

Be Fruitful, but Do Not Multiply

Abstract: Recently, Kenneth Himma (2010) argued that salvific exclusivism, some common beliefs about Hell, and a plausible moral principle entailed anti-natalism. Himma is on to something. But given the dialectic between Himma and a staunch critic, Shaun Bawulski (2013), I'll provide a stronger version of Himma's argument that allows us to discard a commitment to salvific exclusivism and satisfactorily respond to some of Bawulski's strongest objections. In this paper, I'll argue that some common beliefs about Hell, a risk-averse decision principle, and Himma's moral principle—reworked in light of the risk-averse decision principle—entail anti-natalism.

The specter of anti-natalism—the belief that it is wrong, in every case, to procreate—has risen its head many times since Benatar's seminal work on the matter, *Better Never to Have Been* (2006). Arguments for anti-natalism, like modal realism, are generally either met with the Lewisian incredulous stare or vehemently refuted. Recently, Kenneth Himma (2010) provided an argument for anti-natalism that attracted some scrutiny. He claims that the conjunction of some common beliefs about Hell, salvific exclusivism, and a plausible moral principle regarding circumstances when procreation is permissible entails anti-natalism. But if we seriously consider some dialectical moves made by Himma—specifically, his commitment to the claim that one ought to make procreative decisions on a risk-averse basis—we can provide a stronger version of the argument. In what follows, I'll argue that the conjunction of some common beliefs about Hell and a risk-averse moral principle entails anti-natalism. First, I'll provide these common beliefs about Hell. Then, I'll briefly summarize the dialectic between Himma and a staunch critic, Shaun Bawulski. Finally, I'll present a modified version of Himma's argument that avoids several of

Bawulski's objections and allows us to discard a dialectical commitment to salvific exclusivism.

If my argument is sound, then I am, in tandem with Himma, presenting a dilemma for theists: either reject this notion of Hell or endorse anti-natalism.

1.1 *The One About Hell*

Before I proceed with the argument, I will detail what Himma and I take these pervasive beliefs about Hell to be:

- (i) After death, every person is either granted entry to Heaven or justly condemned to Hell, and no one will go to both.ⁱ
- (ii) Some people are justly condemned to (and afterward, exist in) Hell.
- (iii) Those in Hell are tormented for eternity.
- (iv) For every person brought into existence, there's a non-zero probability at the time of their birth that they will be justly condemned to (and afterward, exist in) Hell.

The above are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for what I will call Infernalism.ⁱⁱ (i) provides the circumstances under which one is either condemned to Hell or granted entry to Heaven, while (ii) establishes that Hell is populated. In the background of (i), it is assumed there are adequate reasons for a person to be justly condemned to Hell.ⁱⁱⁱ Such reasons might be performing morally wrong actions, having the wrong beliefs, being intrinsically worthy of condemnation to Hell, or some combination of the three.^{iv} (iii) concerns the *duration* and *nature* of an individual's condemnation to Hell, while (iv) sets the prior probability of any person's condemnation to Hell at a non-zero number between 0 and 1. I will not specify what this probability *is*, exactly, for reasons that will become clear later. While (i) and (ii) are reasonably clear and well-accepted, some further clarifications regarding (iii)-(iv) are necessary.^v

In most cases, proponents of these beliefs about Hell readily affirm (iii). Augustine (2013) labors at length to not only demonstrate the nomological possibility of being consumed by fire and not destroyed but to establish that sinners will endure that (and more!) within the confines of Hell. John Wesley (1872) describes the sleeplessness and agonizing, ever-changing suffering without reprieve that the damned must endure; John Calvin (2008) claims that the suffering of the damned transcends the bounds of what language can sensibly express. And who can forget the colorful language with which Jonathan Edwards describes the perils of being condemned to such a place, held by the whim of God above a raging fire “. . .much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect” (Edwards, 1741, p. 15)?

However, not all have such a strong stomach for the suffering of others. To escape contemplating the horrors of Hell, one might douse Hell's fires by thinking that moment-to-moment, Hell isn't all that bad. There's still suffering and retributive justice for sin, but that need not look like a hungry, undying worm coupled with unquenchable hellfire (English Standard Version Bible, 2011, Isaiah 66:24).^{vi} C.S. Lewis's notion of Hell still requires that sinners are tormented, but not quite in the way that Augustine, Wesley, Calvin, and Edwards describe.^{vii} William Lane Craig (2013) takes a similar tack, claiming that abandonment by God is its own punishment. But these two pictures of Hell are not obviously consistent with the "eternal torment" those others above would easily grant—in fact, they seem to fall well short of it. As such, for the purposes of my main argument, I'm not immediately concerned with these descriptions of Hell; though I'll briefly comment further on them at the end of my argument.

Finally, (iv) is usually framed in exclusivist terms, wherein generally, the conditions for salvation are inflexible and demanding. Himma seems to cash this out along epistemological lines, wherein one and only one set of beliefs (and accompanying actions) is necessary and

sufficient for escaping condemnation to Hell (Himma, 2010, pp. 27-28). This is called 'salvific exclusivism'. On this interpretation, it's often inferred that more people go to Hell than Heaven (thus, setting the prior probability of any one person's going to Hell above or around .5). I will take up Himma's interpretation of salvific exclusivism. On one way of interpreting the conclusion of my argument, I will argue for a broader claim: anti-natalism can arise from an interpretation of (iv) consistent with what I will call 'salvific inclusivism,' wherein the set of individuals who escape condemnation to Hell is far larger. Perhaps the set of appropriately salvific beliefs (and accompanied actions) is very large—and so long as an individual has some of these appropriately salvific beliefs and accompanied actions before they die, they may be saved.^{viii} Nonetheless, it's not necessary that *everyone* escapes condemnation to Hell—even if most do.^{ix} To me, it seems clear that anti-natalism arises from salvific exclusivism, but I will not argue for this.^x It is an interesting development if anti-natalism *also* arises from a less radical stance, as I will argue it does. On another way of interpreting my conclusion, I'll argue that we can generate the anti-natalist conclusion without settling whether salvific exclusivism or inclusivism is the case. This is the more interesting interpretation. But if the reader prefers the latter over the former, the argument is unaffected.

1.2 *The Initial Argument and Reply*

In this section, I'll provide a brief synopsis of Himma's argument and the ensuing dialectic between Himma and Bawulski. Himma argues that the conjunction of some of the aforementioned doctrines about Hell (he calls this the "Traditional Doctrine"), and a certain ethical principle entail that it's always impermissible to procreate. Specifically, Himma first orients his argument towards those who endorse salvific exclusivism and Infernalism. Then, he

uses the following ethical principle (the New Life Principle) to establish that procreation, under these conditions, is impermissible:

It is morally impermissible to bring a new child into the world when there is a sufficiently high probability that doing so will create a substantial risk that the child will invariably suffer severe harm as a direct consequence of being born. (2010)

Himma notes that this formulation is somewhat misleading. 'Direct consequence', in this context, seems to imply a causal relationship, but merely being born does not cause one to be condemned to Hell. To remedy this problem, Himma later provides a modified version of the New Life Principle:

It is morally impermissible to bring a new child into the world when would-be parents rationally believe there is a sufficiently high probability that their child would suffer some severe harm after birth that will endure for as long as she lives. (2016)

According to Himma, this principle enjoys some intuitive support. In his words,

Suppose, for whatever reason (perhaps God thunders it from the sky), that my wife and I *know* that if we conceive a child in the next two weeks, he or she will be kidnapped shortly after birth and tortured for three weeks and then killed painfully. It seems clear that we should refrain from conceiving for that two-week period—even if it means that the particular child who would have been born is never born because some other child is conceived instead. . ." (2016)

Or, to choose another example, if I knew that my wife and I were in the midst of a deadly viral epidemic that exclusively infects newborn children, it seems that my wife and I ought to refrain from conceiving until the epidemic has passed (Himma, 2016).

The New Life Principle provides sufficient conditions for establishing that procreation is morally impermissible: (i) there's a sufficiently high probability of severe harm to the child, and (ii) the severe harm will endure for as long as the child exists.^{xi} *Even if* severe harm comes about as a direct result of the child's free choices, procreation is impermissible.^{xii} Given Infernalism and salvific exclusivism, it seems there is a sufficiently high probability that a child will suffer severe harm that endures for as long as she exists. So, procreation is impermissible.

While not every philosopher finds Himma's argument problematic (Hereth, 2022, p. 105), Bawulski strongly disagrees. In "Do Hell and Exclusivism Make Procreation Morally Impermissible? A Reply to Kenneth Himma," Bawulski raises several objections to Himma's argument.^{xiii} First, given a theological assumption, the New Life Principle implies an implausible eschatological view: Hard Dogmatic Universalism (2013, pp. 335-338). Second, Bawulski puts pressure on Himma's claim that the probability of eternal torment is high enough to merit an application of the New Life Principle. Finally, Bawulski argues that the New Life Principle is too strong; it entails that all procreation is impermissible even before one accounts for the possibility that one's children are condemned to Hell. While Himma might avoid the first objection (though, I'll provide an alternate response to Bawulski's objection if Himma's isn't compelling), I'll leverage Himma's replies to the second and third objection to introduce my argument.

There is at least one necessary theological assumption that Bawulski details to argue that the New Life Principle implies Hard Dogmatic Universalism: God is causally involved in the creation of new persons (Bawulski, 2013 p. 336). As Bawulski puts it, while humans don't play a trivial role in bringing about the existence of new persons, ". . . God, in a very meaningful sense 'brings a new child into the world'" (Bawulski, 2013, p. 336). If this is true, Bawulski continues, then it's plausible that the New Life Principle applies to God.^{xiv} But if the New Life Principle

applies to God, then according to the New Life Principle, God may permissibly bring persons into existence only if they are saved (Bawulski, 2013, pp. 336-337). Thus, on the assumption that the New Life Principle is true and given God's causal role in procreation, Hard Dogmatic Universalism is implied. And *sans* some independent and strong arguments for endorsing Hard Dogmatic Universalism, Bawulski concludes that the Infernalist is justified in rejecting the New Life Principle.

Himma disagrees. He argues that even if one endorses the causal claim, there's no reason to suppose any form of the New Life Principle governs God's agency. One might endorse either a skeptical position that claims we're ". . .not in a position to understand how moral principles apply to God" or that an entirely distinct set of moral principles apply to God (Himma, 2016, p. 97). If we're not in an epistemic position to understand how moral principles apply to God, then Bawulski cannot claim that the New Life Principle implies Hard Dogmatic Universalism or ". . .that God cannot bring into the world people he knows will go to Hell" (Himma, 2016, p. 98). And if God's agency is governed by an entirely distinct set of moral principles, then God is not obligated by the New Life Principle. So, in either case, Bawulski can't quite get what he's looking for.

If the above isn't compelling, then there's another way that Himma could have argued against Bawulski. Philosophical worries about the causal claim aside, even if the New Life Principle governs God's agency, it's false that God may permissibly bring persons into existence only if they are saved. To see this, set eschatological considerations to the side for a moment and consider the *certainty* that one day, our children will die. Despite this certainty, any charitable interpretation of the New Life Principle (foregoing any *other* sufficiently high probability of severe and enduring harm) doesn't imply that procreation is impermissible. On some Epicurean

views, death isn't a harm at all (Epicurus, 2016, para. 3), and on other—perhaps more plausible—views, death's harmfulness is contingent upon what one might lose by dying (Nagel, 1970, p. 78; Brueckner & Fischer, 1986, p. 219).

Upon bringing eschatological considerations back in, there's room for Annihilationism, which, under one way of cashing it out, is a view that claims God ultimately destroys those who are condemned to Hell (Brown & Walls, 2010, p. 45). If this is true, then some will ultimately die, whereas others will live. But by the prior claims, the fact that some will die does not imply that it's impermissible for God to bring those persons into existence. If death is neither a harm nor a good, then those who die are not harmed—thus failing the sufficient conditions for the New Life Principle. If death is only *sometimes* a harm, then it's reasonable to think that God only brings those into existence who do not die or those for whom their death would not be a harm. Perhaps the damned, under a non-Hard Dogmatic Universalism eschatology, do not suffer harm if they die. Were they to continue existing, they'd either suffer privation of the many goods brought about by existing in harmony with God or, given the Infernalist flavor of Hell, would additionally suffer a great many evils within the bowels of Hell. By dying, the damned have nothing to lose, as there is nothing good left for them; and thus, their dying is not a harm to them.^{xv} So, it's false that God may permissibly bring persons into existence only if they are saved.

If that's right, then it's not obvious how Bawulski can argue that the New Life Principle implies Hard Dogmatic Universalism. There are other eschatological options on the menu. Annihilationism, while still a denial of Infernalism, might still sate God's justice with respect to the existence of evil. Of course, Annihilationism is philosophically and theologically contentious, as is Hard Dogmatic Universalism—and there are independent arguments against the position

(Brown & Walls, 2010). But the same sorts of worries that Bawulski seems to have in mind with respect to Hard Dogmatic Universalism don't necessarily apply to Annihilationism, and at the very least, it's not true that the New Life Principle implies Hard Dogmatic Universalism.^{xvi}

Even if Bawulski's first argument isn't successful, he provides other objections. Next, he critiques Himma's assessment of the probability that a child will be condemned to Hell, given salvific exclusivism (Bawulski, 2016, pp. 339-340). Parents undeniably influence the beliefs that their children adopt. As a result, an Infernalist parent seems justified in having a relatively high credence that their child will endorse the same kinds of beliefs they do—at least, high enough to believe that procreation, even given the New Life Principle, is permissible since the risk of eternal damnation is minimal. If that's right, then even given the New Life Principle, salvific exclusivism, and Infernalism, procreation is permissible.

But Bawulski, ultimately, doesn't think that the New Life Principle allows for many permissible cases of procreation—even if Infernalism isn't the case. Granting some vagueness in a *sufficient* probability of severe and enduring harm, it seems like there's a sufficient chance that our children can suffer many kinds of lasting harm beyond Hellfire. According to Bawulski, “. . . procreation would be morally impermissible for poor married couples, for anyone living in impoverished communities, and even for some entire nations” (Bawulski, 2013, pp. 340-341). Since being born in any of the above circumstances has a substantial risk of causing enduring harm, Bawulski contends that an adherent to the New Life Principle must think that procreation is impermissible in all these cases. For many, this implication would be distinctly distasteful. But Bawulski also argues that the New Life Principle entails that procreation is impermissible with respect to risks of genetic disorders, depression, or chronic migraines (Bawulski, 2013, p. 341). As such, Bawulski contends that we ought to reject the New Life Principle.

To generalize Bawulski's worry, it seems possible that many don't share the intuition required to accept the New Life Principle; perhaps, even at the risk of enduring harm in *this* world, it's still better to bring new life into existence. But could we get *something* like the New Life Principle to work that allows for procreation in the above sorts of circumstances? I'll argue that we can, and the key is in Himma's response to Bawulski's second objection.

To reiterate, Bawulski, in the second objection, argues that an Infernalist parent's credence that their child will have the same religious beliefs might be high enough to fail the first sufficient condition for the New Life Principle—namely, that there's a *sufficiently high probability* of severe harm. In response, Himma argues that procreative decisions ought to be *risk-averse*. Few would play Russian Roulette, he claims, even if the odds are on your side and no matter how desirable the prize is (Himma, 2016, p. 11). When we procreate, we are, in essence, playing a version of Russian Roulette with our children (perhaps we might call it "Heavenly Roulette"). The cost of losing this game of Heavenly Roulette is *so* catastrophically horrid that it ". . . warrants giving up a significantly greater chance of winning the best possible prize" (Himma, 2016, p.11). As Himma concludes, insofar as it would be irrational to play Heavenly Roulette—or, minimally, rational not to play, as he later argues—it is morally wrong to bring others into existence (Himma, 2016, p. 11).

Unfortunately, Himma does little to flesh out the details. He seems to have a decision principle in mind, but he fails to adequately specify how the decision works and why, exactly, the better choice is not to have children. Taking on board the dialectical assumption that procreative decisions ought to be made on a risk-averse basis, I'll argue that we can revise the New Life Principle such that we get the result Himma aims for: either reject Infernalism or endorse anti-natalism.

1.3 What Procreative Decisions Look Like and Why We Shouldn't Procreate

Until now, I've spoken about decisions, risks, and risk-taking loosely. Here, I intend to precisify my language and clarify my decision-theoretic commitments in the procreative context.^{xvii} Decisions are choices that agents make. In many cases, agents might prefer one decision over another; ideally rational agents will always make the decision they prefer.^{xviii} These preferences can be expressed as *weak preferences*, *strict preferences*, and, in the case of neither weak nor strict preferences, *indifference*. An agent *weakly prefers* one decision, B, over another decision, A, just in case B is at least as good as A ($A \leq B$).^{xix} An agent *strictly prefers* one decision, B, over another decision, A, just in case B is as good as A and it is not the case that A is as good as B ($A < B$). An agent is *indifferent* between one decision, B, and another decision, A, when B is as good as A and A is as good as B ($A \sim B$).

When an agent is presented with a variety of decisions, what determines an agent's preference for a particular decision often involves considering the outcomes of the decision. An outcome is a way the world might be given that a particular decision was made. Some outcomes can be good, some outcomes can be bad, and some outcomes can be neutral (equivalent to the status quo). Generally, these outcomes are represented numerically. Outcomes have a certain probability (on an interval between 0 and 1) of obtaining. We might conceptualize this probability as either objective (i.e., chanciness in the world) or subjective (i.e., credences relative to evidence). One might immediately note that the existence of chances not equal to 0 or 1 seems to assume an indeterministic world. But this is not necessarily the case; one alternative is that objective chances are credences relative to all the evidence a person *can* have. In the procreative context that I'm interested in, when I refer to the probability that a particular outcome will obtain, I refer to the outcome's objective probability of occurring. Given a focus on objective

rather than subjective probability, a world-state is a complete description of a nomologically possible world. We may then think that world-states and decisions determine outcomes.

When one knows the probabilities of the world states associated with the outcomes of a decision, it's often said that the decision is a *decision under risk*. When one does not know the objective probabilities of the world states associated with the outcomes of a decision and does not have precise credences, it's said that the decision is a *decision under uncertainty*. Up until this point, the natural way to think about procreative decisions was to think of them as decisions under risk. This is what allows us to speak of chances that the suboptimal outcome will obtain (our child's condemnation to Hell) and why it initially may seem compelling that salvific exclusivism and Infernalism entailed anti-natalism. To be more specific, the orthodox way of determining what choice an ideally rational agent should make in a decision under risk involves maximizing expected utility. Given the Von Neumann-Morgenstern theorem, expected utility is calculated by taking the product of an outcome and its utility function and summing it with the products of the other outcomes and their utility functions (Steele & Steffanson, §2.3).^{xx} If the expected utility for making a decision exceeds that of other decisions (or the status quo, depending on the decision), then an ideally rational agent ought to make that decision. Similarly, if the expected utility for making a decision falls below that of other decisions (or the status quo, depending on the decision), then an ideally rational agent ought not make that decision. If it's more likely than not that our child will be condemned to Hell, then it's easy to see why the expected utility associated with the decision to procreate might fall well below the expected utility associated with the decision not to procreate. But, given Bawulski's pressure on whether the probability of the optimal outcome *is* actually that low, the expected utility calculation changes.

We might interpret Himma's response to Bawulski in one of two ways. We might insist that procreative decisions are still decisions under risk but claim that we ought to do something other than maximize expected utility. The literature offers options, but they are philosophically contentious.^{xxi} Instead, we might claim that the procreative decision is a decision under uncertainty. Again, what decision principle is most relevant for decisions under uncertainty is philosophically contentious, but a promising candidate is Maximin.^{xxii}

Informally, Maximin requires us to choose the decision that maximizes the worst possible outcome. It's the decision principle of choice for John Rawls, who famously argues that ideally rational agents use Maximin in decisions under uncertainty to choose principles of justice (1971). Formally, we can express Maximin as follows:

Maximin: For some decisions, A and B, $A \leq B$ iff $\min(A) \leq \min(B)$

In simpler terms, an ideally rational agent will have a weak preference for one decision, B, over another decision, A, just in case the minimum outcome associated with B is at least as good as the minimum outcome associated with A. In a decision under uncertainty, ideally rational agents have access to the decisions that can be made, the states of the world, and the outcomes associated with the states of the world. However, they do not have access to the probabilities of the outcomes and do not have precise credences. In this circumstance, Maximin prescribes making the decision that maximizes the worst outcome. That way, no matter what the state of the world *actually* is, you're as well off as you could be (relative to the other decisions and states of the world were those decisions made) if the worst happens. (Mandle, 2014).

There are a few reasons why Maximin is a compelling candidate for Himma's (and by extension, my) purpose. First, it helps make sense of his claim that a negative outcome associated with procreating can be bad enough that it's not worth any chance of it occurring.

Given an orthodox expected utility analysis for a decision under risk, this claim is almost obviously false.^{xxiii} But given an application of Maximin for a decision under uncertainty, this claim is, on its face, quite plausible. If a decision has a better minimum outcome, then that's the decision we ought to make, especially when we don't know the probabilities. To be clear, I am not arguing that we should advocate for the claim that *every* decision (or even every decision as a *parent*) ought to be modeled as a decision under uncertainty and that we ought to use Maximin. Neither am I arguing that Maximin ought to be used for every decision under uncertainty. Rather, I'm making a weaker claim that I take to be consistent with Himma's last argumentative move: Procreative decisions when there is an extremely negative outcome ought to be treated as decisions under uncertainty, and we ought to use Maximin.^{xxiv}

Second, using Maximin allows us to avoid an objection that might otherwise arise to the argument, namely, that if our progeny *could* consent to be brought into existence, they *would* consent (Shiffrin, 1999, p. 131). One way of understanding this objection is to consider what an ideally rational agent in the Rawlsian original position would consent to (Singh, 2018). Singh appeals to the original position since parents know little about their future children, their preferences, or their beliefs (2018, p. 1141-1142), but we can also claim that from the child's standpoint, they play a lottery when they are brought into existence. Who they will be born to, when they will be born, and where they will be born are unknown to them. So, a decision under uncertainty best models whether an ideally rational agent would decide to procreate, and contingent upon the decision such an agent would make, we can infer whether our progeny would consent could they do so (Singh, 2018, p. 1142). I'll argue that an ideally rational agent in the Rawlsian original position, given Infernalism and the choice to procreate or not, would not

choose to procreate; thus, our progeny would not give their consent could they do so, avoiding the above objection.

It also seems that procreative decisions in this context meet Rawls' three criteria for an application of Maximin. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls first claims that Maximin is applicable when knowledge of the probabilities of world states is “. . .impossible, or at best, extremely insecure” (Rawls, 1971, p. 154). Second, Rawls claims it must be the case that “The person choosing. . . cares very little, if anything, for what [they] might gain above the minimum. . .that [they] can, in fact, be sure of by following the maximin rule” (Rawls, 1971, p. 154). Finally, it must be that the rejected alternatives have extremely negative outcomes (Rawls, 1971, p. 154).

Regarding the first criterion, the debate between salvific exclusivism and inclusivism is far from a settled matter. Additionally, before a child's birth, the typical parent doesn't know what kind of person their prospective child will be or what choices they will make. It also seems that a significant part of being a good parent not only includes providing good guidance to your children, but also encouraging your child to make their own choices. So, it seems very difficult to estimate the probability that a child will be condemned to Hell.

Initially, it might seem that the second criterion is problematic. After all, the value of the outcome at which a child goes to Heaven seems to far exceed any of the outcomes associated with deciding not to procreate. But Rawls' caveat—namely, that the alternative decision must not have an outcome that falls far *below* what is guaranteed to them by making the decision that maximizes the minimum outcome—seems particularly relevant. One would be hard-pressed to argue that the outcome at which a child is condemned to Hell is *not* significantly worse than any of the outcomes associated with choosing not to procreate. While the decision not to procreate comes at some, if not a significant, cost to the prospective parents, the suffering brought about by

choosing not to have children is dwarfed by the suffering their child would experience were they condemned to Hell. After all, given the tenets of Infernalism, the torment one experiences in Hell is supposed to far exceed any suffering we might experience while on Earth. In addition, there is no hope for redemption or reprieve from suffering in Hell. At least while on Earth, suffering might serve as a soul-making crucible through which better people are made (Hick, 2010). But no such hope is available for those damned to an Infernalist Hell. In that same vein, given Infernalism, the decision to procreate has an extremely negative outcome—in fact, that decision has the worst possible outcome of *any* possible decision. So, we can plausibly satisfy all three of Rawls' criteria for applying Maximin.^{xxv}

Finally, reasoning according to Maximin is consistent with the intuitive judgments we might make when presented with Himma's justification for the New Life Principle. Suppose, to choose an example adjacent to Himma's, God thunders from the sky, "If you and your wife procreate in the next two weeks, it's possible that your child will be born with Tay-Sachs," then says little else. I might engage in some polite fist-shaking towards the Heavens due to God's reticence to tell me the exact probability that my child will be born with Tay-Sachs, but suppose such fist-shaking would be met with deafening silence. The decision not to procreate in this two-week period, then, is at least *consistent* with reasoning according to Maximin; the worst outcome associated with my procreating in this two-week period is worse than the worst outcome associated with my procreating after this two-week period.^{xxvi} So, the rational choice is not to procreate. Rather than completely throwing out the New Life Principle, I propose we revise the New Life Principle, in light of Maximin, as follows:

New Life Principle: If procreating (i) has an extremely negative possible outcome for the child that endures as long as they exist, and (ii) an ideally rational agent in the Rawlsian

original position, reasoning according to Maximin, would not choose to procreate given the same decision, states of the world, and possible outcomes, then it is impermissible to procreate.

But what if some don't share this intuition? Bawulski certainly doesn't because it seems to imply that procreation would be impermissible in impoverished, war-torn countries. Maximin provides us with resources to accommodate Bawulski's objection. But to show this, let's first walk through the argument and resulting decision table.

Like Himma, I will assume Infernalism. Here are the commitments of Infernalism once more:

- (i) After death, every person is either granted entry to Heaven or justly condemned to Hell, and no one will go to both.
- (ii) Some people are justly condemned to Hell.
- (iii) If someone is justly condemned to Hell, they are consciously tormented for eternity.
- (iv) For every person brought into existence, there's a non-zero probability that they will go to Hell.

Now that we've revised the New Life Principle, we include it as a premise.

- (v) If procreating (i) has an extremely negative possible outcome for the child that endures as long as they exist, and (ii) an ideally rational agent in the Rawlsian original position, reasoning according to Maximin, would not choose to procreate given the same decision, states of the world, and outcomes, then it is impermissible to procreate.

Given the (i)-(iv), the first sufficient condition for the revised New Life Principle is satisfied; there is an extremely negative possible outcome for the child that endures as long as they exist,

given the decision to procreate. To determine whether the second sufficient condition is satisfied, we need to provide a decision table. On the left (rows) side of the decision table, I'll represent the decisions to procreate or not procreate as (P) and (\sim P). On the top (columns) of the decision table, I'll represent the possible states of the world. Given our prior assumptions, eschatologically speaking, there are only two states. The first state, (Hell), represents the state at which our child is justly condemned to Hell. The second state (Heaven) represents the state at which our child is granted entry to Heaven.

	Hell	Heaven
P		
\sim P		

Filling out the outcomes is strange but manageable. In a normal decision table, the utilities of the outcomes are the utilities *for the agent who makes the decision*. But this decision table is slightly different. When deciding whether to procreate, what merits consideration is the outcome of the decision to procreate *for the child*. After all, we are concerned about outcomes that harm or benefit the child, not ones that harm or benefit those who bring the child into existence. To accommodate this feature of the decision, the parents' utilities for the decision to procreate mirror the utilities for the child given these states of the world. Given the decision to procreate, if the child who would be brought into existence is condemned to Hell, they suffer the worst torment imaginable for eternity. For the purposes of the argument, I'll assign a large (but finite) negative utility to this outcome. If the child is granted entry to Heaven, they experience the best existence has to offer for an eternity. Again, I'll assign a large (but finite) positive utility.^{xxvii}

	Hell	Heaven
P	-1000	1000
\sim P		

There are two options to determine the utilities for the decision not to procreate. On the one hand, I could claim that the utility for non-existence is zero. On the other hand, I could claim that we should only consider the utilities *for the agent who makes the decision*—in this case, the parent. I prefer the latter over the former for the following reasons: I'm hesitant to attach *any* utility to non-existence since that requires me to take a non-trivial stance on the non-identity problem. If my argument can succeed without such a commitment, it's better to eschew it now. One might reasonably object that only considering the utilities for the agent who makes the decision switches perspectives, thus rendering a comparison difficult. But I've been careful to state that the utilities for the decision to procreate are still the parent's utilities; in this case, the parents' utilities mirror the child's utility should either outcome obtain. Finally, as we'll see in a moment, whether the utility for non-existence is zero or a reflection of what the parent must sacrifice doesn't impact the argument—and if the reader prefers to think of the utility for non-existence as zero, then they may help themselves to my argument just the same.

If we ought to consider the outcomes of the choice not to procreate from the perspective of the parent making the choice, presumably, the choice not to procreate comes at some significant cost. But again, it'd be difficult to argue that the decision not to procreate, for the agent, results in a worse outcome than the one in which a child is justly condemned to Hell. So, whatever utility we assign to the decision not to procreate, it will not be as negative as the utility

associated with a child being justly condemned to Hell—and since the child fails to exist, the utility will be the same no matter what the state of the world is.^{xxviii}

	Hell	Heaven
P	-1000	1000
~P	-10	-10

Given an application of Maximin, the rational decision for an ideally rational agent in the Rawlsian original position is clear: the rational decision is not to procreate since the negative outcome associated with not procreating is better than the negative outcome associated with procreating. Given this result, we satisfy the second sufficient condition for the revised New Life Principle, and the anti-natalist conclusion follows:

- (vi) Thus, it is impermissible to procreate.

To return to Bawulski's second objection, he claims that the New Life Principle entails that it'd be impermissible to procreate for impoverished families, war-torn countries, or in any general circumstance in which we might imagine that our child will possibly suffer extreme harm. The revised New Life Principle gives us the resources to easily accommodate this objection. We might claim that many harms fail the first sufficient condition for the revised New Life Principle since—given our eschatological considerations—no harm on earth endures for as long as the child exists. We might also argue that the above harms are *never* worse than the decision not to procreate, thus failing the second sufficient condition. Even so, if one *minimally* grants that condemnation to an Infernalist Hell is worse than the outcome of a decision not to procreate, it is still impermissible to procreate.

But Thomists, at this juncture, may object as follows: Perhaps goodness and being are convertible (Aquinas, 1981, IA.5 a.1). If goodness is convertible with being, then it's not true that non-existence is generally better than being condemned to an Infernalist Hell. At least, the objection may continue, those who exist in Hell still exist, and are not entirely separated from God, the source of goodness. But non-existence is a *summum malum*—an evil devoid of all good (Stump & Kretzmann, 1991, p. 105). If this is right, then the decision table might look like this instead:

	Hell	Heaven
P	1	1000
~P	-10	-10

Thus, even assuming the revised New Life Principle and the general decision-theoretic framework in procreative contexts that I've argued for, the rational choice is to procreate since procreating maximizes the worst outcome.^{xxix}

In response, suppose that during the Final Judgment, God offered the damned a choice: they can either be condemned to an Infernalist Hell, where they suffer the worst torments imaginable for eternity, or they can be annihilated here and now. What's the rational choice for the damned? If we're to endorse the Thomistic response, then the Thomist is not only required to say that the rational choice is to choose condemnation to an Infernalist Hell, but that it'd be *irrational* to choose annihilation. After all, the outcomes of either decision are certain, and the outcome at which the damned suffer in an Infernalist Hell, according to the Thomist, is better than the outcome at which the damned are annihilated. My intuitions move in the opposite direction, and I'm not the only philosopher who balks at such a claim in a similar context

(Marsh, 2015, p. 75). I agree that existence is *a* good, but unlike the Thomist, I believe it is a good that can be outweighed—particularly given the worst suffering imaginable with no possible hope of remediation or reprieve. While there may not be many other circumstances where it's rational to choose non-existence, it seems that the above would be a paradigmatic case where it is rational to choose annihilation. To the extent that the Infernalist theist shares my intuition, they must grapple with my argument. But my argument will find little purchase against those who do not believe that it's *possible* for non-existence to be preferable to existence.

While the revised New Life Principle and Infernalism entail that it's impermissible to procreate, other eschatological frameworks do not share a similar fate. If one endorses Universalism, then there is no outcome at which our child is condemned to Hell. So, both sufficient conditions for the revised New Life Principle would fail. If Annihilationism is the case, then depending on our philosophical account of death, the same is true. So, contrary to what some argue with respect to procreation in the face of evil generally, the permissibility of procreation does seem to hang on our eschatology (Vitale, 2017, p. 287).^{xxx}

As a closing note, consider once more the (substantially softer) notions of an eternal Hell consistent with either Lewis or Craig. Proponents of these views must ask themselves: Are the harms that the damned experience worse than the harms of choosing not to procreate? Choosing not to procreate comes at a price to those who wish to, but if the harms that the damned experience are worse, then my argument creates a problem for thinking that procreation is permissible, even given these weaker notions of an eternal Hell.

1.4 Conclusion

Himma was right to argue that Infernalism and (some) version of the New Life Principle entails anti-natalism. But while his argument requires a commitment to salvific exclusivism and

is particularly vulnerable to one of Bawulski's objections, I modified Himma's argument such that the first commitment can be jettisoned, and the objection can be accommodated. First, I clarified Himma's commitment to the claim that some procreative decisions ought to be risk-averse and worked out the necessary decision theoretic details. Then, in light of those details, I revised the New Life Principle and argued that those modifications resulted in the same anti-natalist conclusion as before. Does this mean that we ought to be anti-natalists? Certainly not! Few theists would be sympathetic to such a conclusion. But if the revised New Life Principle governs whether procreation is permissible, that is the heart of the dilemma that I argue Infernalist theists face.

Works Cited

- Aquinas, Thomas. (1981). *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Christian Classics.
- Augustine. (2013). *The City of God* (W. Babcock, Trans.). New City Press.
- Barrett, Jacob (2020). Is Maximin egalitarian? *Synthese* 197 (2):817-837.
- Bawulski, S. (2013). Do Hell and Exclusivism Make Procreation Morally Impermissible? A Reply to Kenneth Himma. *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*, 30(3), 330–344. <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil201330326>
- Benatar, David. (2013). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Clarendon Press.
- Brown, C. & Walls, J. (2010). Annihilationism: A Philosophical Dead End? In J. Buenting (Ed.), *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology*. Ashgate.
- Brueckner, A., & Fischer, M. (1986). Why is Death Bad? *Philosophical Studies*, 50(2), 213–221. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00354589>
- Buchak, L. (2014). Risks and Tradeoffs. *Erkenntnis*, 79(6), 1091–1117. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-013-9542-4>
- Buckareff, A., & Plug, A. (2013). Hell and the Problem of Evil. In *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (pp. 128–143). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Calvin, J. (2008). *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (H. Beveridge, Ed.). Hendrickson Publishers.
- Chen, E. K., & Rubio, D. (2021). Surreal Decisions. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 100(1), 54–74. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12510>
- Craig, W. (Director). (2013). *William Lane Craig Q&A: What is Hell? Is Hell Compatible with a Loving God?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CjSy9CWEeU>

- Edwards, J. (1741). Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: A Sermon Preached at Enfield, July 8th, 1741. *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, 54.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/54>
- English Standard Version Bible. (2011). *The Holy Bible* (W. Grudem, J. Packer, J. Collins, T. Schreiner, L. Dennis, J. Taylor, & B. Deckard, Eds.). Crossway.
- Epicurus. (2016). *Letter to Menoecus*. <http://classics.mit.edu/Epicurus/menoec.html>
- Hacking, I. (1972). The Logic of Pascal's Wager. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 9(2), 186–192.
- Hereth, B. (2022). Heavenly Procreation. *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*, 39(1), 100–123.
- Hereth, Blake (2024). Heavenly Overpopulation: Rethinking the Ethics of Procreation. *Agatheos: European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 1 (2):76-97.
- Himma, K. (2010). Birth as a Grave Misfortune: The Traditional Doctrine of Hell and Christian Salvific Exclusivism. In J. Buenting (Ed.), *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology*. Ashgate.
- Himma, K. (2016). The Ethics of Subjecting a Child to the Risk of Eternal Torment: A Reply to Shawn Bawulski. *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*, 33(1), 94–108. <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil2015123053>
- Jackson, E. & Rogers, A. (2019). Salvaging Pascal's Wager. *Philosophia Christi* 21 (1):59-84.
- Lewis, C. S. (2015). *The Great Divorce: A Dream*. Collins.
- Marsh, Jason. (2015) "Procreative Ethics and the Problem of Evil," in *Permissible Progeny? The Morality of Procreation and Parenting*, eds. Sarah Hannan, Samantha Brennan, and Richard Vernon (NY: Oxford University Press), 65-86.
- McClennen, E. (1994). Pascal's Wager and Finite Decision Theory. In *Gambling on God* (pp. 115–139). Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, INC.

- Nagel, T. (1970). *Death*. 4(1), 73–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2214297>
- Neumann, J. V., & Morgenstern, O. (2007). *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. Princeton University Press.
- Rawls J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press.
- Shiffrin, S. (1999). Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm. *Legal Theory*, 5(2), 117–148. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1352325299052015>
- Singh, A. (2018). The Hypothetical Consent Objection to Anti-Natalism. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 21(5), 1135–1150. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-018-9952-0>
- Steele, K., & Stefánsson. (2020). Decision Theory. In E. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/decision-theory/>
- Stump, Eleonore & Kretzmann, Norman (1988). Being and Goodness. In Thomas V. Morris (ed.), *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. pp. 281-312.
- Sullivan, J. (1907). The Athenasian Creed. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Robert Appleton Company. <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02033b.html>
- Veatch, Robert M. (1998). Egalitarian and maximin theories of justice: Directed donation of organs for transplant. *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 23 (5):456 – 476.
- Vitale, Vince. (2020) *Non-Identity Theodicy: A Grace-Based Response to the Problem of Evil*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Vitale, Vince. (2017) “Non-Identity Theodicy,” *Philosophia Christi* 19.2: 269-290.
- Wesley, J. (1872). Of Hell (Sermon 73). In T. Jackson (Ed.), *Wesley Center Online*. Northwest Nazarene University. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-73-of-hell/>

ⁱ I've trimmed the eschatological possibilities to two, since those who hold the doctrine of purgatory don't generally consider it to be a permanent feature of their eschatological picture: eventually, there is just Heaven and Hell. I owe this helpful clarification to an anonymous reviewer.

ⁱⁱ Often, the above is referred to as the "traditional" concept of Hell. But there's some disagreement about whether this concept of Hell is genuinely the traditional one, and I'd rather not get mired in that debate. So, I'll propose what I take to be a neologism that captures the same idea.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some might immediately argue there are no *just* condemnations to Hell, and these beliefs about Hell create a serious problem for the existence of God on par with the Problem of Evil (typically known as the Problem of Hell) (Buckareff & Plug, 2013). While this is a parallel issue worth mentioning, it creates no serious problems or considerations for my argument.

^{iv} As an example of the second disjunct, the Athanasian creed stipulates a *very* large set of appropriately salvific beliefs, explicitly specifying that ". . .one cannot be saved without believing [the Athanasian creed] firmly and faithfully" (Sullivan, 1907).

^v As a final note regarding (i) and (ii), they exclude Universalist interpretations of Hell. Under one Universalist pass, no persons go to Hell (thus falsifying (ii)), while under another, some persons go to Hell, but only until they are rehabilitated/punished for a sufficient period of time. At the conclusion of their time in Hell, they are granted entry to Heaven (thus falsifying (i)).

^{vi} Hell is often tied to understanding Hell's purpose as retribution for evil wrought by persons on Earth, but this is not the only way to understand Hell's purpose within logical space. For example, as previously noted, God might wish to *rehabilitate* Hell's denizens. But as I noted, taking this stance would deny (i)—and as such, I am content tying this picture of Hell to a retributive model.

^{vii} Here, I have in mind *The Great Divorce*; in it, the suffering that the damned experience is primarily self-inflicted (Lewis, 2015 p. 23-24).

^{viii} I will not consider inclusivist positions that claim that an individual, *after* death, may still be saved.

^{ix} As I've characterized it here, Salvific Inclusivism is consistent with Universalism, but does not imply it. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this.

^x *Prima facie*, so long as the utilities associated with condemnation to Hell and entry to Heaven are finite and symmetric, and if the probability that your child will go to Hell is greater than .5, it is irrational to procreate. Of course, more details would need to be filled out here—and matters get significantly more complicated if the utilities associated with condemnation to Hell and entry to Heaven are infinite rather than finite.

^{xi} Technically, Himma says 'lives' rather than 'exists.' I prefer to say 'exists' and do not think this adversely impacts Himma's moral principle.

^{xii} Himma (2016) responds to an objection from free will raised by Bawulski (2013), which argues that NLP can't apply in cases where the severe harm suffered by a child comes about as a result of the child's free choices. Since condemnation to Hell is *just* (in that our condemnation to Hell requires that we've freely chosen to do the wrong things), NLP cannot apply. Himma, in response, thinks it's perfectly reasonable to suppose that NLP still applies in situations involving deserved suffering. To provide a case similar to the first intuitive case for NLP, suppose that my wife and I *know* that if we conceive within a two-week period, our child will commit acts that lead him to ". . .spend most of his life incarcerated under the worst conditions consistent with moral principles governing the conditions and terms of punishment" (Himma, 2016). Both Himma and I have the intuition that it'd be wrong to conceive in this circumstance, as prescribed by NLP.

^{xiii} This is not an exhaustive list of Bawulski's objections, as I do not wish to retread ground that Himma (2016) satisfactorily responded to.

^{xiv} Bawulski argues that one must modify the NLP to NLP(God), given that God's foreknowledge eliminates probabilities as a measure of uncertainty (Bawulski, 2013, p. 337). I've glossed over this detail, as I don't think it's particularly important for the objection in order to intuitively grasp it.

^{xv} There is more to say here. A Thomist who holds that goodness is convertible with being might argue that non-existence is *always* worse than existence, even if one is to exist in the bowels of Hell. I'll return to this worry in a later section.

^{xvi} Suppose that the NLP governs God's agency and God sends the damned to a world much like ours. While there is a horrific amount of evil in our world, the NLP still allows for *some* permissible cases of procreation—though this claim will be tested momentarily. If at least *one* person could be condemned to a Hell like that, then it seems that God could permissibly bring that person into existence without needing to save them; this, again, would undermine Bawulski's argument that the NLP implies HDU.

^{xvii} I draw much of this from Katie Steele and Orri Stefánsson (Steele & Stefánsson, 2020).

^{xviii} I refer to ideally rational agents instead of rational agents to allow for the fact that, insofar as we are rational agents, we sometimes fail to make the decision we prefer (due to weakness of will). Ideally rational agents suffer no such defects and always make the decision that's consistent with their preferences.

^{xix} One might think that ideally rational agents only prefer that which is the most objectively valuable. But this is not necessary to capture what the decision theorist means by the term. A preference, in this minimalist sense, is just an agent's comparative assessment of value (Steele & Steffanson, §1).

^{xx} Technically, the ordinal function must be transformed into a cardinal utility function. But for the sake of simplicity, I've skirted the distinction between ordinal and cardinal utility functions.

^{xxi} Specifically, I'm thinking of Lara Buchak's risk-weighted expected utility (REU) (2014).

^{xxii} See Barrett (2020) and Veitch (1998) for why egalitarians ought to reject Maximin as their decision-making principle of choice. I don't intend to tangle myself in this debate; I primarily select Maximin for its practical applicability in this context. However, I will additionally argue that it satisfies the conditions Rawls lays out for applying Maximin and allows my argument to avoid some rather sticky objections.

^{xxiii} The following is not rigorous proof of this claim, but it is hopefully enough to get an intuitive grasp of the reasoning behind it: Suppose I'm trying to decide whether to play a lottery. If I lose, I'll lose \$1000, and there's a 95% chance of losing. Although I'm very likely to lose a good amount of money, there will be some amount I could win such that the 5% chance I'll win merits playing the lottery. In this case, the amount of money, m , necessary for the expected utility of playing the lottery to be greater than the status quo (0) is $m > \$19,000$. My general point is that while outcomes can be *very* bad, it's not true that, given a standard expected utility analysis, some outcomes are so bad that they aren't worth any risk of them occurring. To get that sort of result, the easiest option is to endorse a risk-averse decision theory that does something other than maximize expected utility.

^{xxiv} Another option for decisions under uncertainty is to treat the outcomes as equiprobable (McClelland, 1994, p. 128). However, this would not be consistent with Himma's claim that procreative decisions should be made on a risk-averse basis when significant harm is at stake. So, I'll put this option aside.

^{xxv} It's also worth noting that a recent paper by Blake Hereth also utilizes Maximin to provide an anti-natalist argument—though, the source of their anti-natalism is distinct from mine (2024).

^{xxvi} First, it's important to note that I don't intend to claim that a Tay-Sachs diagnosis results in a life not worth living; merely that the condition results in some severe and lasting harms to those who must bear it. Second, I've intentionally framed this case as a case where one doesn't know the probability. All that one knows is that during the two week period, there is an outcome at which one's child develops Tay-Sachs, and after that two week period, there isn't. Were the probabilities known (or if it were merely enhanced probability), then an expected utility analysis would be more appropriate—though, the result of the expected utility analysis would still be *consistent* with the result of treating the decision as a decision under uncertainty with Maximin (don't procreate during those two weeks). It would just arrive at that result for different decision-theoretic reasons.

^{xxvii} One might immediately object that these utilities, given the same reasoning that applies in Pascal's Wager, are infinite. Ian Hacking (1972) provides a wonderful analysis of Pascal's Wager that includes these infinite utilities, as do Elizabeth Jackson and Andrew Rogers in their contemporary defense of Pascal's Wager (2019). However, infinite utilities are inconsistent with orthodox Bayesian decision theory (McClelland, 1994). Infinite utilities also seem to cause more trouble than they're worth—though there is some recent work on the matter that might resolve some of those worries (Chen & Rubio, 2021). But more to the point, if I can provide a version of the argument that works with finite utilities, the argument is more—on its face—plausible as a result.

^{xxviii} Since I'm using ordinal utility functions, the exact number I assign to these outcomes is arbitrary since all that matters is the order of preferences.

^{xxix} Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

^{xxx} Vitale offers a fuller treatment of what he calls a grace-based non-identity theodicy in a book several years later (2020).