalities for others, who

help bear their cost. (Others, including the parents who are sharing their costs, could therefore say: we are contributing to paying for your fair share, when we could similarly complain that doing so diminishes ours!)

The case of parents and non-parents, then, is in this respect relevantly unlike that of the gambler and the non-gambler. The non-gambler's abstention from gambling does not create costs for the gambler, and it seems unfair to the non-gambler to ask her to pick up the costs of the gambler, *despite* having cost the gambler nothing. Non-parents cannot similarly say that they would be treated unfairly by a system in which the costs of children are socialised because, while meeting their claims of justice costs others nothing, they would have to bear the costs of meeting others' claims of justice. So, non-parents' complaint must be understood differently: it cannot be that others' children constitute a negative externality for them, which it would be unfair for them to bear because non-parents do not similarly constitute negative externalities for others.

Two replies are available at this point to defenders of Parental Provision, neither of which, I think, is satisfactory.

First, defenders of Parental Provision could say that non-parents *whose parents have paid for them* (in line with the demands of Parental Provision) could complain against having to meet others' children claims to a fair share. But now note that, while this would indeed be a valid complaint, it would not constitute a case in support of Parental Provision, for two related reasons: *i)* this line of argument already assumes Parental Provision to be in place, and, if it is to ground a complaint on the part of all non-parents, it further assumes that all non-parents' parents complied with the demands of Parental Provision; *ii)* the complaint is fundamentally one of comparative unfairness: given that some people have borne some costs in line with the requirement of Parental Provision, it seems unfair that others who are similarly placed should be exempt from those demands. Such a complaint can arguably be raised quite independently of whether we think that Parental Provision is itself a demand of justice.

A second reply defenders of Parental Provision can make is to deny the disjunctive claim I have pressed thus far, i.e. that either non-parents themselves impose costs on others, or would only cost others nothing if their own parents had paid for them. There is in fact a third scenario, one in which non-parents might

raise the complaint that others' having children creates costs, while they themselves did not negatively affect others on balance (or: that others' children create *greater* costs than the ones which others had to incur to meet their, i.e. the non-parents', claims). That is the scenario in which non-parents belong to a generation *of which it is true* that creating new members constituted a positive externality, or a net benefit, and those non-parents are raising a complaint against parents of children of whom it *would not be true* that they, too, would be a positive externality.²¹ The scenario at issue is illustrated in the table that was used before, to introduce Moderate Parental Provision:

Table 3 – Moderate Parental Provision [repeated]

<i>Time</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>NP</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>GC</i>
<i>t1</i>	60	30	30		
<i>t2</i>	96	32	32	32	
<i>t3</i>	96	32	32	0	32

But now note that, while it is true that in this scenario non-parents might be able to complain that continued socialisation of the costs of children, now that the creation of new children is no longer a positive externality, constitutes a cost to them, while meeting their own claims *was not* costly for others under a socialisation regime, the conclusions we can draw from this fact do not generalise to provide support for Parental Provision. The complaint at issue could be made only by members of a particular generation, or of a few generations alive at a particular time, on the cusp of a transition from a world where the addition of new members is a positive externality to a world in which it is not. It would not be a complaint that non-parents (and non-parents only) can *generally* make against Socialisation in favour of Parental Provision.²²

5. The comparative case for Parental Provision (II)

²¹ Andrew Williams has made this point in conversation.

²² It is worth noting also that it would not be only non-parents who could stake this complaint; *all* parents from that same generation could say the same to other parents, from later generations who decide to have children. As I said in section 1, I here only focus only on the claims that all non-parents could make, according to Parental Provision, so I do not discuss the implications of the view for the claims that parents (whether only some or all parents of a particular cohort of parents) could make.

The defender of Parental Provision, however, could grant all the above, and still press another argument. It is true, the argument goes, that under socialisation, everyone's fair share, including non-parents', will be paid for by everyone else. In this respect, everyone, i.e. parents, non-parents, and the newcomers, are alike. But parents and non-parents are unlike in another, important, respect: parents have children; they are causally and morally responsible for the existence of new persons and new claims to fair shares. So, while under socialisation non-parents, too, *constitute* negative externalities if children are negative externalities, there is a relevant inequality between parents and non-parents under a socialisation scheme, because parents *create* higher costs for non-parents than non-parents *create* for them. This complaint needs disambiguating and making more precise. I now identify two different interpretations of it, and suggest that neither grounds a case in favour of Parental Provision.

One way of understanding the complaint non-parents could press is that a socialisation scheme treats non-parents and parents unequally in that it accords non-parents a *smaller lifetime share* or a *smaller opportunity set* than parents. This is the standard complaint responsibility-sensitive egalitarians raise against compensating for inequalities that result from people's choices: we would be giving more resources *overall* to the gambler than to the non-gambler if, after every gambling loss, we compensated him so that he is brought back to the status quo ante.²³ That would clearly amount to giving the gambler a greater share than the non-gambler, and that seems eminently unfair. On closer inspection, however, this way of understanding the non-parents' complaints seems misguided. It is incorrect to say that *parents* are receiving a greater lifetime share than non-parents: their lifetime share is the same as the non-parents'. It is *their children's* lifetime share that is being paid for by non-parents (and themselves).²⁴

So, although it is true that parents are creating new persons who will have claims to a fair share, and that, through choices they make, and could avoid making, they are causally and morally responsible for creating more costs than non-parents, this does not amount to showing that *they* receive a greater lifetime share than non-parents. What happens as a result of parents' having children that

²³ For a classic statement of this, see Dworkin 1981a.

²⁴ Casal and Williams (2004: 161-2) note this point; I address their response to it below.

are negative externalities is not that non-parents and parents are *unequally well off*, but rather that, as a result of parents' choices, they are equally well off at a lower level of resources. The objection in question would then be one that appeals to non-comparative considerations, to which I turn in the next section.

Another way of understanding the charge of unfairness at issue here is this: although the parents themselves are not the final beneficiaries of extra resources, non-parents can complain that, if the costs of children are socialised, a particular plan of life or ambition is being favoured without adequate justification, and this is unfair to non-parents, whose different plans of life are not being similarly supported. It is unfair in the same way in which it would be unfair to non-religious citizens if building licences, public land and funds were granted for churches and other religious buildings but not for sports centres and music halls. The unfairness in question exists even if everyone, regardless of whether they are religious or not, may access the religious buildings, and even if it is true that it is not the case that religious individuals' lifetime share in personal resources is thereby made greater than that of non-religious people.²⁵ This arrangement favours the religious way of life, and the citizens who practice it, indefensibly, because (I assume here) there is no neutral justification that may be offered to non-religious people for why they are required to internalise the costs of their preferences for sports and music while religious people are not. Similarly, no justification can be offered, to non-parents, for socialising the costs of children, but not the costs of other lifeplans or ambitions: no justification can be offered to non-parents for why their share may be diminished as a result of other people's having children (while they may not make similar demands on their fellow citizens in order to finance their lifeplans) that does not appeal to the special good of parenting on the basis of comprehensive considerations which, so the argument goes, can be reasonably contested. Where children are positive externalities, some such considerations are arguably in the offing, whether as grounds for the weaker claim that non-parents lack a complaint against sharing the costs of children, or the stronger one that non-parents have an obligation, grounded in fairness, not to freeride on parents' cost-

²⁵ This example, and the points made in this paragraph, draw on Casal and Williams 2004: 161-2.

incurring activities. But where children are net negative externalities, no such considerations can be offered.

In responding to this argument for Parental Provision, I would like to grant, for now, as much as possible to its defenders. In particular, I would like to grant both that we should avoid responding to the challenge raised by defenders of Parental Provision by embracing a view on which the costs of all or many other lifeplans should be similarly socialised, so there is no unequal treatment,²⁶ and that we should not adduce comprehensive considerations when justifying the unequal protection accorded to people's ambitions to have and rear children as opposed to other ambitions. Even when we grant these two assumptions, I suggest, we can resist this argument for Parental Provision. In response to non-parents' complaint, we can point to the desirability that everyone contribute to meeting *fellow citizens' general claims of justice*, i.e. those claims of justice which, even according to defenders of Parental Provision,²⁷ *everyone has* just in virtue of being a fellow-citizen. This reason, which expresses egalitarianism's commitment to the value of solidarity and the importance of citizens' sharing each other's fate in some sense, does not apply to the case of other ambitions and lifeplans.²⁸

To see this, it is first important to notice what endorsing Parental Provision commits us to. Under Parental Provision, and as a matter of ideal justice, each one of us has a claim to being provided with our fair share, not against her/his fellow citizens, but only against her/his 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 – quite the contrary, respect for justice is said to require that our share not be diminished in order to give our fellow citizens *their* fair share. True enough, we all have duties to uphold and support (e.g. by paying taxes needed to support law enforcement) institutions that ensure that those who owe

²⁶ Some accounts of equality such as equal opportunity for welfare, or equality of capabilities, would endorse the case for socializing the costs of children *alongside* the accommodation of other "expensive tastes". But according to other egalitarians, including defenders of Parental Provision like Casal and Williams, this conclusion is troubling because it would mean that we would all have shares that are less secure, that is, that what we can lay a claim of justice to is vulnerable to other people's choices.

²⁷ This point is important: I am not making the question-begging claim that it is desirable that all fellow citizens contribute to the costs of meeting everyone's claims to having expensive ambitions equally catered for.

²⁸ As John Rawls notes, "In justice as fairness men agree to share one another's fate". See Rawls 1972: 102.

our fellow citizens their fair shares (i.e. their parents) discharge their obligations. But 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. It is also true that, if individual parents were unable or unwilling to internalise the costs of children, then everyone, including non-parents, would have obligations (owed to the children involved, and to other non-parents) to step in to discharge those obligations themselves. But these obligations are a last and undesirable resort and are only triggered in a non-ideal context. A society governed by Parental Provision, then, is not a society in which citizens are bound by obligations of egalitarian justice to one another. The contrary is true: non-parents are advancing their claim to *not be* held, ideally, to any such obligations. The relationship among fellow-citizens in this society are akin to the obligations which, on a certain nationalist picture of global justice, members of rich states have towards the global poor: the poor's compatriots are the first and, ideally, final port of call; rich states are only called to step in where and when, as a matter of non-ideal circumstances, the global poor's fellow nationals are unable or unwilling to meet their claims (Miller 1995). On the Parental Provision view, the same holds true of all co-citizens. This may strike us as implausible, and an unappealing consequence of taking the commitment to holding individuals responsible for the consequences of their choices too far.

The defender of Parental Provision could reply to these observations by pointing to cases in which requiring some particular individual (as opposed to everyone) to bear the costs of meeting someone else's egalitarian claims, seems both intuitively plausible and compatible with affirming that everyone else is bound by obligations of egalitarian justice to the person whose claims are in question. If, for example, a person is homeless and destitute as a result of an arsonist's burning down her house and all other possessions (which, let us assume, were her justly held resource share), the arsonist, not society as a whole, should pick up the costs of compensating his victim so as to restore her to the *status quo ante*, and her fellow citizens' demanding that of the arsonist in the name of justice

does not imply that they are disavowing their obligations of egalitarian justice towards the victim.²⁹

In response, however, we can say that cases like this one are relevantly different from that of non-parents and parents under discussion, for two reasons. First, the arsonist is responsible, specifically, for wronging another person whose rights are infringed; this fact (at least partly) account for why it is right that the arsonist himself be called upon to redress the wrong and compensate his victim. No wrong is standardly done by parents to their children, we are assuming, by bringing them into existence. Second, and more importantly, the arsonist's action results in the loss of a *previously held fair share* of his victim – a fair share which, we can assume, all fellow citizens contributed to providing in the first place. The arson victim's fellow citizens, then, had discharged their egalitarian obligations already, and the arsonist's actions subsequently created *additional* costs. These facts account for why the victim's fellow citizens are not disavowing those obligations by asking the arsonist to pay: they can rightly say that they should not pay *twice* to secure their fellow citizen's fair share, given that someone is responsible for having created the need to incur additional costs for securing that share. The claim that non-parents make is fundamentally different: they claim that they ideally should not pay *at all* for anyone else's fair shares. When the Parental Provision defender affirms that, as a matter of justice, all the costs of children should be internalised, she affirms that, as a matter of justice, citizens should not pay for each other's general claims of justice. We can deny that this is what justice requires, without thereby implying that some citizens' lifelans or ambitions are especially valuable or superior to others. If these arguments are correct, then it follows that we can silence the complaint that *if* we socialise the costs of children, we must, on pain of illegitimately appealing to perfectionist considerations, also socialise the costs of other lifelans.

6. The non-comparative case for Parental Provision

So far I have argued against attempts to show that *equality for non-parents* requires Parental Provision. But as I noted in the previous section, even if non-

²⁹ Examples like this one have been raised by Zofia Stemplowska and Daniel Viehoff. For a defence of the claim that the person responsible for another's disadvantage, rather than society as a whole, should pay the costs of restoring equality, see Steiner (1997).

parents cannot complain that a socialisation scheme does not place them at the short end of an unjust inequality, the fact that some people’s choices result in others’ situation being worsened, even if *everyone’s* situation is so worsened, may still seem troubling. As I also noted earlier (in section 2), pointing to this fact does not *suffice* to show that those who are negatively affected suffer an injustice, but it does call for justification. In this final section I would like to offer that justification indirectly, that is, by casting doubt on the claim that non-parents’ situation is (normally) worsened in the relevant sense by parents’ having and rearing children. More specifically, I suggest that the baseline relative to which non-parents’ situation is indeed worsened when children are declared to be negative externalities is one which defenders of Parental Provision may not assume; and that, relative to the baseline which defenders of Parental Provision are entitled to assume, it is improbable that others’ having and rearing children is often or even ever likely to be a net negative externality.

Let me explain. As we saw earlier, according to Parental Provision, non-parents could ask parents to internalise the costs of children when socialising them would constitute net negative externalities for the non-parents, relative to the *status quo ante*, i.e. relative to how non-parents fared *before the new* children’s arrival. In the highly stylised, static picture offered by defenders of Parental Provision, the share that non-parents (and parents) could claim in the *status quo ante* was a share of resources (e.g. raw natural resources) the existence of which, we are asked to assume, was simply given and up for appropriation by only the initial generation. Table 1, recall, represented this:

Table 1 – Socialisation (with no positive externalities) [repeated]

Time	Total	NP	P	C
<i>t1</i>	60	30	30	
<i>t2</i>	60	20	20	20

To claim that parents should not worsen non-parents’ situation relative to *that* situation seems plausible, and it seems plausible, I submit, partly because the situation of non-parents at *t2* is worsened relative to a situation at *t1* in which non-parents were *unaffected* by people’s having and rearing children.

However, in any dynamic and realistic scenario, the share that non-parents (and parents) can lay a claim to at any point in time is *not* a pre-given share of raw natural resources, but a share that *was in part made possible as a result of other people's having and rearing children who were positive externalities* (relative to the previous *status quo ante*). In other words, the claim that defenders of Parental Provision make on non-parents' behalf are always like the claims of the non-parent at *t3* in the following table, where the non-parent is assumed to have the claim to the share that he would reap at *t2*, when others' having children improved everyone's situation:

Table 3 – Moderate Parental Provision [repeated]

<i>Time</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>NP</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>GC</i>
<i>t1</i>	60	30	30		
<i>t2</i>	96	32	32	32	
<i>t3</i>	96	32	32	0	32

But why should the non-parent have a complaint if his situation is worsened relative to how he could fare when children were positive externalities (*t2*), rather than relative to how he fared or would fare in a situation in which he reaped neither the benefits nor the costs of others' having and rearing children (*t1*)? This claim is controversial. At any rate, whether or not it is ultimately defensible, that claim is one that defenders of Parental Provision say nothing in defence of, and are especially ill placed to defend, since buttressing it requires, I believe, viewing parents and nonparents as engaged in a cooperative scheme. To see this, note that nobody (and especially the non-parents) could say that their share has been *unjustly* diminished if, relative to a state of affairs in which children were positive externalities, everyone's share went down because people chose to have fewer or no children:

Table 5 – No new children

Time	Total	NP	P
<i>t1</i>	60	30	30
<i>t2</i>	30	15	15

So, in order to support non-parents' claim against parents' "worsening" of their situation prior to the new children's arrival, defenders of Parental Provision must

presuppose the claim that everyone, non-parents included, have the right to that share made possible by parents' having children at the rate at which by so doing they create positive externalities. This assumption, however, is one that they are not entitled to make. The situation of non-parents, then, should be assessed relative to a different baseline than that used by defenders of Parental Provision, namely, that in which non-parents reap neither the benefits nor the costs of others' procreative choices. But now note that, relative to *this* baseline, the addition of children, even of a substantial number of children, is highly likely to be almost invariably a positive externality, since a large part of what constitutes anyone's fair share is the result of a myriad of cooperative endeavours and initiatives, both past and present, which are made possible, in part, thanks to the continuous renewal of society, from one generation to the next, which requires people's having and rearing children. In sum: relative to the baseline in which non-parents internalise neither the benefits nor the costs of anyone's having and rearing children, children, even in great numbers, are not likely to be negative externalities; whether or not children are negative externalities relative to a situation in which children are positive externalities may not be what grounds the complaint of non-parents. So, whichever baseline we assume, Parental Provision remains unmotivated as a demand of justice.

Concluding remarks

The claim that, when creating new persons threatens negative externalities, parents who choose to have children should internalise the costs of those children, may strike many as plausible in light of concerns about overpopulation, and, in particular, about the vast environmental impact of bringing new children into existence in developed societies. Nothing I have said in this paper is supposed to show that we need not worry about overpopulation, and that policies aimed at reducing the fertility rate are not pressing matters. What I have cast doubt on in this paper is only the claim that there are reasons of *justice towards non-parents* to require parents to internalise all the costs of children. If our concern is with identifying as wrong the choice to create children who increase population size beyond the optimal size, we may do so – and must find a way of doing so - without resorting to the rationale behind Parental Provision, and by appealing instead to

the importance of maintaining that population size for the sake of everyone's interests in an adequate standard of living.

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