

This is an accepted Manuscript of an article published by De Gruyter in *SATS Northern European Journal of Philosophy* on July 6, 2022, available at <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/sats-2022-0004>.

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Who Should Have Children? (Us?) When Should We Have Children? (Now?)

This paper has three sections. First, I briefly and selectively review the topic of environmental grief and its related emotions. These emotions are multiple; sometimes they overlap, sometimes not, as testified by the overwhelming and almost inconsistent multiplicity and diversity of terms used. I refer to this cluster by the acronym ECEGADMAT: environmental/climate/eco(logical) grief/anxiety/depression/melancholia/anger/trauma. It is not a single thing but in some respects behaves so, and can be thus treated for the sake of simplicity, when suitable. I state that ECEGADMAT exists, what it is, and indicate what kind of philosophical issues are discussed in the existing literature.

The second, longest part is a winding reflection on one particular expression or form of this emotional cluster: the negative attitude towards having children. I argue that it may be misplaced to understand, or analyse, this attitude as, universally, argument-based. In the short concluding section, I attempt to show that such a misleading framing of the attitude, and the near-condescending responses to it, may be related to a specific generational failure of understanding.

1. ECEGADMAT

1.1 The many forms and names of ECEGADMAT

It is indisputable that the various forms of degradation in the environment – local or planetary – have, on a widespread scale, a negative impact on people’s lives, or, more narrowly construed, their mental health. This impact has only recently become the focus of thorough scholarly attention, though awareness of the phenomenon dates back further (e.g. Carson 1962), and relates to the pioneering works exploring the embeddedness of people within the Earth’s environment. One of the first attempts to address directly and label the phenomenon was Windle’s (1992) “The Ecology of Grief”. Windle’s focus is partial in that she primarily explores the grief felt by scientists who research the natural world and are in close contact with animals, plants, and natural habitats. It is partial also in that it attempts to analyse the emotion in particular terms, as a version of ‘common’ grief. Thus, there can be inquiries into the structure of the emotion as something deserving of serious attention and detailed investigation, much as philosophy studies other emotions.

Since the establishment of this emotion as the object of a focused study, the terminology has diversified immensely. Perhaps the most common term is ‘environmental grief’ (coined and described by Kevorkian 2004): ‘the grief reaction stemming from the environmental loss of ecosystems caused by natural or man-made events’, exacerbated by its disenfranchisement by wider society. Others speak of ‘ecological anxiety’ or ‘eco-anxiety’ (Edwards 2008; Kelly 2017), ‘ecological grief’ (Cunsolo and Ellis

2018), or use various other terms such as ‘trauma’ (Woodbury 2019). In a series of works, Albrecht (e.g. 2020) proposes an independent term ‘solastalgia’, suggesting that we do not do justice to the phenomenon if we analyse it as a version of another, more basic emotional phenomenon of a common nature. The term combines (the lack of) solace, desolation, and nostalgia.

There have been some recent shifts in the terminology. First, in relation to the heightened awareness of the climate emergency, the emotion is now more often labelled ‘*climate* despair’ or ‘anxiety’ (Clayton 2020; Godsmark 2020), probably reflecting the influence of the vocabulary used by present-day climate activism and in Green politics. (The vocabulary used by public movements such as Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion relies more on ‘climate’ than on ‘environmental’ vocabulary.) The emphasis on climate also strengthens the link to the political context, where decisions with international implications regarding fossil fuels or energy are being made. Second, a greater and darker variety has entered the terminology used to characterise the described emotion. Thus, while previously ‘grief’ or ‘anxiety’ were the most common terms, now ‘despair’, ‘anger’ (Stanley et al 2021), or ‘melancholia’ (Lertzman 2016) are becoming prominent, too.

1.2 ECEGADMAT as an emotion

It is not surprising that a phenomenon called ‘grief’ or ‘anxiety’ (if used with a qualifier) is considered an emotion. Importantly, though, I will consider emotions *not* in the sense of largely automatic, evolutionarily old, instinctive, ‘lizard-brain’ reactions to external stimuli but as forms of understanding. This opens up space for thinking of them as more or less appropriate, as (not) doing justice to the world. This is in line with the influential cognitivist accounts of emotion (cf. Solomon 1973; Nussbaum 2004), though my aim is not to argue for a form of cognitivism. I share, however, the sense of the importance of keeping open the possibility of considering emotions as something that shows us the world but does not happen automatically and is further worked with. Understood thus, emotions can also be influenced by various forms of cultivation to which we are exposed (notably, art and narrative; cf. Nussbaum 1990), and can even undergo rapid developments.

However, only a few individual authors acknowledge the heterogeneity of ECEGADMAT (e.g. Kevorkian 2019; Wardell 2020). Because philosophical theories of emotions discern finely between grief, anxiety, and despair, it seems appropriate that the possibility, if not the necessity, of applying the same fine grain is taken into account with ECEGADMAT, in order to see the nature and degree of the

interconnectedness of its various forms. In non-environmental contexts, these emotions differ and respond to different settings. This requires that we distinguish between them.¹

For one thing, grief and anxiety, for instance, are very different emotions, and no philosophical analysis concerned with them in a non-environmental context would analyse them as the same thing, or as two different varieties of the same thing. The former is past-oriented, the latter typically future-oriented. Further, grief has valued – and lost – parts of the life of the one who experiences it as its object (typically, this object is another person). Thus, C. S. Lewis's classic *A Grief Observed* explores the disruption that grief presents to the mourner's sense of their own identity. Anxiety, on the other hand, has no particular object at all, as for instance Heidegger famously argues. Analogous differences pertaining to the relational structure of the emotion can be explored between grief and despair, anxiety and trauma, etc. These differences also indicate that while all these varieties of ECEGADMAT are in some way motivated by various phenomena of environmental degradation, they are not all motivated by the same particular phenomena and in the same way – simply because reactions such as grief and despair process different kinds of impulses and in different ways.

If forms of ECEGADMAT are taken seriously as particular versions of analogous emotions or conditions, because they occur without the ECE- prefix, they also require exploration in relation to their counterparts. Afflicting conditions such as grief or trauma are often construed in contrast to envisaged or desired options of recovery (overcoming, processing, healing). However, ECE trauma apparently contradicts this assumed working relation to recovery (Woodbury 2019). In the case of other forms, the assumed counterpart experience or state may not lie in the future, as a prospect, but equally or more typically in the past, in the form of something that has been lost. One such example is hope, as the (lost, disrupted) counterpart of despair (a contrast explored by Aristotle and Aquinas, and in more complex form by Kierkegaard). Another is a generally optimistic outlook on the world, as that which is missing in melancholy. While hope or a general attitude of optimism can also represent a goal to reach, on the way from despair or melancholy, the intuition that despair, especially when framed in terms of mental health, *results* from the *loss* of hope is strong. The relationship of anxiety or anger to their presumed counterparts (calmness – probably – and forbearance or serenity, respectively) does not seem to suggest any such preference in the prospective vs. retrospective directedness. This overview suggests that the various complex kinds of differences between forms of ECEGADMAT call for caution in applying terms borrowed from philosophical and moral psychology, or simply psychology, and in treating them all as synonymous or largely overlapping.

Without further theorising about this problem, for which I don't have enough space here, I will content myself with the following tentative suggestions. It seems theoretically hasty to try to pin

¹ Wardell's (2020) is a rare attempt to look behind the multiplicity of used terms and discern between past- or loss-oriented forms (grief, solastalgia), future-oriented anxiety and dread, and rather self-contained conditions (resembling mental health issues, narrowly construed, more than emotions) such as depression.

ECEGADMAT down specifically as grief, or anxiety, or something else. When, for instance, what one feels is both past-oriented (grief-like) and future-oriented (anxiety-like), this does not need to mean that one is feeling two discernible emotions, even though other people often feel only one or the other. It is, I believe, rather typical that many people affected by ECEGADMAT do not clearly and distinctly feel only one particular form of it, though one aspect may be dominant; more often than not, the experience is conflicted or confusing rather than clear-cut. Focusing exclusively on anxiety', or 'grief' would amount to either ignoring all the cases in which the anxiety- or grief-modality is not present or dominant, or mislabelling them unnecessarily. To avoid problems of this kind, I think it more faithful to consider ECEGADMAT as a 'family concept' in Wittgenstein's sense: an experience that may be very heterogeneous, consisting of partly overlapping but discernible components that can be specified further but should not be taken individually as exhaustively representative of the whole complex.

1.3 The clinical vs. the existential framing of ECEGADMAT

While many of the works referenced above describe the phenomenon as a *mental health* issue, many of the labels they use refer to *emotions*. There are important differences between the terms used by philosophy to discuss emotions and those used to discuss mental health issues.

One important point involved in the difference between framing ECEGADMAT primarily in terms of mental health and in terms of emotions disclosing a general existential condition is the following. The former framing suggests forms of recovery, or restoration of balance, as natural and required (e.g. Bourque and Willox 2014, 419ff; Clayton 2020, 5f; Lertzman 2016, chap. 6 and 7; Woodbury 2019; 6f). Some resources mobilised to overcome ECEGADMAT are openly philosophical (e.g. the ideas of 'climate stoicism' in Goodman 2020). However, grief, for instance, is a form of relationship with something/somebody lost, and the idea of overcoming it ('moving on') may not be experienced as natural. Studies comparing various forms of grief, including non-death contexts, indicate that some are perpetual and chronic (Harris 2019; sect. III and IV); environmental grief appears to be one such form (Kevorkian 2019). This lends support to an 'existential' framing of ECEGADMAT, amounting to a sense that one's life has undergone a significant structural transformation, likely a degradation. In this existential sense, only some forms of ECEGADMAT admit an intelligible 'recovery' or 'overcoming'. Even these differ from the ways in which we recover from mental health issues, and would incorporate existential emphases and elements of reconciliation (rather than recovery) or finding peace with oneself. In this respect, ECEGADMAT seems analogous to the phenomenon of 'moral injury', as distinct from *psychological* conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Wiinikka-Lydon 2019).

As will be discussed in the following section, doing justice to particular forms, or expressions, of ECEGADMAT may require *not* dismissing or discounting them in the way we tend to dismiss states, conditions, or attitudes that have the character of an error or pathology.

2. No future! No children

Some of the caveats and disambiguations in the above overview may sound trivial, but we need to keep reminding ourselves of them. I will try to show the importance of doing so by looking at a particular example.

Recently, there have been many media reports about people seriously pondering over whether to have children or even deciding not to have children at all, in the face of the climate crisis. The reported motivations are various: some predict a direct existential threat to their children's lives by 2050 (say). Some worry about the possible life options for their children. Starting a family, having a more or less stable job, living a life structured in roughly the way as the life of their parents, which is still just possible for many adult Westerners, may not appear equally available for their children. Thus, if we feel that starting a family seems an uncertain enterprise, for our children, in 25 years' time, it might feel outright absurd. Other motivations identify children directly as a part of the problem: people concerned about 'overpopulation' consider every child brought into the world as adding to the unbearable burden on the planetary ecosystem.²

I will highlight some important aspects of these attitudes by making a distinction between what I will call their 'argument construal' and their 'perception construal'.

However, first, a disclaimer: I rely mainly on newspaper articles, opinion pieces, etc. There are several reasons for this. First, there have been very few academic studies of the non-parenting movement, which has only very recently become visible, and much of this literature consists of university theses.³ Also, basically nothing of it is philosophy. And, when focusing on argument- or understanding-contents of the non-parenting attitude, this research tends to stress the normative implications of the fact (not indisputable, as discussed below) that 'by becoming a parent, an individual becomes a source of increased emissions, both in the short term and in the long term' (İdil Gaziulusoy 2020). The focus on the situated experience of agents, along with the terms in which they reflect on their experience and on the justification of what they make of their experience – which is of principal interest

² I will leave this aside here; I have argued elsewhere (Beran 2021) that the overpopulation concerns are problematic in many respects.

³ Cf. Mo (2021) or Krähenbühl (2022). Mo's MA thesis also, somewhat ironically, comments that (apart from cursory notes in research principally interested in other topics) the scholarly literature the author was able to find about the BirthStrike movement (her object of interest) consisted in "several master theses".

for philosophy – is thus more easily found in non-academic sources.⁴ On the other hand, the genre of the opinion piece is such that it strives (whether implicitly or not) towards shaping the public perception and (implicitly or not) considers rather narrowly construed rational argument as its natural medium. From the perspective of philosophy, this can be easily challenged as naive, and since a part of what follows can naturally be read as a polemic against this popular approach, I may give the impression of reaching for low-hanging (philosophical) fruit. However, though the authors of the texts I quote may have simplifying ideas about the nature and role of argument, my aim is not to ‘refute’ them as ‘mistaken’. I only want to indicate that something important seems to be missing from the picture that they offer and that is valuable regardless of my critical efforts here.

2.1 The ‘argument construal’

Many writers of opinion pieces about the decision to remain childless, but also most of their respondents (whom they quote), phrase and reconstruct this as an *argument-based decision*. As it were: having a child – when it does not happen unexpectedly and one first has an opinion about it *before* it happens – is a serious decision. Compare this with the decision whether to study medicine or become a civil rights activist, or whether to move to a foreign country to pursue a better life or professional opportunities. Despite the middle-class ‘responsible lifestyle’ character of these examples, they *are* difficult decisions. Many people approach them by weighing the pros and cons, and when they finally reach a decision, they cite arguments for it. Undeniably, people often approach the question of parenting in this manner, as a responsible lifestyle choice.

Thus, the growing phenomenon of choosing not to have children is often explained as a decision based on arguments that show convincingly (enough at least to make *some* decision) what having children would involve and why one should not want that. Undoubtedly, this often is the case, as one of Krähenbühl’s (2022, chap. 4) respondents testifies:

Developing environmental thinking and adding a ... in fact for me it was really ‘adding a theoretical edge to a decision’ [...] it was a way like any other – because I have several arguments that justify for me and for others this decision [...] It was something that allowed me to justify and to have ... not just a visceral thing, but to have a little more global vision of that ... and also to cement [my decision].

⁴ Apart from Krähenbühl’s thesis, an exception is Helm et al. (2021), who quotes respondents at length, though, again, predominantly the voices concerned with the carbon footprint of overpopulation.

Some authors of opinion pieces do not just quote their respondents but offer counterarguments as to why we should not refrain from having children. For instance, Sigal Samuel (2020):

On this model, instead of having one fewer kid, you can skip a couple of transatlantic flights and you'll save the same amount of carbon. That seems like a way more manageable sacrifice if you're a young person who longs to be a parent.

What's better than having fewer kids? Donating to effective climate charities.

When considering the lifestyle changes we can make to help the climate, we typically think about things like flying less, driving less, and eating less meat. And to be clear, those are all great things to do. But there's another great action that tends to get less play in these conversations: donating to effective climate charities.

This is, basically, an *argument* why children do *not* have to represent such a burden for the planetary ecosystem, as some prospective parents seem to worry. Therefore, the argument for not having children due to the assumed burden does not hold.

Similar counterarguments can be found regarding the other common motivations. Some argue that the Earth will simply *not* become uninhabitable by 2050 (or even 2100) and though life will become more difficult – significantly, in all likelihood – there are many variables involved in predicting where, in what form, or to what extent (cf. Rood 2021). Some would say that despite the high probability of life on Earth being irreversibly affected, there will still be meaning to life, and that is what should matter for us as prospective parents, and for our children (actual or hypothetical), their children, etc.:

Last week, my eldest daughter was flipping blueberry pancakes. “Mom,” she said. “I just read an article that says anyone under 40 will have a hard life because of climate change. Is that true?”

“I think it will be hard,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “But we’ll continue to find beauty in the world, and help others.” My daughter returned to her pancakes. (Mayhew Bergman 2021)

These counterarguments purport to show that, as an argument-based position, the ‘no future’ standpoint of not having children does not hold water. At least, it is not as bulletproof as suggested: there are good reasons for having children, and they are not displaced by what we know or can predict about the climate and the near future. And if we play the game of argument, there are ways of at least

trying to show that having children is actually an even stronger argument-based standpoint. Thus, as Samuel (2020) points out, we should consider things such as:

[W]e can never quite see what's around the bend. There's hope in that. Perhaps nuclear war won't break out. Perhaps racist laws will be struck down. Perhaps a few kids in the next generation — including your kid, maybe! — will be the ones to figure out how to use clean energy to save the planet. (...)

And there's one more thing to consider here. It's an obvious fact, but one that too often gets left out of conversations on climate and kids: Children aren't just emitters of carbon. They're also extraordinarily efficient emitters of joy and meaning and hope.

Though I will devote the rest of this section to problematising this picture and its emphasis on the central role of *arguments* and, generally, *decision-making* in what we do, I want to place a caveat here. There is no point denying that many people really do think along these lines and do their best to get to what they could subscribe to as the best-argued decision. Which is certainly commendable.

Unlike the voices I referred to, I have no normative answer to the question of whether it is right to have children nowadays. My concern is different: there is no need to presuppose this model universally. Thus, many people may feel uneasy, uncertain, or worried about having children. But whether they eventually have children, or not (leaving aside cases such as contraception failure or difficulty with conception), may not result from any argument. For instance, if someone who has had argument-shaped worries about having children eventually has them (or the other way round), it may not be because they have found a stronger counterargument to their original argument. They may have literally nothing coherent to reply to the question 'what convinced you otherwise?' Or, they may not be able to get further than 'It just felt (didn't feel) right' or 'It feels right (wrong) to be a parent'. Whatever the affective intestines of this feeling are, I want to stress that it appears to be a kind of perception or understanding of the world that doesn't fit neatly into the strict shape of an argument. There may be no critical thinking, or even uncritical thinking, behind it. More importantly, this does not mean that these people act 'blindly' or 'are not justified'; a meaningful application of these notions seems hindered here.

First, as mentioned above, there is no good reason to presuppose that a rational argument is always behind the decision (not) to have children. If we do not presuppose this as a dominant model, it means that we should avoid applying this interpretive lens, by default, to each and any particular case. Thus, when we meet a person who has had children despite the sense of foreboding about an unpleasant planetary future, or who doesn't have children and feels this foreboding, analysing these standpoints, by

default, as argument-based may amount to misunderstanding them. It simply is not an exhaustive description of what is going on in real people's real lives.

Second, and more importantly, we should avoid encouraging others only to adopt such attitudes towards their lives for which they can produce arguments (arguments they had *before* they adopted the attitude and that in fact moved them). A lot of things we do – and they can be the best and wisest things we do (and not involuntarily or unawares) – do not involve argument-based decisions. Marriage, for example. It is myopic to expect that an argument will decide whether it is the right thing to marry (a particular person?) and/or to start a family, or to remain single and childless. This is no call for an argument. If somebody marries and starts a family based on an argument, this argument may not be any argument for anybody else to do the same. For what *is* 'the same' here? What a particular person may take to be arguments for marriage and starting a family 'in general' are very often inseparable from this particular person's arguments for marrying, and starting a family with, that particular person. *If* we have arguments for starting a family, they are naturally of a different kind from arguments in favour of admitting the truth of Pythagoras' theorem. The writers of insightful and well-meaning opinion pieces make the mistake of overlooking the importance of the differences of scope and nature between kinds of argument. Why they are tempted to do so, I am not sure, but it may be the inevitable lot of everybody who voices an opinion; one should enter the space of opinions with the ambition or capacity to measure oneself against others and to persuade.

Another caveat, though not directly related, is the following: arguments that we can put together, follow, or produce stand in all kinds of relationships with the things we do, ostensibly on account of these arguments. Haidt (2008) famously analyses such rational arguments as *ex post* rationalisations of our intuitive evaluative reactions to situations. His analysis has weak points, namely the uncritical assumption that arguments *never* really motivate us, or that our real ('intuitive') motivations always have a transformed evolutionary background. But his observation that we often look for justifications *after* we have already taken our stand has its merits. A subtler philosophical form – without this particular agenda – of the same observation can be found in Murdoch's "Vision and Choice in Morality" (1997). She argues that our moral stances are, exactly, *stances*: whole complexes of how we relate – in emotions, reflection, bodily flexions, evaluations, assessments, humour – to ourselves and others. Arguments and argument-based actions are only a small part of this complex, and ontogenetically a late one. Most of us can produce an argument in favour of our position long after much that influenced this position has already happened and settled. When we disagree with each other, it is not necessarily because we weigh facts differently and each takes different facts as important. Often, we simply each see different facts (as salient). Our spontaneous inclinations of vision need not be natural or inborn, though.

This move from choice based on arguments – that I am free to access, assess, and choose – towards vision is important for what I call inelegantly the ‘perception construal’ of the position of not having children, in relation to there being ‘no future’. This move allows for a more justice-giving account of many people’s experiences. A related importance of this move consists in realising that while it makes sense to remind people that, based on particular arguments, they might be required to think and do particular things, there seems little sense in reminding them, analogously, that they might be required to perceive or feel particular things.

2.2 The ‘perception construal’

As said before, emotions can be seen as forms of understanding of what is going on – with oneself, around oneself, with the world. When we feel joy, anger, grief, fatigue, we perceive the world as clear or foggy, waxing or waning; we perceive ourselves as separated from the world in a cocoon (pleasant or unpleasant), or at one with the world, or exposed to the world or to a part of it. The world, and our place in it, means various things to us, which is another way of saying that we feel various emotions – joy, grief, etc.. Our emotions are also expressed in what we are doing and how.

This is, emphatically, *not* the same as having arguments for our decisions. The way in which we perceive and understand the world and our lives – in which an identifiable emotion may be expressed, strongly and clearly or dimly and marginally – is not an argument for a decision. This is easily overlooked. Consider this quotation from an article by Hannah Ritchie (2021):

None of the climate scientists I know and trust – who surely know the risks better than almost anyone – are resigned to a future of oblivion. Most of them have children. In fact, they often have several. Young ones, too. Now, having kids is no automatic qualification for rational decision-making. But it signals that those who spend day after day studying climate change are optimistic that their children will have a life worth living.

I do not know any climate *scientists* personally, but I know many people engaged in climate activism or Green politics. Many are my age or younger; many of them have kids. I do not think that this is because they, having occupied themselves with issues of climate change, have arguments to be optimistic about the future prospects for their children. They may have no such arguments at all. Or, if they have reasons, they may not be grounded in this particular manner. Several of them have sincere and serious doubts about the quality of their children’s future lives.

At least in some cases (not exceptional, I think), having children simply made sense to them, they wanted children, and they love their children. This is despite their worries about the climate future; or more precisely, perhaps *independently of* their worries about the climate future. Having or not having children, then, is not a decision responsive to arguments. A lot enters into one's life when moving in this direction, and 'the same' kinds of life moves have many different forms and structures.

Even with climate scientists, who study the prognosis of climate developments for a living, it would be hasty to overlook other possibilities. For example, people do things (they are not just forced to do things) they don't always agree with; some then experience cognitive dissonance, internal conflict, or akrasia. We also do things out of habit or momentum. Generally, we do not organise our personal lives based on findings derived from our professional lives. Many people have jobs that provide little direct input for the organisation of their private lives; they may be butchers, civil servants in a surveyor's office, theoretical physicists, you name it. There is no reason to presuppose that all people rely on the same kind and composition of resources in organising their personal lives. Scientific findings about the world are one such resource, professional perspectives from one's job are another, so is a religious tradition, or the momentum of one's upbringing. But many resources on which people rely will be independent of their professional expertise and information. Most of us act and function as different personas at work and at home. Why should climate scientists be an exception? That they have children need not mean that they do not predict that people living in 2050 or 2060 (including their own children) may have miserable lives.

That people have children need not tell us anything about what they think the future will be. It tells us that they want to have children, that they want to be parents, or that they are prepared to do things for their children's sake. That they think that the future will be miserable might be reflected in the unease they feel for children they already have (or are about to have) rather than in a debate over whether or not to become parents at all.

Conversely, when people do *not* have children *in relation to* the climate crisis, it is far too easy and unjustified to understand this 'in relation to' as arguments forming a rational basis for their decision. In fact, more often than not, this 'relation' proves to be rather mixed and complex (cf. Krähenbühl 2022, chap. 6). The expected request to produce arguments can just as commonly lead to *ex post* rationalisations, as Haidt explores them. Some of these can be given in various forms of 'bad faith', to borrow Sartre's term. One may not be consciously lying when attributing one's childlessness to the climate crisis; this may not be the real reason but rather a mask justifying – in the best way one could muster – an attitude the real motivations of which one is not able to decipher nor prepared to face. Ask for arguments and this may be the best you will get in return; you can only blame yourself and your unreasonable expectations. If one does not really believe one's own arguments – but is forced to produce and maintain some – one can easily have a conflicted relationship with them; if this becomes 'the normal

aspect of life [and o]ne can live in bad faith', this is likely to be accompanied by 'sudden awakenings of cynicism' (Sartre 2018 [1943]; 90). Or, to put it more simply, in claiming that one has decided not to have children because of the future of the planet, one may be either deceiving another (one's partner) or deceiving oneself. If the latter, it may be good to keep in mind Rorty's (1994) observations that self-deception need not necessarily rely on falsehoods but rather on diversions, and need not be self-interested, or even harmful, though in general it 'is only as good as the person who has it' (p. 226).

Examples of bad faith and self-deception show us clearly that even in more benign cases, the 'relation' of the 'in relation to' is far from straightforward. For one thing, many people know, or think they know, much the same about the future, yet they differ strikingly in their attitudes to parenthood, and neither may be more deluded than the other. What people think they know about the future is not enough to explain this disagreement, and a lack of clarity on either side (or both) cannot be the key. Simply put, only for some people is there a direct link between what they think they know and a normative recommendation for having or not having children. For many people, what they know or what they think they know translates in a wide variety of ways, or even fails to translate at all, into what they do and what strikes them as the right thing to do or how they feel about a matter.

Elsewhere (Beran and Kronqvist 2021), I have tried to explore a different view of the relationship between climate anxiety and not having children: the fact of there being a climate crisis may not serve arguments but rather be 'grammatically disruptive', to put it in Wittgensteinian terms. Of course, this too relates to what we know, or fear, about the future. But what is happening here is the gradual, or abrupt, displacement of certain structures of our understanding. Some ways of relating to our future, with respect to having children, are no longer open. Love for one's children is suffused with a sense of responsibility and worry for them. In rich Western societies, this usually materialises in the expectations that our children will have the same possibilities that we had to structure their lives – should they wish it – according to the familiar scheme: come of age, fall in love, settle down, have a family, have a meaningful and sustainable job, grow old, see their own children and grandchildren entering their lives with similar chances. Once we have realised the urgency of the climate crisis, it becomes drastically more difficult for us to understand, to *perceive*, our lives as having such a future, laid along the indicated lines.⁵ It is not a trifle to lose the possibility of understanding one's life in a certain, once 'normal' way. There have been complaints filed with the UN Human Rights Council that the UN has failed to protect the right of younger generations to have children sustainably⁶ (Shao 2021).

This understanding reflects the socio-economic realities of Western societies and their high level of secularisation. It is, as it were, 'Aristotelian': the underlying implicit idea of a good life assumes some 'material goods' that a 'reasonable man' can expect from life, or, to put it differently, it does not discount

⁵ This, in itself, is already a gross and almost insulting idealisation. Covid-19 pandemic, housing crisis, or the situation on job markets makes this expectation almost as unstable and hollow as the climate crisis makes it.

⁶ One of the basic human rights, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

the importance of the ‘basic capabilities’. A presumed ‘Platonic’ alternative in the face of the climate crisis would be to stress the principal significance of the sense I make of my life, whatever its conditions are ‘materially’ (cf. Gaita 2004, ch. 11). But such an alternative is much easier to accept for oneself than it is to impose on others, especially on one’s children, as their only choice; in relation to one’s children, love seems necessarily to have an ‘Aristotelian’ dimension. Part of the impossibility for a potential parent to perceive and understand her life as including a fair chance of a future for her children – a grammatical reduction of ‘parenthood’ – consists in the perceived disturbance of the idea of parenthood by the ‘moral injury’ (cf. Wiinikka-Lydon 2019) one would suffer should one have children.

Unlike some of the referenced writers, my aim is not to provide a normative argument that (not) having children is justified. I want to show that not having children ‘in relation to’ the climate crisis may simply be an intelligible way of perceiving the world, or its expression. And, to repeat, whether one has children in the face of the climate crisis is then less a matter of what one knows about the future, and more an overall attitude one adopts towards the world. Within this overall attitude, some things strike one implicitly as possible or thinkable; some do not.

If we intend to explore the ‘in relation to’ as having to do with *emotions* (of the ECEGADMAT kind), we can see that i) the explanation in terms of an argument-based decision is not universally sufficient, though sometimes it certainly fits, and that ii) the terms of emotion appear apt to capture important structural aspects of what I called above the ‘overall attitude’.

But even here we are not talking about one thing. To say that one has a negative attitude towards having children ‘in relation to’ the climate crisis can mean (1) that one feels, say, environmental grief and that this emotion provides a *reason* for remaining childless. It is not necessarily an argument, with premises and a logically following conclusion, but it is an intelligible explanation of why one does, or does not, do something. One is motivated by the emotion, and this relationship is not blind, causal, or instinctive – one may disregard this reason and *not* act upon it – but one may also have been unaware of one’s reasons at the time and reconstruct them retrospectively. (This is often what we do in therapy.) In this respect, reasons, especially when they are emotions, differ from arguments. One does *not* formulate or execute an argument unawares, and when one reconstructs a justification retrospectively and claims it is an argument, it is often an *ex post* rationalisation, as Haidt suggests. Taking emotions as reasons is in line with their accounts as forms of judgement or understanding. As reasons, emotions *qua* motivations of actions or attitudes are also open to an assessment of their sufficiency, relevance, or justification, which is misplaced in cases of instinctive behaviours. Identifying that something has been done out of fear may make it intelligible, by way of showing this reason, but it does not make it necessarily a good reason.

Another option would be (2) to see the emotion as expressed in, or taking the form of, the non-parenting attitude. Here, not having children would not *rely on* an ECEGADMAT emotion; these would

not be two different things, each of which could be judged separately and with independent results. (Compare: while it sometimes makes sense to judge one's having an emotion, this is an independent judgement that may differ from the one we pass about the emotion's being the *reason* for some action.) Just as being a Christian is neither an argument nor a reason for praying or participating in the mass, in a way it is not separate or located elsewhere from these religious practices. The distinction between (1) and (2) is not to say that (1) and (2) are always necessarily distinguishable or that they could not be present simultaneously. But the importance of stressing aspects of (2) lies in its impact on the possibilities of judgement. A negative judgement about childlessness, when faced with the perceived bleak planetary future, applies meaningfully where the perception serves as a reason for a step following this input. But if we talk about a case of (2) – an expression of an ECEGADMAT emotion in, or rather an ECEGADMAT emotion expressed as, the childless attitude – such a negative judgement, unless it is a judgement passed about merely having the emotion, appears misplaced. Keeping open the possibility of understanding (2) is, I believe, crucial for doing justice to ECEGADMAT and its relation to attitudes towards parenting.

Let us try to elucidate it by considering the parallel of environmental grief with *grief* itself. People are struck by loss in different ways. Some 'recover' and 'move on' with their lives; some do not. Neither of these alternatives is internally related to the 'objective situation' of loss. Losing one's spouse in an age where the average life expectancy gives 30 more years to the bereaved does not mean that moving on and remarrying is disrespectful to the deceased or irrational with respect to her, nor does it make one's resignation from any such project unintelligible or illogical. It is perfectly intelligible. A part of what grief often makes one think and feel is that even thinking of moving on naturally is a form of betrayal of those we have lost (cf. Rees 1999; Riley 2019). This is not pathological. At least during the initial stages of grief, such thoughts of the future strike the bereaved as literally unthinkable.

This intensity of the reaction may recede with time, but there is no objective timetable for grief. Some people *never* get to such a mindset that *this kind* of future would feel very relevant to them. That they never remarry because they, in this sense, have never stopped grieving for their dead beloved does not have to mean that they feel gloomy all the time. 'Grief' would amount here to a shift in how they perceive and understand their lives.⁷ Some things that used to be options, or that are options for other bereaved people (which does not suggest any contradiction), are not options for them. Similarly, for many people, the climate crisis may be an integral part of their environmentally grieving view of the world, one in which making plans for a family in the future simply does not strike them as relevant.

There are several different forms of resignation available here. Many opinion pieces that call for the processing of environmental grief think that what they consider 'succumbing' to it must mean

⁷ Cf. the ground-breaking findings of Rees's (2001, ch. 22) research into the experiences of widowhood, especially of the 'bereavement visits'. One of his respondents (widowed 27 years) says, 'I often have a chat with him [her deceased husband]. That's why I've never bothered with anyone else' (p. 271).

numbness, passivity, or constant depression. It may – it certainly often does – but it may not. Resignation might also mean to stop investing oneself in the future in exactly the same way that was usual for one's parents or grandparents. Or to stop thinking about the future at all, even though one continues doing the things (such as starting a family) that normally suggest that one is aware of the future continuity and implications of what one is doing.

3. The well-meaning cynicism of environmental positivity

Throughout the previous two sections, I have argued that seeing – in fact, requiring – an 'argument-based decision' structure in the childlessness attitude may be a misunderstanding of this attitude. If the assumption is that this attitude always or in general has or should have this structure, then the assumption is simply mistaken. In this concluding section, I want to briefly point out that in this particular case, the misunderstanding may prove to be of a peculiar kind and with peculiar implications.

First, one hitherto neglected aspect of the whole debate, as outlined above, exhibits a certain colonial aspect. Theorising, in a worried tone, about ECEGADMAT and about the need to psychologically process and overcome it is itself a form of privilege, one that self-immolating Indian farmers (cf. Carleton 2017) don't have. The farmers are no less rational than the (presumably rational) climate scientists, but the obvious options of understanding the condition of their lives are markedly more 'grammatically' disrupted in comparison to the scientists. Once we see that the 'rational' pro-parenthood attitude bears the marks of a position of privilege, we may ask if this critical angle does not also show us other things.

For what do the climate scientists do? Have they – having started families – made a decision based on a previous deliberation (as we discussed above)? Or do they try to find a place for themselves in the midst of what has already happened? In an intriguing BBC radio series, *The End of the World Has Already Happened* (2020), Timothy Morton reflects on the bleak message sent by their 2014 book *Hyperobjects*, and tackles critically the need to offer something positive to the younger generation who have the full right to curl up in the foetal position and be depressed.

But some of Morton's suggestions betray an embrace of the literal meaning of the title of the series – that the end of the world has really already happened. For instance, Morton suggests that beauty and meaning can still be found in the world, in living in the present and enjoying what is present. Tellingly, this does not offer much 'Aristotelian' solace. Instead, it is, as it were, suggested that what we – presumably – owe to our children may be given by helping them find meaning in the world they might claim for themselves.

Yet, as I suggested above, what we are thus offering to our children is the sugared necessity of adopting the only meaningful positive attitude towards the world that is left for them, but that was, for

us, in the past, just one of several alternatives. There is a strange kind of well-meaning cynicism to this. We, the well-meaning adults, volunteer to help the young find and embrace something that we might have seen as less than unequivocally attractive if we ourselves had been presented with it as the only thing we could have (not as one among various alternatives). To an adult's suggestion that 'The world is still so beautiful, you can find beauty and meaning in flowers you can observe blooming in spring' or 'When I am struck by such dark thoughts, it helps me to play a bit with my cat', and so on, it would be, in my opinion, perfectly proper for somebody in their teens or early twenties to answer: 'OK, boomer.' Our children may eventually feel they have to do exactly this, but we have little right to prompt them by our calls.

In order to understand the generational sensitivity of people under thirty, we should perhaps simply listen less to what people over thirty have to say.⁸ This includes ourselves, especially if we passed the age of thirty some time ago. This is not meant as a sociological observation; deep down, the difference points back to the tense-related differences between the various ECEGADMAT emotions. It is natural (though there is no causal necessity) that people who understand their lives as having significant portions in the future (ahead of them) will be more prone to future-oriented kinds of ECEGADMAT emotions (climate anxiety). Those who, when reflecting on their lives, look largely into the past may more naturally feel grief for something that has been lost. These are different kinds of concerns, and under certain circumstances may lead to a very limited capacity to inhabit the other's standpoint. Living in the present, or caring for the present, means very different things for people who may share the present, but not quite the future, because they have come to the present with different loads of the past.⁹

Not being a boomer – that is, somebody who ignores the differences in how the present presents itself to people who share it but live their lives with different tense orientations – is not the greatest of philosophical challenges. However, it is one of the least obvious, and it is at the heart of this case. ECEGADMAT, in particular when expressed in the form of not having children, seems to be a generational sentiment (in this 'phenomenological' sense of generational differences), to a perhaps unprecedented extent. For philosophers old enough to have children and able to think explicitly that there is nothing particularly worrying about it, it presents a task of understanding a whole generation of people who feel that they, as a *generation*, 'shall never grow old'.¹⁰ We need not only to recall what it feels like to be young but also to admit that it may feel different now. The climate crisis plays a cruel

⁸ Perhaps a good introduction for the middle-aged into the Millennial sensitivities would be Sally Rooney's last novel.

⁹ The point made in this sentence comes from my anonymous reviewer; I consider it very illuminating.

¹⁰ Samuel (2020) does not consider the case to be that unprecedented and finds parallels with the Cold War anxiety about having children under the threat of nuclear war. The parallel seems misleading to me. The chances and prerequisites of nuclear war not happening differ from those of the climate catastrophe not happening. In the former case, political inactivity and the momentum of everyday life were parts of the solution, in the latter case they are parts of the problem.

trick on those who are young now: not only does it force them to think about the future to an extent that their parents may not have experienced, but it also constantly reminds them of the inescapable threat to their future.¹¹

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¹¹ I thank to the participants of the session of the European-American Online Workshop in Philosophy of Emotions, where I presented this material, for the discussion. The comments by Nora Hämäläinen and an anonymous reviewer also helped me improve the text significantly.

Work on this paper was supported by “ECEGADMAT”, grant no. 22-15446S of the Czech Science Foundation.

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