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# Kids? Just say no

You don't have to dislike children to see the harms done by having them. There is a moral case against procreation

**David Benatar**

In 2006, I published a book called *Better Never to Have Been*. I argued that coming into existence is always a serious harm. People should never, under any circumstance, procreate – a position called 'anti-natalism'. In response, readers wrote letters of appreciation, support and, of course, there was outrage. But I also got this message, which is the most wrenching feedback I have received:

I have suffered horribly since I was a teen because of severe bullying in school that left me profoundly traumatised to the point I had to abandon school. Unhappily, I also have terrible looks and I've been judged, mocked, insulted because of being 'too ugly' even by random strangers in the street what usually happens almost daily. I've been called the ugliest person they

ever seen. That's extremely hard to deal with. Then, to finish it, I've been diagnosed with a serious congenital heart disease when I was just 18, and today in my early 20s, I suffer from severe heart failure and malignant arrhythmia that threaten to kill me. My heart has almost stopped many times and I deal with the fear of sudden death each day of my existence. I am petrified by fear of death and the agony and torment of imminent death is indescribable. I don't have much time left and the unavoidable will happen soon. My life has been pure hell and I don't even know what to think anymore. Certainly, sentencing someone to such a world is the worst of all crimes, and a serious moral violation. If it wasn't by my parents' selfish desire, I wouldn't be here today suffering what I suffer for no reason at all, I could have been spared in the absolute peace of non-existence but I am here living this daily torture.

One does not have to be an anti-natalist to be moved by these words (which are quoted with permission). Some might be inclined to say my correspondent's situation is an exceptional one, which should not incline us towards anti-natalism. However, severe suffering is not a rare phenomenon, and thus anti-natalism is a view that, at the very least, should be taken seriously and considered with an open mind.

The idea of anti-natalism is not new. In Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, the chorus declares that 'not to be born is, beyond all estimation, best'. A similar idea is expressed in Ecclesiastes. In the East, both Hinduism and Buddhism have a negative view of existence (even if they do not often go so far as to oppose procreation). Various thinkers since then have also recognised how pervasive suffering is, which moved them to explicitly oppose procreation: Arthur Schopenhauer might be the most famous, but others include Peter Wessel Zapffe, Emil Cioran and Hermann Vetter.

Anti-natalism will only ever be a minority view because it runs counter to a deep biological drive to have children. However, it is precisely because it is up against such odds that thoughtful people should pause and reflect rather than hastily dismiss it as mad or wicked. It is neither. Of course, distortions of anti-natalism, and especially attempts to impose it forcefully, might well be dangerous – but the same is true of many other views. Appropriately interpreted, it is not anti-natalism but its opposite that is the dangerous idea. Given how much misfortune there is – all of it attendant on being brought into existence – it would be better if there were not an unbearable lightness of bringing into being.

**B**ut even if life isn't pure suffering, coming into existence can still be sufficiently harmful to render procreation wrong. Life is simply much worse than most people think, and there are powerful drives to affirm life even when life is terrible. People might be living lives that were actually not worth starting without recognising that this is the case.

The suggestion that life is worse than most people think is often met with indignation. How dare I tell you how poor the quality of your life is! Surely the quality of your life is as good as it seems to you? Put another way, if your life feels as though it has more good than bad, how could you possibly be mistaken?

It is curious that the same logic is rarely applied to those who are depressed or suicidal. In these cases, most optimists are inclined to think that subjective assessments can be mistaken. However, if the quality of life can be underestimated it can also be overestimated. Indeed, unless one collapses the distinction between how much good and bad one's life *actually* contains and how much of each a person *thinks* it contains, it becomes clear that people can be mistaken about the former. Both overestimation and underestimation of life's quality are possible, but empirical evidence of various cognitive biases, most importantly an optimism bias, suggests that overestimation is the more common error.

## Destruction is easier than construction. Many desires are never satisfied

Considering matters carefully, it's obvious that there must be more bad than good. This is because there are empirical asymmetries between the good and bad things. The worst pains, for instance, are worse than the best pleasures are good. If you doubt this, ask yourself – honestly – whether you would accept a minute of the worst tortures in exchange for a minute or two of the greatest delights. And pains tend to last longer than pleasures. Compare the fleeting nature of gustatory and sexual pleasures with the enduring character of much pain. There are chronic pains, of the lower back or joints for example, but there is no such thing as chronic pleasure. (An enduring sense of *satisfaction* is possible, but so is an enduring sense of dissatisfaction, and thus this comparison does not favour the preponderance of the good.)

Injury occurs quickly but recovery is slow. An embolus or projectile can fell you in an instant – and if you're not killed, healing will be slow. Learning takes a lifetime but can be obliterated in an instant. Destruction is easier than construction.

When it comes to the satisfaction of desires, things are also stacked against us. Many desires are never satisfied. And even when they are satisfied, it is often after a long period of dissatisfaction. Nor does satisfaction last, for the satisfaction of a desire leads to a new desire – which itself needs to be satisfied some time in the future. When one can fulfil one's more basic desires, such as hunger, on a regular basis, higher-level desires arise. There is a treadmill and an escalator of desire.

In other words, life is a state of continual striving. We have to expend effort to ward off unpleasantness – for example, to prevent pain, assuage thirst, and minimise frustration. In the absence of our strivings, the unpleasantness comes all too easily, for that is the default.

When lives go as well as they *practically* can go, they are much worse than they *ideally* would be. For example, knowledge and understanding are good things. But the most knowledgeable and insightful among us know and understand inordinately less than there is to know and understand. So, again, we fare badly. If longevity (in good health) is a good thing, then once more our condition is much worse than it ideally would be. A robust life of 90 years is much closer to 10 or 20 years than it is to a life of 10,000 or 20,000 years. The actual (almost) always falls short of the ideal.

Optimists respond to these observations with a brave face. They argue that although life does contain much that is bad, the bad things are necessary (in some or other way) for the good things. Without pain, we would not avoid injury; without hunger, meals would not satisfy; without striving, there would be no achievement.

But plenty of bad things are clearly gratuitous. Is it really necessary that children are born with congenital abnormalities, that thousands of people starve to death every day, and that the terminally ill suffer their agonies? Do we really need to suffer pain in order to enjoy pleasure?

Even if one thinks that the bad *is* needed, perhaps to better appreciate the good, one must admit that it would be better if that were not the case. That is, life would be better if we could have the good without the bad. In this way, our lives are much worse than they could be. Again, the actual is much worse than the ideal.

Another optimistic response is to suggest that I am setting an impossible standard. According to this objection, it is unreasonable to hold that, say, our intellectual attainments and our maximum lifespan should be judged by standards that are humanly impossible. Human lives must be judged by human standards, they could argue.

The problem is that this argument confuses the question 'How good a life can a human reasonably expect?' with the question 'How good is human life?' It is perfectly reasonable to employ human standards in answering the first question. However, if we are interested in the second question, we cannot answer it simply by noting that human life is as good as human life is, which is what employing human standards involves. (An analogy: given that a mouse's lifespan in the wild is usually less than a year, a two- or three-year-old mouse might be doing really well – but just for a mouse. It does not follow that mice fare well on the longevity standard. Mice are, in this way, worse off than humans, who are worse off than bowhead whales.)

**A show might not be bad enough to leave, but would you have come at all if you knew how bad it would be?**

Given all the foregoing, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that all lives contain more bad than good, and that they are deprived of more good than they contain.

However, such is the affirmation of life that most people cannot recognise this.

One important explanation for this is that in deliberating about whether their lives were worth starting, many people actually (but typically unwittingly) consider a different question, namely whether their lives are worth *continuing*. Because they imagine *themselves* not existing, their reflection on non-existence is with reference to a self that already exists. It is then quite easy to slip into thinking about the loss of that self, which is what death is. Given the life drive, it is not surprising that people come to the conclusion that existence is preferable.

Asking whether it would be better never to have existed is not the same as asking whether it would be better to die. There is no interest in coming into existence. But there is an interest, once one exists, in not ceasing to exist. There are tragic cases in which the interest in continuing to exist is overridden, often to end unbearable suffering. However, if we are to say that somebody's life is not worth continuing, the bad things in life do need to be sufficiently bad to override the interest in not dying. By contrast, because there is no interest in coming into existence, there is no interest that the bad things need to override in order for us to say that it would be better not to create the life. So the quality of a life must be worse in order for the life to be not worth continuing than it need be in order for it to be not worth starting. (This sort of phenomenon is not unusual: a performance at the theatre, for example, might not be bad enough to leave, but if you knew in advance that it would be as bad as it is, you would not have come in the first place.)

The difference between a life not worth starting and a life not worth continuing partly explains why anti-natalism does not imply either suicide or murder. It can be the case that one's life was not worth starting *without* it being the case that one's life is not worth continuing. If the quality of one's life is still not bad enough to override one's interest in not dying, then one's life is still worth continuing, even though the current and future harms are sufficient to make it the case that one's life was not worth starting. Moreover, because death is bad, even when it ceases to be bad all-things-considered, it is a consideration against procreation – as well as against murder and suicide.

There are further reasons why an anti-natalist should be opposed to murder. One of these is that one person should not force on another competent person a decision whether the latter's life has ceased to be worth continuing. Because nobody can be certain about these matters, such a decision should, where possible, be made and acted upon by the person who will either live or die as a result.

**T**he confusion between starting a life and continuing a life is not the only way in which life-affirmation clouds people's ability to see that life contains more bad than good. Having children is widely seen as one of the most profound and satisfying experiences one can have – though hard work, of course. Many people do it, for reasons of biology, culture and love. Given how rewarding and widespread

procreation is, it is really difficult to see it as wrong.

The case against procreation need not rest on the view, for which I have been arguing, that coming into existence is *always* worse than never existing. It is enough to show that the risk of serious harm is sufficiently high.

If you think, as most people do, that death is a serious harm, then the risk of suffering such a calamity is 100 per cent. Death is the fate of everybody who comes into existence. When you conceive a child, it is just a matter of time until the ultimate injury befalls that child. Many people, at least in times and places where infant mortality is low, are spared witnessing this appalling consequence of their reproduction. That might insulate them against the horror, but they should nonetheless know that every birth is a death in waiting.

### With the cumulative risks of all the misfortunes that can befall us, the odds are stacked deeply against any child

Some might wish to follow the Epicureans in denying that death itself is bad. However, even discounting death itself – no mean feat – there is a wide range of appalling fates that can befall any child that is brought into existence: starvation, rape, abuse, assault, serious mental illness, infectious disease, malignancy, paralysis. These cause vast amounts of suffering before the person dies. Prospective parents impose these risks on the children they create.

The magnitude of the risk obviously varies, depending on such factors as one's geographical and temporal locations, and one's sex. Even controlling for these variables, the lifetime risks are often difficult to quantify. For example, rape is significantly underreported, but there are conflicting data on just how underreported it is. Similarly, studies on mental diseases such as major depressive disorders often underestimate the lifetime risk, in part because some of the subjects have not *yet* experienced the depression that will later affect them. Even if we take the low estimates, in the cumulative risks of all the different misfortunes that can befall people, the odds are stacked deeply against any child. The risks of cancer alone are substantial: in the United Kingdom, roughly 50 per cent of people will develop the disease. If people imposed that sort of risk of that sort of harm on others in non-procreative contexts, they would be very widely condemned. The same standards should be applied to procreation.

**T**he foregoing arguments all criticise procreation on the grounds of what procreation does to the person who is brought into existence. These I call philanthropic arguments for anti-natalism; there is also a misanthropic argument. What is distinctive about this argument is that it criticises procreation on the grounds of the harm that the created person will (likely) do. It is presumptively wrong to create new beings that are likely to cause significant harm to others.

*Homo sapiens* is the most destructive species, and vast amounts of this destruction are wreaked on other humans. Humans have killed one another since the origin of the species, but the scale (not rate) of killing has expanded (not least because there are now so many more humans to kill than there were for most of human history). The means by which many millions of humans have been killed have been dismally diverse. They include stabbing, hacking, slashing, hanging, gassing, poisoning, drowning, and bombing. Humans also visit other horrors on their fellows, including persecuting, oppressing, beating, branding, maiming, tormenting, torturing, raping, kidnapping, and enslaving.

The optimists argue that prospective children are unlikely to be among the perpetrators of such evil, and this is true: only a small proportion of children will become perpetrators of the worst barbarities against humans. However, a much larger proportion of humanity *facilitates* such evils. Persecution and oppression often require the acquiescence or complicity of a multitude of humans.

In any event, the harm that humans do to other humans is not restricted to the most serious violations of human rights. Daily life is filled with dishonesty, betrayal, negligence, cruelty, hurtfulness, impatience, exploitation, betrayals of confidence, and breaches of privacy. Even when these do not kill or physically injure, they can cause considerable psychological and other damage. Of such harms, everybody is, to varying degrees, a perpetrator.

Those who are unconvinced that the harm caused by the average child to other humans is sufficient to support the anti-natalist conclusion will have to reckon with the immense harm that humans do to animals. More than 63 billion terrestrial animals and, by very conservative estimates, more than 103 billion aquatic animals are killed for human consumption *every year*. The amount of death and suffering is simply staggering.

**If any other species caused as much damage as humans do, we would think it wrong to breed new members of that species**

All this is caused by the human appetite for animal flesh and products, an appetite shared by the great majority of humans. Using very conservative estimates, every human (who is not a vegetarian or vegan) is, on average, responsible for the death of 27 animals per year, or 1,690 animals over the course of a lifetime.

Perhaps you think that by raising vegan children you can evade the reach of the misanthropic argument. However, each new child, even if a vegan, is very likely to contribute to environmental damage, one of the means whereby humans harm humans and other animals. In the developed world, the per-capita contribution to environmental degradation is considerable. It is much lower in the developing world,

but the much higher birthrate there offsets the per-capita saving.

If any other species caused as much damage as humans do, we would think it wrong to breed new members of that species. The breeding of humans should be held to the same standard.

This does not imply that we should take a leap further and attempt to eradicate humans through a species-wide 'final solution'. Although humans are massively destructive, attempting to eradicate the species would cause considerable harm and violate appropriate proscriptions on murder. It might well also be counterproductive, causing more destruction than it seeks to prevent, as so many violent utopians have done.

The misanthropic argument does not deny that humans can do good in addition to causing harm. However, given the volume of harm, it seems unlikely that the good would generally outweigh it. There might be individual cases of people who do more good than harm, but given the incentives for self-deception in this regard, couples who are contemplating procreation should be extraordinarily skeptical that the children they create will be the rare exceptions.

Just as those wanting a companion animal should adopt an unwanted dog or cat rather than breed new animals, so those who want to rear a child should adopt rather than procreate. Of course, there are not enough unwanted children to satisfy all those who would like to parent, and there would be even fewer if more of those producing the unwanted children were to take anti-natalism to heart. However, so long as there are unwanted children, their existence is a further reason against others breeding.

Rearing children, whether one's biological offspring or adopted, can bring satisfaction. If the number of unwanted children were to ever come to zero, anti-natalism would entail the deprivation of this benefit to those who accept the moral prohibition on creating children. That does not mean that we should reject anti-natalism. The reward of becoming a parent does not outweigh the serious harm procreation will cause to others.

The question is not *whether* humans will become extinct, but rather *when* they will. If the anti-natalist arguments are correct, it would be better, all things being equal, if this happened sooner rather than later for, the sooner it happens, the more suffering and misfortune will be avoided.

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