

The Sylvans

Detailed summary powered by AI

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Motion: deciding not to have children deserves as much social respect as deciding to have them.

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1. Analysis of the outcome

By 11 votes to 6, after opening at 10 to five, the childfree by choice motion carried. This was a house settled from the start, and the debate explains why it stayed that way. The opposition chose to argue a different question, whether society should promote parenthood, and on that question it made real headway. Yet the motion asked about respect for a choice, and the room kept voting on the motion.

The proposition's case: pressure, information, decision

The opening speech worked by inversion. Instead of defending people without children, it questioned how freely the other choice is made: the biological clock, the relationship escalator, the reassurance that you will be ready. The five-star question gave the room an immediate personal stake, and the good enough parent standard framed parenthood as hard to do well rather than as an automatic good.

Several strands ran off at angles. Adoption, parental leave and the social media list each raised a real point, but none was tied back to respect. The closing was tighter. It took the opposer's phrase about positive images and turned it into a charge of coercion, which was the most effective rhetorical move of the evening. It then gave the motion a positive content it had lacked: respect for the work of deciding, not only tolerance of the outcome.

The opposition's case: promotion, independence, demography

The opposer conceded equal dignity at once and moved the debate onto public policy. That was a deliberate redefinition, and it had a cost. Agreeing that everyone deserves equal dignity came close to granting the motion, leaving the opposition to argue that respect and promotion are different things, which the room never fully accepted.

Within its own frame the case was coherent. Low birth rates are measurable, the critique of career-centred lives drew on a recognisable experience, and the egg-freezing example in the closing gave the argument about values its sharpest illustration. The claim that climate concerns are mostly an excuse, however, met a floor speaker who had just described people weighing them seriously, and it read as a dismissal.

The opening's account of upbringing, that children raised mainly to receive find it harder to give, was the most original idea in it. It went largely undiscussed, though one floor speaker for the motion agreed with it, which suggests it found more sympathy than the demographic case.

The ebb and flow of the floor in the childfree by choice debate

Four battlegrounds formed. The proposition held two and the opposition one; the last was shared.

What social respect is for. The opening floor speech gave the opposition its most rigorous theory: respect is an incentive society distributes to get useful things done. If that is right, the motion asks society to give up a tool. The same speech also contained the evening's most contested line, that women may have to be unhappy, and several later speakers answered that line rather than the theory. The theory had more force against the motion; the line drew the replies.

Birth rates and evidence. This was the proposition's ground, won from the floor. One speaker asked for evidence that equal respect lowers birth rates and pointed out that none had been offered. Another set a global fertility rate above replacement against the claim of collapse, and a third argued that migration answers a national shortfall. The older speaker's warning about population decline was the only reinforcement the opposition received, and its framing around boat arrivals moved the discussion away from respect.

Women, bodies and burden. The proposition held most of this ground, with speakers on autonomy, on the selfish label and on the gap between how childless men and women are treated. The opposition's answer came from one speaker, and it was the strongest single argument against the motion: parents take on a responsibility that society benefits from, and recognition should follow responsibility.

Thought versus instinct. The climate science speaker argued that people childfree by choice had often thought harder than parents. It became the basis of the proposer's closing. The opposer answered it by calling the reasons excuses. Each side kept its own voters on this ground.

What the floor added

Both sides found their sharpest material in the floor speeches, as rapid debates often do. The question that unsettled the opposition's demographic argument, where is the evidence, came from the floor, and so did the figures that answered it. So did the responsibility argument against the motion, which neither opener had made.

The proposer's closing drew openly on what had been said, quoting the opposer's own phrasing back at them and taking up the climate speaker's point about thought. In a format where neither opener arrives with a finished case, that is how the final case for a side gets built.

What the childfree by choice debate left unexamined

Men were almost absent. Only the speaker on parental leave and the speaker on middle-aged men addressed how the choice is judged for them, and the debate otherwise treated not having children as a women's question. People who do not have children by circumstance rather than choice appeared once, through the point about lesbian couples, and never again.

Nobody separated respect from material recognition. Child benefit, parental leave and tax allowances are forms of social recognition for parents, and the responsibility argument could have been tested against them. In the end the room debated attitudes without asking what equal respect would change in practice, if anything.

Respect, status and the childfree by choice decision

Underneath the evening ran a disagreement about what social respect is. The proposition and most of the floor treated it as regard: the absence of judgement, the end of the selfish label, the freedom to say no without a dinner-table defence. On that reading the motion asks very little, and almost everyone could accept it. Even the opposer's opening, with its insistence on equal dignity, came close.

The opposition's two strongest contributions treated respect as status instead. One floor speaker described it as an incentive society hands out to reward useful sacrifice. Another tied it to

responsibility borne: parents carry an 18-year obligation, so their decision earns recognition that a decision to decline cannot. On either account, being childfree by choice can be entirely respectable and still not deserve as much respect, because respect in this sense is earned by contribution.

The two readings never met head on. Speakers for the motion answered the status argument with autonomy and dignity, which are arguments about regard. Speakers against answered the regard argument with birth rates and responsibility, which are arguments about status. A room in which each side was answering a different question was unlikely to move, and it did not.

What drove the result

The proposition began 10 to five ahead and needed only to avoid losing ground. The opposition's redefinition gave it a coherent case but not a route to the votes it needed, because few in the room disputed that the choice deserved respect. Again and again the floor returned to the motion's own words, and on those words the proposition led.

The opposition argued that society should encourage people to have children. It agreed society might, and still declined to think less of those who do not.

2. Detailed transcript

The childfree by choice motion, and the opening show of hands

The motion is: deciding not to have children deserves as much social respect as deciding to have them. We'll take a quick vote. Deciding not to have children deserves as much social respect as deciding to have them: who is in favour? I make that 10. And who's against? Five.

Would you give your parents five stars?

I would like to ask a bit of a cheeky question, which is: if I were to ask you all, would you give your parents a good review on Yelp? Would you give them five stars for how they raised you, for what they did when you were a kid? How many people would, absolutely? Raise your hands. A credit to you. I say this because in most cases people think that their parents had a lot to learn, or could have done it better the next time round, and that's not necessarily anything to deride. We are all living as human beings for the first time this time.

There's a reason that the concept of the good enough parent is, in my anecdotal, personal experience as a doctor, what we teach people, and how we're expected to judge parents on their competency. It's not about being the perfect parent; it's about being good enough. But whilst we preach that academically, in reality many of us are quite scarred by our parenting experiences, and also quite daunted by the idea of doing it ourselves. And yet there is continued drive, I believe societal pressure, towards making the choice to have kids. "You'll be ready once it happens." "You'll figure it out." "There's never a good time." These kinds of phrases are often quoted when we talk about the cisgender heterosexual relationship escalator, which pushes people towards it in fear of a biological clock, where the choice isn't even a choice any more; it's thrust upon us.

Is it fear that stops people saying no?

I chose to propose this motion today because I'd like to ask the question: is it actually just fear that stops some people feeling able to say no? And if it is fear, what is the cost they are afraid of paying? I think that cost falls mainly upon women. Now, that isn't the end of my argument. There is definitely a social respect element that is positive for men who choose to pass on their legacy in the traditional sense, or in more modern senses share the burden, which is a respected one, of doing the difficult job of raising a child. But I think that the active choice not to have a child is one that people seem to have to labour over and defend more than the active choice to have one.

I'm going to move on to one of my points, which is that we've often seen people say, "Send it to the girl with the list". If you're familiar with any kind of pop culture or social media context, this is a woman who was keeping a list of reasons not to have a child. It was started in humour, but it gained really quite high traction on social media, specifically because of people not really knowing what they're signing up for. And I would argue that as we grow in access to information, about both the health consequences of pregnancy and the health consequences of birth, we may find more women making a more informed decision against having a child.

Naturally, biologically, we release oxytocin at the point of birth, which makes it a joyous postnatal experience that often leads people to physically forget some of the pain they've just experienced, and to be less likely to choose not to go again in the future. But as we gain more access to information as a society, something that health education charities prioritise in offering

contraceptive advice in countries with less access to resources, we move towards a more informed form of consent.

Adoption, and the elephant in the nursery

Similarly, in my second point, I think that deciding not to have children of one's own but to adopt may be something worth discussing in the later part of the debate, as something that arguably should be given a lot of respect. It's an altruistic action in many cases, but it doesn't come to mind first when we think about this debate, versus having your own child.

Similarly, we cannot ignore the elephant in the nursery, to use the phrase: social respect can also be detrimental to women who lose social power in the workplace. For example, in the UK we have a better maternity leave offering than paternity leave offering, meaning that you could be the most determined stay-at-home dad and still not have equitable access through your workplace to offer that nurture following the birth, even if you want to relieve your female partner of that duty. I will now stop talking. Thank you.

The opposition: dignity for all, and what society should promote

I would like to start my speech by saying that everybody on Earth deserves the same dignity that is owed to a human being. I think the question has been understood a lot as being about respecting women who have children more than women who don't, and I don't think that's what the question is about, because there are a lot of things for which people gain merit in society. It's about their positive impact on society: discovering a new vaccine, for example, or a new cure, or acting positively in any other way. There are many ways people have a positive impact, and therefore have merit in society. So if the question is whether we should respect people more or less based only on the fact of having children or not, I don't think this is enough to answer the overall question we have here.

The way I understand the question is: all other things being equal, should we promote having children in society, or should we not, and should we let things go as they do naturally nowadays? I say naturally because having a child or not nowadays happens in a very sophisticated world. A lot of things are in our consciousness other than our primitive thoughts and the will to reproduce and have sex. A lot of psychologists from the late 19th century started writing about this: sublimating our impulses through art, science and so on.

Independence, careers and the value of family

The way I see society nowadays is that we prioritise things outside the family. People have to accomplish themselves by themselves. They need to be independent individuals. They need to make their own income. They need to be autonomous. Nothing wrong with this, but it is entering a frame of values that doesn't allow you to fulfil what allowed our society to happen in the first place. If people hadn't reproduced in the first place, we wouldn't be here to debate this. And unfortunately the level of complexity we sometimes have in our own psyche goes against what is optimal for us to survive. This is the main origin of neurosis, as psychology described it.

In my own experience, I do observe this a lot: people who overinvest in their career and forget about investing in human interactions, and they stop having friends. They stop going to events like this one, for example. And this is a valued aspect of life. Social interaction, the intimate and

emotional ones you have with your family, offers a context, a frame that promotes trust, and that is also something you should prioritise.

We now live in a society that has gone so far into independence, into promoting distance between individuals and allowing autonomy, that people's intuition hasn't been fed with positive images that would make them want to have children rather than not have them, and I do see this as problematic. In a society where the birth rate is between one and 1.5, as in most modern societies, I think it is problematic, and I think we can all agree on this. By this single value itself, we could agree that if you are below two there is a problem, and in order for society to sustain itself, you should promote it.

I can also talk about the origin of it. If you are not used to being altruistic, to thinking about giving before receiving, and I think a lot of children have been raised being given a lot, receiving a lot, and not necessarily being trained to give to siblings, and we know families were more numerous in the past, which promoted community and family values, then it is very difficult for you to take the initiative to do so.

Being virtuous when you have a child is not only passing on your genes, because in our society, in our state of being, we can have a much bigger legacy than that. We can pass on our value system, for example, and it is important for the father and the mother to be present in a household to raise those children. But nevertheless, there is a form of selfishness that arises from receiving too much and not being used to giving yourself. Thank you.

Social respect as a ruthless social tool

I'd like to support the opposition a little bit, which is that social respect is something given out by society. It's not a question of our individual value judgement of a person's choices, and therefore it is a ruthless thing that society does when it gives out social respect. In other words, it awards it so that individuals do things they wouldn't otherwise do. That's the point of it. It's why you give firemen the badge. It's why you give people Oscars, because people are fools. They'll just follow their own instincts, and they'll do things that are not useful to society.

Now, society is not really a collection of individuals with individual judgements. It's the desire of a group of people to survive and thrive as a group of people, as a society. Maybe you don't want to be part of society, but most people do, and insofar as they do, they want society to reproduce itself, to grow and to survive, not to die. So the function of social respect isn't to make people happy. It's the exact opposite. It's to make people do the good thing in cases where what will make you happy isn't the thing that society needs you to do. At some point you have to sacrifice something.

And this is in the context of a United Kingdom in which birth rates are substantially below replacement. Take South Korea. South Korea's ethnicity will be gone in 100 years. South Koreans won't exist as an ethnic population. It'll be Chinese, it'll be North Korean. If you desire the survival of a people, you can't just say, well, women are unhappy. Well, women have to be unhappy, unfortunately. Which means some people have to sacrifice, and the function of social respect is not to make people happy. That's not why it exists. It's to make people do the right thing, or what is useful for society.

I just wanted to draw that distinction, because I think what the speaker was proposing was that in our individual hearts we award each other the same respect. Individually, you could do that. If you

did that societally, there'd be no firemen, and no one would do anything. So it's not a functional system for social respect.

Women's choice, the village and the homophobia charge

I just think women in society should be valued for being able to choose what they want to do. At the end of the day, for a man or a woman to make a child, it involves a woman's womb. So I think it creates an abusive society to project that on to women, that it's not of value to not want to have children. I also think women can have a nurturing quality without actually procreating, and they can be selfless and give. It takes a village, doesn't it? Women can look after others. They can have a goddaughter, or they can be an auntie.

I also think not putting value on women who choose not to have children is homophobic as well. There are lesbian couples who can't have children, and if they do want to have children, they have to go through IVF. They might not want a random sperm donor to procreate. So I actually think the notion is homophobic. I feel there's a certain level at which people fear women having choice. There's already an inequality where women don't always have the power, and as soon as women are having a choice and making decisions with autonomy over their very own body, it becomes a bit edgy. I think that's woven into the feeling of not valuing a woman who wants to have autonomy over her body.

I'm just pro-choice, for women doing what they want. And a lot of the time women can now fund themselves as well, so things have changed slightly: the man isn't the provider bringing in an income, so women can look after themselves. I don't think my last point was quite coherent, but I wrote loads on those other things. Essentially I'm for women having autonomy, and also for whether they want to bring a child into a world that maybe isn't great right now. Is that a moral thing to stand by? That's all from me.

A more individual society, and who defines respect

First off, a bit of a weird one: I'm actually going to challenge your definition of society. I think it's become much more individual over the past 20 or 30 years than it was before. With the rise of social media and other platforms, people are able, for lack of a better word, to pick their own tribe. Society is not as homogeneous as it used to be. Individualism is massively on the rise.

Leading on from that, I think the question to ask yourself is: what is your definition of social respect? We will all have different ones. I'm relatively young, and there are things I value and respect people for. I think a lot of people tend to value authority. There are a lot of different options you can choose.

The next question after that is: once you've got your definition of social respect, which of the criteria or things you value actually relate directly to whether or not someone has a child? For me, none of them. I would look at the individual and value them, not based on the things they have around them, but on what this person is bringing. There could be an argument that bringing up a child is part of that, but for me it just isn't. It's what this person is directly contributing to society, positive or negative, and that is what influences my social respect, not their offspring. That's it.

Freedom is not the same as recognition

I oppose the notion that deciding not to have children deserves as much social respect as deciding to have them, because it confuses personal freedom with social respect. Of course adults are free not to have children, but why must society treat the decision not to take on a responsibility as equally deserving of recognition as the decision to take it on? Parenthood is not simply a lifestyle choice. Once you have a child, you cannot wake up tomorrow and say, "Oh, I've changed my mind. I don't want it." For the next 18 years you're tied up with a child who you are totally responsible for: bringing up, paying for, looking after, being connected to emotionally.

We hear a lot about parents' rights, but what rights exactly? In reality, parents get responsibilities: feeding, educating, paying, organising life around the child, while we sacrifice careers, money and other prospects in life. Meanwhile, society benefits from that work. Someone has to raise the next generation. We need future doctors, nurses, teachers, builders, carers and taxpayers. A society in which nobody has children quite literally has no future.

The proposition might tell you that treating the child-free choice equally will free people, particularly women, from anxiety about the biological clock. But social respect cannot stop biology. Fertility does decline with age. Pretending that this pressure is entirely created by society does not empower women; accurate information does. Nobody should be shamed for not having children. But "do not shame me" is not the same argument as "my decision deserves exactly the same social recognition".

Other ways to add value to a community

I read the motion as being not just about respect for the individual, but about social respect. Breaking down what social respect is, my definition is receiving high regard and recognition based on the value and added benefit you bring to society, and the role you have within a community, whatever that community is. My question then was: are there not other ways to calculate that added value than having children? And have we not now moved forward as a society to more varied lifestyles, which would attract high regard and value?

To expand on that, parenthood, in my opinion, should be a voluntary decision. It shouldn't be a social obligation that we're pressured into. People may choose not to have children for so many different reasons, whether that's financial, medical, personal, cultural, or simply that you choose not to want children. From what I've seen in our communities, women in particular who choose not to have children are often treated as incompetent or incomplete, or sometimes even selfish. And even if they change their minds, that selfish label will follow you throughout your life.

Respecting the choice does not mean we're undervaluing parenthood, or criticising what a sacrifice it is, the burden and the challenges that parenthood brings. What we're saying is that there are so many more ways to live a meaningful life and to bring value to society in the way you choose to live your life. To finish that off: people with children and without children may contribute to society in so many different ways, whether that's volunteering, their work, or the people they care about and look after. Ultimately, reproductive autonomy includes the freedom not to reproduce, and those who choose not to are also deserving of social respect.

Where is the evidence on birth rates?

Thank you, Chair. It's a really interesting topic. I wanted to unpick a couple of things, and possibly challenge. I thought the opposer's opening was very thoughtful, and I agree with almost

everything they said. Thinking about children: we give so much to children, but do we teach them to give back? I would love to be able to teach mine to give back a little bit more.

I do want to pose a question, though. It seems a couple of people have come up and argued, implicitly or explicitly, that if we give the same level of respect to women who don't have children, that is going to lead to lower birth rates, and at the extreme to societal collapse, where there's no population any more and the tribe is gone. I haven't seen any evidence of that. I haven't heard any evidence that that is actually what is driving birth rates. I haven't studied it; I've read a bit about it over the years. The culture of a society clearly is going to have an impact on the birth rate, so there could well be a link. But if we haven't proved that link, then I think those arguments just fall apart. You have to be able to show that.

So if we give the same level of respect to women who don't have children, the first question is: does that mean that more women will decide not to have children? If that's not true, then there's no harm in doing it, and that takes away some of the arguments. If it is true, that opens up a couple of other questions. Can we take other steps, which are not about social respect, to get society to produce enough children to continue to propagate ourselves?

Different countries try to do it differently. Money seems not to work very well. Poland is throwing cash at having extra kids. France, I believe, has crèches everywhere, so childcare is sorted, which is very different from what you have here. The birth rate in France has historically been higher, but the gap relative to other countries is not as large as it used to be. China had the one-child policy, kept it in way too long, and did a U-turn, so now you can have more children. But no one is choosing to, because the culture has changed.

I have no idea whether there's any interplay between respect for women who have or don't have children and the birth rate. There's the principled and moral argument here, which I support totally. But I'm just posing the question of what's underpinning the arguments against, and I don't think we have the facts. It is very complicated, because it's definitely about culture and about social interactions. Last point: can we give women who choose either way the same social respect, and still make it great for women to have enough children for society? I don't know.

The global fertility rate

I'd just very quickly like to reflect on one point and, I think, refute another. The point I'd like to reflect on is that I thought it was really interesting, the debate we've had this evening about where social respect is placed, whether it should rest on societal or individual values, and how sometimes those two things can come into conflict with each other. Obviously it depends on how you read the question.

The bit I wanted to refute was the idea that current fertility rates are critical to the survival of the human race. The current global total fertility rate, as of about 2023, was 2.23. That's 2.23 children born per woman, as best we were able to estimate it. I understand that the rate generally perceived as required to sustain human life is 2.1, so it's not far above that. That could involve demographic change, with fewer children being born in some countries around the world. But I think the idea that human life would cease if the current fertility rate dropped is simply false. Thank you.

Rome, plague and the population of Britain

There is actually a big problem, which has been partially touched on by a few speakers. My own opinion is that the world's population is going to mushroom as the underdeveloped countries become developing, and people have made forecasts of how big this is going to get, and it's huge. I'm not supposed to go back to the Roman Empire, but I'm afraid we very often have to. Rome shows that when a society becomes wealthy, women reduce the number of children they have. They had pretty cruel ways of doing it in the Roman world, which I won't go into, but the population certainly stabilised.

I think people have roughly made the point already. In Britain we are probably a little wealthier than the Romans were at their peak. You have to have over two children per woman, 2.2, to keep the population stable, since not everybody can have children. The figure at present for Britain, I believe, is not much over one. I'm not quite sure how much it is, but it's certainly nowhere near two. That is going to mean, when you push this forward in time, that the population of Britain will go down. Or else, of course, all these people streaming in in their little boats, which we don't seem to have any means of solving, are going to take their place. Do we want that to happen in our society? I don't. I think that's a question.

There are times in history when the population, including Britain's, has gone down enormously, usually with the advent of plagues. What happens then is that people feel wealthier. If you halve the population, even the underdogs feel more wealthy. People get more land, which used to be the main basis of wealth in early societies. But a great problem occurs: there's not enough labour to produce the output any more. Someone mentioned that the hierarchy in past times was all Norman conquerors, and this led to a Parliament full of Norman conquerors and wealthy landowners introducing rules to keep wages down, so they didn't have to pay people more. It didn't really solve the problem. So I think you have to bear in mind where you want to see Britain go in the longer term.

Judged for being childfree by choice

So I think this idea that you won't be respected, or will be less respected, if you don't have kids is just weird. That is just insane, frankly. That sort of society is less attractive to me. My parents come from a country where that's all they talk about: when are you going to get married, when are you going to have kids, how many kids have you had? That's all it is, and it's freaking annoying, frankly. I'm glad that I live here, where I've never noticed any kind of disrespect from people towards others who don't have children. So in that sense I'm glad I live here.

To go back to a time when someone's value is measured by having children, I think, is a backward step. We'd be going back to the 60s. Didn't that cause repressive societies? Didn't gender roles become much more defined in a traditional way? That's not a good way. And didn't we try to break out of that, because women were constrained and men were constrained? Aren't we moving to a better place, where it's not all about having children?

Socioeconomics has been mentioned. In other countries it's socioeconomically important to have kids, because otherwise who's going to take care of you? There isn't a social safety net, so you're relying on your family. Here that doesn't seem to be the case.

We have a social safety net, and I've noticed with friends whose kids have grown up, gone to uni and left home that they rarely see them again. So this whole idea of having children because they'll

take care of you in your old age doesn't seem to be much of a thing, even though I guess it's nice having them around. Anyway, the core point for me is that I just find it really weird that we would be judged negatively by other people because we don't have kids. If I was at a party and people made that assessment of another person, I wouldn't like that person very much.

Migration, culture and The Selfish Gene

I want to bring up the natality rate. Here, like we said, it's 1.1, 1.2, but in other parts of the world it's ridiculous. I know in the Bihar region in India it can be up to five at some points. So for the UK, if our population is declining, like you brought up, it just means we can get more people in from elsewhere. Whether or not you think that's a good thing, if it's a choice between the same number of people here and overpopulation somewhere else, or us having fewer kids, bringing in more people and less overpopulation elsewhere, I think from a utilitarian point of view the second is objectively the better thing to do.

Also, on your point about South Korea and their ethnicity not existing in 100 years, I think that's a questionable point to make, because I think a region is defined more by its culture than by its genetics. I think this can be shown because, for a person of two Nigerian parents who lives in the UK, to devalue them as a British person is just objectively wrong. Genealogy doesn't determine who we are and what countries are, and I just don't think that's a great point, if I'm honest.

I'm reading a book, *The Selfish Gene*, which is about genetics, and I think the point about social values and social respect is a kind of animalistic, hierarchical point of view: whether people are considered better or worse based on having kids and passing on their genes. I just think everyone deserves dignity regardless of that. It is just weird.

Thought, climate and being childfree by choice

When I was initially reading the motion, I thought it was talking about evening out social respect, and I do agree with a lot of people who said it's very silly that we attach so much respect to those things. But when we look at the people who are actually choosing not to have children: in my background I studied climate sciences, so I know a lot of people who are very aware of the impacts of climate change, and who have taken that into consideration when deciding whether investing in a family is the best thing for them.

I feel those people have put a lot of thought into whether or not having a child is the best thing for them or for their children, in comparison to some people I know who have had children without as much thought going into it. You made a good point as well about the information we're getting, and about getting more autonomy as women to decide this.

It's also interesting that we veered towards the gender difference, because the motion was just about someone who has children versus somebody who doesn't. Of course that affects women more, so it's a bit more difficult. But in my experience, with a middle-aged man who hasn't had any children yet, I haven't seen the same response, the same almost disappointment, as with women of a similar age who don't have children. So in terms of that, that's where social respect needs to tip a bit more towards people who choose not to. I also feel it's more the younger generation who have considered the social, economic, political and environmental impact of whether a child is actually viable right now.

As has been mentioned, somebody said France has crèches everywhere. We're not really in a position, in this country, where it takes a village to raise a child. We're so individualised, especially in this country and this city, that that's almost an impossible thing. So when you're planning whether to have children, you have to think: okay, I'm going to be alone in this; can I actually do that? That's a lot of mental and emotional baggage to carry.

It takes a lot to break out of that initial socialised idea that we're supposed to have children, and that it's the thing we need to reach for in our lives. I also think it's important to look at why women are choosing not to have children, rather than questioning whether or not we should respect their choices. If we had more things to support people, I think it would be much easier to make the choice to have children.

I also wanted to say that I thought it was a bit, for lack of a better word, ignorant, my friend, to talk about a social sacrifice that women have to make, because that has been the story since the start of time. So, talking about social sacrifice, maybe we should find a way to get you lot pregnant, and then you can tell me how you feel about that.

And just quickly, about adoption. A lot goes into people trying to adopt a child before they actually get accepted, and you have to prove to the state and many other organisations that you're actually capable of doing it. That's not the same as people who are just having children. Not to say that we should put everyone through a test before they can conceive, but I think it's an interesting thing to consider when we're looking at who we should respect here: the people who just kind of boned, or people who have actually spent hours and weeks and days thinking about this. So thank you very much.

Closing for the opposition in the childfree by choice debate

A lot of things have been said, and three minutes is definitely not enough. But I would like to stress that the question itself needs to be understood not as respecting people themselves, because, as I said, everybody deserves the same human dignity. It's about promoting it or not. Should we promote having children in our context? I checked the birth rate. Natality was 1.39 last year in the UK, and 1.56 in France. That's a little bit more, but still way below two.

I have a few points to make on the origin of this, and we have to understand why it is like this in order to change it. I think we are in the wrong value system nowadays, in the sense that we overpromote people being independent and autonomous, with the only way to fulfil themselves and be valuable in society being through their career and through having money: accumulating the means, and having honour through your career. In the frame of a capitalist society this is very handy, and the system sustains itself, because what some companies do is offer women the chance to freeze their eggs, for example. They prefer investing in this, and keeping a worker who has already been trained and has experience in the company, to investing in hiring and training someone else.

So the company is defending its own interest when it does this. It's not defending the interest of the individual who has to accomplish themselves. Quite frankly, I think this is odious: offering something for someone to act against their own interest. It should be a mutual interest. Your career shouldn't necessarily override the fact that there are other things that are valued in life, and it shouldn't lock you into a frame where nothing matters except the good of the company you're

working for. As I said before, I don't think there is enough family experience to feed a positive intuition during our upbringing, a positive meaning of having children.

About global warming, which was mentioned earlier: it is a very interesting one, because we have a global morality nowadays, and the media and social media are feeding pessimism to people. I believe it is not the origin of why people are not having children. I think most of the time it is an excuse for not having children.

The reason is that if things are going wrong around you, as the lady said earlier, you could actually be optimistic about the future. You can have children and raise them well, so that they have good values and spread them. You can hope that your child will become the next Nobel Prize winner and find a solution to this crisis we are living through. But that is not the state of optimism we are in. So it's really not global warming that is inducing this. It's your psychological state that has made you susceptible to this narrative.

A quick sentence to finish. We need to accomplish ourselves, not only intellectually. Some people are more wired to accomplish themselves intellectually. Fine. Some people are not wired to have children in the first place, I believe, naturally. But not on the scale we are experiencing. We need to remember that we also have to accomplish ourselves in a carnal, primitive, indeed physical way: by being fit, by multiplying ourselves through breeding, and by doing what allowed society to exist in the first place.

Closing for the proposition in the childfree by choice debate

First of all, absolutely fascinating, and I wish we all had more time to go into this. But to bring it back to my fierce proposition against your case, I'm going to try and pick out three points that I think have threaded this debate together. I'll quote some people; I'm sorry, I don't know everyone's names, but just for the purposes of argument.

I heard the phrase, "People haven't been fed with images." It raises the idea of propaganda: the idea that if we really, truly have to convince you it's a good thing, maybe it isn't, and maybe it's not for everyone. I'm not saying that giving information on both sides isn't needed. But the idea that the reason somebody hasn't chosen it is that they haven't been fed the right images is a little concerning. If we are having to convince someone, I'm arguing that it's coercive rather than consenting.

Secondly: giving before receiving, promoting community, the altruistic choice. On these points, I think we can all see that this equates having a child with giving a gift to society. I don't deny it increases the numbers. We all know: one more child, one more future worker. It's an economic argument, but stay with me here.

I would argue that a child raised not so well, by a person who didn't quite love it, might introduce some economic and psychiatric costs in later life. It's not that a child, once they're here, is ready to go. They must be raised. They must be gently brought into society. And much as we have seen the argument in America turn towards the idea of a child being born at any cost, we often forget: born in what state? Born healthy, born wanted, born nurtured? I think that 18-year investment is often harder to do well than we give it credit for.

That is why my argument is not to take away the credit from those who do the exceptionally difficult job of being a good enough parent. It's in fact to say that other choices, often ones that, as people have highlighted, require lots of thought, lots of arguments at the dinner table and lots of defence of one's choice, should be credited for the process of decision-making. They should get respect for taking the time to really evaluate whether this is for them.

We've had a few mentions of the animalistic view. There was a mention of the hierarchy of passing on genes, and I agree that there is an evolutionary urge in many biological creatures to reproduce. Could we argue that it's more evolutionarily advanced to pause before acting on those urges? Potentially. But that, again, is not to criticise those who act upon them.

My final and, to me, most important point is the choice between two harms: actively harming somebody who is encouraged into having a child that physically, psychologically or otherwise ruins their experience of life, and the passive harm to the child that is born unwanted, born without the societal resources to raise them properly, while we place the credit on the person who decides to have them for that pivotal moment of having, but not raising, that child. So I hope we can sit back and take a moment with our decision, because that's truly what we want to be respectful of.

The vote on the childfree by choice motion

So now I'm going to put it to the vote. The motion is: deciding not to have children deserves as much social respect as deciding to have them. All in favour of the motion, please raise your hands. I make that 11. And all those against the motion, please raise your hands. So originally the vote was 10 in favour of the motion and five against, and now we've got 11 in favour and six against.