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## **Antinatalism – Solving everything everywhere all at once?**

Joona Räsänen<sup>1</sup>, Matti Häyry<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Philosophy, Contemporary History and Political Science, and Turku Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Turku, Finland.*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Management Studies, Aalto University School of Business, Finland.*

In 2019, an Indian man named Raphael Samuel was planning to sue his parents for giving birth to him without his consent.<sup>1</sup> Samuel believed it was wrong to bring children into the world and subject them to a lifetime of suffering.

A similar premise is depicted in a 2018 Lebanese movie directed by Nadine Labaki, where a 12-year-old child from the slums of Beirut intends to sue his parent.<sup>2</sup> The boy is brought before a court, having decided to take legal action against his mother and father. When asked why he wants to sue his parents, the boy answers: "because you had me".

Antinatalism – as the view is called – is an emerging philosophy and practice that challenges pronatalism, the prevailing approach in reproductive matters. According to antinatalism, it is morally wrong to have children. There have been different justifications for antinatalism. Some argue that we should not produce sentient lives

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<sup>1</sup> Pandey, G. (2019). Indian man to sue parents for giving birth to him. *BBC News*, Accessed 19 Aug 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47154287>

<sup>2</sup> Bradshaw, P. (2019). Capernaum review – little boy lost in an unjust world. *The Guardian*, Accessed 19 Aug 2023.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/feb/20/capernaum-review-nadine-labaki-zain-al-rafeea>>

because they are all bad,<sup>3</sup> some claim we should not produce lives that can be bad,<sup>4</sup> and some assert that we should not create lives without the permission of those produced.<sup>5</sup> Yet, others contend that we should use the funds and resources to improve the well-being of existing people.<sup>6</sup> Discussions on antinatalism continue<sup>7</sup>, and further applications are being raised and analyzed.<sup>8</sup>

Little attention has been given to the notion that by adopting antinatalism through voluntary human extinction all of humanity's problems could be solved. Severe problems such as climate change would find a resolution if humans ceased to exist, thus eliminating environmental destruction. It appears clear that numerous problems plaguing humanity – such as wars, famine, crime, discrimination, and cruel treatment of animals, to name a few – would vanish if humans would not exist. The adoption of antinatalism would, therefore, truly solve 'everything'.

If antinatalism were universally adopted, it could potentially resolve problems on a global scale, thus solving the problems 'everywhere'. But it would not result in an immediate and simultaneous resolution due to the challenge posed by the last generation. Thus it would not solve the problems 'all at once'. Human beings rely on one

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<sup>3</sup> Benatar, D. (2006). *Better never to have been: The harm of coming into existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Häyry, M. (2004). A rational cure for prereproductive stress syndrome. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 30, 377–378.

<sup>5</sup> Shiffrin, SV. (1999). Wrongful life, procreative responsibility, and the significance of harm. *Legal Theory*, 5, 117–148.

<sup>6</sup> Rachels, S. (2014). The Immorality of Having Children. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 17(3), 567–582.

<sup>7</sup> Magnusson E. (2019). How to reject Benatar's asymmetry argument. *Bioethics*, 33(6), 674–683; Gould D.C. (2021). Future minds and a new challenge to anti-natalism. *Bioethics*. 35(8):793–800; Hereth, B., & Ferrucci, A. (2021). Here's not looking at you, kid: a new defence of anti-natalism. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 40, 14–33; Piller, C. (2022). Benatar's Anti-Natalism: Philosophically Flawed, Morally Dubious, *Philosophia*, 51(2), 897–917; Häyry, M., & Sukenick, A. (2023). Imposing a Lifestyle: A New Argument for Antinatalism. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, Published online 27 July 2023. <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180123000385>>

<sup>8</sup> Räsänen, J. (2023). Should vegans have children? Examining the links between animal ethics and antinatalism. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, 44(2), 141–151; Bülow, W. (2023). Why (at least some) moral vegans may have children: a response to Räsänen. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, 44(4), 411–414.

another, and the present generations are, to some extent, dependent on the next generations. Our children and grandchildren will pay for our pensions and retirement. The younger population will care for the elderly until they themselves grow old, requiring a new generation to care for them.

Some hold optimism that technological advancements will eventually provide the elderly with satisfactory lives without requiring the assistance of the younger generation. Care robots and other technological innovations are sometimes celebrated as substitutes for humans and human care<sup>9</sup>, suggesting that technological optimism can address the diverse challenges in caregiving. However, technology cannot eradicate loneliness, as it is incapable of substituting for genuine human interaction.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, some also contend that life lacks meaning without children. These people pass the existential crisis onto their offspring, who then must procreate in order to avoid the same emptiness lurking inside that led their parents to have children in the first place. Life, thus, bears a resemblance to a pyramid scheme, where new participants work for the well-being of the previous 'victims' of the scheme, creating a vicious circle where new people must be 'recruited' to benefit those already within the system. The game only exists as long as new players join, and the scheme ultimately ends badly for the latecomers, because it is not possible to recruit new members indefinitely. Nonetheless, there isn't a finite maximum of potential humans to exist. Consequently, it seems that the pyramid scheme of life will likely go on approaching infinity, postponing the final suffering of the last generation by always creating the next generation. As one generation replaces another, suffering persists. In the meantime, humanity also inflicts suffering upon other species through direct killing and indirect environmental degradation.

Imagine a non-human species that would cause as much damage to its own members and the members of other species as humans do. Many would think it would be wrong to breed new members of that species and, surely, we should do anything to stop such species from procreating. Why should we act differently when the destructive species is

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<sup>9</sup> Frennert, S., Aminoff, H., & Östlund, B. (2021). Technological Frames and Care Robots in Eldercare. *International Journal of Social Robotics*, 13, 311–325.

<sup>10</sup> Lederman, Z. (2023). Technological solutions to loneliness-Are they enough? *Bioethics*, 37(3), 275–284.

our own?<sup>11</sup> Perhaps we should do what Rust Cohle, a fictional character in the hit TV show *True Detective* suggested: “The honorable thing for our species to do is deny our programming. Stop reproducing. Walk hand in hand into extinction, one last midnight. Brothers and sisters opting out of a raw deal.”<sup>12</sup>

Having said that, would antinatalism solve the problems too drastically – would the victory be Pyrrhic? Is it truly a victory if no one is there to enjoy it? When people discuss putting an end to reproduction, they usually talk about ending some, not all, reproduction. The correct name for their view could, of course, be selective or eugenic pronatalism, but the concept of antinatalism has also been connected with the idea of population control they are after.

Paul R. Ehrlich, the author of *The Population Bomb* (1968) and ardent champion of contraception and lower birthrates, made clear his alliance to the qualified view in an antinatalist podcast.<sup>13</sup> According to him, as well as many others, the goal should be to have fewer people but so that they could then have good and meaningful lives. Interestingly, however, when Ehrlich was pressed further, he admitted that if future people cannot be guaranteed decent lives, it might be best not to bring them into existence at all. Thus, the issue seems to hang on a factual – albeit also evaluative – premise.<sup>14</sup> If human or sentient or all lives are bad, then there is nothing Pyrrhic about the unqualified antinatalist victory.

According to antinatalists, the prohibition against causing harm to existing individuals prevents us from resorting to violence, as death is harmful. However, non-existent cannot be harmed by not being brought into existence, therefore not having children

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<sup>11</sup> David Benatar makes the same point in his Benatar, D. (2020). *Kids? Just say no. Aeon*. Accessed 20 Aug 2020. <<https://aeon.co/essays/having-children-is-not-life-affirming-its-immoral>>

<sup>12</sup> See for example Calia, M. (2014). The Most Shocking Thing About HBO's 'True Detective'. *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 August, 2014. Accessed 20 August 2023. <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-SEB-79531>>; Benatar, D. (2015). We Are Creatures That Should Not Exist. *The Critique*, Accessed 20 August 2023. <<http://www.thecritique.com/articles/we-are-creatures-that-should-not-exist-the-theory-of-anti-natalism/>>

<sup>13</sup>The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast. (2023). Paul R. Ehrlich (With special guest co-host Matti Häyry) 1 September 2023.

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5CS8VY0nFQ>>

<sup>14</sup> The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast. (2023). Population bomb exploding? Not on our watch! Premier 18 August 2023. <[https://youtu.be/K1AaBEqV\\_q0](https://youtu.be/K1AaBEqV_q0)>

harms no one. Thus there is a crucial moral difference between ending humanity by means of killing and by means of non-procreation. The former approach is wrong, but the latter is preferable. Nonetheless, embracing antinatalism might seem too far-fetched objective for many; some think the best argument should not always win.<sup>15</sup> Some people might even mourn the prospect of human extinction. Yet, even that sorrow serves as another illustration of the suffering that could be alleviated by adopting antinatalism. Until people are convinced that antinatalism would solve everything and everywhere, perhaps a reasonable thing to do is to create fewer people but with the best possible lives?<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Pihlström, S. (2009). Ethical unthinkabilities and philosophical seriousness. *Metaphilosophy*, 40(5), 656–670.

<sup>16</sup> Häyry, M. (2004). If you must make babies, then at least make the best babies you can? *Human Fertility*, 7,2, 105–112.