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Issue Introduction

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Is Procreation Immoral?: Introduction

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There has never been any doubt that procreation raises important moral issues. After all, when we procreate we bring into being a new person, and must accept appropriate moral responsibility for the welfare of that new being. For this reason, there have long been discussions of what exactly the rights and duties of a parent are. Now, however, a new area of discussion has arisen: What are the social ramifications of bringing a new person into being? We recognize that the question of whether and when it is morally right to procreate is no longer a private one, if it ever was. We face the prospect of great environmental destruction. We suffer now, and will suffer increasingly, from climate change, the depletion of natural resources, the destruction of habitat, overcrowding, and the wars that ensue when people fight for advantages under these changed conditions. While there are many steps we can and should take to diminish our harmful impact on the natural world, no question is so central as that of population growth. If the population continues to grow as it has in the last hundred years, whatever steps we take to mitigate the damage we do—cutting back on per capita carbon emissions, reducing per capita resource use, etc.—won't be enough to stave off massive suffering. If we continue doing as we have done, an unsustainable population is in the offing. It is true that at present the growth rate is falling, but given our present numbers, the population is still growing and will continue to grow. This is why even given present trends, the United Nations predicts a world population of 11.2 billion by the year 2100.

The question is what we should do in the face of such facts. Do we have a right to procreate? Does society have a right to demand that we refrain from doing so? If it does, does

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that mean we have no right to control our own bodies? If we have fewer children, or if some of us have no children at all, what will our lives be like? These are some of the most pressing questions we face today. In this special issue, we certainly do not answer all of them, but we make a start on what I think is the most pressing question of our time.