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Dicing With Life: An Antinatalist Argument for the Immorality of Procreation

by

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Abstract

This thesis aims to develop a novel argument for the view that procreation is always morally impermissible. In the first half of my thesis, I identify the major problems facing the most popular existing arguments for the antinatalist conclusion I wish to defend – in particular, the arguments developed by the South African philosopher, David Benatar. Having shown that these arguments miss the mark, I present and explain the philosophical appeal of the risk argument for antinatalism. This argument states that almost all cases of procreation are immoral because they involve the imposition of significant risk on the individual brought into existence (the *risk claim)* in the absence of the two best justifications for risk imposition on others – namely, the absence of consent from the created being to being exposed to such risks (the *no-consent claim*) and the absence of any adequately compelling moral or practical reason to impose the risk (the *no-necessity claim*).

The second half of my thesis is devoted to examining a wide range of replies (both existing and possible) to the each of these three claims as well as the more central idea that the combination of these claims establishes an act as immoral. Some major objections I respond to include the view that procreative risk is acceptably imposed given the high likelihood that one's offspring will enjoy a good life, that the invocation of consent in pre-natal contexts is metaphysically confused, and that the value of biological parenthood constitutes a compelling reason to procreate. I aim to demonstrate that these criticisms fall short of undermining the risk argument for antinatalism.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: **Harish Narayanan**

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I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

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6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;

7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Date: **27 May 2026**

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Introduction

Background

Procreation is, by common consensus, one of the central, defining activities in a human being's life; one that is awaited, celebrated, and cherished.[1] Those who choose to procreate spend vast amounts of resources[2] and a great portion of their lives invested in the physical, emotional, and intellectual development of their progeny. Extending beyond individual preferences and practices, procreation is, of course, a sine qua non for the continued existence of human civilisation (and all its attendant achievements and projects). In recent years, the quite apparent ubiquity and import of procreation has received greater attention, critical and otherwise, in the contemporary philosophical literature on applied ethics.

This thesis is a reaction both to the widespread support for procreation and the growing academic interest in the philosophy of procreation. I argue in this thesis for the philosophical-ethical view known as antinatalism,[3] by presenting an argument for the immorality of procreation. This argument, titled *the risk argument*, states that almost all cases of procreation are immoral due to the presence of three conditions – the imposition of significant risk on the individual brought into being, the absence of consent on the created being's part to being exposed to such risks, and the absence of any adequately compelling moral or practical reason to impose the risk.[4]

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[1] The wish to have children is often amongst the foremost of a person's desires, and it is not uncommon to hear it said that the birth of one's child is the "happiest moment" in one's life.

[2] As of 2024, the estimated cost of raising a child in the UK from birth to the age of 18 is estimated to be £260,000 for a couple and £290,000 for a lone parent. See Child Poverty Action Group (December 2024), *The Cost of a Child in 2024***.** Retrieved from: https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-12/Cost_of_a_Child_2024.pdf (Accessed: 12 February 2025).

[3] See the following section for a discussion of how this term may be defined.

[4] The precise relationship between these conditions and the role they play in the argument will be developed in Chapter Three.

However, before turning attention to that argument, we shall begin with what might legitimately be termed 'philosophical housekeeping' - in other words, my attempt to provide a backdrop and context for the ensuing analysis by commenting more generally on the nature, purpose, and limits of this thesis. After I start by defining antinatalism, I outline the motivation for, and aims of, this project, in the process giving an overview of the structure it shall follow, the philosophical topics it addresses, and a clear statement of its originality.

Defining Antinatalism

The term, antinatalism, was first coined in 2006, appearing separately in Théophile de Giraud's *The Art of Guillotining Procreators: An Anti-natalist Manifesto* and David Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been: The Harms of Coming Into Existence.* Antinatalism offers a negative moral evaluation of procreation, with this designation of procreation as morally bad or wrong then leading the antinatalist to issue a moral prescription not to procreate.

Two separate questions arise here. Firstly, we may ask what exactly we mean when we say "procreation", for this act involves a cluster of related yet distinct biological phenomena, including fertilisation, gestation, and birth. The primary concern of the most prominent forms of antinatalism tends to be the act of bringing a sentient human being into existence. Whilst debate rages as to when exactly somebody comes into existence in a morally relevant sense,[5] we need not open up that philosophical can of worms here and begin wrestling with issues at the margins so early on. It is sufficient to simply note for the purposes of operationalising our study that antinatalism problematises creating new people, and this is what procreation does.

Secondly, we could ask why antinatalism regards procreation as immoral. There is no straightforward answer to this question, as antinatalism is a capacious label housing a family

[5] Benatar, for example, holds that this is when someone becomes a conscious, subjectively aware being. Prior to this point, such as the state of a zygote in very early-term pregnancies, Benatar is of the view that no conscious person has yet begun existing, and given his belief that causing one to begin existing is morally unsound, he maintains that abortion would be morally preferable. See Benatar, D. (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harms of Coming Into Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 132-162.

of arguments that centre on the normative-prescriptive view that procreation is immoral and that, consequently, people ought not to have biological children.[6] The strength, both of the moral assessment of procreation and the call not to engage in the act, will vary depending on the exact argument advanced. In its most radical form, antinatalism maintains that procreation is a serious wrong and that no one should ever procreate, with a view to achieving the self-extinction of the human species. This is the form of antinatalism I defend, and the reasons for this will become clear as we proceed.

We should also say something about antinatalism's antonym, pronatalism. In recent years, this term has increasingly found its way into political discourse, with the rallying cry for more children coming from right-wing technology entrepreneurs and cultural conservatives.[7] Their reasons for promoting more births vary greatly; with some concerned about preventing future depopulation, others interested in maximising the good of parenthood, yet others seeing it as a means to strengthen the nation-state, and so on. We shall return to the positive case for procreation in Chapter Six. For now, I want only to clarify that references to "pronatalism" in this thesis are not references to specific political articulations, unless otherwise specified. Rather, when I use the label, I am using it broadly to identify any philosophy standing in opposition to antinatalism by virtue of endorsing the goodness (or, minimally, justifiability) of procreation.

Motivation

We may wonder why we ought to intellectually concern ourselves with such a minority position, relegated to the fringes of public life and regarded by some as a blasphemous area or inquiry.[8] There are three chief reasons. Firstly, as intimated in the opening paragraph of this study, the issue is one of immense cultural significance. Antinatalism certainly has far-

[6] An attempt to classify the arguments in order to better understand their diverging and intersecting motivations and conclusions will be the focus of Chapter One.

[7] Sherman, C. (11 March 2025). The rise of pronatalism: why Musk, Vance and the right want women to have more babies. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/11/what-is-pronatalism-right-wing-republican (Accessed: 24 June 2025).

[8] Anscombe, G.E.M. (1989). Why Have Children?, *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 63, pp. 48-53.

reaching implications for its adherents, inasmuch as it "informs and influences radically all aspects of [their] personal and social lives".[9] However, the pride of place procreative activity assumes, in both personal and cultural narratives, means that any prescriptive conclusions generated by a critical philosophy of procreation would also have meaningful and broad social consequences.

Secondly, even at first glance, procreation appears to be a prime candidate for philosophical investigation. It is often taken for granted as a natural stage in the human life course, and the assumptions underlying the pronatalist worldview are rarely recognised, let alone scrutinised.[10] Furthermore, it provides a platform for exploring various, keenly contested dilemmas in moral philosophy, such as theories of harming, conceptions of consent, and the ideal population size. Antinatalism also wrestles with the one of the most foundational of all questions – ought we to be here at all? The philosophical dimensions of procreation, thus, demand further investigation.

Thirdly, although antinatalism has undoubtedly enjoyed increasing popularity over the past decade,[11] serious scholarly literature on the ethical propriety of human procreation is still nascent and often ignored, at least when compared to other branches of applied ethics.[12] Where procreation has been subject to ethical analysis, it is usually particular instances of human reproduction that are at issue. For example, there is a great deal of writing on "the

[9] Rossolatos, G. (2019). 'On the Discursive Appropriation of the Antinatalist Ideology in Social Media'. *The Qualitative Report*, 24 (2), pp. 208-227, p. 223.

[10] Indeed, few non-philosophers have even heard of terms like "antinatalism", let alone come to regard it as a coherent moral stance.

[11] As an example, consider the publication of the first magazine dedicated to antinatalism in September 2017. See Hwang, J. (ed.) (2017, September). *The Antinatalism Magazine*, 1.

[12] Discourses of antinatalism have largely entered the public consciousness in other ways. As an example, see Graham, J., Sparrow, T. (Eds.) (2017). *True Detective and Philosophy: A Deeper Kind of Darkness*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell for a lively study of the philosophy of antinatalism (amongst other existential issues) in the acclaimed anthology series, True Detective. For a fictional exposition of philosophical pessimism and antinatalism, see Ligotti, T. (2010). *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror*. New York: Hippocampus Press.

non-identity problem"[13] and on wrongful life torts.[14] However, these works implicitly assume the permissibility of procreation, and deem boundary cases to warrant further scrutiny. As such, an investigation of the morality of procreation per se deserves closer attention.

Novelty

So much for my interest in the subject matter – let us turn now to the ways in which my thesis will provide novel commentary on, and insight into, antinatalism. My study shall be an original contribution to the field in several ways. Firstly, it proposes a new systematic aggregation and classification of antinatalist argumentation and of pronatalist objections. This systematisation will provide a conceptual map of antinatalism, and of objections to core antinatalist ideas, in a way that has thus far been absent in the literature.

Secondly, I advance new criticisms of the antinatalism of other prominent scholars (most influentially, David Benatar's asymmetry argument), explaining in the process why my argument is able to avoid or resolve difficulties attendant to these approaches. This thesis, therefore, not only presents an overview of popular presentations of antinatalism, but also identifies their shortcomings and explains how the risk argument overcomes the difficulties facing other antinatalist arguments.

Thirdly, I propose to develop an original risk-based argument for antinatalism that differs both from the prevailing orthodoxy in reproductive ethics and from the body of existing anti-procreation arguments. Whilst there are, of course, similarities between my argument and other antinatalist arguments, the special attention I pay to the inter-relationship between three distinct aspects of procreation – risk, consent, and necessity – represents a distinct way of thinking about the wrongness of reproduction.

[13] A term coined by Derek Parfit, and one to which we shall return at a later juncture.

[14] A wrongful life action typically involves a child disabled in virtue of a genetic defect bringing a suit "in his own name, claiming that it would have been better if he had never existed in the first place". See Hensel, W.F. (2005). 'The Disabling Impact of Wrongful Birth and Wrongful Life Actions'. *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, 40 (1), pp. 141-196, p. 141.

Fourthly, I engage in the hitherto most sustained analysis of the views advocated by critics of antinatalism, many of whose pronatalist (or, at least, anti-antinatalist) arguments, as of the time of writing, remain completely unanswered in the philosophical literature. For example, my response to the arguments contained in Rivka Weinberg's 2016 book, *The Risk of a Lifetime,* will be the most detailed treatment of her philosophy to date. Furthermore, my critique of Samuel Scheffler's views on human meaning, as propounded in his *Death and the Afterlife*, constitutes, at the time of the writing, the only attempt to integrate his ideas into procreative and antinatalist philosophy.

Fifthly, in the process of evaluating counter-arguments, I also explore the intersection between my subject matter and branches of philosophy that have not traditionally been considered by antinatalist academics. For instance, I address potential criticisms of antinatalism from transhumanism in Chapter Four and part of Chapter Five draws on the philosophy of consent literature and applies it to antinatalism.

Academic Scope

My thesis, although ostensibly grounded in reproductive ethics (and, more specifically, procreative ethics),[15] will address issues and themes in a number of philosophical disciplines; including metaphysics (for example, the metaphysical basis for pre-existential moral claims-making) and the philosophy of meaning (in relation to my discussion on the implications that species survival holds for the quality and meaningfulness of human lives). However, the thesis shall remain highly focused on the core concept of procreative risk, and will address these other areas only to the extent that they are pertinent to the case for my argument (or the arguments of critics, as the case may be).

There are three main domains of literature that my thesis engages with. The first is the literature on positive arguments for antinatalism. The second is the literature centred on critical responses to antinatalism. The third is the tangential literature on other areas of

[15] There are many interesting and important areas of reproductive ethics that my thesis does not address – the ethics of embryo selection, of saviour siblings, of the relationship between gender and parental responsibility (e.g., responsibility borne by mother and father, etc.). Rather, my work concentrates on a question more fundamental than all of these – are we justified in reproducing at all?

philosophy whose importation into the antinatalist debate helps address topics such as consent and parenthood.

The argument that I intend to present also rests on empirical facts, most obviously in connection with my appeal to the nature and prevalence of risk that characterises nearly all lives. As such, at certain points in my thesis, I will refer to evidence (scientific facts, statistical data, qualitative studies, etc.) from other academic disciplines and fields of study, including the psychology of wellbeing and the sociology of parenthood.

Structure

In this section, I briefly set out the structure that my thesis shall follow. There are six chapters to my thesis, divided into two parts. The first half of my project involves both a presentation of the mechanics of my argument and a defence of its central claims. In the process, I will also review and evaluate the contemporary literature on antinatalist argumentation, explaining why my argument represents a significant advance on the most influential of these other arguments.[16]

The second part of my thesis will consist in an evaluation of the host of potential challenges to my argument in particular and antinatalism more widely. I will consider a range of criticisms that can be pressed against each component of my argument in turn – significant risk, absent consent, and absent necessity – showing why these criticisms are deficient. My ultimate aim is to defend the significance and strength of the antinatalist argument from risk, addressing both potential and actual criticisms of this stance. I summarise below the content of each chapter of this thesis.

Part I – Antinatalism and the Risk Argument

Chapters One to Three fall under Part I (Antinatalism and the Risk Argument).

[16] Please note that there will be quite a bit of forward-pointing in the first few chapters to highlight when issues will recur or be revisited more fully. This might be cumbersome, but it is a necessary evil to ensure a structured and comprehensive treatment of the subject at hand.

In the first chapter, I survey the contemporary (and, to a lesser extent, historical) literature on antinatalist argumentation, arguing that modern arguments can generally be categorised as either child-focused arguments or third-party arguments. My goal here is to map out the conceptual space of antinatalism so as to chart out the moves that are made and can be made by antinatalists. My second chapter revisits the most influential, persuasive, and relevant child-focused arguments considered in my first chapter (in particular, the arguments of David Benatar and Seana Shiffrin). Although I seek to ultimately defend antinatalism, this section shall highlight the problems with the current assortment of antinatalist arguments, before showing how my view is able to evade identified philosophical difficulties.

Chapter Three is devoted to a fuller presentation of my argument. I begin by setting out the core claim of my argument (*P1)* – that the imposition of significant risk on another is morally unjustified in the absence of either consent from the person bearing the risk or significant countervailing considerations. I then identify reasons to accept this premise by drawing on thought experiments and highlighting its agreement with wider principles in normative ethics (such as the importance in having a say over decisions that could detrimentally affect us). Following this, I turn to each individual element of my case against procreation – that procreation involves the imposition of significant risk (the *risk claim*) without prior consent from the created person (the *no-consent claim*) and without any countervailing consideration of moral force favouring procreation (the *no-necessity claim*). To support the *risk claim*, I draw on a wide body of empirical data to support my claim regarding the prevalence and severity of existential risks. With respect to the *no-consent* and *no-necessity* claims, I offer in this chapter only a clarification of the role that the absence of these two factors play in my argument, deferring a fuller defence of these claims until Part II of the thesis, given that their plausibility can only be worked out in conversation with critiques.

Part II – Responding to the Critics

Having laid out *P1* and the three contributory claims that I maintain are satisfied by nearly all cases of procreation, I turn in Part II (Responding to the Critics) to examining responses to my argument for the immorality of procreation. I divide the terrain of criticisms to parallel the three individual claims – responses to risk, responses to no-consent, and responses to no-necessity. Along the way, I show where arguments overlap across these categories (for

example, where a given argument constitutes a response to both the *risk claim* and the *no-consent claim*) as well as where they are responses to the more central idea expressed in *P1* (that an act is wrong if all of the three claims are fulfilled).

The fourth chapter opens the second part of my thesis and considers criticisms directed at my contention that the procreative act entails the imposition of significant risk on the being brought into existence. I attempt to show why these criticisms – such as the view that happiness compensates for the harms of life and that antinatalism is excessively risk averse – are faulty.

In Chapter Five, I investigate challenges broadly targeting the *no-consent claim*. Many believe that the antinatalist is unable to invoke the absence of consent in order to argue that procreation is morally unsound, either because such an invocation is not metaphysically coherent or because we are justified in assuming hypothetical or retrospective consent on the part of the created being. I shall demonstrate that these challenges rest on dubious premises, and fail to impair the argument I present.

The intent to undercut the no-necessity portion of my argument is the principal focus of Chapter Six. Here, I evaluate at length whether philosophers such as Samuel Scheffler, Rivka Weinberg, and Christine Overall are successful in their efforts to demonstrate why we have compelling reasons to procreate. In particular, I seek to debunk arguments to the effect that human extinction concomitant of worldwide childlessness threatens to undermine meaning in our lives (Scheffler's argument) and that we are justified in procreating to create and foster a loving parent-child bond (the Weinberg-Overall argument). I conclude by suggesting possible directions for future philosophical enquiry and research on this subject.

1. Arguing for Antinatalism

In this section of my thesis, I present an overview of the antinatalist body of argumentation. After presenting a short overview of strains of antinatalist throughout history, I turn to contemporary analytic antinatalism. I assert that arguments in this tradition can generally be categorised as either *child-focused arguments* – moral arguments that derive their force from the wrong done to the individual brought into existence – or as *third-party arguments* – moral arguments that focus on the harms suffered by society or other persons or things qualifying for moral consideration such as animals, the environment, and unadopted children. After a brief discussion of the main third-party arguments, I focus on the key features of the most influential child-focused arguments in the literature as a way of setting the stage for my own argument.

1.1 – Historical Antinatalism

Antinatalism, notwithstanding its relatively marginalised status, has a rich and long history,[17] with its earliest origins in the Western philosophical tradition dating to Ancient Greek thought. The pre-Socratic philosopher, Democritus, perhaps most well known as a proponent of early atomism, was critical of procreation, noting that it is a risky act that results in great suffering.[18][19] Consequently, he cautioned against having children on account of the dangers of existence, with success in life being precarious and failure resulting in unrivalled pain.[20] Antinatalist sentiment is found elsewhere in Greek philosophy too. Heraclitus, for example, argued that birth initiates a cycle of death, exposing both one's progeny and their offspring to the harm of death.[21]

[17] See Coates, K. (2014). *Anti-natalism: Rejectionist Philosophy from Buddhism to Benatar.* Sarasota, FL: First Edition Design Publishing for a general introduction to the sociology and religio-philosophical history of antinatalist sentiment. Lochmanová, K. [Ed.] (2020). *History of Antinatalism: How Philosophy Has Challenged the Question of Procreation*. Independently Published also features an overview of the "protohistory" of antinatalism.

[18] Democritus B297.

[19] In line with standard academic practice, I have followed the Diels–Kranz (DK) numbering system when referencing the works of any pre-Socratic philosophers.

[20] Democritus B275, B276.

[21] Heraclitus B20.

Another prominent and recurring antinatalist theme in Greek philosophy and literature is the wisdom of Silenus, a dictum which is re-engaged in 19th century German philosophy, most notably in the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche.[22] In the story, Silenus, the sagacious Greek mythological figure, when asked to reveal the most desirable thing for humankind, pronounces that "for humans, the best for them is not to be born at all, not to partake of nature's excellence; not to be is best, for both sexes."[23] The second best choice (having already been born), Silenus affirmed, was "to die as soon as we can".[24] We see here a strongly pro-mortalist tendency that recurs in the thought of antinatalist continental philosophers.

Antinatalism appears, although perhaps to a lesser extent, in medieval philosophy too; especially in the musings of Abu al-Ala al-Ma'arri, a Syrian philosopher and poet of the Islamic Golden Age who was active during the turn of the first millennium. Al-Ma'aari was of the view that begetting increases "the sum of evil", and considered non-existence to be a form of "bliss…which surpasses all the pleasures of this world".[25] Here, Al-Ma'aari may be regarded as arguing to antinatalism from negative utilitarianism[26] for two reasons. Firstly, he uses the increase in aggregate suffering as a result of creating new humans as a basis for castigating birth. Secondly, he contends that the freedom from, and ignorance of, the blight of aimless suffering is to be deemed preferable to worldly pleasures, which is in keeping with negative utilitarian arguments about the relative assessment of benefits and harms.[27]

The late nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the emergence and flourishing of European philosophy of a distinctively pessimistic. The work of philosophers such as Arthur

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[22] Brennan, K. (2018). 'The Wisdom of Silenus: Suffering in *The Birth of Tragedy*'. *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 49 (2), pp. 174-193.

[23] Aristotle (354 BCE). *Eudemus*. Surviving fragment quoted in Plutarch (1st century CE). *Moralia. Consolatio ad Apollonium, sec. xxvii* (trans. S. Horton).

[24] Ibid.

[25] Nicholson, R.A. (1921). *Studies in Islamic Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 139.

[26] Negative utilitarianism can be simply defined as a consequentialist theory that prioritises the avoidance of pain over the promotion of pleasure. See Acton, H., and Watkins, J. (1963). 'Symposium: Negative Utilitarianism'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 37, pp. 83-114; and Walker, A. (1974). Negative Utilitarianism. *Mind,* 83 (331), pp. 424-428.

[27] This relative assessment shall be revisited in Chapter Four (see 4.3).

Schopenhauer and Emil Cioran carried forward the tradition of antinatalist thought. Schopenhauer, arguably the most famous pessimist (and antinatalist) in the history of Western philosophy, regarded life to be a purposeless and unprofitable endeavour, "disturbing the blessed calm of non-existence" and culminating in the nothingness of death.[28] In light of the misery and suffering that the human race experiences and perpetrates, Schopenhauer stated that it would be preferable were the Earth to be lifeless,[29] and argued that a rational agent would not impose the burdens of existence and perpetuate the human species.[30] The output of the Romanian philosopher, Emil Cioran, arguably represents the apotheosis of this pessimistic tradition. Cioran held that creation (birth) is connected to destruction (death), and that the intervening period (life) is characterised by great suffering. In Cioran's philosophy of life, birth is presented as a catastrophic event,[31] one that is the source of malaise and hardship, the intolerable origin of all worldly suffering.[32] In an even sharper image, Cioran compares birth to bondage, noting that "birth and chain are synonyms".[33] The poignancy and validity of this analogy lies in the twin facts that birth is inescapable and that it does not involve pre-natal consent on the part of the created being. Cioran, then, is one of the most recent philosophers in a long tradition to position not being born as the best state of affairs.[34]

Having briefly considered the rich tradition of antinatalism, let us now turn attention to modern analytic arguments for antinatalism. We begin to see in the philosophers propounding these arguments a more methodical approach to defending antinatalism, in contrast to the general appeals to the miseries of existence and the inevitability of death that characterised much of historical antinatalism. These arguments are principally motivated in one of two ways – either they seek to establish procreation as problematic on account of the harm thereby done to morally considerable persons other than the created child (*third-party*

[28] Schopenhauer, A. (1891/2015). *The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer: Studies in Pessimism*, trans. T.B. Saunders. Scotts Valley, CA: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, p. 2.

[29] He writes that "it would be much better…if the surface [of the Earth] were still in a crystalline state". Ibid, p. 2.

[30] Ibid., p. 2.

[31] Cioran, E. (1976/1998). *The Trouble With Being Born*, trans. R. Howard. London: Arcade Publishing, p. 4.

[32] Ibid., p. 3.

[33] Ibid., p. 211.

[34] Ibid., p. 212.

arguments) or they argue for the wrongness of procreation by appealing to some feature(s) of the life led by the person brought into existence (*child-focused arguments*). We begin with an overview of the former.

1.2 - Third-Party Arguments

Contemporary third-party arguments for antinatalism situate the wrongness of procreativity in the harm that procreation imposes on morally considerable beings or entities other than the created child. These arguments focus on the extent to which procreation compromises or displaces the discharge of our other-centred moral duties (to other sentient beings and the environment). Such arguments come in several distinctive flavours and varieties, which I will not be able to evaluate in detail for reasons of space. I do, however, briefly summarise three different classes of third-party antinatalist arguments as this helps to illustrate the main forms these arguments take and will help to clarify the ways in which these arguments differ from child-focused antinatalist arguments when we turn to them in the next section.

The Utilitarian Argument From Human Evil: This argument claims that the harms perpetrated by humans on other sentient beings, including other humans, constitutes an excellent reason to refrain from procreation. The two most notable arguments of this kind have been put forward in a paper co-authored by Gerald Harrison and Julia Tanner and also separately by David Benatar. Harrison and Tanner argue that the perpetuation of the human species is "bad for others", citing the actual and potential destructive capacity of human beings.[35] The former (actual destruction) is identified by Harrison and Tanner primarily with the harms done by humans to other creatures, but such an argument can be extended to a plethora of inter-human rights violations. The latter (potential destruction) is seen as a pressing issue in light of technological advances in warfare, such as the development of nuclear weapons, which carry the potential for human-created suffering on an even greater scale. They believe, therefore, that abstaining from procreation is the safest way to ensure this destructiveness is ended. Benatar, too, appeals to the extent and extremity of human moral

[35] Harrison, G., and Tanner, J. (2011). 'Better Not To Have Children'. *Think*, 10 (27), pp. 113-121, pp. 113-114.

imperfection in order to buttress an argument to the desirability of a world without human beings.[36]

The details of these arguments overlap with the risk argument I present in Chapter Three, inasmuch as some of the reasons to avoid procreation on negative utilitarian grounds also constitute significant risks (borne by the person brought into existence). We shall leave a more forensic cataloguing of these human-caused harms until I formally present my argument then.

There are two particularly noteworthy considerations in relation to this argument that I wish to outline here. First, it seems indisputable that many of the ethical problems confronting our species supervene on the existence of sentient beings. All the terrible injustices in the world would be eliminated if the antinatalist vision played out, as there would be no more murder, rape, spousal abuse, poverty, animal commodification, discrimination, warfare, slavery, and so on. Hence, by agitating for an end to human procreation, antinatalists of this ilk are also agitating for an end to all the cruelty human beings do and all the suffering conscious beings experience at the hands of members of the human species. Second, one is also struck by the exponential nature of suffering prevention via not procreating. If we were to assume that a couple has two children,[37] then over twenty generations, more than a million people's births (and their inevitable suffering) could be causally traced to that couple's procreative decisions.[38] This long-term view gives greater force to the negative utilitarian desire to avert suffering.

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[36] Benatar, D., and Wasserman, D. (2015). *Debating Procreation: Is It Wrong To Reproduce?*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 78-121.

[37] This is not an unreasonable assumption. According to the UN Population Division, the global fertility rate is 2.4 children per woman (United Nations Population Division (2019). *World Population Prospects: 2019 Revision.*). These figures differ by country, from a high of 7.153 in Niger to a global low of 1.218 in Taiwan, but in over 130 countries (including the UK, the US, and France), the figure is greater than 1.8. See World Bank (2019). *Fertility rate, total (births per woman)*. Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN. [Accessed: 3 January 2020.]

[38] This argument does require the caveat that the potential partner of one's never-realised offspring would likely still marry someone else and bear children. Nevertheless, in the absence of a clear-sighted picture of what will happen in a counterfactual scenario in which one never procreates, it is easy to see how the potentially long lineage of procreative harm could move one motivated by utilitarianism.

***The Environmental Argument*:** This argument, which animates many antinatalists,[39] critiques procreation on the grounds that the act worsens the environmental crisis confronting our planet. There is extremely compelling evidence to support the claim that we find ourselves mired in an ecological predicament. A consensus of climate scientists concur that anthropogenic climate change presents a catastrophic threat to the planet, with the world in the midst of a "climate emergency".[40] The evidence base for procreation's contribution to this catastrophe is also persuasive.[41] A 2017 study found that having one fewer child is the most effective way to cut greenhouse gas emissions, with it amounting to an average reduction in developed countries of 58.6 tonnes of carbon dioxide-equivalent emissions for each year of a parent's life.[42][43] Overpopulation is also one of the key challenges facing humanity,[44] with the world population having exploded from 1 billion in the early 1800s to over 7.7 billion as of

[39] For instance, Théophile de Giraud, an antinatalist writer and childfree activist, organised a "denatalist" event in Paris in 2012, citing ecological reasons for abstention from procreation. The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, which advocates abstention from reproduction in order to gradually and voluntarily phase out the human species, is also primarily motivated by environmental considerations. See Ormrod, J.S. (2011) ''Making Room for the Tigers and the Polar Bears': Biography, Phantasy and Ideology in the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement'. *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 16 (2), pp. 142-161.

[40] Ripple, W., Wolf, C., Newsome, T., Barnard, P., Moomaw, W., and 11,258 Scientist Signatories from 153 Countries (2019). 'World Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency'. *BioScience*. Available at: https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/advance-article/doi/10.1093/biosci/biz088/5610806. [Accessed: 9 December 2019.]

[41] This, of course, is not to deny that there exist other causes of environmental problems that pertain to economic structure, government policy, and general socio-political forces.

[42] Wynes, S., and Nicholas, K. (2017). 'The climate mitigation gap: education and government recommendations miss the most effective individual actions'. *Environmental Research Letters*, 12 (7).

[43] Such data is, of course, not unchallenged. For concerns that these statistics double-count greenhouse gas emissions (attributing a child's emission contributions to both the child and to his parents for begetting him), see Pinkert, F., and Sticker, (2021). M. Procreation, Footprint and Responsibility for Climate Change. *J Ethics*, 25, pp. 293–321. I do not delve further into this debate given that I am not interested in this project in defending the environmental argument for antinatalism.

[44] Bartlett, A. (1994). Reflections on Sustainability, Population Growth, and the Environment. *Population and Environment,* 16 (1), pp. 5-35.

the time of writing (and projected to reach 9.7 billion in 2050).[45] 250 babies are born every minute, whilst the death rate is 108 people per minute.[46]

Over 15,000 climate scientists agree that this rapid growth is a "primary driver behind many ecological and even societal threats", with a reduction in fertility rates advocated as one of the key steps that individuals and governments ought to take (especially in regions where access to education or family-planning resources are lacking).[47] The famous English natural historian, David Attenborough, is of the view that "almost every problem that faces humanity at the moment would be easier to solve – and probably even be solvable – if there were fewer people".[48] Refraining from procreation, which has the necessary effect of enlarging the population of *Homo sapiens*, is therefore one of the most direct and sensible individual responses to the problems enumerated above.[49]

The environmental argument, much like other third-party arguments, is radically contingent. Those who argue solely on environmental grounds for procreation's immorality typically

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[45] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Population Prospects 2019: Highlights*. Available at: https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2019_Highlights.pdf. [Accessed: 15 December 2019]

[46] For the birth statistic, see Lamble, L. (2018, 23 April). With 250 babies born each minute, how many people can the Earth sustain? *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/apr/23/population-how-many-people-can-the-earth-sustain-lucy-lamble (Accessed: 30 March 2020). Population Reference Bureau & The World Factbook (Central Intelligence Agency) (2020). Retrieved from: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/xx.html (Accessed: 30 March 2020) contains the death rate figure.

[47] Ripple, W., Wolf, C., Newsome, T., Galetti, M., Alamgir, M., Crist, E., Mahmoud, M.I., Laurance, W.F., and 15,364 Scientist Signatories from 184 Countries (2017). 'World scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice'. *BioScience*, 67 (12), pp. 1026-1028.

[48] Stadlen, M. (29 December, 2013). 'David Attenborough: 'Life would be easier if I didn't speak out''. *The Telegraph*. Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/earth/environment/globalwarming/10541724/David-Attenborough-Life-would-be-easier-if-I-didnt-speak-out.html. [Accessed: 3 January 2019.] For a narrative account of the environmental consequences of a world without humans, see Weisman, A. (2007). *The World Without Us*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books (St. Martin's Press).

[49] See Rieder, T. (2016). *Toward a Small Family Ethic: How Overpopulation and Climate Change Are Affecting the Morality of Procreation*. New York: Springer for a more complete overview of the environmental argument. For the general ethics of limiting population on climate change grounds, see Cafaro, P. (2022). Climate ethics and population policy: A review of recent philosophical work. *WIREs Climate Change,* 13 (2), e748.

recognise that abstaining from procreation is merely a strategic step to repair the damage done to the planet (or, at any rate, to prevent further damage). Were the detrimental effects of anthropogenic climate change and overpopulation to be curbed and controlled, then this argument would lose its potency and urgency. After all, supporters of the environmental argument often cite as a reason for opposing current levels of procreation that it is best for future generations and the long-term survival of our species. That is, this argument usually leads to the view that what we ideally want in the longer-term is sustainable procreation instead of no procreation.

The Adoption Argument: Some ethicists over the past decade have gone further than considering adoption to be merely an alternative option to procreation, arguing that we have a pro tanto duty to adopt and that we ought to adopt instead of procreate.[50] The form of the argument, as with the environmental argument, can be stated straightforwardly. The empirical arm of the argument cites the Global Orphan Crisis, noting that hundreds of millions of children are in need of parental care. Social science research is also relied upon to substantiate the claim that these parentless children lack many basic goods, including shelter, food, and a relationship with a loving caregiver.[51]

The moral component of the argument that runs parallel to the foregoing states that "we have a moral duty to assist those in need, if the risk of harm to them is critical and the cost to us is small".[52] Certainly, the absence of basic necessities in the lives of many children without parents represents a serious harm to such individuals. Furthermore, it has been argued that the costs of adopting in lieu of procreating are negligible, given that the primary reasons cited for the latter lack moral force (e.g., the desire on the part of the procreator to have genetic offspring with whom physical and psychological traits are shared).[53]

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[50] Rulli, T. (2011). *The Duty to Adopt* (Doctoral thesis, Yale University). Also, see Friedrich, D. (2013). 'A Duty to Adopt?'. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. 30 (1), pp. 25-39.

[51] See Arsiradam, V. (2018). *A Duty to Adopt? On the Ethics and Politics of Adoption* (Doctoral thesis, The University of Western Ontario). Available at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7598&context=etd, pp. 19-22 for more details.

[52] Ibid., p. 25.

[53] Rulli, T. (2016). 'The Ethics of Procreation and Adoption'. *Philosophy Compass*, 11 (6), pp. 305-315.

In summary, then, the adoption argument presses that procreation is morally wrong because it displaces adoption, which we have a duty (or, minimally, very strong moral reasons) to engage in, given the acute deprivations of parentless children and our ability to conceivably ameliorate the predicament in which orphaned and abandoned children find themselves.

1.3 – Child-Focused Arguments

In the previous section, we canvassed contemporary third-party arguments for the wrongness of procreation. In this section, we shift focus to the second type of contemporary analytic arguments for antinatalism – *child-focused arguments*. These arguments locate the wrongness of procreation in the harm thereby done to the being brought into existence. For obvious reasons, then, I call these arguments '*child-focused arguments*'. I begin by providing an overview of arguably the most influential contemporary child-focused argument – David Benatar's asymmetry argument.

1.3.1 – Benatar's Asymmetry

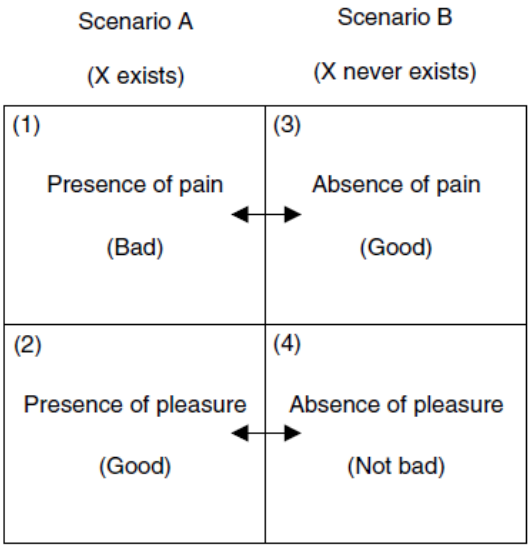
David Benatar, a South African moral philosopher, mounts a clear and analytically-grounded book-long case for the immorality of procreation (and, by extension, a defence of the moral rectitude of abstention from procreation) in his 2006 treatise, *Better Never To Have Been: The Harms of Coming Into Existence*. He argues that being brought into existence represents a grievous harm with respect to the created being's interests. He develops some distinct, but overlapping, lines of argumentation to this end, but his core argument – the asymmetry argument – is the one that has sparked the most debate and will be the focus of the below summary.

There are two chief reasons why this particular argument has been selected for the closest philosophical investigation, over others in the field. Firstly, it is one of the most well-developed, with Benatar having devoted a sizeable chunk of his book and a large part of two subsequent papers to fleshing out this argument. Secondly, it is arguably the most topical, being the argument that has received the greatest attention from applied ethicists.

Below, I simplify, systematise, and analyse the purported asymmetry, as presented in his original book and as developed and modified in subsequent papers. Benatar's asymmetry argument turns on an asymmetry between harms and benefits. He states, "The absence of bad things, such as pain, is good even if there is nobody to enjoy that good, whereas the absence of good things, such as pleasure, is bad only if there is somebody who is deprived of these good things."[54] In its full form, the asymmetry proceeds as follows:

"(1) the presence of pain is bad
(2) the presence of pleasure is good
(3) the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone
(4) the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation."[55]

Benatar titles this formulation, the 'basic asymmetry', in order to distinguish it from so-called 'support asymmetries' (considered in detail in my critique of the asymmetry in the following chapter). This basic asymmetry can also be illustrated by means of the following schema[56]:



[54] Benatar 2006, p. 14.

[55] Ibid., p. 30.

[56] Reproduced from Benatar 2006, p. 38.

The evaluative intra-life judgments in (1) are (2) are uncontroversial. For if we were to claim that the infliction and experience of pain is good (and, conversely, that the instantiation of pleasure is bad), our most central and basic moral sensibility would be dismantled, one that is generally accepted by practically all ethical theories. To overturn the building blocks of moral reasoning in this way is to opt out of the debate, rather than participate in a discourse within it.

Most criticism is directed at the assignments of value to (3) and (4), and so a detailed examination of precisely what is being claimed therein is warranted. To this end, I shall first provide four alternative, albeit consistent, ways in which the asymmetry can be conceptualised, before exploring the mechanics and principles of the argument.

The asymmetry, stated above in terms of goods and bads, can be restated in the language of:

1) *Advantage and Disadvantage* – Existence offers no advantage over non-existence, whereas it does have disadvantages that would not obtain if one never exists.

2) *Benefit and Cost* – Coming into being incurs costs relative to never existing, but it does not have any comparative benefits.

3) *Worseness* – Existence can be morally worse than non-existence, but it can never be better.[57]

4) *Mattering* – It does morally matter that suffering is averted by not creating a being who will suffer. But it does not morally matter that the non-existent will never experience the goods in life (precisely because those goods don't matter to the non-deprived).

These four restatements help us to get a better handle on the asymmetry's core idea. Whichever way the asymmetry is worded, though, the central idea remains unchanged – procreation, insofar as it results in a being who will have any negative experiences, is always

[57] We should note here that this explicitly comparative terminology invites the objection that such moral determinations are only coherent when there is a person whose position can be bettered or worsened. This criticism shall be investigated in further depth when I evaluate Benatar's argument in the next chapter.

bad for that being when compared to never being born.[58] However, at this stage, it is critical to note that the comparative assessment of value or disvalue in the asymmetry is person-affecting across possible worlds, rather than impersonal (to borrow Derek Parfit's distinction in his seminal work, *Reasons and Persons*).[59]) The asymmetry does not claim that people's lives, or lack thereof, are vehicles for utilitarian maximisation of the good or minimisation of disvalue. It is therefore important to recognise that the judgments in the asymmetric matrix – 'good', 'bad', 'not bad' – are made specifically with respect to the interests of possible people who might exist (person-affecting), and not from some abstract all-things-considered perspective (impersonal).

A source of confusion here is that the four claims that comprise the basic asymmetry entail two different kinds of value assessment, even though they all speak about 'goodness-for-someone' rather than goodness *tout court*. Whilst boxes one and two make intrinsic statements about the value of harms and benefits within a life, boxes three and four make comparative judgments (with respect to boxes one and two, respectively). In other words, in the case in which X exists, his pleasure is intrinsically 'good' and his pain is intrinsically 'bad' for him, but in the scenario in which X does not exist, the references to 'good' and 'not bad' are to be read comparatively (as 'better' and 'not worse' than their respective horizontally adjacent box).

Relatedly, the asymmetry is axiological in character, rather than prudential. Prudential value "is often identified with well-being".[60] 'Good' in the prudential sense means "good for someone" such that it "makes...that person's life go better".[61] The asymmetry does not trade on such actually-experienced prudential value judgments, but rather on counterfactual comparative moral value assessments. The judgments of 'good' and 'bad' still concern the interests of a potential person, but in the asymmetry, they denote the notion of a morally preferable outcome (with regard to the interests of the possible being).

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[58] Thus, the truism that every life includes harms is sufficient to constitute the bridging claim between the basic asymmetry and the conclusion that procreation is wrong.

[59] See Part Four of Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[60] Tiberius, V. (2015). 'Prudential Value'. In I. Hirose and J. Olson (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Value Theory* (pp. 158-174), Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 158.

[61] Taylor, T. (2013). 'Well-being and Prudential Value'. *Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly*, 31 (2), pp. 10-17, p. 10.

Another key takeaway from the asymmetrical quadrant analysis is that it does not turn on the relative preponderance of harms and benefits, for the mere presence of any harm will make that life worse than never existing (whereas no amount of benefit could ever tip the scales, as it were, in favour of existence). The asymmetry is a qualitative claim to the effect that being brought into existence always involves being harmed. It is, thus, an absolute argument for antinatalism that, in itself, is insensitive to any balancing assessment of harms and benefits within a life.

However, this independence from a posteriori harm evaluation must be caveated with the concession that an appreciation of the relative amounts of good and bad in a life is pertinent to determining the magnitude of the moral wrongness perpetrated by procreating. Relatedly, if we were to discover that a life contained absolutely no bad, then this would obviously mean that no wrong is done by bringing about that life. In this sense, the asymmetry argument is complemented by a separate antinatalist argument advanced by Benatar – the argument from the badness of human lives, or the quality-of-life argument (QOLA), as Benatar also titles it.[62] QOLA, which we will look at soon, seeks to show that humans lead severely impoverished lives blighted by great harm. Thus, whilst the asymmetry shows that procreation is always wrong, QOLA can be deployed to show how much of a wrong it is.

Throughout this discussion, I have made reference to benefits and harms, and this too is in need of clarification, for the asymmetry only refers to the experiential terms, 'pleasure' and 'pain'. Thus, we should also note that the asymmetry is between goods and bads more generally, and is not reductive to pain and pleasure. The latter are “exemplars of harms and benefits”, introduced to facilitate discussion and reflection, and not exhaustive of all the goods and bads (wisdom, meaninglessness, etc.) that characterise human life.[63]

[62] This argument first appears in Benatar 2006. However, it is formally titled as the 'quality-of-life' argument in Benatar, D. (2012). Every Conceivable Harm: A Further Defence of Antinatalism. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 31 (1), pp. 128-164, p. 146 and Benatar, D. (2013). ‘Still Better Never To Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics’. *The Journal of Ethics*, 17 (1-2), pp. 121-151, pp. 123-124.

[63] Benatar 2006, p. 30

Finally, we can observe that the asymmetry is not a metaphysical asymmetry. The asymmetry does not derive its force from the indeterminacy of the non-existent. The reason why the absent benefits of non-existence are not bad is not because there is a reference failure (i.e., no identifiable entity to whom the benefits can be traced), for if this were the explanation, one would be forced into accepting that absent pains are not good for the same reason. Rather, such absence is not bad because benefits that one is not deprived of are not, morally speaking, disadvantageous. In other words, one who never exists does not in a meaningful sense lose out on the goods of life and so is not worse off on account of this in never coming into existence. We shall return to the plausibility of this idea in the next chapter.

It is interesting also to observe the similarities between Benatar's asymmetry and other arguments. Benatar certainly owes some debt to the Epicurean philosopher, Lucretius, who although not an antinatalist, espoused a position that is functionally akin to Benatar's view that the absence of pleasures in non-existence do not entail deprivation (and are hence not bad). In his *De Rerum Natura* (On The Nature of Things), he writes:

What loss were ours, if we had known not birth?
Let living men to longer life aspire,
While fond affection binds their hearts to earth:
But whoso ne'er hath tasted life's desire,
Unborn, impersonal, can feel no dearth.[64]

Furthermore, both Benatar's decision-theoretic matrix and the idea that not procreating dominates procreating (as per the matrix) bear a close resemblance to an argument advanced by Hermann Vetter in 1969. Vetter's own matrix is reproduced below[65]:

[64] Translation in Salt, H.S. (1912). *Treasures of Lucretius*: *Selected Passages from the De Rerum Natura*. London: Watts & Co., p. 53. The specific quote comes from Book V, lines 176-180 of Lucretius' work – see Lucretius (First Century B.C.E.). *De Rerum Natura*, trans. M.F. Smith (Indianopolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1950), p. 141 for an alternative translation.

[65] Vetter, H. (1969). 'The Production of Children as a Problem for Utilitarian Ethics'. *Inquiry*, 12, pp. 445-447.

	Child will be more or less happy	**Child will be more or less unhappy**
Produce the child	No duty fulfilled or violated	Duty violated
Do not produce the child	No duty fulfilled or violated	Duty fulfilled

As per the above, Vetter held that were the child one brings into existence to lead an all-things-considered good life, then neither producing the child nor failing to do so would involve the fulfilment or violation of a moral duty. We are under no obligation to produce happy children, nor does producing such children constitute a moral transgression on our part. However, in the case of a child who would lead a generally unhappy life, we have a duty not to initiate this bad life – as such, creating this child would violate a moral duty, whereas not doing so would discharge said duty.

Thus, producing children leads to the possible violation of duties and never to the fulfilment of any duties; vice versa, not producing children leads to the possible fulfilment of duties and never to the violation of any duties. That is, not producing a child is the dominant decision. Given that we can never preclude the possibility that a child will lead an unhappy life, Vetter argues it is always morally preferable to abstain from procreation.

Despite the similarity in structure between the two arguments, Benatar does not frame his argument in deontic vocabulary, but rather in terms of harms and benefits. To the extent he makes reference to an asymmetry in procreative duties, he does so as a way of bolstering his basic asymmetry (as we shall see in Chapter Two). We shall return to Benatar's asymmetry at that stage. For now, let us consider some of the other major arguments that dominate the contemporary antinatalist landscape.

1.3.2 – Benatar's 'Quality of Life' Argument (QOLA)

A separate child-focused argument put forward by Benatar is the quality-of-life argument (QOLA). This argument derives its force from the badness that purportedly characterises human lives. It states that human lives are very bad, and should therefore not be started,

regardless of whether one accepts the asymmetry.[66] Although this argument can function independently of the asymmetry, Benatar intends for them to work alongside one another, with the asymmetry showing that creating someone is always wrong and the quality of life argument demonstrating just how much of a wrong it is.

To make this argument, Benatar considers three of the most popular philosophical theories of what makes a life go well – the hedonistic theory, the desire fulfilment theory, and the objective list theory.[67] According to Benatar, our lives contain a great deal of bad under all of these accounts. The hedonistic theory states that the quality of our life is determined by the number and extent of states of positive experiential welfare (in relation to negative states such as pain). Benatar grants that we can have intrinsic pleasures,[68] but nevertheless argues that many lives are characterised by a plethora of negative sensations, including "allergies, headaches, frustration, irritation, colds, menstrual pains, hot flushes, nausea, hypoglycaemia, seizures, guilt, shame, boredom, sadness, depression, loneliness, body-image dissatisfaction, the ravages of AIDS, of cancer, and of other such life-threatening diseases, and grief and bereavement".[69]

Our lives fare equally as badly under the desire fulfilment and objective list theories. According to the former, the satisfaction of desires (i.e., getting what we want) is what is good for people.[70] Benatar contends that, both in the short-term and in the long-run, many of our desires remain unsatisfied or are only satisfied after several decades. Our career goals, our romantic aspirations, our hopes for knowledge, and our wishes for extended contentment are examples of this unsatisfied or too-slowly-satisfied longing.[71]

Finally, the objective list theory, which states that well-being is a product of the realisation of an objective set of goods, also yields the assessment that our lives go very badly. This is because when viewed from an objective perspective (*sub specie aeternitatis*), our lives are

[66] Benatar 2006, pp. 60-92.

[67] This taxonomy also appears in Parfit 1984, p. 493.

[68] Benatar 2006, p. 73.

[69] Ibid., p. 72.

[70] See Heathwood, C. (2016). 'Desire-Fulfillment Theory'. In G. Fletcher (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Well-Being* (pp. 135-147), New York, NY: Routledge.

[71] See Benatar 2006, p. 74-76.

much shorter and unhappier than we can conceivably imagine.[72] Benatar dismisses the view that perfection is an unrealistic standard, concluding that if we wish to "determine how good human life in general is", we need to adopt the *sub specie aetnernitatis* perspective, and this shows that the quality of human life is "found wanting".[73] As with the asymmetry, a fuller examination of counter-arguments and possible defences shall have to wait until the following chapter.

1.3.3 – Seana Shiffrin's Argument

Benatar's asymmetry and quality of life arguments are not the only contemporary arguments that object to procreation on the basis of the harm the act inflicts on the created being. Other philosophers have advanced different arguments for this conclusion, some of which are much closer in form to my own argument. Seana Shiffrin, for instance, presents an argument intended to problematise the general presumption that "procreation is a straightforward, morally innocent endeavour" in her paper, 'Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm'.[74] Shiffrin never identifies her position as an antinatalist one, and in fact, she denies that she is making an argument for the moral impropriety of procreative activity itself. She claims that "the unconsented-to burdens of life do not make it wrong to procreate per se, but rather wrong to procreate without undertaking a commitment to share or alleviate any burdens the future child endures".[75] Nevertheless, I will treat Shiffrin's argument as an antinatalist one, as it is so obviously friendly to an antinatalist formulation for reasons that will become apparent very soon.[76]

Her paper primarily seeks to provide a novel way of thinking about wrongful life suits, which she defines as civil torts "brought by a child (typically a congenitally disabled child) who seeks damages for burdens he suffers that result from his creation", usually charging that he

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[72] Ibid., pp. 81-85.

[73] Ibid., p. 86.

[74] Shiffrin, S.V. (1999). 'Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm'. *Legal Theory*, 5, pp. 117-148, p. 118.

[75] Shiffrin 1999, p. 139.

[76] See Singh, A. (2018). The Hypothetical Consent Objection to Anti-Natalism. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 21 (5), pp. 1135-1150 for a modified "Shiffrin-esque" argument defending a more robust antinatalism.

or she was "born into an unwanted or miserable life".[77] Such suits are normally brought against a third party responsible for the negligent or reckless birth; normally, a medical practitioner or medical entity.[78]

The legitimacy and coherence of wrongful life claims are viewed with suspicion by many philosophers.[79] Joel Feinberg, for example, argues that holding one liable in these cases would be analogous to "holding a rescuer liable for injuries he caused an endangered person" (in the process of saving the imperilled individual).[80] Feinberg dismisses the plausibility of such liability on the grounds that the rescuer "did not cause a condition that was harmful on balance, offset as it was by the *overriding benefit* of rescue", and therefore cannot be said to have caused relevant harm to the rescued person.[81] Similarly, insofar as one enjoys compensating existential benefits (conjoined as they are with life's burdens) that make that life worthwhile, then we are not justified in thinking that any party has acted wrongfully in the wrongful life case.

Shiffrin argues that this response cannot work, given that the rescuer imposes a lesser harm not to secure a benefit, but to prevent an even greater harm (i.e., death). It is this prevention of a greater harm which justifies the imposition of a lesser harm (i.e., the breaking of the endangered person's arm). However, Shiffrin argues that in the case of procreation, a different trade-off is involved, as the harms concomitant with existence are thought to be offset by the greater benefits secured, as opposed to any greater harms prevented. She argues this reasoning cannot justify procreative activity, because there are certain "significant asymmetries between harms and benefits".[82] More specifically, Shiffrin develops a maxim,

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[77] Shiffrin 1999, p. 117.

[78] Jecker, N. (1987). 'The Ascription of Rights in Wrongful Life Suits'. *Law and Philosophy,* 6 (2), pp. 149-165, p. 149

[79] Notwithstanding the fact that the alternative stance - that birthing a child who lacks any meaningful prospects for leading a good life is wrong - has a long philosophical history, finding expression in the writings of John Stuart Mill. See Harris, J. (1990). 'The Wrong of Wrongful Life'. *Journal of Law and Society,* 17 (1), pp. 90-105.

[80] Feinberg, J. (1994). *Freedom and Fulfillment: Philosophical Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 27.

[81] Ibid., p. 27.

[82] Shiffrin 1999, p. 123.

which states that "unconsented-to harms inflicted as necessary incidents of the delivery of a *pure* benefit" are unjustifiable.[83] She defines 'pure benefits' as "those benefits that are just goods and which are not also removals from or preventions of harm", an example being the non-essential enhancement of one's condition.[84]

In simpler terms, Shiffrin argues that procreation entails the infliction of (lesser) harms to secure (greater) benefits, without the person's consent, and is therefore immoral. In support of this claim, she presents several examples that involve some infliction of harm (such as injuring one's arm) as a necessary pre-condition for the bestowal of a greater independent benefit (e.g., a large sum of cash or enhanced vision), which lead her to the intuitive conclusion that, absent consent, such actions would be wrong.[85] As procreation involves an absence of consent on the part of the created being, and as a normal human life typically contains both goods and bads, Shiffrin's argument would preserve the antinatalist conclusion even were the goods to outweigh the bads. In this respect, it is similar to Benatar's absolutist antinatalism.

1.3.4 – Other Arguments Approximating The Risk Argument

Two other authors that deserve mention here are Matti Häyry and Jimmy Alfonso Licon. Häyry presents a very short argument from rational risk avoidance, according to which it is both irrational and immoral to have children.[86] It is irrational, he argues, because having children "deliberately allow[s] the worst outcome of our action in a given situation".[87] The possibility of creating a child who leads a bad life in which he or she "genuinely would prefer non-existence to their own life" is seen as the worst outcome of our reproductive choices, and thus fails the rationality test as above.[88] Häyry also maintains procreation is immoral because one ought not to bring about avoidable suffering, which is exactly what procreation does. This is both because all humans suffer, and because the life of a child could become "at some

[83] Ibid., p. 126.

[84] Ibid., pp. 124-125.

[85] Ibid., footnote 23 on p. 125.

[86] Häyry, M. (2005). 'The Rational Cure for Prereproductive Stress Syndrome Revisited'. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 31 (10), pp. 606-607.

[87] Ibid., p. 606.

[88] Ibid., p. 606.

point in time (physically, mentally, or socially) overwhelmingly miserable".[89] The riskiness of life is thus central to Häyry's argument.

Licon's antinatalist argument is probably the closest existing argument in the literature to my risk argument.[90] He argues in a short paper that "*an individual is justified in subjecting someone to potential harm only if either: (a) they provide informed consent, (b) such is in their best interests, or (c) they deserve to be subjected to potential harm*".[91] Licon observes that procreation involves subjecting one to potential harm, and that none of the three justificatory conditions are satisfied – the non-existent cannot provide their consent, do not have interests to protect, and do not deserve to be subjected to potential harm (or, indeed, subjected to anything). As such, he thinks that procreation is objectionable.

Indeed, as Häyry focuses on risk avoidance and Licon on the absence of consent, my argument can be seen as a combination and elaboration of these two distinct strands of thought, married to the further thought that we have no good reasons to procreate. These arguments, then, are forerunners of the risk argument. However, I do not believe that they satisfactorily make the case for child-focused antinatalism and I shall briefly lay out the reasons why I think so now.[92]

Let's start with the reasons why Häyry's argument will not do. Firstly, the paper in which his argument makes an appearance is extremely short (coming in at a single page), and in such limited space as that, he can only hint at some of the ideas that feature prominently in the risk argument, such as the risk that the life of any child could become intolerably miserable. My thesis defends at length the reasons why we should think the risk is so great and why that morally matters. Secondly, Häyry needly complicates his argument by appealing to principles of rationality in addition to principles of morality. Determining what rationality demands of

[89] Ibid., p. 607.

[90] Licon, J.A. (2012). 'The Immorality of Procreation'. *Think*, 11 (32), pp. 85-91.

[91] Licon 2012, p. 88.

[92] For the other child-focused arguments in this chapter, I defer my critique until the next chapter. This is for two simple reasons. First, these other arguments are developed by their proponents at significantly greater length. Second, they represent more radical points of departure from the risk argument. Thus, they warrant a more detailed rebuttal in a separate chapter.

us when deciding whether to procreate, further to what morality demands of us, is a hard epistemological problem to solve.

Thirdly, Häyry's proposed answer to the problem remains undefended, as he supplies no reason to think that an optimally rational agent would always avoid the course of action that that *could* produce the worst-possible outcome (in this case, a horrible life). Why, instead of always seeking to avoid potentially maximal disutility, would a rational agent not weigh up all the probabilities and pursue that course of action which, on the balance of probabilities, maximises net utility – indeed, this is commonly how we conceive of the rational actor. Finally, the idea that it is immoral to produce avoidable suffering is certainly attractive, but what if the suffering of a given person is bound up with great pleasure for that person or enormous benefits for some other persons? Häyry does not answer these questions. By contrast, my risk argument will give clear answers to these obvious counter-arguments.

Let's now turn to Licon's argument. On the surface, his argument has all the core elements of my risk argument – he appeals to the idea that procreation subjects the person brought into existence to potential harm (a softer version of the *risk claim*), that it does so without informed consent from that person (the *no-consent claim*), and is not deserved by or in the best interests of that person (examples of the *no-necessity claim*). Notwithstanding this, I believe more work is required to deliver a decisive blow in favour of child-focused antinatalism. Firstly, Licon's argument is also very short, leaving an obvious gap for an argument developed at considerably greater length, both in its formal presentation and in defending it from robust criticisms. Secondly, I frame the argument in terms of significant risk, and not potential harm – the reasons to prefer the former phrasing will be set out when I present my risk argument in Chapter Three. Thirdly, the two justifications Licon considers for subjecting one to potential harm are far too limited. Many people are inclined to believe that we can subject one to potential harm if the harm is adequately compensated or if the harm is very small or if the harm is the only means of delivering some great benefit for our species and other humans. Thus, (b) and (c) in Licon's formulation do not exhaust the landscape of procreation justification, meaning that a more capacious claim is required. My *no-necessity claim* serves this function.

1.4 – Summary

In this chapter, I surveyed the literature on antinatalism and proposed a new typology to capture its varied manifestations. I began by summarising the core epochs and themes in the rich historical tradition of antinatalism as a way of setting the stage for the arguments that tend to dominate modern antinatalist philosophy – what I termed contemporary analytic arguments for antinatalism. I claimed that these arguments fall into one of two camps: *third-party arguments* and *child-focused arguments*. The former situates the wrongness of procreation in the harm done to persons other than the created child, with the locus of concern commonly being non-human animals (*the utilitarian argument from human evil*), the environment (*the environmental argument*), and unadopted children (*the adoption argument*). The other major camp, *child-focused arguments*, makes a more direct case for why procreation is wrong, holding that the wronged party is the child who is brought into existence, either because only harms matter in assessing the moral status of whether to start a child's life (*Benatar's asymmetry argument*) or because the harms of that child's life will be very great (*Benatar's QOLA*) or because we may not impose harms to impose greater benefits for that child (*Shiffrin's argument*).

Although I distinguish between these two camps, there is no necessary conflict or inconsistency in accepting multiple arguments for antinatalism. Indeed, I believe that the cumulative weight of the child-focused risk argument and the best version of some of the third-party arguments tip the argumentative scales in favour of non-procreation. This would provide a route to antinatalism via a kind of argumentative confirmation holism, in which a set of arguments, viewed in unison, together confirm the legitimacy of antinatalism. Of course, although I believe a cumulative argumentative strategy is the most persuasive means by which to establish antinatalism, it is not within the remit of this thesis for me to further defend third-party arguments against criticisms or to construct a multi-argument antinatalist playbook. Rather, my goal is to show that my own risk argument makes a powerful case for antinatalism and is needed because the major child-focused arguments fail to establish the case for antinatalism. Having now mapped the antinatalists' repertoire of reasons for abstaining from reproduction, we are prepared to examine where the existing child-focused arguments go wrong.

2. Critiquing Antinatalism

In this chapter, I critically assess some of the key child-focused antinatalist arguments set out in Chapter One, with a view to explaining why the risk argument I go on to present in the following chapter represents an advance on this existing body of work. I begin by explaining how I have made the decision to whittle down the array of ideas and positions canvassed in the preceding chapter.

2.1 - Which Antinatalists to Consider?

I focus, in this chapter, on three specific arguments – Benatar's asymmetry, Benatar's quality of life argument, and Shiffrin's argument from consent. There are principally three considerations that have guided this selection (or, viewed in another way, my omission of particular authors and their antinatalist arguments).

1) *Length and Substance* – In some cases, there is simply insufficient material to warrant a protracted examination. For example, the works of the early Greek and Medieval philosophers are fragmentary. Even some of the later child-focused arguments (such as Hayry's rational risk avoidance argument and Licon's argument from consent) are only a few pages in length and so were dealt with briefly at the end of the last chapter.

2) *Similarity of Subject Matter* – Another way of thinking about the jettisoning process is in terms of similarity. The kind of argument I am making is one that seeks to show procreation is wrong for child-focused antinatalist arguments, which means that the arguments of Benatar and Shiffrin are the closest rivals to my own. By contrast, third-party arguments for antinatalism often have very different motivations and goals. I think many of these arguments are persuasive and successful, but their driving force for antinatalism is not my own.

3) *Space* – Even where I would have liked to consider some of the arguments above further, I have not been able to engage with them purely for reasons of space.

Although I do not consider historical and third-party antinatalist arguments any further for the above reasons, much of the subsequent analysis in this thesis incorporates ideas expressed

therein – the significance of death, the ethical weightage given to suffering, etc. In any event, having now understood the reasons for concentrating on Benatar and Shiffrin, let us begin to critique each of their positions.

2.2 - Assessing Benatar's Asymmetry

The asymmetry argument advocated by David Benatar receives the most attention in this section, as it is the antinatalist argument that has enjoyed the most scholarly interest. The asymmetry holds that the absence of harms in non-existence are better than the harms of existence, but the absent benefits in non-existence are not worse than the benefits of existence as no one is deprived of these benefits. I critique this argument at length, before arguing that my argument avoids the implausible intuitive commitments that plague his approach and better captures the spirit of antinatalist sentiment. In short, I maintain that my theory offers a more plausible and coherent account of the wrongfulness of procreation than the Benatarian asymmetry.

2.2.1 – A Failed Criticism: Symmetrical Evaluations

Before commencing my critique of Benatar, I wish to quickly show here why one of the most common responses to Benatar's argument is ineffective. The proponents of this response, foremost among them being Christine Overall, state that inserting the correct axiological evaluations in Benatar's matrix in fact yields a symmetrical assessment of procreative benefitting and harming. More specifically, they claim that boxes three and four of Benatar's matrix should feature a neutral evaluation. That is, the absence of pain is "neither good nor bad" and the absence of pleasure is "neither good nor bad".[93]

However, such a reply fails, because it does not respect the distinction that Benatar makes between intrinsic and comparative axiological claims. As clarified when presenting the asymmetry in Chapter One, Benatar intends "good" to be understood in a comparative, person-affecting sense. The absence of pain if one never exists is "good" in the sense that it is *better* than its presence if one does exist, with respect to the would-be person's interests. If

[93] Overall, C. (2012). *Why Have Children?* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 106.

we say, instead, that the absence of pain is "neither good nor bad", then under a comparative reading, this amounts to the claim that it is "neither better nor worse". However, this seems to obviously be false, as the absence of pain is clearly better than counterfactual suffering. Did we not make this judgment, we'd be hard pressed to explain on what person-affecting grounds we morally prefer the non-creation of children who would lead a life that isn't worth living.

Perhaps Overall recognises this point, but is nevertheless pressing that the failure to consider the net effects of harms and benefits within a life is a weakness of the asymmetry argument. However, it's hard to see how this can be a downside, as the asymmetry is challenging the very notion that such a ranking or balancing exercise is needed – existence is always disadvantageous if there are harms within a life, notwithstanding how much benefit accrues to the being in question. To treat this as an inherently deficient view on account of not incorporating actual amounts of intra-life pleasure and pain, as Overall does, is to privilege the prevailing view on procreative ethics from the outset. By favouring the pro-natalist orthodoxy ab initio, she begs the question against the antinatalist. A more sophisticated engagement with Benatar's asymmetry is therefore required to show where it goes wrong.

2.2.2 – Appealing to Intuition

Before advancing such a critique, we first need to understand how the asymmetry sketched out in Chapter One can be defended. One approach might claim that the asymmetry's probative force lies in its immediate intuitive plausibility, such that it strikes one upon reading or hearing it as a "fundamental moral truth".[94] Whilst asserting the asymmetry and relying on its (apparent) intuitive appeal may convince some, others are likely to demand an exploration of the factors or principles that motivate this appeal before they find this argumentative strategy satisfactory, especially in light of the fact that most people's intuitions decidedly point in the direction of pronatalism.

Benatar nowhere fleshes out the deeper reasons that might underlie such an asymmetry (although he recognises that there may be a deeper explanation and suggests that it may pertain to the fact that avoiding harms is of greater moral weight than bestowing or attaining

[94] Benatar 2012, p. 129.

benefits).[95] However, this idea that the attainment of benefits is of lesser ethical importance than the avoidance of harms cannot possibly constitute an explanation of the asymmetry's central claim. The ethical prioritisation of suffering over pleasure does not necessarily entail that absent pleasures that don't deprive one are no worse than present pleasures.

Of course, it may be that even if the basic asymmetry demands a deeper explanation, there is none, such that it is simply a brute moral fact and we have hit explanatory rock bottom. As Benatar himself admits, "every argument must have some justificatory end".[96] However, it is difficult to accept that a fairly intricate comparative principle could be an irreducible just-so moral fact. As such, I shall attempt to explore some possible foundational explanations for the basic asymmetry that satisfy the need for a rationale. I will then argue that these theories are, themselves, questionable, and not only weaken any defence from intuition, but also undermine the plausibility of Benatar's asymmetry.

2.2.2.1 – Intuitive Explanations: Anti-Frustrationism and Tranquilism

One kind of foundational explanation for why the absence of pleasure in non-existence is non-depriving (and, hence, *not bad*) posits that life's goods are fundamentally grounded in the satisfaction of desires and the fulfilment of needs. Accepting a view of this kind makes the asymmetrical assessment of pleasure considerably more attractive. In order to see how this is the case, consider Christoph Fehige's anti-frustrationism. Fehige argues that frustrated desires alone are of moral import, whereas satisfied desires and the absence of any desires are on a moral par. In defence of the second half of this claim, Fehige wonders, "if somebody induces in me the wish to own a Ferrari, and makes sure I get a Ferrari, am I ipso facto any better off than I would have been without the wish?"[97] He concludes that he would not be, as "I never want or miss either the Ferrari or anything it would have procured me."[98]

[95] Benatar 2013, p. 134

[96] Benatar 2006, p. 32.

[97] Fehige, C. (1998). 'A Pareto Principle for Possible People'. In C. Fehige and U. Wessels, *Preferences* (pp. 508-543), Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, p. 511

[98] Ibid., p. 512

Other philosophers have also expressed a theory of intra-life goods that is similar to Fehige's. Peter Singer's preference utilitarianism, for instance, "directs us to maximize the satisfaction of existing preferences", but "the creation of preferences which we then satisfy gains us nothing".[99] Singer writes that we may "think of the creation of the unsatisfied preferences as putting a debit in the moral ledger which satisfying them merely cancels out".[100] The closeness of this view to Fehige's is evident.

Another very similar position is that of the tranquilist axiology, according to which "the most intense pleasures are no better, intrinsically, than so-called 'hedonically neutral' states which are completely free of cravings".[101] Very much in keeping with the Buddhist idealisation of the absence of desire, tranquilism holds that a state in which one does not crave change entails the impossibility of improvement. There may be fine-grained distinctions between this view and anti-frustrationism, but any such differences are likely to be minor for my purposes, so future references to anti-frustrationism should be read as encompassing tranquilism.

At the intuitive heart of these positions appears to be the view that the pursuit (and realisation) of goods offers no advantage to one who lacks all desire to pursue such a course. If our pleasure-orientation is borne of a need for gratification, then the satisfaction of created needs of this kind cannot be morally superior to a state of affairs in which such the needs are totally absent. As the non-existent do not miss or lack things that they cannot desire and are not attracted to, they are not thereby made worse off by non-procreation.

Benatar, although he highlights the similarity between his thesis and Fehige's,[102] fails to explicate how the above characterisation of goods underlies the basic asymmetry. That such a need-based view of pleasure is integral to his asymmetry is evident if we study his Sick and Healthy analogy. Benatar asks us to compare a sick person with the capacity for quick

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[99] Singer, P. (1980). 'Right to Life?'. *New York Review of Books*. Retrieved from: https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1980/08/14/right-to-life/ (Accessed: 1 June 2020). Singer appears to back-track from this view in *Practical Ethics*. See Singer, P. (1993). *Practical Ethics* (2nd Edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 129.

[100] Ibid., p. 129.

[101] Gloor, L. (2017). 'Tranquilism'. *Foundational Research Institute*. Retrieved from: https://foundational-research.org/tranquilism/ (Accessed: 1 June 2020).

[102] Benatar 2006, pp. 54-57.

recovery with a healthy individual lacking such powers, and questions whether the latter is relatively disadvantaged by the absence of this healing ability.[103] He argues, plausibly, that the healthy individual is in no way worse off, for lacking something of which he has no need or use is no disadvantage. Similarly, we are invited by Benatar to conclude that the absence of good for the never-created being is no cost, for its absence is never felt or missed.

We can see, then, that the intuitive force of the basic asymmetry rests in large part on the plausibility and persuasiveness of anti-frustrationism. But is this a convincing axiological theory? There are some good reasons to suspect that it isn't. For one thing, anti-frustrationism generates odd conclusions about the nature of the good. All theories of well-being; whether well-being is identified with higher experiential welfare, with desire-satisfaction, or with the realisation of an objective list of goods; treat the instantiation of the well-being-promoting phenomenon as evaluatively desirable. It does not seem right to say, as anti-frustrationism does, that a being with more of these well-being-related goods is no (evaluatively) better off than a being (or a non-being) with less or none of those goods.

One could object at this stage that this is begging the question against the anti-frustrationist, as the idea that lacking goods necessarily amounts to being worse off is exactly what he wishes to undermine. However, the pertinent point is that we are considering the intuitive force of different axiological theories of value (with a view to assessing the intuitive merits of the asymmetry), and the fact that our intuitions do not support anti-frustrationism on this matter counts against it. Another potential objection – that procreation is a highly unusual case that calls for a different or modified theory of value – fails for the same reason. Whilst this might be a justified protest, it will not do if we are assessing a given proposal on intuitive grounds, as our intuition is governed by typical cases.

Anti-frustrationism also yields wildly counter-intuitive implications about how much weight we should give to goods in relation to bads. We are forced to conclude, for example, that a blissful life with a single unfulfilled preference is morally undesirable.[104] Cashed out another way, consider being given the choice between creating an Edenic state in which everyone enjoys unparalleled happiness and acting so as to avoid the frustration of a minor preference.

[103] Benatar 2006, p. 42.

[104] See Petersen, T. S. (1999). Brave New Children. *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy*, 34, pp. 91-117, p. 98.

According to the anti-frustrationist, we are to choose the latter.[105] Benatar's theory, then, implies that we ought to be indifferent between non-existence and a perfectly blissful life (characterised by no harms whatsoever), and that we should prefer non-existence to a lifetime of bliss adulterated only by a momentary sensation of pain. Benatar acknowledges the counter-intuitiveness of these implications, but pushes back that intuitions oft lead us astray, noting the long-standing intuition that slavery was morally acceptable.[106]

What weight to assign to intuitions is, of course, a keenly contested matter. For the time being, we can note that the overwhelming intuitive pressure against anti-frustrationism is at the very least a potential worry, especially if we are assessing ethical proposals by the standards of common-sense morality. A deeper problem, however, is that such a response is self-defeating. Recall that this section is devoted to an exploration of whether intuition gives us any reason to accept the asymmetry. It is argumentative chicanery to appeal to a particular device, and then dismiss its validity when it proves unfavourable to one's theory. A similarly ineffective argument deployed by Benatar to block the counter-intuitiveness charge is to say that the latter is motivated by "primal psychological features that compromise our judgement".[107] Cognitive biases, such as over-optimism, might impair how people assess the amount of good and bad in their lives, but it does not defuse the intuition that coming into existence can sometimes be a benefit. Psychological biases are therefore pertinent to his quality-of-life argument (as we will see later), but not to the asymmetry.

To be fair to Benatar, he does offer another more plausible reply here, namely that his view captures and reconciles widespread antinatalist intuitions that override the initial counter-intuitiveness of his position. When he argues that the asymmetry neatly explains a number of other intuitions in a way that other positions (particularly pronatalist positions) are unable to do, he has in mind the support asymmetries that I investigate shortly. But, first, we need to look at another intuition-based objection to Benatar's theory.

2.2.2.2 – Intuitions Regarding Inter-Life Comparisons

[105] Ibid., pp. 99-100.

[106] Benatar 2006, p. 203.

[107] Ibid., p. 207.

Jeff McMahan presents a thought experiment to expose the counter-intuitive commitments of the asymmetry. I shall argue that McMahan's argument fails, but can be modified in such a way that it is effective against the asymmetry. McMahan's thought experiment involves considering the possible people to be birthed by two couples. The first couple will create a life, it is determined by genetic testing, that will only last two years and be filled with "unremitting pain", without any possibility for "satisfying experiences".[108] The second couple will have a child who lives to the age of at least eighty years, and experiences "a long and happy life – an unusually good life by current standards", in which "the benefits...greatly exceed the harms".[109] However, the total quantity of harm suffered by the second child will be slightly greater than that endured by first child (as the second child has a longer life over which harms can be experienced).

Suppose, now, that effective birth control can only be made available to one of these couples. Because the second life contains more harm than the first, and because, according to McMahan, Benatar's view holds that "noncomparative existential benefits do not weigh against or cancel out corresponding noncomparative existential harms to the same person", Benatar is committed to the view that we should prioritise preventing the second child from coming into existence, even though our intuitions strongly suggest that bringing the first child into being is much more objectionable.[110] In short, the asymmetry implies that a life containing only suffering would be preferable to a "long life at an overall high level of well-being".[111] Thus, McMahan concludes that this deeply troubling implication should lead us to reject the asymmetry.

This is not a particularly compelling argument in itself, as Benatar has two persuasive responses. First, he is able to adopt a non-tabulative, intensity-based approach to the evaluation of harm. McMahan's thought experiment encumbers the antinatalist with an inter-life evaluative account in which units of suffering are simply quantified and ranked according to their totals (such that eighty years with two units of suffering per year, say, is deemed to be

[108] McMahan, J. (2013). Causing People to Exist and Saving People's Lives. *The Journal of Ethics*, 17 (1-2), pp. 5-35, p. 23.

[109] Ibid., p. 23.

[110] Ibid., p. 18.

[111] Ibid., p. 23.

worse than two years with forty units of annual suffering). However, the antinatalist is not wedded to such a naive additive view, and could instead adopt a threshold view of inter-life harm comparison.[112] Some harms, as in the case of the first child, are of such intensity that they make a life worse, irrespective of whether another life contains a greater number of smaller harms that experientially sum to a greater amount of pain. The defender of the asymmetry can allow for the fact that pleasures function as mediating states that reduce the intensity of periods of suffering, in addition to improving the general quality of one's life.

Second, consider the role of death in McMahan's example. Although Benatar states that the lives of conscious beings should not be started, he can still argue that they have an interest in continuing their lives once they exist on account of the serious harm of death (unless the harm of death is trumped by other considerations, such as the life's appalling quality).[113] We might wonder, though, how death can even be a harm under Benatar's theory if it offers relief from a life that is not worth starting. To see how, recall that the asymmetry concedes that pleasure is intrinsically good for the person that exists. Death, inasmuch as it deprives a person of such future goods, can harm someone. By contrast, failing to create someone to enjoy life's goods is not a harm, as this abstention from procreation does not deprive anyone. So, if a life is to be created, it is better, ceteris paribus, that it is not cut unduly short, as the deprivation (and, hence, the harm of death) would be greater in this case. And if a life is so poor that it is not worth continuing at all (as with the first couple), then all the more reason to abstain from actualising that life.

When McMahan argues that the asymmetry disbars existential benefits from cancelling harms, this cancellation is ambiguous between two readings –
(1) existential benefits can outweigh existential harms, so as to justify bringing a being into existence; and
(2) existential benefits can outweigh existential harms, thereby improving the quality of that life.

[112] Indeed, Benatar, himself, appears to endorse a threshold theory in intra-life assessments of well-being. See Benatar 2006, p. 63.

[113] This is because Benatar believes there is a distinction between starting a life and continuing a life.

The rejection of (1), in line with the asymmetry, does not mean (2) is unavailable to the proponent of the asymmetry. And under a certain reading of (2), one can avoid McMahan's concern. In other words, the antinatalist can deploy additional philosophical resources with respect to determining harms within a life, as per the foregoing, in order to reconcile the asymmetry and the correct comparative judgment in McMahan's thought experiment.

However, the problem identified by McMahan cannot be so neatly disentangled from the Benatarian asymmetry (which, recall, states that no lives containing suffering are worth starting). For suppose that we were to change the details of McMahan's case, such that the suffering of both potential children never exceeds the stipulated threshold of harm (i.e., neither child suffers severe harms) and they die at the same age. Imagine, further to this, that the harms and benefits within these two lives are distributed such that the harms are front-loaded – all harms are endured before the first benefit is experienced, in order to neutralise the mediating effects of pleasure. Finally, let's say that child X suffers some moderate pains in the first few years of his life, before going on to experience a reasonably pleasant life; whilst child Y suffers the same moderate pains in the first few years of his life, before leading an extraordinarily pleasant life. We can conceive of the split as something like this:

Child	**Units of Harm**	**Units of Benefit**
X	40	100
Y	40	10,000

My amendments to McMahan's thought experiment better locate the counter-intuitiveness of the asymmetry, as it lies more in Benatar's treatment of benefits than in his treatment of harms. According to the asymmetry, prospective benefits are never a consideration in favour of procreating, whilst prospective harms do give us a reason not to procreate. But, as the only distinction between these cases lies in the nature of the benefits, the asymmetry appears to lead to the view that we have no reason to favour the creation of child Y over the creation of child X. However, a view that solicits indifference between lives differing in their benefits by two orders of magnitude, and equal in every other respect, is surely wrong.

Let us quickly consider three argumentative moves Benatar might make at this juncture. First, Benatar could reply by pointing out that we should make birth control available to the parents

of child X because child Y's life will be of a higher quality. Notice, though, that this response can only work at the expense of the asymmetry, because it suggests that the quantity and degree of potential benefits constitute a relevant consideration when deciding whether to bring someone into existence, which is exactly what the asymmetry denies.

Second, Benatar could suggest that the prospective benefits are only to be accorded procreative weight when forced to choose between starting two different lives, but that they play no role when deciding to create an individual child. This suggestion will not do either, as the problem is precisely that according to the asymmetry, in neither case is the child deprived of any benefits by not being brought into existence, which means that the potential benefits cannot be a relevant consideration in either case.

Third, Benatar might say that child X would be deprived of the extra (9,900 units of) pleasure that child Y enjoys if he were to be created, leading us to think child X's life would be worse. However, we must remember here that child X still enjoys lengthy, low-intensity pleasures that he is content with. Benatar surely cannot say that any pleasure falling short of absolute bliss is a deprivation, for then he risks defusing one counter-intuitive commitment by replacing it with another. Thus, all three of the above responses look unpromising, and I conclude the asymmetry still faces an intuitive challenge in accounting for the common judgment that we should favour the creation of child Y over child X.

However, we should note here the existence of final response available to Benatar. This is the bullet-biting response, which concedes that we have no reason to prefer the creation of child X over child Y. Although this might seem to be a bullet that cannot be bitten, Benatar can argue that other advantages enjoyed by the asymmetry override its counter-intuitive commitments. One such advantage envisaged by Benatar is the asymmetry's explanatory fruitfulness in accounting for various other kinds of asymmetries that are widely held – the so-called 'support asymmetries'. It is to this strategy that we now turn our attention, noting as we do so that the high intuitive costs of the asymmetry set the bar for these explanatory benefits especially high.

2.2.3 – The Support Asymmetries

We've seen that the appeal to intuitive obviousness is not persuasive and incurs additional theoretical baggage (e.g., requiring the truth of anti-frustrationism/tranquilism and the threshold theory of harms) that is open to serious challenges. However, it's important to recognise that this isn't Benatar's principal strategy to bolster his asymmetry hypothesis. Instead, he proposes that one should accept the basic asymmetry as it is able to ground other widely-shared intuitions in a way that other explanations are unable to do, and it is this explanatory power that gives us a strong reason to accept it. More specifically, Benatar contends that the basic asymmetry serves as "the best explanation for other asymmetries that are widely accepted".[114] These asymmetries will henceforth be titled, 'the support asymmetries'. Benatar lists and defines four of these support asymmetries, as follows:[115]

i) The asymmetry of procreational duties:
While we have a duty to avoid bringing into existence people who would lead miserable lives, we have no duty to bring into existence those who would lead happy lives.[116]

ii) The prospective beneficence asymmetry:
It is strange to cite as a reason for having a child that that child will thereby be benefited. It is not similarly strange to cite as a reason for not having a child that that child will suffer.

iii) The retrospective beneficence asymmetry:
When one has brought a suffering child into existence, it makes sense to regret having brought that child into existence – and to regret it for the sake of that child. By contrast, when one fails to bring a happy child into existence, one cannot regret that failure for the sake of the person.

iv) The asymmetry of distant suffering and absent happy people:

[114] Benatar 2013, p. 140.

[115] Benatar 2012, p. 44. Interestingly, these asymmetries, although identified and addressed in *Better Never To Have Been*, were only named in the first of his two papers responding to critics, 'Every Conceivable Harm'.

[116] Although here presented in the language of duty, this argument can also be conceived of as reasons to act in a certain way and thus stripped of deontological commitments. In other words, the deontic proscription can be recast as a reason to refrain from the action in question.

We are rightly sad for distant people who suffer. By contrast we need not shed any tears for absent happy people on uninhabited planets, or uninhabited islands or other regions on our own planet.

All these support asymmetries appear to turn on the notion that we have moral duties and stances towards non-existent beings who would lead bad lives that we do not similarly have in relation to non-existent beings who would lead good lives. It is Benatar's view that these support asymmetries are, or should be, accepted, and that his basic asymmetry best explains them. Benatar's primary argumentative strategy consists in asserting the bare fact of the asymmetry, and subsequently trying to underpin it by appealing to support asymmetries that it is the best explanation of. There are several ways in which one could respond to this strategy, and below, I sketch out four possible replies, that, taken together, undercut Benatar's argument.

2.2.3.1 – Denying the Support Asymmetries

Benatar's argument only goes through if we accept the four support asymmetries he lists. Let's consider first, then, whether the support asymmetries that Benatar appeals to are prima facie plausible, or whether they could be reasonably denied.

The first of these asymmetries is widely (although not universally)[117] accepted by moral philosophers. Undoubtedly, individuals' intuitions may conflict on this matter, but it appears to many that we have strong moral obligations to avoid bringing about lives characterised by great suffering, whereas we have no corresponding positive duty to initiate lives we can be reasonably confident will be very fulfilling. Indeed, within population ethics, it is this view that is typically cast as "*the* asymmetry" [emphasis my own], with the most famous statement of this prescriptive asymmetry regarding procreational reasons/duties coming from Jeff McMahan who casts the asymmetry as follows: "the goods in a person's possible life provide

[117] For a rejection of this asymmetry, see Rachels, S. (1998). Is It Good to Make Happy People?, *Bioethics*, 12 (2), pp. 93-110.

little or no reason to cause him to exist", whilst "the expectation that a person's life would be worth *not* living *does* provide a moral reason *not* to cause that person to exist".[118]

Similarly, the third and fourth support asymmetries are difficult to deny – we can regret and be saddened by actualised bad lives, but we do not regret and are not upset by non-actualised good lives.[119] There is one way to push back against these two support asymmetries. In order to see how, we can turn to a thought experiment proposed by John Leslie to show that a planet of happy people could be better than nothing.[120] Leslie invites us to imagine islands each carrying one miserable life. Suppose each of these islands also contain varying numbers of happy people. Leslie argues that, if not actually good, then we should at least deem the island to be a lesser moral disaster when huge numbers of happy people also exist on them.[121] It's not clear that this would undermine Benatar's third and fourth support asymmetries though, as when contemplating the islands with fewer happier people, we do not experience feelings of regret and sadness for the sake of the unactualised additional persons. Rather, it seems like what is happening is a kind of psychological allayment founded on utilitarian thinking, where we are more easily reconciled to the existence of the miserable life by knowing that it is accompanied by plentiful well-lived lives. Even if this doesn't undermine any of the support asymmetries, it still counts against Benatar's basic asymmetry, as it shows that we might still have a reason to create happy lives.

The second support asymmetry – the prospective beneficence asymmetry – is less clear. Benatar could claim it is similarly attractive, for it appears to be very closely related to the asymmetry from procreational duties. That is, it's precisely because we do not believe we are possessed of compelling reasons to create good lives that it should strike us as bizarre were one to explain his or her desire for genetic offspring by citing the good that would be bestowed on the child by a procreative act. Similarly, it is partly because we are possessed of

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[118] McMahan, J. (2002). *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 300. McMahan revises his view in McMahan, J. (2009). 'Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist'. In Wasserman, D., & Roberts, M. (Eds.), *Harming Future Persons: Ethics, Genetics and the Nonidentity Problem* (pp. 49-68), New York, NY: Springer.

[119] I will explain in the next sub-section why I have grouped these two asymmetries together.

[120] Leslie, J. (1996). *The End of the World: The Science and Ethics of Human Extinction*. New York: Routledge, pp. 177-178.

[121] Ibid., p 182.

morally motivating duties or reasons to refrain from creating those who would suffer considerably that appealing to such suffering when so refraining does not strike us as unusual.[122]

However, it is not at all uncommon to hear it said that procreation confers the gift of life on the individual brought into being (the implicit idea being that this 'gift' can give one a reason to have the child for that child's sake). As Bertrand Russell states in his magisterial *History of Western Philosophy*, "there is a general belief (which I have never understood) that it is better to exist than not to exist; on this ground children are exhorted to be grateful to their parents".[123] Benatar's response to this is to say that such views are only held by unschooled people, and notwithstanding how widespread they are, such talk remains "strange and false".[124] He insists that "people reflecting on the idea of creating a child for that child's sake will discern something odd about it even if they cannot explain it", and that his basic asymmetry arms such individuals with an explanation of this oddity.[125]

However, it is not only unreflective individuals who hold such views. As we shall in Chapter Six of this thesis, there are several philosophers who disagree with the second support asymmetry, believing that it makes perfect sense to cite the goods conferred on a prospective child as a reason for having that child.[126] Some even go further and deny the first support asymmetry, arguing that these goods give us a strong moral reason to have the child. Although I do not believe any of those arguments are ultimately successful, we may note here that it's far from clear that even considered consensus sides with Benatar's intuition with respect to the second support asymmetry.

Benatar could, of course, continue to insist that notwithstanding the philosophers who deny the prospective beneficence asymmetry, the strangeness nevertheless remains. However, this response is unsatisfactory. The purpose of appealing to the support asymmetries is to make the basic asymmetry more intuitively appealing by showing its explanatory potential. Insofar

[122] One could also frame the relationship between the two asymmetries in the opposite explanatory direction, using the prospective beneficence asymmetry to buttress the asymmetry from procreational duties.

[123] Russell, B. (1946/2004). *History of Western Philosophy*. London: Routledge, p. 542.

[124] Benatar 2012, p. 130.

[125] Ibid., p. 130. See also p. 139.

[126] See, for example, Gardner, M. (2016). Beneficence and procreation. *Philosophical Studies,* 173**,** pp. 321-336.

as intuitions diverge as to the validity of one of these support asymmetries, the stubborn insistence that such a diverging intuition is bizarre appears to beg the question against the pronatalist. An alternative strategy that Benatar could take is demonstrating that most people's actual motivations for procreating are based on perceived meaning and personal desires in their own lives, not bestowing a benefit on the non-existent. However, as I noted a few paragraphs ago, the "gift of life" argument is a popular one.

In essence, most of the support asymmetries do enjoy widespread support in the philosophical community, and appear to be at the heart of the way in which many people commonly think about procreation. However, it is far from clear that they all need to be accepted, and in particular, the second support asymmetry can plausibly be denied (at least if we were to use philosophical consensus and popular opinion as the litmus test for plausible deniability).

2.2.3.2 – Reducing the Support Asymmetries

An objection to Benatar's support asymmetry strategy that appears to have been missed in the literature is that Benatar unduly inflates the number of asymmetries that exist. More specifically, the fourth asymmetry – the asymmetry of distant suffering and absent happy people – seems to me to be reducible to the third retrospective beneficence asymmetry. Indeed, the former is just an examplar of the third. Benatar clearly seems to think that these two asymmetries are distinct and that the fourth does work over and above the third. For example, in response to one of his critics, David Spurett, he highlights the fact that Spurett only limits himself to replying to the first three asymmetries and fails to address the fourth.[127]

However, it's not clear what independent work the fourth asymmetry does over and above the third, beyond simply extending the sphere of moral concern from one's biological progeny to non-kin third parties. Benatar might protest that there is a difference here not just in scope, but also in the emotive attitudes at play, as the retrospective beneficence asymmetry appeals to regret, whilst the asymmetry of distant suffering and absent happy people refers to sadness. This, though, is only a superficial difference, as both support asymmetries convey the same point, and it's hard to see how they meaningfully come apart in any practical context. Extreme suffering in the real world prompts us to feel sadness (and, by extension, regret if

[127] Ibid., p. 131

one has created the life in which that suffering manifests); the non-realised pleasure of those who never existed does not prompt either sadness (or regret if one's refusal or inability to procreate is the cause of the non-realised pleasure).

We may wonder whether the other support asymmetries are sufficiently differentiated. As I noted earlier, the asymmetry of procreative duties and the prospective beneficence asymmetry overlap to a great extent. It is difficult to see how one could accept the latter, whilst rejecting the former – if it's bizarre to cite future benefits as a reason for having a child, then how could we maintain that we have a reason to have a child for that child's sake? However, in this case, the two can come apart if our stance towards these asymmetries were inverted – that is, if the first support asymmetry is retained and the second is rejected. This is because one could think that even though reasoning that a child will be benefitted in deciding to procreate is not strange, we still don't have any strong reasons to bring happy lives into existence.

To summarise, then, as the fourth support asymmetry appears to mostly be a restatement of the third, one could argue that Benatar overstates the explanandum. This, however, still leaves open the question of whether his asymmetry serves as the best explanans for the plausible support asymmetries (for even if an asymmetry were reducible to or supervenient on another, we'd still require an ultimate explanation). Nevertheless, the amount of explanation required would be reduced if the reduction strategy were to be successful.

2.2.3.3 – Alternative Explanations for the Support Asymmetries

Setting aside any potential reduction, let us consider whether the support asymmetries are actually best explained by the basic asymmetry. It is certainly the case that they are explained by the Benatarian asymmetry. The claim that the absent harms in non-existence are preferable or "good" serves as an underpinning reason for why we have duties not to create greatly impoverished lives and make the prospective, retrospective, and emotive judgements regarding such lives as stated by Benatar. Equally, the idea that non-depriving absent benefits are not worse or "not bad" explains why we have no duties to bring about the existence of happy beings, why we find it odd to have a child for the sake of the child, and why we do not regret or feel sad about the non-existence of lives that would have been characterised by plentiful benefits.

Whether the basic asymmetry is the best explanation of these other widely accepted asymmetries, however, requires us to consider if there exists any superior alternative account of the intuitions being pumped in Benatar's argument. Such an alternative account must be capable of explaining all the support asymmetries (insofar as they are accepted) in a non-question begging manner, whilst avoiding the conclusion that procreation is always impermissible (i.e., without holding a view that is functionally akin to Benatar's idea that non-depriving absent pleasures are not worse). They should also avoid implausible and intellectually unsatisfactory ad hoc insertions of speculative principles to insulate pronatalism from scrutiny.

Complex alternative explanations have been developed by a number of different philosophers responding to Benatar, including David Boonin and David DeGrazia.[128] Below, I offer my own strategy, comprising two principles, that aims to capture the support asymmetries whilst avoiding the radical conclusion proposed by Benatar. If this attempt is successful, it strips the basic asymmetry of much of its argumentative force. Let us begin by first considering two principles that I hold are true:

1) **The Actual Persons (AP) Principle** – Only the experiences of actual persons inform our emotional responses; the never-existent, by contrast, do not cause us to undergo any particular emotive responses.

2) **The Detrimentality of Duties (DOD) Principle** – Our duties (both positive and negative) only exist where the failure to act on them is to the detriment of actual or future persons.[129]

AP appears to be true. Our emotive attitudes are almost always intentional and directed, grounded in real-world dynamics and dependent on the existence of concrete causes – indeed,

[128] Boonin, D. (2012). Better To Be. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 31 (1), pp. 10-25. DeGrazia, D. (2010). Is it wrong to impose the harms of human life? A reply to Benatar. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, 31 (4), pp. 317-333.

[129] Detriment can be broadly conceived as a harmed state, not just narrowly in the utilitarian terms of a lower welfare state. Even the undiscovered breaking of trust (e.g., infidelity) can be thought of as being to the detriment of an actual person.

it is precisely this intuition that produces the paradox of fiction.[130] This paradox – consisting in the apparent internal inconsistency in our being emotionally impacted by non-actualised inventions – might lead one to believe that there is a problem for AP, for being emotionally moved by fictitious entities and events seems to suggest that an actual person is not required to prompt emotional responses. Even if AP is too strong in ruling out non-real causes of emotion like this, we can endorse a weaker reading that allows for the possibility of AP being generally true but suspended in certain fictitious contexts:

The Weaker AP Principle: Only the experiences of actual persons inform our emotional responses; the never existent can only cause us to undergo emotional reactions if there is a sufficiently well-developed fiction.

Certainly, we may fear our own impending non-existence, but a 'future person' is just a pure potentiality – a placeholder term that lacks the interpersonal cache to engender feelings of regret and sadness.[131] Hence, weaker AP is still capable of explaining support asymmetries 3 and 4.

DOD is also very attractive, for it is difficult to see how we could have a duty, the non-discharging of which does not affect anybody. Morality is about our other-affecting conduct, and this is the basic idea exploited by DOD. Furthermore, note that both AP and DOD taken together do not yield the Benatarian position that procreation is always impermissible. Benatar might argue that any experienced harm is to the detriment of a future person, but nothing in AP and DOD commits one to this view (as detriment can be capaciously understood as "bad overall", where living a life of great pleasures and insignificant pains would not be detrimental).

Thus, AP and DOD appear to be plausible principles and function independently of the asymmetry. Let's now see how AP and DOD can account for each of the support asymmetries. Take the asymmetry of procreational duties, first. DOD explains this by noting

[130] See Carroll, N. (1990). *The Philosophy of Horror*. New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 60-87 for an engaging treatment.

[131] In the following section, I consider this idea of developing the 'future person' fiction such that we are emotionally moved.

that we have a duty not to bring a suffering child into existence because failing to act on this duty is to the detriment of a future person; by contrast, we have no duty to bring a happy child into existence because failing to act on this duty is not to the detriment of any actual or future person.

This account fares better than many other alternative accounts that have been provided to explain the first support asymmetry.[132] Consider the unattractive underlying explanation that we have no (or only very weak) positive duties. This is an unsatisfactory explanation because whilst it is true that have no positive duties in relation to non-actual persons, it does not explain why we appear to have negative duties in this respect. The explanation that a positive duty to create happy children would be too onerous is also inadequate – it would imply that we would have such a duty in the event that pregnancy and the costs of parenting were short and painless, but the procreational duties asymmetry drives at the idea that it seems incoherent to suggest we could ever have such a duty.

A hedonic priority principle, in which avoiding pain is more important than creating pleasure, has also been cited as a potential explanation,[133] but this doesn't explain why we don't have reasons to create a hypothetically happy child – it merely says preventing the possible birth of a miserable child ought to be prioritised. Something like the prioritisation of harm avoidance only explains why our duties to avoid creating suffering children are stronger; it does not explain why we don't ever have duties to procreate for the sake of the child.[134] In itself, this is insufficient to ground the second-half of the asymmetry, for it provides no rationale as to why absent pleasures are "not bad".

As for the second support asymmetry, which I have already given reasons to be suspicious of, DOD is capable of explaining this too. It is not strange to speak of not creating a suffering child for that child's sake because the failure to act on the non-creation (i.e., having the child) will be to that child's future detriment. However, if it seems strange to speak of benefitting a prospective happy child by having them, this is because we have no strong reasons or duties

[132] See Benatar 2012 and Benatar 2013.

[133] See Degrazia 2010.

[134] Benatar himself notes this in Benatar 2013, p. 131.

to have such a child (given that the failure to act on such reasons is not to that child's current or future detriment).

Now let us turn our attention to the third and fourth support asymmetries. Note that they both turn on our emotional responses (regret and sadness, respectively) in relation to actual suffering and potential pleasure. Recall also that AP states that only the experiences of actually existing persons dictate our emotional responses in the absence of a robust fiction. We can now see how AP explains these two asymmetries. We regret the birth of, and feel sad for, suffering humans because they are actually existing people undergoing negative experiences. However, we do not regret the birth of, and feel sad for, non-existent potentially happy humans because we have no emotional attitudes towards the non-existent.

To recap, our assessments regarding miserable, suffering-laden lives in each of the four support asymmetries can be explained by AP and DOD, complemented by a simple "badness" moral principle to the effect that it is bad that people lead lives of a poor quality which would be widely endorsed. With respect to our assessments regarding happy, pleasure-filled lives in the support asymmetries under consideration, we may say that we have no duties to create happy children because of DOD, and feel no regret or sadness when we reflect on the non-existence of those who would have led happy lives because of AP.

How might Benatar respond to all of this? For one, he might argue that DOD is an unsatisfactory explanatory principle, as it remains vulnerable to the legitimate demand for further explanation. For instance, he might enquire why we ought not to accept the following principle instead of DOD:

3) **The Beneficence of Duties (BOD) Principle** – Our duties (both positive and negative) can only exist where the fulfilment of the duty is to the benefit of an actual or future person. [135]

[135] Benatar makes a similar point against Gerald Harrison, who expresses a view similar to DOD in holding that we "can only have a duty to do X, if failing to do X would wrong someone". Harrison, G. (2012). Antinatalism, Asymmetry, and an Ethic of Prima Facie Duties. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 31 (1), pp. 94-103, p. 96. Benatar criticises this view by questioning, "Why should it not be the case that there can be a duty only if there is a *beneficiary* in the event that the purported duty *is* performed?" Quote from Benatar 2012, p. 162. See also Ibid., p. 140 where he makes a similar point.

If we were to accept BOD instead of DOD (or, perhaps, alongside it), then we are unable to explain the asymmetry of procreational duties, as fulfilling a purported duty to create a happy child would be to the benefit of such a child (according to standard pronatalism). In response to this, I am inclined to argue that we should favour DOD instead of BOD because of something akin to a priority principle in which preventing harms takes ethical precedence. However, this does not mean that my argument fares any worse than the basic asymmetry. This is because, as I noted at the start of section 2.2.2, Benatar concedes that there is probably a deeper story to his asymmetry, which might consist in the fact that "the avoidance of harms has greater value than the bestowal or attainment of benefits".[136] As such a principle underpins both the asymmetry and DOD, it appears that both accounts have the same terminus of explanation and Benatar's demand for further explanation is self-defeating.

Another objection targets AP instead of DOD, by identifying cases in which our emotions are seemingly triggered by cases of non-existence. Consider, for instance, the supposed relief we feel when contemplating the non-creation of a child who would have suffered terribly. Why do we feel relief when thinking about a child whose horrible suffering was averted by refraining from procreation, but we do not feel regret or sadness when contemplating the existence of a child who would have lived very fruitfully but is denied such a life by refraining from procreation? Above, I posited that the priority principle underpins DOD, but here I suggest that DOD might underpin AP. When we reflect on the first case, we are relieved that we chose (or will choose) the outcome that results in less suffering, because the alternative would have been a case of actual detrimentality, and this violation of DOD supersedes AP. However, we are not regretful of, or saddened by, a case of never-actualised happiness, because the alternative would not have been a case where DOD is violated, and therefore AP still dominates.

Benatar is likely to protest at this stage that his basic asymmetry possesses the desirable quality of theoretical parsimony, for it explains all the support asymmetries viz. a single, unified explanatory principle.[137] His explanation, thus, satisfies certain general criteria for an explanatory theory, namely that of elegance and simplicity in a way that alternative accounts

[136] Benatar 2013, p. 134.

[137] Benatar 2013, p. 127.

(such as mine) cannot. I grant that this is undoubtedly a virtue of his asymmetry. But simplicity is only a general indicative virtue in theory selection, it is not an instant defeater. Simplicity is one of the considerations that figure in the cost-benefit analysis of determining which explanation to favour. In this cost-benefit exercise, I would argue that the significant intuitive costs incurred by the asymmetry override the virtue of simplicity – my theory might be more complex, but this complexity is philosophically purchased by improved plausibility a and intuition-capturing internal consistency.

We may conclude by considering what exactly AP and, in particular, DOD imply for antinatalism. Although they have been presented here as a rival explanation to the support asymmetries, they appear to be favourable to an antinatalist reading, very much akin to Hermann Vetter's matrix in Chapter Two. If we assume that we can never be certain that a life will go well, DOD implies that we should not procreate. However, this is now a statement that reads like my risk argument, not the asymmetry (as creating a child who will lead a guaranteed good life, even if it were marred by some minor costs, would still be permissible).

2.2.3.4 - The Reference Point Objection

Another powerful objection to Benatar's support asymmetry strategy is what I shall term the *reference point objection*. Julio Cabrera is the philosopher who has most forcefully advanced this critique. Cabrera argues that the formal part of Benatar's argument, by which he means the 'basic asymmetry', suffers from a logical flaw.[138] Cabrera maintains that in evaluating absent pain as good and absent pleasure as not bad, Benatar uses two different conceptions of a "possible being" (more specifically, he uses a counterfactual conception in the former case and an empty conception in the latter case).[139] By empty, Cabrera means that the possible being is "not [counterfactually] represented in the world".[140]

[138] Cabrera, J. (2011). Quality of Human Life and Non-existence. *Revista Redbioética/UNESCO*, 1 (3), pp. 25-35, p. 26. This formal argument is contrasted with the 'material' argument, by which Cabrera means the quality-of-life argument critiqued in the next section.

[139] Ibid., p. 27.

[140] Ibid., p. 27.

Although I think this criticism is basically correct, Cabrera's account lacks clarity, which I aim to offer below. The differing counterfactual conceptions that Cabrera speaks of, in my view, boil down to an equivocation in Benatar's asymmetry with respect to the reference point for evaluation. When Benatar asks us to think about absent pains, he imagines a possible being whose pain is such that he would be better off never existing (or, in Cabrera's words, that "if he could choose, he would choose this way").[141] However, when we are told to imagine absent pleasures, there is no possible being whose experiences are realised in a subject represented in the world.

Here's another way of thinking about the foregoing. When Benatar invites us to think of the "good" absent pain in non-existence, we usually imagine this from a 'looking-back' perspective. That is, we think of a particular person's suffering and make claims about the absence of that suffering being better. However, when considering the "not bad" absent pleasures in non-existence, Benatar is asking us to conceive of this purely from the 'looking-forward' perspective (some would-be person experiencing would-be happiness). Were we to equalise this and imagine both as counterfactually identifiable beings (e.g., consider Brian who leads a bad life and Brian who leads a good life), then we are more inclined to see the absence of Brian's pleasures had he never existed as "bad/worse" (as opposed to merely "not bad/not worse").[142] Therefore, specifying a concrete reference point undercuts the intuitive force of Benatar's basic asymmetry.

By extension, then, the Benatarian explanation of the support asymmetries is only superficially plausible because of this referential trickery. Take the retrospective beneficence asymmetry, for example. Whilst the failure to create any would-be unindividuated happy individual is not regrettable, the counterfactual state of affairs in which an existent identifiable individual leading a good life was never birthed is a cause for regret.

2.2.4 – The Risk Argument vs. The Asymmetry

[141] Ibid., p. 29.

[142] Whether we regret this for Brian depends on the quality and richness of the fiction, as per AP. DOD, meanwhile, explains why it is not bad to fail to create Brian even on the condition he has a good life.

Having now looked at where the asymmetry argument comes unstuck, we can begin to see how the risk argument is well-placed to overcome these weaknesses. I am conscious of the fact that I have not yet presented my argument, and so it might seem strange to already begin positioning it as superior to alternative *child-focused arguments*. However, with the problems facing the asymmetry fresh in our minds, I am reluctant to yet again defer a comparative critique until after the formal presentation of my risk argument in the next chapter. Instead, I think we are already in a position to look forward to the risk argument and anticipate the benefits it can offer over its major rivals, foremost of which is the asymmetry argument.[143]

My argument promises a large number of advantages over the asymmetry, which may be broadly categorised as follows. Firstly, my argument is more stable, insofar as it is not dependent on the truth of theories of well-being like anti-frustrationism and tranquilism. The risk argument would be aided by these theories, but is not reliant on their being true. As we saw above, the asymmetry is also committed to a threshold theory of quantifying harms in order to evade counter-intuitive inter-life comparisons. Because my argument is less reliant on very specific conceptions of well-being, it is more accessible to those of different philosophical persuasions.

Secondly, the risk argument is not vulnerable to the kinds of compelling critiques that I have put forward against the asymmetry above. This is because my argument incurs fewer damaging intuitive costs, is not open to outright denial, and isn't susceptible to logical flaws (cf. the 'reference point' objection). Of course, this isn't to say that criticisms cannot be lodged against my position, but we shall have to wait until Part II of this thesis to see if those criticisms are successful.

Thirdly, the risk argument better captures the antinatalist moral objection to procreation. Although relatively few people openly adopt the label of 'antinatalist', those who do so (and do so for child-focused reasons) are generally concerned about the severe harms that new beings could, and probably will, suffer. Arguably no one who comes to antinatalism does so for the technical asymmetry argument. My argument is thus more in more in keeping with the spirit of the strongly-held opposition to bringing new sentient beings into existence.

[143] The same point also holds for QOLA and Shiffrin's argument, both of which I compare to the risk argument later in this chapter.

2.3 – Assessing Benatar's 'Quality of Life' Argument (QOLA)

In Chapter One, we surveyed another of Benatar's antinatalist arguments – his 'quality of life' argument (QOLA). The essence of this argument, it shall be recalled, is that even the best human lives are of a very poor quality under any plausible theory of well-being. This argument is less complicated than the asymmetry, but it's no less fraught with difficulties. I outline below three major weaknesses of this argument.

2.3.1 – Partisan Tabulation

The first problem with this attempt to establish antinatalism is that it over-estimates life's bads (and, as a corollary, under-estimates life's goods). Benatar rightly identifies the pervasiveness of suffering, but he systematically ignores the widespread goods that many people enjoy. Each of the negative phenomenal states pinpointed by Benatar, which we saw in section 1.3.2, has an antonym. One could just as easily say that our lives are characterised by fulfilling hobbies, gustatory pleasures, meaningful relationships, stimulating conversations, artistic appreciation, the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge, participation in sport, the enjoyment of natural beauty, simple relaxation, the comforts of sleep, healthfulness for the most part, sexual gratification, liberty, moral growth, and so on.[144] Many people, reflecting on such a list, would be inclined to say that such goods feature prominently in their own lives.

Benatar might concede that good states such as the ones enumerated above are instantiated, but the negative states obtain more frequently. However, were he to make this move, his claim would turn out to be evidently false, at least in many important respects. Consider, for example, the aches and pains that Benatar points out are a regular feature of our lives. Whilst this is correct, it is also true that, normally, we are in an ache-less, well-functioning state.[145]

[144] See also Weinberg 2016, pp. 171-172 for a list of procreative goods.

[145] When I say "we" in this context, I am referring to most people who are in a position to deliberate on Benatar's argument.

The inability to immediately satisfy our hunger is another factor identified by Benatar as symptomatic of our miserable plight, but here too, we are more often sated than hungry.

Nor is our life as bad as Benatar claims it is under the desire fulfilment theory. Unquestionably, important desires remain unfulfilled for many people, but it is implausible that everyone in the world is burdened by a plethora of un-met desires. A non-negligible percentage of people harbour desires for the goods surveyed in the opening paragraph of this sub-section, and these desires are, at least in large part, satisfied. Similarly, under the objective list theory of well-being, many of the goods I listed would be included as objective goods that are realised within several lives.

My criticism here is not that Benatar pegs the benchmark of a good quality of life to an unreachable standard. Benatar argues that just because a given standard is unattainable doesn't mean it's not required. I agree – indeed, this is what I think of consent. Rather, my criticism is that Benatar does not engage in any meaningful discussion of the goods in life, discussion that is entirely necessary to establish his strong conclusion that everyone in the world endures an appalling quality of life.

2.3.2 – Neglecting Subjectivity

The second problem with Benatar's QOLA is that it treats subjectively-endorsed goods as mostly irrelevant, disregarding in the process "the authority of the individual's evaluative perspective".[146] Benatar stresses that his argument is consistent with many theories of welfare (hedonism, objective list theories, etc.), but it crucially regards the subjective assessments of welfare that underpin many of those theories to be fatally flawed. Of course, such low weight must necessarily be accorded to subjective judgments about one's quality of life in order for QOLA to go through, given the obvious fact that most people determine their life to be of a suitably high standard.

Many people, reflecting on their lives, regard themselves as leading a happy and fulfilling life; a life filled with many goods that are valuable to them. Peter Railton has argued that

[146] Hawkins, J. (2010). The Subjective Intuition. *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition,* 148 (1), pp. 61-68, p. 62.

"what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware".[147] Thus, in the fact that most people take events and features in their existence to be desirable, we have good prima facie grounds for concluding that the quality of human lives is not as dreadful as Benatar claims. Benatar will here object that we ought not to immediately cede to subjective determinations, especially if we have independent evidence that casts doubt on its rationality. In other words, Benatar argues that the life-affirming judgments made by the majority of the population fail to satisfy Railton's proviso ("at least if he were rational"). A great deal hangs, then, on the psychological data that is marshalled in support of this thesis.

2.3.3 – Contested Psychology

Benatar argues that the widespread satisfaction with one's quality-of-life (QOL) is produced by irrational mechanisms, and should therefore be significantly discounted. Drawing on a body of psychological research, he argues that humans are prone to systematic, distortionary cognitive biases that impair their ability to make accurate assessments of their QOL. In particular, he cites three such biases – Pollyannaism (an overriding optimism bias), adaptation (people become habituated to even substantial decreases in their welfare), and relative assessments of well-being (in which people assess their QOL by comparison to that of others).[148]

Other writers have also considered the intersection between cognitive biases and the predisposition to pronatalism. Metzinger, for instance, argues that a superintelligence that is "an authority in the field of ethical and moral reasoning", whose values are perfectly aligned with our own best interests, might favour antinatalism by correcting for cognitive biases that prevent us from recognising the enormity and significance of suffering.[149] However, as

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[147] Railton, P. (1986). Facts and Values. *Philosophical Topics,* 14 (2), pp. 5-31, p. 9.

[148] See Benatar 2006, pp. 64-69 for more. Sharot, T. (2011). *The Optimism Bias: A Tour of the Irrationally Positive Brain.* New York, NY: Pantheon Books presents a good overview of the literature on the optimism bias.

[149] Metzinger, T. (2017, 7 August). Benevolent Artificial Anti-Natalism (BAAN). Retrieved from: https://www.edge.org/conversation/thomas_metzinger-benevolent-artificial-anti-natalism-baan (Accessed: 9 May 2020). Metzinger, drawing on the Buddhist notion of *bhava-tanha* (the craving for existence), also proposes an additional deep-rooted and pervasive cognitive bias that he calls "existence bias". This bias, forged

Benatar's treatment of this subject is much fuller than Metzinger's, I shall limit myself only to an exploration of the points he raises.

The problem, once again, is that Benatar overstates the strength of these biases. Psychological phenomena, like the optimism bias and habituation, are background biases that can pollute the accuracy of our assessments, but they don't render us completely incapable of making reality-attuned judgments. It is wildly implausible to suppose that each and every person who deems their QOL to be satisfactorily high is under the grip of an omnipotent triad of biases that leaves them unable to make true foundational judgments about their mental state and life satisfaction. In other words, the biases should be factored into our analysis as an offsetting factor, but not as an overriding factor.

Another problem is that much of the actual psychology referenced by Benatar is susceptible to critique. For instance, whilst we do generally become adapted to a hedonic set point, this varies greatly depending on individual temperament and this set point is not unmoving regardless of conditions or circumstance.[150] Take also his claim that we recall positive life experiences more frequently than negative ones, and that this "distorts our judgment of how well our lives have gone so far".[151] There is compelling research to indicate the exact opposite – that we are more likely to remember negative experiences,[152] and remember them with more accurate detail.[153] Indeed, there is a vast body of psychological literature that explores the prevalence of a negativity bias, in sharp contrast to the optimism bias that supposedly infects our QOL assessments.[154] In other words, bad events exercise a greater

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in the fires of evolutionary history, heightens our sensitivity to pro-existence factors and dulls our sensitivity to those factors that might caution against existence, either our own or others'.

[150] Diener, E., Lucas, R.E., and Scollon, C.N. (2006). Beyond the hedonic treadmill: revising the adaptation theory of well-being. *American Psychologist*, 61 (4), pp. 305-314.

[151] Ibid., p. 65.

[152] See Laura Carstensen's comments in Caren, A. (2018, 1 November). Why We Often Remember The Bad Better Than The Good. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/2018/11/01/why-we-often-remember-bad-better-than-good/ (Accessed: 1 July 2020).

[153] Kensinger E. A. (2009). Remembering the Details: Effects of Emotion. *Emotion Review: Journal of the International Society for Research on Emotion*, 1 (2), pp. 99-113.

[154] See Rozin, P., & Royzman, E.B. (2001). Negativity bias, negativity dominance, and contagion. *Personality and Social Psychology Review.* 5 (4), pp. 296–320.

power over our lives than good ones.[155] To complicate matters further, the negativity and positivity biases vary with age[156] and gender,[157] which makes it even more difficult to make blanket generalisations across the global population.

What seems clear, though, is that biases can point us towards both optimism and pessimism, and these dispositions will colour our QOL judgments.[158] Thus, if the negativity bias holds sway for some people, then they are actually under-estimating just how good their lives are (even if they already take it to be going reasonably well). In other words, correcting for this bias would mean affected people come to realise that their lives are going extremely well, as opposed to merely well.

Finally, Benatar's appeal to psychological findings may also be self-defeating. Consider that one of the most distorting influences in the realm of philosophical argumentation is confirmation bias, in which one selectively constructs arguments and chooses evidence to support a given pre-theoretical stance. Reason, then, is a justificatory instrument deployed to validate a conclusion we've already accepted.[159] Coupled with the above psychological literature on the negativity bias, why ought we not to conclude that Benatar's QOLA is the product of these twin biases?

Here, Benatar might retort that he is able to exercise critical scrutiny with respect to his beliefs in order to overcome the pressure of such psychological biases, which most people do not routinely do. However, what are we to make of the many philosophers, whose daily calling is the employment of their critical faculties, who, even after deliberation, determine

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[155] Baumeister, R.F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K.D. (2001). Bad Is Stronger Than Good. *Review of General Psychology*, 5 (4), pp. 323-370.

[156] Carstensen, L.L., & DeLiema, M. (2018). The positivity effect: a negativity bias in youth fades with age. *Current opinion in behavioral sciences*, 19, pp. 7–12.

[157] Grabe, M.E., & Kamhawi, R. (2006). Hard Wired for Negative News? Gender Differences in Processing Broadcast News. *Communication Research*, 33 (5), pp. 346-369.

[158] Mayo Clinic. (2002, August 13). Mayo Clinic Study Finds Optimists Report A Higher Quality Of Life Than Pessimists. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved from: www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2002/08/020813071621.htm (Accessed: 7 July 2020).

[159] See Sperber, D., & Mercier, H. (2017). *The Enigma of Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 247.

that they are happy? It seems unbelievable, not to mention wildly narcissistic, to propose that Benatar and his supporters are somehow endowed with the power to overcome cognitive biases in a way that other humans cannot. Thus, if we are looking at the psychological roots of our assessments, then Benatar's QOLA is equally the product of a distortionary bias.

2.3.4 – The Risk Argument vs. QOLA

Based on the above concerns, there are two main reasons to prefer the risk argument to QOLA. Firstly, as we will see in the next chapter, my argument does not ignore or downplay the intensity and frequency of the goods that are enjoyed by many people, a one-sided hedonic tabulation that Benatar's analysis is guilty of. Secondly, my argument doesn't deny, dismiss, or override the positive QOL evaluations that are made by many people. Benatar can only see the fruits of his QOLA if he can show that billions of people are systematically mistaken about such subjective determinations of their wellbeing (i.e., have cognitive biases that impair self-assessments of their well-being), and in pursuit of such a demonstration, he empirically over-commits himself to a tendentious and selectively curated body of psychological literature to underscore his core argument.

By contrast, the risk argument seeks to problematise procreation notwithstanding these evaluations. My argument does not face any of the above problems, as it focuses on riskiness (i.e., the significant potential for badness), rather than making an actual claim that every life is miserable. The latter claim, made by QOLA, at best can only generate a local, limited form of antinatalism, whereby people should not have children if their offspring will grow up in abject poverty, be born with painful genetic disorders, and so on. The move to a more global kind of antinatalism on the grounds of QOLA alone will incur the problems discussed above, which the risk argument is able to sidestep.

As a final observation on how the risk argument fares when compared to QOLA, it seems true to me that Benatar is unlikely to be hostile to the risk argument in its broadest outlines. Indeed, he, himself, appeals to risk at certain junctures in the presentation of QOLA. In noting that children are liable to suffer serious harms, he contends that prospective parents "play a procreational 'Russian Roulette', in which their children stand to pay the price".[160]

[160] Benatar 2013, p. 124.

Benatar, in other places, draws upon the consent claim, arguing that the infliction of life's harms on "non-consenting beings" is especially problematic.[161] However, despite Benatar's many interesting and highly unique contributions to the debate, he does not develop why this out to be deemed morally problematic; work that I see my risk argument as doing.

2.4 – Assessing Shiffrin's Argument

The final argument we shall look at in this chapter is Seana Shiffrin's argument. I have relatively little to say about this, because I find much of her reasoning persuasive and her argument, in many important ways, parallels my own. She, too, focuses on consent, and notes that plentiful goods within a life do not exculpate procreation. However, despite these similarities, I will identify here how my argument constitutes a departure from Shiffrin's argument, and why this departure is to be favoured.

2.4.1 – The Risk Argument vs. Shiffrin's Consent Argument

The first way in which my argument differs to Shiffrin's is that I actually try to show how the risk argument leads to global antinatalism. This, however, is not Shiffrin's objective. In fact, she openly states that procreation might be permissible, notwithstanding some of its morally dubious features (such as the "nonconsensual imposition of significant burdens").[162] Thus, although her argument problematises procreation, she doesn't robustly defend antinatalism, given that her interest is in presenting the basis for wrongful life suits. This, in turn, means that she doesn't properly address counter-arguments to her view. For example, she concedes that she is not sure what to make of the counter-argument that a very high percentage of people are happy to be born and retrospectively endorse their lives.[163] By contrast, I spend the entire second half of this thesis dealing with objections such as this.

There are also deeper problems with Shiffrin's framing of her argument. Recall from Chapter Two that the essence of her anti-procreative claim can be summarised as follows:

[161] Ibid., p. 132.

[162] Shiffrin 1999, p. 139.

[163] Ibid., p. 133.

Shiffrin's maxim (SM): The imposition of non-consensual lesser harms to secure greater pure benefits is morally problematic.

Her primary analogy to defend *SM* is a case in which Wealthy decides to bestow his wealth on a non-needy population by "dropping a hundred cubes of gold bullion, each worth $5 million".[164] Unable to deliver this bounty by any other means, Wealthy makes an effort to minimise the risk of the dropped cubes hitting anyone, and although it mostly lands at people's feet, one individual (Unlucky) is struck by the falling cube, which breaks his arm. Call this the *Gold Bar* case. *Gold Bar*, Shiffrin maintains, shows that *SM* is true.

However, there seem to be clear instances in which *SM* appears not to hold. Consider, for instance, parents who involuntarily send their young offspring to summer camps. The benefits, such as the inculcation of positive virtues and discipline, are necessarily connected to the costs of discomfort and temporary hardship, yet it would generally be agreed that such behaviour would be defensible (if not desirable) on the part of parents. Shiffrin might retort that parents may justifiably force their children to attend the camp not because it provides the child with a benefit (e.g., discipline), but rather because it averts a future harm (e.g., a more wayward life lived in the absence of discipline). So, we are justified in imposing the short-term costs on our child because we are aiming to thereby avoid even greater costs down the line (which is justifiable), not because we want to provide greater benefits (which, as per Shiffrin, is not justifiable). I leave it to the reader to consider whether this is a plausible explanation of these parenting decisions. Even if one is persuaded that it is, there is another way to show that *SM* is not tenable.

We can show this by modifying *Gold Bar* so that the lesser harms imposed involve relatively miniscule costs and the greater benefits thereby secured are extraordinarily valuable. Consider *Modified Gold Bar*, wherein the stipulated monetary value of the bars delivers intense and prolonged happiness, and lands with reduced impact so that it only produces a mild and quickly passing headache for Unlucky. All other features of the case are identical to

[164] Ibid., p. 127.

Gold Bar (Unlucky cannot be consulted, there is no other way to deliver the bars, etc.). Here, I suggest we are inclined to think dropping the bars is not only justifiable, but desirable.[165]

In these cases, Shiffrin might say that something of "great objective significance is at stake" that perhaps enables us to hypothesise consent on the part of the affected party.[166] However, we may here wonder why procreation does not satisfy the "objective significance" test, especially given the common view that existence is supremely and intrinsically valuable. Here, Shiffrin is likely to say either that the lesser harms are insufficiently small or that the greater benefits are uncertain, both of which make it difficult to assume consent on the grounds of "objective significance".

This kind of defence appears to expose an irony latent in *SM*. This is because *SM* claims that the unconsented-to imposition of lesser harms for greater benefits is impermissible, unless the benefits *really* are lesser and the benefits *really* are greater. Furthermore, this appeal to epistemic uncertainty paired to the significance of harms now ends up resembling my risk argument. Indeed, like Benatar, Shiffrin has also made statements that seem very amenable to the risk argument. For example, she notes that procreation is "a morally hazardous activity because in all cases it imposes significant risks and burdens upon the children who result".[167]

However, it is important to note that the risk argument expresses a slightly different idea to *SM*. This is because the risk argument doesn't presuppose that harms imposed without consent can never be justified to secure pure benefits – it rather appeals to the idea that exposure to possibly very severe harms is unjustified without consent or a compelling reason to impose that risk on another. In other words, *SM* focuses on actual outcomes, whereas the risk argument focuses on probability. My formulation avoids some of the above-cited problems. Nevertheless, in spirit, the argument made by Shiffrin and my own argument are bedfellows. What Shiffrin doesn't do, as mentioned before, is engage with the litany of objections that can be directed at this form of antinatalism, and it is to the corpus of

[165] It is probably the case that procreation is better simulated by *Gold Bar* than by *Modified Gold Bar*. However, we will see in Chapter Four that there are some who believe that future human life may be radically enhanced, such that it arguably begins to resemble *Modified Gold Bar.* I take that view to be deeply mistaken, and will show why there.

[166] Shiffrin 1999, p. 132.

[167] Ibid., p. 137.

objections that the bulk of the remainder of this thesis shall be dedicated. Before that, however, a fuller exposition of my own argument is in order, as I have hinted at the risk argument's many virtues in this chapter without formally presenting and defending it. This is what the next chapter is devoted to.

3. The Risk Argument

In the introduction to this thesis, we saw that my risk argument consists of three distinct claims – that procreation entails the imposition of significant risk, that said risk is imposed without the created being's pre-natal consent, and that there is no compelling reason to introduce the risk – and argues on the basis of these claims that procreation is (almost always) immoral. A formal version of this argument could be presented as follows:

P1: Imposing a significant risk on another human being is, by default, morally impermissible unless either one has consent from that human or there are significant countervailing considerations.
P2: Procreation involves the imposition of a significant risk on another human (the *risk claim*).
P3: Procreation involves the absence of consent from the affected human (the *no-consent claim*).
P4: Procreation is not a case involving significant countervailing reasons (the *no-necessity claim*).
C: Procreation is morally impermissible.

P1 is what I sometimes refer to in this thesis as the core moral claim – it is a general (and, I will argue below, well-supported) moral postulate. If *P1* is correct, then saddling non-consenting persons with unnecessary significant risk is wrong. *P2*, *P3*, and *P4* aim to show that procreation satisfies *P1*. The *risk claim*, the *no-consent claim*, and the *no-necessity claim* work together to show that procreation is the kind of act that *P1* states is impermissible. This chapter aims to examine the contours of this argument. However, before turning to that task, I first explain the mechanics of my argument, with a view to clarifying how it is best situated within the body of antinatalist argumentation surveyed in the preceding chapters.

3.1 – Mechanics and Clarification

The antinatalist procreative principle at the heart of the argument locates the wrongness of reproduction in a harm that is done to the person brought into existence. Therefore, returning to the framework proposed in Chapter One, we can immediately see that my argument is a

child-focused argument. However, the argument's membership in this group does not, of itself, furnish an account of how my argument works, given the wide variety of forms that child-focused arguments can take.

As a way of defining the precise contours of the risk argument, then, we may consider a number of different antinatalist binaries in three different domains – the scope of my argument, its motivations, and its function. This taxonomy primarily functions as a novel way of delineating the fine-grained distinctions between antinatalist arguments even when they appear to be broadly similar, so that my own contribution can be situated within this rich tapestry. In this way, it adds more flesh on the bones of the simple binary taxonomy introduced in Chapter One. This is important because, before we can get our teeth into the philosophical meat of my argument, we must get clear on what my argument is and isn't saying. Let us proceed by first clarifying the scope of my argument.

Scope

The first distinction I want to draw is between global and local forms of antinatalism. A local form of antinatalism seeks only to problematise a narrow subset of procreative acts, such as couples with poor parenting skills becoming biological parents. A global moral argument for antinatalism has a more comprehensive scope inasmuch as it asserts the wrongness of all, or almost all, procreation by challenging features inherent to the act of procreation. For reasons that will become clear in due course, my argument is best understood as belonging to the global category of antinatalism.

The second scope-related distinction is between sentiocentric antinatalism (antinatalist arguments that apply to the creation of all sentient beings) and anthropocentric antinatalism (antinatalist arguments that apply to the creation of only human beings). How my argument is to be classified here is a much more difficult question to answer. In principle, the considerations that I assert underlie procreative wrongness could be extended to cover cases of animal reproduction. The object of philosophical scrutiny in this thesis shall exclusively be human procreation as this is what is of most practical interest given our moral agency and the relative ease with which we can control our reproductivity (as compared to the reproduction of free-living animals). However, even though I do not explore in this thesis how the argument applies to other sentient creatures, I briefly set out below the moves one would

need to make in order to extend the argument from human lives to subjectively aware non-human animal lives.[168]

The *risk claim* seems easy to extend to animals. The lives of animals are characterised by great risk, and, indeed, there are good reasons to think that the lives of conscious free-living animals are characterised by much more suffering than is, generally speaking, typical of an average human life.[169] The *no-consent claim* and the *no-necessity claim* are trickier to settle. Animals also do not consent to their birth. Of course, it is debatable whether sentient non-human animals are, in principle, capable of consenting to anything. Much depends on the theory of animal cognition that one subscribes to, but further reflection on this issue need not detain us here, as it is the absence of consent that my argument focuses on.[170] Animals also do not need to be brought into existence. It could be argued that animal reproduction is necessary to maintain predator-prey dynamics in a thriving ecosystem. However, this raises the higher-level question of whether the continuation of species and ecosystems constitutes a compelling reason to procreate, which is further explored in Chapter Six.

In short, I think there is obvious scope for maintaining that the relevant subjects of unconsented-to risks without necessity are all beings with an experiential welfare that can be promoted or compromised by the outcome of such risks. Such an argument would pertain to the creation of any sentient being, including, but not limited to, Homo sapiens. In any case, I largely remain neutral on this expansion of moral scope, limiting all subsequent argument to human procreation.

Motivations

[168] The most obvious consequence of this position is that, akin to Benatar's argument, it would yield the view that the practice of breeding animals into existence for human use is wrong. See Benatar 2006, pp. 2-3.

[169] See Horta, O. (2010). 'Debunking the Idyllic View of Natural Processes: Population Dynamics and Suffering in the Wild', *Télos*, 17, pp. 73-88. Faria, C (2022). *Animal Ethics in the Wild*: *Wild Animal Suffering and Intervention in Nature*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press offers an excellent overview of the prevalence of wild animal suffering.

[170] In Chapter Five, I explain why the *no-consent claim* does not turn on the capability to give consent.

Let us now turn to considering the motivations for my argument. We may draw a distinction in this respect between principled antinatalism and pragmatic antinatalism. My argument belongs to the former category, for the features of procreation that it designates as problematic are characteristic (or so I hold) of nearly all procreative acts. This means my argument is motivated by a principled ethical objection to what is necessarily entailed by bringing a sentient being into the world. This is in contrast to a pragmatic antinatalist argument. As we saw in Chapter One, antinatalism is sometimes adopted for pragmatic reasons; purely as a strategic ploy to rectify or ameliorate a given issue, such as environmental degradation. This distinction also dovetails with my distinction above between global and local versions of antinatalism – principled motivations tend to produce global forms of antinatalism, whilst pragmatic motivations are usually associated with local forms of antinatalism.

Another distinction that we can make is between philanthropic and misanthropic antinatalism.[171] The risk argument is a 'philanthropic' argument because it is concerned with the interests of potentially existent beings and wanting to do right by them. A 'misanthropic' argument, by contrast, is generally based on beliefs regarding the seriousness or prevalence of human wrongdoing. Certainly, inter-social human evil is one of the constituents of risk, as I lay out below, but my argument is not principally motivated by the harms suffered by others as a consequence of procreation, but rather by the wrong that is perpetrated against the person brought into existence. Here, there is an obvious overlap with the categories of child-focused and third-party antinatalism, themselves. Philanthropic antinatalism is a feature of all child-focused argumentation, whilst misanthropic antinatalism is a subset of third-party argumentation.

Function

With respect to the function of my argument, we may start by noting a distinction between empirical antinatalism and non-empirical antinatalism. The risk claim is critically dependent on empirical facts about the nature of existence and human societies. Unlike Benatar's asymmetry argument, the thrust of which is that existence can never confer an advantage on a potentially existent being irrespective of any quantification or tabulation of worldly suffering,

[171] This terminology has been borrowed from Benatar's book. See Benatar 2006, pp. 223-225.

my argument is partly reliant on an empirical fact-finding exercise to determine the magnitude and severity of the harms that human beings typically confront. As my argument as a whole relies on a posteriori facts, it is best classified as an empirical argument for antinatalism.

We can note here, too, that this distinction intersects with a distinction I introduced when discussing the environmental argument, between absolute antinatalism and contingent antinatalism. Recall that forms of antinatalism reliant on concrete, empirical facts about the world are thereby rendered contingent. I argue, however, that many of the risks confronting a created person are structural features of human existence (as opposed to easily-addressed and conceivably ameliorable harms), making my argument far less contingent than the third-party arguments investigated in Chapter One.

Another dichotomy is that between holistic antinatalism and hedonic antinatalism. Hedonic (or experiential) forms of antinatalism are solely concerned with negative experiential welfare, and argue to antinatalism on the basis of the prevalence of negative states (e.g., pain) or the paucity of positive states (e.g., pleasure). Holistic antinatalism does not commit to such a narrow conception of 'goods' and 'bads', and is the category to which my argument belongs. Under this framework, goods may include knowledge, fulfillment, meaning, productive challenges, and relationships; which don't have to be deflated to pleasure (even if they are sometimes characterised by positive emotions). Conversely, bads cover such things as ignorance, meaninglessness, empty relations with others, and so on (which, again, don't have to be analysed in terms of pain or dissatisfaction, but may be bad simpliciter). So, although much of the subsequent discussion regarding existential risk[172] is framed in the language of pleasure and pain, these should be read as typical instances of a wider set of goods and bads within a sentient, intelligent being's life.

[172] I intend the term 'existential risk' to be understood as significant intra-life possibilities for harm. I do not use it to describe scenarios that entail the annihilation of intelligent life, although some have used the term in this way. See Bostrom, N. (2002). Existential Risks: Analyzing Human Extinction Scenarios and Related Hazards. *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 9, p. 2. Retrieved from: http://jetpress.org/volume9/risks.html (Accessed: 7 June 2020).

My argument is also a form of person-affecting antinatalism, as opposed to an exemplar of impersonal antinatalism. The reason why creating children is wrong according to the risk argument is not because there is a deliverance of disvalue to the universe in some impersonal sense. Rather, the argument is opposed to such creation on the grounds that it involves some wrongdoing to the created child. The argument is person-affecting because it obtains its moral force from the joint application of its three constituent claims to the case of every individual human being brought into existence. We shall be returning to many of these distinctions in Part II of this thesis when considering the objections raised by opponents of antinatalism. For now, equipped with a more precise understanding of the commitments of the risk argument, we can look at the reasons to accept the argument.

3.2 – Defending *P1*

It is readily apparent that the risk argument intends to overturn a fairly central intuition (namely, that child-bearing is permissible), so the onus is on the antinatalist to evade the inevitable charge of counter-intuitiveness. I parry this anticipated response by showing the intuitive appeal of the core claim, *P1*, of the risk argument. There are two main ways in which *P1* can be defended. Firstly, we can resort to thought experiments in order to draw out our tacit moral allegiance to this approach to risk-taking. Secondly, we can look to other intuitively forceful ethical principles or ideas that *P1* is built upon.

3.2.1 – Thought Experiments

In order to drive home the idea at the heart of *P1*, let us start by looking at two supporting thought experiments.

The Gamble: James is a skilled, successful, and knowledgeable stockbroker. He is also a skilled hacker, in addition to being strongly motivated by altruistic impulses. Martha is a middle-aged, moderately rich woman. James withdraws £20,000 from Martha's bank account (which he accesses using his expert hacking abilities) and uses these funds to speculate on the stock market, intending to return any gains to Martha. He does so without Martha's awareness or approval. If James' strategic investments are correct, then the unsuspecting Martha will see a sizeable return. Alternatively, there is the possibility that the vagaries of the

market result in the loss of the initial sum. Given James' knowledge and experience, the latter outcome is unlikely, but the possibility is still present.

The Game: Anita is forced to spin a giant wheel divided into two unequal segments, each of which corresponds to two separate doors that each conceal different fates for Anita. In a somewhat more macabre twist on the Monty Hall Paradox,[173] suppose that behind door one lies in wait an assortment of harms (of the kind considered in the next section) that would radically diminish the quality of Anita's life to the point that it were not worth living. Suppose behind the other door was great pleasure, guaranteeing its fortunate selector a life of happiness and fulfilment.

In *The Gamble,* we intuitively think that James behaved impermissibly, and we think so for reasons that parallel *P1*. This secretive gamble carries the risk of a significant financial loss, occurs without the informed consent of Martha, and is not strictly necessary when considering the interests of Martha, James, or anyone else. Premises two to four of the argument, of course, aim to show that procreation operates on the same logic, leading us to the conclusion that we ought not to exempt procreation from condemnation of the sort that we feel James warrants.[174]

Now, of course, this example doesn't perfectly simulate procreation – no existential case of risk-taking can recreate the very unique features of bringing someone into existence. However, this example appears to be similar to procreation in the relevant ways of involving risk, absent consent, and absent necessity. How might one press the case for a disanalogy here? It might be said that Martha could have been consulted for her consent, in a way that cannot be done when bringing someone to existence. However, it is fairly easy to alter the circumstances of this thought experiment to simulate the non-existent's inability to consent – suppose, for instance, that Martha is in a coma, or that she is cognitively impaired such that

[173] See Khalili, J. (2013). *Paradox: The Nine Greatest Enigmas in Physics*. London: Black Swan, pp. 19-43 for an excellent and engaging overview of this paradox.

[174] We might say here that the hedonic neutrality of non-existence is Martha's original wealth in the thought experiment, with existence yielding the possibility of positive states (financial gain) or negative states (financial loss).

she cannot provide informed consent. This still does not appear to yield the pro-risk conclusion in this case.

Another option would be to bite the bullet and accept that James' activity is morally justified, so long as the probability of "winning" is extremely high (especially if Martha is incapable of consenting). Thus, procreation is similarly justifiable, insofar as the probability of one's child leading a good life is very high. Suppose we set the likelihood of success in this example at 98% (which, based on the risks to be enumerated in section 3.3, would be a very liberal approximation of the likelihood of procreation leading to a good life). Is this figure sufficiently high? To see that it is not, we can turn to *The Game*.

In *The Game*, how big would the second segment need to be (in other words, what would the probability of selecting door two need to be) in order to justifiably place Anita in this high-stakes game without her consent and without any reason to think she wants the benefits of the game, such that she is compelled to live with the consequences of either door being opened? It seems that it would need to be astronomically high, and certainly far higher than 98% (which, itself, was a concessionary figure on the part of the antinatalist). Indeed, I am sure some believe that making Anita play this game would never be justifiable without her approval. Even if we don't say this, it seems that it would only be justifiable if the probability of "losing" were infinitesimally small, such that it is zero for all practical purposes. However, as the real-world equivalent of door one being picked is not that low, and similarly involves the absence of consent and necessity, we should refrain from procreation.

How could the pronatalist respond here? One objection might be that life can rarely be reduced to extremes, as in this example, since it always consists of "shades of grey". However, the thought experiment can easily be tweaked to accommodate this concern, whilst still yielding the conclusion the antinatalist desires. Suppose door one conceals an overall bad life that is not worth living (but which still includes some goods), and door two conceals a generally good life that is worth living (but which also includes some bads). It does not appear to be the case that forcing Anita to live with either of these consequences without her consent is justified – perhaps ever, and certainly not unless the odds of door two's selection are extraordinarily high.

Another objection states that Anita's predicament is unlike that of the potentially existent person, given that we normally have the power to determine outcomes in our life, whereas Anita is afforded no such agency. Anita cannot control her fate, whereas we can choose our actions, which in turn affects the quality of our lives. This criticism is predicated on the assumption that we have free will, which has been questioned by some philosophers, although that is not a counter-point I can satisfactorily develop here.[175] In any case, many of life's risks are similarly outside our control, at least in significant part (e.g., diseases and illnesses, loss of loved ones, death, natural disasters). Furthermore, even if Anita were able to exercise more control, the main point is that there is still a considerable risk of bad outcomes resulting; that they result from Anita's agency doesn't give us a reason to consider the outcomes any less bad for her.

A third objection pressing on the disanalogy between the thought experiment and the procreative case highlights that Anita already exists and presumably already has a particular quality of life, whilst this cannot be said for the non-existent. Certainly, these intuition pumps based on existing individuals do not perfectly simulate non-existence, but their force does not derive from a purported perfect parallel between the existent and non-existent cases. Rather, their goal is to show how the three factors of risk, consent, and necessity figure in our reasoning about risk impositions and to force the pronatalist to specify some pertinent difference between these cases that can explain our differential moral attitudes towards the risk imposition.

Perhaps some feature of Anita's existence can do this work. We might feel that Anita's ability to consent (as a future person cannot) makes a moral difference. We might think that Anita already has rights, such as her right not to be interfered with, that are violated by placing her in this game; rights that the non-existent do not possess. We are also left with the problem of how we can even make claims about the non-existent, given the metaphysically empty referent when we speak of a "potentially existent person being similarly situated to Anita". We shall have to wait until Chapter Five of this thesis to address these more

[175] See Pereboom, D. (2001). *Living Without Free Will*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for an argument for hard incompatibilism – the view that free will is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism, and is thus at odds with our best scientific theories. Double, R. (1990). *The Non-Reality of Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press makes the case for the incoherence of free will.

sophisticated blockers to the no-consent element of my argument. Other more complex counter-arguments (e.g., about the way in which happiness compensates for risk) shall also be explored in Part Two of this thesis.

For the time being, we shouldn't be overly worried that these objections sever the link between the thought experiments and procreation. Because whilst I have tried to construct thought experiments that lend themselves to an antinatalist extension, their primary goal, insofar as they pump out the intuition I say they do, is to support *P1*. *P1* is a general principle for our treatment of existing people and those we bring into existence. If we find the thought experiments plausible but the extension to procreation not immediately plausible, we can at least say at this juncture that we have some reason to endorse *P1* for existing people. Defence of the antinatalist extension, via the three procreation-related claims of the argument (*P2-P4*), can come down the road.

3.2.2 – The 'Say-So Principle'

Before looking at those further premises, we need to look at another way of grounding the plausibility of *P1*. This involves considering other plausible ethical principles complemented by *P1*. This kind of ready-made compatibility between *P1* and other intuitively appealing ethical norms improves its intellectual respectability. The key principle that I shall consider in this section is what I have termed the *say-so principle*. This principle asserts that those who stand to be significantly impacted by a decision ought to participate in the decision-making process, such that they can approve or disapprove of the decision. Arguably, the reason we regard the provision of consent to be essential in morally legitimising *The Gamble* and *The Game* boils down to the *say-so principle*.

The importance of this idea is evident in a number of different domains, especially in the literature on consent. Consent is arguably the bedrock of ethics and political philosophy; the chief, foundational principle on which rest many of our relationships and social practices. It is especially significant in cases where our actions involve the imposition of significant harms (or carry the potential for their resulting), or the violation of (or intrusion into) one's bodily

autonomy.[176] Understandably, then, the importance of having a say over potential harm has frequently arisen in medical ethics.[177] Even beyond the physician-patient relationship, however, there are a wide range of everyday contexts in which implied or actual consent is critical for determining the morality of potential harm imposition or the exposure to risk. Indeed, minimum age restrictions that operate in many domains of society where such factors are present (gambling, dangerous rides, driving, sexual activity, etc.) are often driven by the consideration that informed consent from the party bearing the risks ought to be present.[178]

This idea seemingly central to many areas of applied ethics – that one should have some say over welfare-affecting acts – can be reasserted here as an independent principle. If we wish to make the risk argument intuitively attractive, then we should ideally have something to say about why its core claim, *P1*, is intuitively appealing. The *say-so principle* offers precisely such an explanation – one could say that *P1* is attractive because it captures the foundational idea in ethics that one ought to give assent to an action if one faces the prospect of being (considerably) detrimentally affected by it.[179] I will argue in the next section that existence is extremely risky business (far more so than any of the activities prohibited by age-laws). Combining this with the statement that one's existential undertaking is not freely chosen, as we are brought into the world without giving consent, yields a kind of first-draft extension of *P1* to procreation, an extension developed throughout the remainder of this thesis.

The most obvious objection to the *say-so principle* is that, even if it is true as a general rule, it is suspended in certain contexts where we take ourselves to be justified in imposing harms and risks without the consent of the affected party. Most notably, we routinely take risks on behalf of non-agents whose opinion cannot be solicited, like the non-human animals and children under our care. This paternalistic caveat to the *say-so principle*, whilst true, actually helps to draw out the truth of *P1* – where we impose risks on non-consenting persons, such as dependent children, we either do so because the risks are not significant or because there is a

[176] For more on the moral decisiveness of consent, see Primoratz, I. (2001). Sexual Morality: Is Consent Enough? *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 4 (3), pp. 201-218.

[177] Simple examples include the legitimacy of clinical trials, patients' refusal of treatment, and voluntary euthanasia.

[178] Of course, these laws are partly also motivated by a desire to avoid harms to third-parties.

[179] I claim this is a *foundational* concept in ethics because self-determination and autonomy are very widely regarded by ethicists as central or, at the very least, very important values.

compelling reason to subject them to the risk. These are not cases where *P1* is violated. The task of assessing whether procreative risk imposition is a similar sort of case to justifiable consentless risk imposition will be taken up again throughout this thesis (see section 4.4 for a more thorough critique and 5.3 for the moral significance of consent-talk in natal contexts).

Another objection might be that the *say-so principle* simply re-formulates *P1*, and a re-statement of *P1* does not constitute an underlying explanation of it. However, this is to misunderstand what role the *say-so principle* plays in service of *P1*. This principle captures and re-packages an idea that is well-established in other moral arenas. The *say-so principle* clearly expresses something that lies at the heart of *P1*, and in this way, it connects *P1* to arguments that are firmly situated within, and have received widespread assent throughout, the ethical literature. If this is true, I have still delivered a further consideration in favour of *P1*.

I present the *say-so principle* as a principle in support of *P1* because I take it to have obvious intuitive force. However, there are other more controversial principles that one could appeal to in order to bolster *P1*. Consider a *priority principle* similar in form to the one we encountered in Chapter Two, where the avoidance of suffering is accorded much more moral weight than the creation of pleasures. If this is correct, then we would be much more favourably inclined towards *P1*, as *P1*'s prohibition on risk-taking would ensure that (morally very weighty) extreme hardship is never endured or risked in pursuit of (morally not-as-weighty) benefits. This kind of lexical prioritisation of harm-avoidance has certainly enjoyed support in some quarters,[180] but it certainly has not received universal assent.

Another highly controversial principle is the *precautionary principle*, in which we are asked to take the course of action that seeks to avoid as much as possible the worst possible outcome in a situation of risk. Framed another way, we might think of the motivating idea here as a kind of risk aversion when the interests of others are concerned, so as to avert the possibility of excruciating suffering. Again, as with the *priority principle*, if a *precautionary principle* with respect to procreation were valid, then we would have even more reason to

[180] Take, for example, Karl Popper, who argued that there is "no symmetry between suffering and happiness, or between pain and pleasure." See Popper, K. (1950). *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 570-571.

endorse *P1*. This is because the *precautionary principle* calls into question the dominant approach to procreative risk, which is the "balance of probabilities" or the "expected value" approach. As per this orthodox treatment of procreative risk, risk imposition is morally acceptable if it's more probable than not that a person will lead a good life. That is, if we thought the chance of any particular child living an all-things-considered happy life were greater than 50%, then we may permissibly procreate. A *procreative precautionary principle* would caution against procreating because a good life is the most likely outcome, advising us instead to give special weight to the possibility of the worst possible outcome resulting (and to refrain from procreation to avoid this possibility from becoming a reality).

Defending these more disputed principles is a normative project falling outside the remit of my thesis. I also do not need to over-commit myself in this way, as what I have offered so far goes a substantial way to reinforcing the truth of *P1*. Furthermore, there are ways to access the benefits of these principles without directly endorsing them. Take the rejection of the expected value analysis of risk concomitant of the *precautionary principle* – we do not have to always act with the potentially worst-off in mind in order to think the riskiness of life cautions against procreation. The reasoning I have supplied in defence of *P1* already motivates the idea that we should have a default presumption in favour of risk aversion when somebody cannot consent to the potentially very severe lifetime costs of existence. In any event, we will have more to say about the virtues of risk aversion in Chapter Four. For now, having considered how thought experiments and ethical principles intersect with and support *P1*, we can shift our attention to the second premise of the argument – the *risk claim*.

3.3 – Defending The *Risk Claim*

Let us now turn attention to examining in greater detail the first of those three conditions – the *risk claim*, which asserts that procreation imposes significant risk on the created person. The *risk claim* is absolutely critical to the success of my argument. For even if procreation is needless and unapproved by the birthed infant, why ought this to be of any moral concern if the child would lead a wonderful life with no prospect of any significant risks?[181] Aside from

[181] It might be thought that the creation of such a good life gives us a positive reason to procreate, which in turn undermines the idea that procreation in this instance is "needless". I deal with this objection in Chapter Six.

Benatar, there is virtually no one who thinks that this would be especially problematic from a strictly child-focused perspective. Indeed, without risk, the absence of consent becomes impotent, as the moral contexts that demand the consideration of consent are almost always those in which the risk of harm is present (consider, for instance, consenting to sex or to surgical operations).[182] We may still find this act of procreation problematic on environmental or social grounds, but the creation of a guaranteed excellent life does not seem troubling with respect to the created person's interests.

Unfortunately, we cannot be so sure of how the life of the person we create will turn out. Many philosophers have identified this riskiness of procreation. Rivka Weinberg titles her book on procreative ethics, *The Risk of a Lifetime*, noting in it that procreation is a morally weighty act for it "involves imposing life's risks on whoever will have to live with them".[183] J. David Velleman recognises that the procreation involves throwing one's child into a "predicament, in which the stakes are high, both for good and for ill".[184] Although he advances different antinatalist arguments, David Benatar has also acknowledged the risks of life, observing that even the privileged could give birth to a child who "will suffer unbearably, be raped, assaulted, or be murdered brutally", and that this ultimately amounts to an unjustifiable "procreational Russian roulette".[185]

Although the *risk claim* has received support from these esteemed names, there is still work to be done to defend it. In particular, we need to understand what the risks are, how widespread they are, and how bad they are. Put another way, we need to examine the empirical case for significant risk. Before that, however, we need to clarify the *risk claim*. I

[182] There are some who believe absent consent is wrong even if we purely benefit (with no harm). For instance, Licon in running his antinatalist argument, states that "even in a world where everyone lives blissfully, it is not clear one would be justified in bringing individuals into existence without their informed consent." [Licon 2012, p. 5] Even if one is inclined to agree with Licon, which I am not, it is pretty obvious that exposing someone to pure benefit without their agreement is a very trivial wrong at worst.

[183] Weinberg, R. (2016). *The Risk of a Lifetime: How, When, and Why Procreation May Be Permissible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 1.

[184] Velleman, J.D. (2015). *Beyond Price: Essays on Birth and Death*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, p. 104.

[185] Benatar 2006, p. 92.

aim to provide clarity below on why I focus on risk (as opposed to harm), what I mean by procreative risk being *imposed*, and what I take *significant* risk to be.

Risk and Harm

I have chosen to use the term 'risk' rather than 'harm' for three main reasons. Firstly, this better accounts for the impossibility of perfectly predicting what kind of life one's offspring will lead. In light of our epistemic shortcoming in this respect, and the very high costs that could befall any potential person, procreation is kind of gamble with profound consequences for the welfare of the created being. Secondly, the word, 'risk', captures the fact that a number of people lead pleasurable and generally happy lives. Indeed, such fortunate lives are to be regarded as a positive consequence of risk-taking. Thirdly, my choice of term recognises that procreation doesn't involve directly causing harm, but rather exposing one to the possibility of significant harms.

Of course, an argument turning on the risk of harms being realised demands an account of what we mean by harms. By this, I simply mean instrumental and non-instrumental *bads for* the person. This notion can itself be decomposed into many different ideas – frustration of interests, diminution of well-being, being in a harmed state, suffering some disadvantage, being made worse off, etc.[186] But the precise account need not detain us as the intuition that the events and experiences I will describe are bad is widely shared and that is sufficient for my purposes.

Imposing Risk

I should say a little about what it means for procreation to 'impose' risk, even though this language has been widely used in the literature already. Procreation brings one into existence. The harms that all individuals suffer can be traced back to the act that brought them into existence, for it is this act that is the necessary pre-condition for potentially great harm (namely, the pre-condition of being a sentient person in the world). If one never procreated, there would be no harm; it is only by being brought into existence that one is at risk of all the terrible outcomes we shall appraise shortly.

[186] Kraut, R. (2011). *Against Absolute Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 43.

Of course, there is a long causal chain and a large number of events and persons separating procreative activity from the realisation of significant harm in the created person's life. This is why David Wasserman, rehearsing a point made by DeGrazia against Shiffrin, writes that "parents do not generally cause or impose the more serious harms their children suffer, but merely expose them to those harms".[187] In other words, Wasserman would have it that the harm pursuant to procreation is an exposure rather than a deliberate imposition.

However, here we need to again distinguish between the imposition of risk and the imposition of harm. When we use the former phrasing, as I do, we see that it is equivalent to Wasserman's claim that parents "expose them to those harms". This is because to say that procreation involves the imposition of risk essentially amounts to the claim that procreation is best understood as an act of risk-creation, in which one's offspring is at the mercy of the existential lottery of benefits and harms. Imposition and exposure both capture the fact that procreation opens possibilities, at least some of which entail major harms. Thus, if imposing is understood as above, it's not clear that the imposing/exposing distinction is substantive and we can freely switch between both terms.

Significant Risk

Talk of risk naturally leads us to wonder about the term 'significant risk'. Although this concept is also prevalent in law and used by other philosophers,[188] we may ask why risk needs to be significant and what conditions make it so. With respect to the former question, it is sufficient to note that if existence only ever entailed very mild and/or extremely unlikely harms, then the gamble that I alluded to above is somewhat neutered. Returning to David

[187] Benatar and Wasserman 2015, p. 171. Also, see DeGrazia, D. (2012). *Creation Ethics: Reproduction, Genetics, and Quality of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 153-154.

[188] For example, the Children Act 1989 S31(2) places particular responsibilities on local authorities to intervene in the UK if the child is suffering from *significant harm*. In philosophy, the notion of 'significant risk' is used in ethics, e.g., to ground the wrongfulness of paedophilic practices. See Moen, O.M. (2015). 'The Ethics of Pedophilia', *Etikk i praksis (EiP) - Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics*, 9 (1), pp. 111-124.

Velleman's idea, procreation in this case would not thrust upon one's progeny the kind of "high stakes" that I believe make procreation morally problematic.[189]

How, then, are we to determine what makes a particular risk significant? For the purposes of my analysis, I will largely be relying on two ideas – prevalence and severity. As a way of illustrating both these concepts, let us consider examples of harm that I shall not be counting as significant. One such category is the widespread but less severe suffering that befalls every conscious human brought into existence to at least some extent, including:

- thermal discomfort (when the weather or temperature is a source of irritation);
- milder physical ailments (e.g., aches and passing colds);
- sources of relational dissatisfaction (such as verbal fights and misunderstandings);
- prospective harms (take the anxiety felt by many at impending events like job interviews or the fear of job insecurity);
- retrospective harms (e.g., the disappointment and regret caused by frustrated or failed plans);
- temporary periods of disengagement (e.g., the boredom of commuting);
- gustatory discomfort (an inability to immediately quench thirst or satisfy hunger);
- somnial harms (due to inadequate or troubled sleep).

Although some of these regularly-endured harms could become severe for certain individuals, for the purposes of my analysis, they will not be treated as significant harms as they generally do not radically worsen the quality of one's life. On the opposite end of the spectrum to these experiences, we may note extraordinarily severe but relatively low likelihood risks. Conditions such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and sustained forms of torture are very unlikely to be the fate of any particular person brought into existence,[190] and so we might be inclined to similarly treat these as insignificant risks, given their low prevalence. The probability of a risk occurring, separate to its severity, is thus also a relevant consideration,

[189] Of course, Benatar's argument challenges exactly this idea, holding that any kind of harm within a life is sufficient to make not initiating that life morally preferable. We will examine this point in greater detail in Chapter Five.

[190] Although this will obviously depend on parental genetics, the geopolitical situation in which a person is raised and lives, and so on.

for if only one human being in the entire history of the world had ever met with a horrible fate, then we might think the risk of creating humans cannot be significant in any important sense.

However, it might be the case that whilst high-prevalence/low-severity risks are not significant, low-prevalence/high-severity risks are. If we were asked to play a game in which 95% of players would suffer a mild pinprick, it doesn't seem that this would decisively count against playing if the benefits of the game were great. Conversely, if we were asked to play a game in which there is a one in ten million chance that every participant would be violently killed, we would likely think the gravity of harm would caution against playing despite the low likelihood of this outcome. In any event, not too much turns on this point, and I will conservatively refrain from counting very low likelihood risks as significant.

Now, there is unquestionably much more that can be said about this topic, as it is difficult to simply reduce 'significance' to the magnitude and likelihood of any harm. For one, the notion is contextual. So, for example, we may compare a fractured wrist sustained from an accidental fall in the playground to a fractured wrist resultant from physical abuse at home – whilst the resulting injury, in both cases, is identical, the latter is clearly significant in a way that the former is not. 'Significance' is also relative to the experiences of others. Indeed, part of the reason why the innumerable quotidian annoyances of life set out above are not intuitively seen as significant is that they are suffered by everyone. Finally, there also exists a demarcation problem, as at least some negative human experiences are borderline cases that resist simple classification as either significant or not.

We shall leave these thornier issues here for now, as even if significance cannot be wholly reduced to prevalence and severity, they at least play a critical explanatory role. Let us now turn to examining the empirical case for the claim that procreation involves exposing one to significant risk.

The Empirical Case for Significant Risk[191]

[191] This overview of the landscape of risk was written in 2020, and by the time of submission, it is almost certain that some of the statistics cited will not be the most recent available. However, I think even the most ardent

Of course, it will not be possible to catalogue and evaluate all the risks that characterise existence. What follows, then, is not an exhaustive analysis of worldly harms, but rather an evidence-informed summary of some of the most common and pressing risks.[192] The cumulative weight of the data marshalled below empirically substantiates the claim that causing one to existence amounts to creating significant risk for that person. Whilst I try to retain a global outlook in the statistics and studies I cite, I pay particular attention to the United Kingdom. This is partly because I am most readily able to access research in relation to this country, but also because it is indirectly indicative of the pervasiveness of risk. In other words, if the risks are great in an economically developed country that is amongst the twenty happiest nations,[193] then one can reasonably globalise the risk claim.

However, some of the risks I discuss are necessarily more geographically localised.[194] For example, risks pertaining to human ill-health are more easily recruited in support of a global antinatalist argument than social risks, which are arguably more dependent on geography, family circumstances, the economic and political system in a given country, etc. A further complication is the close relationship that is shared between global and local risks. The interplay between health and socio-economic deprivation means that, even if everyone is susceptible to ill-health, those who live in countries with a poorly functioning or absent welfare state and healthcare system are in a much more precarious position, bereft of a societal safety net.

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pronatalist would have to grant that it is unreasonable to suppose that much, if any, of the data will markedly change (in a way that would be consequential for my claims) in the short to medium-term.

[192] In this analysis, I do not pay attention to future risks arising from artificial intelligence or pandemics or accelerating climate change, all of which, if realised, promise to drastically alter the quality of human lives in the process of threatening humanity's continued existence. For more on this, see Ord, T. (2020). *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity*. New York: Hachette.

[193] Helliwell, J. F., Huang, H., and Wang, S. (2019). Changing World Happiness. In J.F. Helliwell, R. Layard, and J. Sachs (Eds.), *World Happiness Report 2019* (pp. 12-45), New York: Sustainable Development Research Network.

[194] The counter-argument that this presents a problem for the risk claim will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter Seven

As a case study through this exploration of the complicated landscape of risk, consider the hypothetical couple, Fred and Sarah. Without getting bogged down in minutiae, we shall simply stipulate that they are both affluent members of the economic elite, have no general history of ill-health, possess ample social and cultural capital, boast impressive parenting skills, and reside in one of the happiest and most stable countries on Earth. Fred and Sarah recently became parents, with Sarah giving birth to Ralph. Of the nearly eight billion humans who exist on Earth, Fred and Sarah are amongst the luckiest – if any child is best positioned to lead a successful life of human flourishing, then Ralph is surely a paradigmatic case. Yet even Ralph is exposed to a litany of significant risks.

Risk of Death and Suicide

Firstly, Ralph will unquestionably die.[195] The word, 'risk', is not appropriately applied to a discussion on death, because it is not merely a probable outcome, but rather the guaranteed ending for every being brought into existence. However, counting death as a significant risk of existence is tricky for the antinatalist. This is partly because there are different philosophical views on whether death is even a harm, let alone a significant one.[196] Even if we suppose that death is a significant harm, the most popular account of why this is so – the deprivation account of death –gives the antinatalist another problem to deal with. The deprivation account states that death is a harm because it deprives one of something desirable like continuing positive experiences.[197] If the antinatalist resorts to this account, they potentially compromise their own antinatalism for how can we count death as a risk militating against procreation if its bad-making property is the denial of continuing goods (only conferred and enjoyed by procreation)?

I have neither the space nor the need to wade into this debate. Rather than arguing that death itself is a significant risk, I will make a more indirect appeal to risk from suicidality. Given that death is something that is shunned and feared for both cultural and evolutionary reasons,

[195] This point is powerfully conveyed in the title of Sarah Perry's book, *Every Cradle Is A Grave*. Perry, S. (2014). *Every Cradle Is A Grave: Rethinking The Ethics of Birth and Suicide*. Charleston, WV: Nine-Banded Books.

[196] For a denial of the view that death is a harm, see Rosenbaum, S. (1986). How to Be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (2), pp. 217-25.

[197] See Nagel, T. (1970). Death. *Nous*, 4 (1), pp.73-80, p. 75.

and inasmuch as suicide is based on a self-assessment that life is no longer worth living, we ought to regard cases of suicide, parasuicide, and suicidal ideation as indirect evidence for the extremely high possible costs of existence. Here, I take the evidential value of suicide (for the purposes of my risk argument) to be the subjective assessment that life is not worth living.

Suicide is a global and widespread phenomenon,[198] claiming 817,000 lives in 2016 alone.[199] This riskiness is aggravated by three further facts. Firstly, suicides are underreported, sometimes by as much as 30%.[200] Hence, the actual figures relating to deaths from suicide are likely to be significantly greater. Secondly, parasuicide (defined as deliberate attempts to die) are an order of magnitude greater than actual suicides.[201] Thus, many millions of people take active steps to terminate the perceived horrors of their existence, but are unsuccessful in these efforts.[202] Thirdly, even more people contemplate or consider taking their own life. A survey carried out in the UK found that over a fifth of adults (20.6%) had at some point thought of taking their own life.[203] If so many people can envisage hastening their own death, it suggests how troubled existence can be.

Biological Risk

Ralph, then, will certainly die, and may well choose to die, or contemplate dying, prematurely. Very often, the latter desire is founded on physical or mental ill-health, which

[198] This is not to deny that disadvantage and suicide are correlated.

[199] Naghavi, M. (2019). Global, regional, and national burden of suicide mortality 1990 to 2016: systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2016. *The BMJ*, 364: l94.

[200] Tøllefsen, I.M., Hem, E., & Ekeberg, Ø. (2012). The reliability of suicide statistics: a systematic review. *BMC Psychiatry*, 12 **(**9).

[201] Welch, S.S. (2001). A review of the literature on the epidemiology of parasuicide in the general population. *Psychiatric Services*, 52, pp. 368-375.

[202] I should note here that I do not dispute that the desire to die can, and does, fluctuate over the course of one's life, and people often subsequently come to regret the attempt of a failed suicide. However, we should also note that this is not always because they come to believe that they were earlier mistaken about the quality of their life, as other-driven reasons (e.g., not wanting to cause lasting damage to one's family) can be a powerful reason to continue existing. In any event, even time-limited suicidality is a serious harm that is suffered by millions of people.

[203] McManus, S., Bebbington, P., Jenkins, R., & Brugha, T. (Eds.) (2016). *Mental health and wellbeing in England: Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014*. Leeds: NHS Digital.

leads us onto the second category of this empirical overview – biological risk. These are the risks pertaining to human physical and mental health. Now, it is certainly the case that human life expectancy is higher than at any point in human history, and medical and technological advances have eliminated, or at least curbed, many diseases. Notwithstanding this fact, risks to health are amongst the most foundational of procreative risks.

In the realm of physical health, debilitating disorders, terminal illnesses, and chronic conditions abound. Take cancer as an exemplar of one of the most common diseases. According to data from the Global Cancer Observatory in 2018, it is estimated that "1 in 5 men and 1 in 6 women will develop the disease and 1 in 8 men and 1 in 10 women will die from it".[204] In the UK, for individuals born after 1960, the lifetime risk of getting cancer is over 50%.[205] With respect to the experience of cancer, it has been characterised as a 'living-dying' experience, in which the sufferer wrestles with the "intolerable incompatibility of life and death".[206] In one Canadian study, 12.2% of palliative cancer patients reported a genuine desire to die.[207] Even where cancer doesn't prompt a desire to die, it is associated with physical disabilities, psychological trauma, and damage to intimate relationships; such that it hangs over a person and their families for the rest of his or her life.[208]

Chronic pain is another example of a pervasive and severe health burden that human beings must endure. Afflicting between 33% and 50% of the UK population[209], it causes a significant burden to, and radically diminishes the quality of life of, those who suffer from

[204] Bray, F., Ferlay, J., Soerjomataram, I., Siegel, R. L., Torre, L. A., & Jemal, A. (2018). Global cancer statistics 2018: GLOBOCAN estimates of incidence and mortality worldwide for 36 cancers in 185 countries. *CA Cancer Journal for Clinicians*, 68 (6), pp. 394-424, p. 406.

[205] Ahmad, A., Ormiston-Smith, N. & Sasieni, P. (2015). Trends in the lifetime risk of developing cancer in Great Britain: comparison of risk for those born from 1930 to 1960. *British Journal of Cancer*, 112**,** pp. 943-947.

[206] Muzzin, L.J., Anderson, N.J., Figueredo, A.T., Gudelis, S.O. (1994). The Experience of Cancer. *Social Science & Medicine*, 38 (9), pp. 1201-1208.

[207] Wilson, K.G., Dalgleish, T.L., Chochinov, H.M., Chary, S., Gagnon, P.R., Macmillan K, et al. (2016). Mental disorders and the desire for death in patients receiving palliative care for cancer. *BMJ Supportive and Palliative Care*, 6 (2), pp. 170–77.

[208] Ibid.

[209] Fayaz, A., Croft, P., Langford, R., Donaldson, L. and Jones, G. (2016). Prevalence of chronic pain in the UK: a systematic review and meta-analysis of population studies. *BMJ Open*, 6 (6), p.e010364.

this condition. This pain can be brought about by a number of different conditions, including chronic migraines, arthritis, and multiple sclerosis.

Whilst fortunately much rarer, there are other diseases that deserve mention here, given the extremity of suffering they cause. I have in mind advanced forms of incurable motor neuron disease and genetic disorders like infantile Tay-Sachs disease, to cite but two examples. Children with infantile Tay-Sachs suffer seizures, gradual paralysis, and normally die by the age of four. Even if the probability of such conditions is smaller than one in every one hundred thousand births, that may still constitute a significant risk, solely on account of the sheer magnitude of the resulting harm. But, as I indicated in my analysis of significance, I shall not press this point further.

Moving away from physical health, the domain of mental health is also replete with risks. Take the affective disorder of major depression, the incidence of which is 4.7% globally.[210] One sufferer describes his experience as akin to "being in a big black hole and trying to crawl your way out of it but you can't".[211] Depression, especially in its more severe manifestations, has a crippling effect on people's personal relationships, motivation, sense of self-worth, and life satisfaction. Of course, depression does vary in its chronicity, but it's always marked by quite considerable and unpleasant challenges, as even those with milder forms of depression will attest.

When we expand our focus to mental health problems in general (e.g., neurotic illnesses such as anxiety and phobias), data indicates that, in the UK, one in four people experiences a mental health problem every year.[212] Worldwide, nearly a billion people suffer from some

[210] Ferrari, A., Somerville, A., Baxter, A., Norman, R., Patten, S., Vos, T., and Whiteford, H. (2013). Global variation in the prevalence and incidence of major depressive disorder: a systematic review of the epidemiological literature. *Psychological Medicine*, 43 (3), pp. 471-481.

[211] Morris, G. (2016). *The Lived Experience in Mental Health*. Boca Raton, FL: Taylor & Francis Group, p. 64.

[212] McManus, S., Meltzer, H., Brugha, T., Bebbington, P., and Jenkins, R. (2009). Adult psychiatric morbidity in England, 2007: results of a household survey. *National Centre for Social Research, London*.

kind of mental illness.[213] Conditions such as psychosis leaves millions around the world deprived of their freedom in psychiatric hospitals.[214]

Biological risk is also considerable (and arguably even more pronounced) at the age-related poles of our lifeline. Consider, first, the situation soon after the beginning of our lives. As of 2017, the under-five global mortality rate was 3.9%, which amounts to 15,000 children under the age of five dying on average per day from a variety of causes including malaria, birth defects, and lower respiratory infections.[215] It is arguably even bleaker when we consider the situation as people approach the conclusion of their lives. As people age, they are increasingly likely to develop neurodegenerative conditions such as Alzheimer's disease and adult-onset Huntington's disease that cause tremendous suffering. Dementia, for example, affects around 47 million people worldwide, with this figure forecast to rise to 135 million in 2050.[216] Cases of dementia worldwide more than doubled in a twenty-six year period from 1990 to 2016.[217] The suffering caused by dementia is marked by feelings of despair, fear, distress, and isolation.[218] In a non-negligible number of cases, the decline associated with old age leads to pervasive and serious preferences to die. Indeed, quantitative studies of the wish

[213] GBD 2017 Disease and Injury Incidence and Prevalence Collaborators (2018). Global, regional, and national incidence, prevalence, and years lived with disability for 354 diseases and injuries for 195 countries and territories, 1990–2017: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2017. *The Lancet*, 392 (10159), pp. 1789-1858.

[214] It is difficult to estimate the global population who are detained in psychiatric hospitals. However, given that approximately 50,000 people were sectioned under the Mental Health Act in the UK in 2017/18, 'millions' seems a conservative extrapolation.

[215] Roser, M., Ritchie, H., and Dadonaite, B. (2020). Child & Infant Mortality. *Published online at OurWorldInData.org.* Retrieved from: https://ourworldindata.org/child-mortality (Accessed: 7 February 2020).

[216] Ricci G. (2019). Social Aspects of Dementia Prevention from a Worldwide to National Perspective: A Review on the International Situation and the Example of Italy. *Behavioural Neurology*.

[217] GBD 2016 Neurology Collaborators (2016). Global, regional, and national burden of neurological disorders, 1990-2016: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2016. *The Lancet Neurology*, 18, pp. 459-480.

[218] Bartlett, R., Windemuth-Wolfson, L., Oliver, K., & Dening, T. (2017). Suffering with dementia: The other side of "living well''. *International Psychogeriatrics,* 29 (2), pp. 177-179.

to die in the elderly have "consistently found that 10-20% of the older people in different European countries have or have had death thoughts or wishes".[219]

We have so far concentrated on the afflictions at an individual-level, but throughout human history, epidemics have had grave consequences for public health. The Black Death that gripped Europe in the 1300s is estimated to have killed around 60% of the European population.[220] Even in the twentieth century, the Spanish influenza pandemic caused at 50 million deaths worldwide, and possibly as many as 100 million.[221] And, even as recent as 2020, the lives of billions of people around the world were plunged into uncertainty and chaos as a result of coronavirus.

Let us now return to Ralph in order to situate him in this landscape of biological risk. His social privilege (e.g., access to private medical healthcare) inoculates him to a certain degree from some of the above suffering (for example, the risk of dying in early childhood), and the stipulation that his parents are of good health also insulates him from the worst genetic disorders. However, Ralph is not strongly protected from much of what was discussed above (e.g., cancer, the aging process and dementia, mental ill-health).

The complication that physical ailments are correlated with socioeconomic status (SES), which I noted at the outset, reappears here. However, taking cancer as an example, Ralph still faces significant risks, notwithstanding his affluence. Some forms of cancer are either inconsistently or inversely associated with SES.[222] For example, the incidence of breast cancer is higher in affluent women than in socioeconomically deprived women.[223] There is

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[219] Rurup, M.L., Pasman, H.R.W., Goedhart, J., Deeg, D.J.H., Kerkhof, A.J.F.M., and Onwuteaka-Philipsen, B.D. (2011). Understanding why older people develop a wish to die: A qualitative interview study. *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention, 32* (4), pp. 204–216, p. 204.

[220] Benedictow, O.J. (2004). *The Black Death 1346-1353: The Complete History.* Woodbridge: Boydell Press, p. 383.

[221] Barry, J.M. (2004). *The Great Pandemic: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*. New York, NY: Penguin.

[222] Van Loon, A., Burg, J., Goldbohm, R., & Van den Brandt, P. (1995). Differences in Cancer Incidence and Mortality Among Socio-Economic Groups. *Scandinavian Journal of Social Medicine,* 23 (2), pp. 110-120.

[223] Carnon, A., Ssemwogerere, A., Lamont, D., Hole, D., Mallon, E., George, W., & Gillis, C. (1994). Relation Between Socioeconomic Deprivation And Pathological Prognostic Factors In Women With Breast Cancer. *BMJ: British Medical Journal,* 309 (6961), pp. 1054-1057.

also geographic variation – a study in the Netherlands found that SES makes only a small difference to cancer survival.[224] Of course, a large number of studies do show a much stronger correlation between cancer and SES, but even here, the mortality rates for the affluent are significant. In the UK, those in the most deprived group are around 1.5 times as likely to die of cancer as the least deprived, but given the lifetime risk of cancer discussed above, this still constitutes a significant risk for Ralph.[225] In short, even the children of the wealthy and healthy are perilously positioned, liable to see their bodies degrade from millions of potential diseases at any moment.

Interpersonal Risk

A third category of risk is what I term interpersonal risk – the potential harms that result from the relationships we form and interactions we have (or don't have, as the case may be) with other people. One such harm is bereavement, and the associated emotions of grief and distress. The death of a family member or loved one routinely leads to profound suffering that shatters one's subjective world, and it is something virtually every human being must endure, several times over.

The failure or the inability to cultivate and sustain meaningful relationships is another source of pervasive discontent for many people. For example, 7% of Europeans frequently experience loneliness, and 18% are socially isolated.[226] This problem intersects with and compounds the risk discussed in the foregoing paragraph – as some individuals suffer the loss of friends and family members, they are increasingly left with few (if any) people they are able to rely on for support and companionship.

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[224] Schrijvers, C., & Mackenbach, J. (1994). Cancer Patient Survival by Socioeconomic Status in the Netherlands: A Review for Six Common Cancer Sites. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (1979-),* 48 (5), pp. 441-446.

[225] Cancer Research UK (2020). *Deprivation gradient for all cancers combined mortality*. Retrieved from: https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/mortality/deprivation-gradient#heading-Zero (Accessed: 23 May 2020).

[226] D'Hombres, B., Sylke, S., Barjakovà, M. & Mendonça, F.T. (2018). Loneliness – An Unequally Shared Burden in Europe. *European Commission: Science for Policy Briefs.*

Even when people are able to create relationships, they are often perilous and at risk of breakdown. Take romantic relationships, for example. In England and Wales, it was estimated in 2012 that 42% of all marriages will culminate in a divorce.[227] Prior to marriage, the vast majority of relationships end in separation. These kinds of break-ups lead to heightened psychological distress and a decline in life satisfaction.[228] The non-romantic interactions that humans have with one another fare no better, and are often plagued by prejudice and discrimination. Racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and classism remain widespread and have pernicious effects on the lives of their victims. Such attitudes provide the platform for systemic and institutional discrimination, which radically diminish individuals' financial, social, and emotional wellbeing.

We might be inclined to say that Ralph, a caucasian male, is conceivably at lower risk of being the victim of prejudicial treatment. Although I have artificially set the case up in this way, we should bear in mind that we cannot specify in advance what body our child will inhabit, what sexual preferences they will exhibit, etc. We may give birth to girls and LGBT children, who sadly still encounter pernicious forms of discrimination in society. As Ralph ages, he will also be exposed to the stigmatisation and marginalisation associated with ageism, which is also prevalent in many societies.[229]

Furthermore, Ralph is no less likely to suffer romantic distress and the absence of close bonds of friendship. Ralph will probably also have to see those whom he is close to (such as his parents) die, quite possibly after having undergone tremendous suffering. He might also have to live with the consequences of the premature deaths of loved ones – consider the fact that two of the most privileged people on Earth, the British princes, lost their mother in their teenage years. These are all major risks that have extraordinarily detrimental consequences

[227] Office for National Statistics (2013). *What percentage of marriages end in divorce?* Retrieved from: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160106011951/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/vsob1/divorces-in-england-and-wales/2011/sty-what-percentage-of-marriages-end-in-divorce.html (Accessed: 1 March 2020).

[228] Rhoades, G. K., Kamp Dush, C. M., Atkins, D. C., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2011). Breaking up is hard to do: The impact of unmarried relationship dissolution on mental health and life satisfaction. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25(3), pp. 366-374.

[229] World Health Organisation (2020). *Ageism*. Retrieved from: https://www.who.int/ageing/ageism/en/ (22 May 2020).

for one's mental health, very often grounding the desire to die discussed under the 'Risk of Death and Suicide' sub-section.

Violence Risk

A fourth category of intra-life risk is that of violence, which has a ruinous and life-altering (in many cases, life-ending) impact on its victims. Take, first, the loss of human life from warfare in the twentieth century, notwithstanding the rise of modern states, international peace treaties, and so on. Indeed, both absolutely and relative to the population, there has been a trend "toward an increased human…cost of war", with the proportion of deaths caused by military hostilities among European countries probably increasing "to about 3% in the twentieth century" (from 2% in the seventeenth century).[230]

Including non-wartime, state-orchestrated deaths (such as brutal purges under the regime of Francisco Franco, Stalin's Gulags, Mao's famines, etc.), approximately 231 million people died in wars and conflict in the twentieth century.[231] The globality of this violence is also of note – twentieth century genocides, for example, claimed the lives of millions across Europe, Africa, and Asia. Such risks persist in the twenty-first century. By the end of 2018, "70.8 million people were forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, violence, conflict, or human rights violations."[232]

Sexual violence and rape are also high risks, and are sex-specific in their prevalence (disproportionately affecting women). In the UK, 20% of women and 4% of men reported experiencing some form of sexual assault since the age of 16.[233] Extending the analysis to the

[230] Wright, Q. (1942/1964). *A Study of War* (Abridged by L.L. Wright). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. 59-60.

[231] Leitenberg, M. (2006). Deaths in Wars and Conflicts in the 20th Century (3rd Edition). *Occasional Paper #29 for the Peace Studies Program of Cornell University*.

[232] The UN Refugee Agency. (2019). *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2018*. Retrieved from https://www.unhcr.org/5d08d7ee7.pdf (Accessed: 16 February 2020), p. 2.

[233] Office for National Statistics (2017). *Sexual offences in England and Wales: year ending March 2017*. Retrieved from: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/sexualoffencesinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2017 (Accessed: 16 February 2020).

European Union and including physical violence, one in three women have had such experiences since turning 15.[234] On a global scale, the figures are equally depressing, with 120 million girls (over one in ten), having been raped or sexually assaulted by the age of 20.[235]

Violence against children is equally troubling. Millions of children are trafficked and sold into prostitution or pornography – in 2018 alone, technology companies reported "over 45 million online photos and videos of children being sexually abused".[236] Children also suffer severe violence inside their own homes, with a third or more of children experiencing "severe physical punishment resulting from the use of implements".[237] In the UK, one in five adults experiences at least one form of child abuse before the age of 16.[238] A 2006 UN study into violence against children concluded that it is a phenomenon that happens everywhere, in every country and society.[239]

Violence can take other insidious forms, including the ownership and control of other human beings. Figures published by the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO) estimate that

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[234] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p. 21.

[235] UNICEF (2014). *Hidden in Plain Sight: A statistical analysis of violence against children*. Retrieved from: http://files.unicef.org/publications/files/Hidden_in_plain_sight_statistical_analysis_EN_3_Sept_2014.pdf (Accessed: 16 February 2020).

[236] Eid, K., et al. (2019, September 28). 'The Internet Is Overrun With Images of Child Sexual Abuse. What Went Wrong?'. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/28/us/child-sex-abuse.html (Accessed: 24 January 2020).

[237] United Nations (2006, 29 August). *Report of the independent expert for the United Nations study on violence against children*, UN Doc: A/61/299, p. 9. Retrieved from: https://www.unicef.org/violencestudy/reports/SG_violencestudy_en.pdf (Accessed: 1 March 2020).

[238] Office for National Statistics (2019). *Child abuse extent and nature, England and Wales: year ending March 2019*. Retrieved from: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/childabuseextentandnatureenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2019 (Accessed: 2 March 2020).

[239] See Harees, L. (2012). *The Mirage of Dignity on the Highways of Human 'Progress': The Bystanders' Perspective*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, pp. 525-526 for a summary and discussion.

one in two hundred people in the world is a slave.[240] Indeed, there are a greater number of humans enslaved today than at any point in human history.[241] Violence can also occur digitally and manifest verbally, such as in the case of bullying, a phenomenon which a third of young teens worldwide have experienced.[242]

How does this all affect Ralph? Again, Ralph is extremely unlikely to suffer from some of these harms (such as being a victim of slavery or being sexually assaulted in his home). There is no general reason to believe, though, that Ralph will not be at the receiving end of horrific bullying in adolescence or sexual abuse in later life. It is also worth remembering that millions of people who died in World War II were from developed countries and well-off families. Those who have perished in genocides have also been from all social classes (indeed, classicide has generally targeted the affluent upper classes).[243] Financial power can offset to some extent the risk of experiencing violence, but it does not provide a secure level of immunity.

Social Risk

The riskiness of life also encompasses the risks created by the functioning of social institutions and systems, which I group as 'social risk'. The most pressing example of this is the decimation wrought by poverty. World Bank data indicates that, as of 2015, 10% of the world's population lived in extreme poverty (living on less than $1.90 a day).[244] Poverty also plagues more economically-developed countries. A 2019 report found that 14.3 million people in the UK live in poverty, and 4.5 million were in deep poverty.[245] David Blunt, a

[240] See Hodal, K. (2019, 25 February). 'One in 200 people is a slave. Why?' *The Guardian.* Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/feb/25/modern-slavery-trafficking-persons-one-in-200 (Accessed: 23 February 2020).

[241] Ibid.

[242] UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2018). New SGG 4 Data on Bullying. Retrieved from: http://uis.unesco.org/en/news/new-sdg-4-data-bullying (Accessed: 1 March 2020).

[243] See the discussion of communist cleansing in Mann, M. (2005). *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 318-352.

[244] The World Bank. Poverty Data. Retrieved from: https://data.worldbank.org/topic/poverty (Accessed: 7 February 2020).

[245] Social Metrics Commission (2019). *Measuring Poverty 2019*. Retrieved from: https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk (Accessed: 7 February 2020).

lecturer in international relations, has compared global poverty to a crime against humanity.[246] If this were the case, then 10% of the world suffers from a fate that is amongst the worst that humanity confronts. Even if one disagrees with this conception of poverty, it is certainly the case that it involves extreme suffering and severe deprivations.

Unemployment is experienced by over 5% of the global labour force.[247] This is both a bad in itself (as unemployment leads to diminished self-regard, increased boredom, and existential anxiety), but is also a harm to the extent that it acts as an accelerator of poverty. The instability of governmental policy, boom-bust cycles of capitalism, and the role that luck plays in the labour market together mean that even people in relatively secure jobs can find themselves made redundant. This, in turn, means that the overwhelming majority of people are at risk of experiencing the devastating effects of poverty. However, the opposite side of the coin – employment – also entails significant harms. Where many are employed, conditions and pay are often appalling, and do not guarantee a decent living.[248] According to a Gallup World Poll in 2017, 85% of full-time workers are disengaged at work, the place where many of us spend a considerable portion of our adult lives.[249]

Social risk spills over into our ability to meet some of our basic needs, such as accessing food and shelter. Famine and starvation devastate the lives of hundreds of millions of people. A series of reports published in *The Lancet* identifies malnutrition as "the underlying cause of death for at least 3.1 million children…and stunting growth among a further 165 million".[250]

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[246] Blunt, G. (2015). Is global poverty a crime against humanity? *International Theory*, 7 (3), pp. 539-571.

[247] This average unemployment rate for the period since 2000 is 5.4%. See International Labour Organisation (2019). *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2019*. Retrieved from: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_670542.pdf (Accessed: 16 February 2020), p. 18.

[248] Ibid., p. 6.

[249] Clifton, J. (2017, June 13). The World's Broken Workplace. *Gallup*. Retrieved from: https://news.gallup.com/opinion/chairman/212045/world-broken-workplace.aspx?g_source=position1&g_medium=related&g_campaign=tiles (Accessed: 24 January 2020).

[250] Research cited and discussed in Tran, M. (2013, June 6). Malnutrition identified as root cause of 3.1 million deaths among children. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/jun/06/malnutrition-3-million-deaths-children (Accessed: 16 February 2020).

Homelessness remains another pressing problem, even in developed countries like the UK[251], caused by factors such as poverty, unemployment and mental ill-health, which anyone can find themselves confronting.

Now, undoubtedly, social risk is an area in which Ralph fares much better. Unlike billions of other children who starve and labour as victims of circumstance, Ralph will almost certainly be well-fed and have ample educational opportunities, and given his familial wealth, might never have to work. Ralph has a considerable social safety net that insulates him from extreme poverty and social deprivation. But, as discussed above, the socio-economic systems constructed by humans are unstable, and people's fortunes can rapidly change. Consider, for example, the fact that, following the 2008 financial crisis in Britain, educated middle class households suffered the greatest financial losses.[252] In later life, Ralph could find himself penniless and homeless, and it is not uncommon to hear of such fates befalling celebrities, often as a result of addictions and inadequate support networks. It is difficult to confidently state that this will happen to Ralph, but in conjunction with all the other risks, it ought not be discounted.

Natural Risk

The final category of existential risk is natural risk, which I am distinguishing from biological risk. Natural risk encompasses the atmospheric, geological, and hydrological causes of human suffering – the suffering, that is, resultant from the Earth's natural processes. The most prominent example is natural disasters, including hurricanes, heat waves, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, and droughts. The Karlsruhe Institute of Technology estimate that, since

[251] Butler, P. (2018, November 22). At least 320,000 homeless people in Britain, says Shelter. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/nov/22/at-least-320000-homeless-people-in-britain-says-shelter (Accessed: 7 February 2020).

[252] Kirkup, J. (2010, 15 July). Middle class had biggest losses from financial crisis. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/7892788/Middle-class-had-biggest-losses-from-financial-crisis.html (Accessed: 11 May 2020).

1900, there have been eight million deaths as a result of natural disasters.[253] Such disasters have triggered roughly 265 million displacements since 2008.[254]

There is evidence that many such disasters have been spawned by anthropogenic climate change, which, as was already discussed in section 2.3.2 of this thesis, is destroying the lives of millions around the world. Indeed, the scientific consensus as at the time of writing is that weather-related disasters (and all their attendant suffering) are only going to worsen as a consequence of accelerating, and potentially irremediable, climate change.[255]

Ralph's favourable geo-economic situation neuters many of these risks, as it is often lower-income countries that bear the brunt of higher mortality. Data over the period between 1994 and 2013 indicates that "higher-income countries experienced 56% of disasters but lost 32% of lives".[256] However, it is important to note that, notwithstanding the comparatively lower death toll, many hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives (and many more been significantly affected) by these disasters even in richer nations.[257] It is difficult to predict in advance, but there remains some possibility that Ralph will be adversely affected by such events. He must also grow up in a world whose very future is frighteningly precarious.

Summary

We have seen that Ralph is exposed to many severe risks, notwithstanding the very privileged social position he occupies. Any cumulative assessment of the riskiness of Ralph's life ought to deliver the verdict that it is significant, if the term is to be defined in the way I set out at

[253] Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (2016, 18 April). Natural disasters since 1900: Over 8 million deaths, 7 trillion US dollars. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved from: www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/04/160418092043.htm (Accessed: 4 March 2020).

[254] Internal Displacement Monitoring Committee (2019). *Disaster Displacement: A Global Review, 2008-2018*. Retrieved from: http://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/disaster-displacement-a-global-review (Accessed: 1 March 2020).

[255] Oppenheimer, M., & Anttila-Hughes, J. (2016). The Science of Climate Change. *The Future of Children,* 26 (1), pp. 11-30.

[256] Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (2015). *The Human Cost of Natural Disasters 2015: A Global Perspective*. Brussels, Belgium: Author, p. 7.

[257] Ibid., p. 8.

the outset of this section. Ralph is an idealised case, and for the overwhelming majority of people, they will face the prospect of not only these risks, but many or all of the additional risks discussed above.

3.4 – Defending The *No-Consent Claim* and The *No-Necessity Claim*

This section, on the *no-consent claim* and the *no-necessity claim*, are shorter than the fleshier section on risk above. This is because I do not attempt to offer a sustained defence of them at this point, opting instead to offer some basic clarity on the nature of these claims as a way of setting the scene for the critiques in Chapters Five and Six, respectively. There are two reasons why I do not defend the *no-consent claim* here. Firstly, on the surface, this claim is very obvious, and it is unclear what initial explanatory work is required to motivate the belief that we cannot give informed[258] permission or agreement to being brought into existence. It is an incontrovertible fact that the non-existent are incapable of providing prior consent to the risks of living as a conscious subject in the world. Secondly, despite this initial obviousness, this claim is so contested in practice that it is difficult to see how it can be robustly defended without getting stuck into the objections (for which we need to wait until Chapter Five).

As soon as I advance the *no-consent claim*, the pronatalist will inevitably counter that consent in the procreative context is markedly different to considerations of consent in other existential contexts. One way in which this difference manifests is that natal consent to procreation is a case of global consent, as opposed to local consent. This is because I am interested in the fact that those who come into existence do not give consent to the general state of their risky existence, whereas an examination of consent in other domains is typically restricted to specific intra-life events (sexual intercourse, surgical procedures, etc.).

A second difference is that, generally speaking, consent in other contexts involves the ability to actively give or withhold consent (that is, to accept or refuse being subjected to a particular action). For instance, the philosophical analysis of consent in the philosophy of sex focuses

[258] I take informed consent to be consent that is underpinned by the possession and understanding of the relevant facts. For instance, in the event that one were to be offered the option of a serious operation, one must appreciate the attendant risks, the likelihood of survival, the nature of the operation, and so on before giving valid consent.

on the factors that undermine or violate consent (including coercion, deception, and intoxication), operating against the background that such consent-undermining actions are taken against those who are typically capable of giving consent. However, in the procreative case, the focus of the *no-consent claim* falls entirely on the absence of consent to life's risks at the time one comes into existence and treats the fact that ante-natal consent can never be granted or refused as equivalent to the absence of consent.

A third difference between existential cases of consent and the procreative case of consent is that the former specifically concerns duties owed to identifiable moral persons. Much of the way in which consent is analysed in regular ethics is with respect to the moral rights and duties that arise in interpersonal interactions. This kind of model, in which consent relies on duties (which are, themselves, grounded in rights), is not easily applied to procreation, given that the non-existent are not normally thought to be rights-bearers.

Given all these differences, the pronatalist will likely hold that talking of the unborn not consenting to life is metaphysically confused and morally impotent, which are objections that deserve to be taken seriously. This is why I believe that a complete defence of the *no-consent claim* can only come out in conversation with criticisms, as it is only by repelling objections that this claim can be established. That challenge shall be taken up in Chapter Five.

I defer a defence of the *no-necessity claim* until Chapter Six for much the same reason – there is no way to show that we lack a compelling reason to procreate without responding to the many objections to this view. Indeed, it is relatively hard to even pin down what a procreative reason of pressing moral force is, as different people have different standards for evaluating the moral weightiness of a given reason. Furthermore, people often cite several reasons in favour of procreation, and it might be that some combination of these reasons jointly vitiates the *no-necessity claim*. Thus, a defence of the premise that we do not have sufficiently forceful moral reasons to procreate can only emerge from a satisfactory response to the many different attempts seeking to show that we do possess such reasons. I obviously maintain that none of these rebuttals of the *no-necessity claim* pass philosophical muster, but a detailed case-by-case refutation will have to wait till Chapter Six.

Although I am not going to defend these two claims now, I want to at least offer some clarity as to their function in my argument. There are two different ways in which we can think

about the role that the *no-consent claim* and the *no-necessity claim* play in the risk argument. The first is a weaker conception, in which they both fulfill the role of an unrealised defeater. Think about it like this: the risk argument states that, as a default presumption, we ought not to impose significant risk on others unless that presumption can be defeated. The two clearest routes to defeating or disabling that presumption are to show that the one being burdened with the risk consented to it or that there existed some very compelling reason to impose the risk. [259] The weaker reading of the *no-consent* and *no-necessity claims* denies that these defeaters hold, thereby ensuring that the default presumption against procreative risk-taking stands.

However, in addition to this weaker reading in which *no-consent* and *no-necessity* merely identify potential justifications of risk that do not work, a stronger reading of the part played by these two claims in the argument is possible. According to this stronger reading, the absence of consent and the absence of a pressing need to procreate are wrong-exacerbators. In other words, imposing the considerable risks of life on someone is bad, but doing so without consent and for reasons of insufficient moral weight make it worse.

How might the absence of consent or procreative justification independently contribute to procreative wrongness? Take the absence of consent to being brought into existence. If we think there is something bad about having really dangerous things happen to you without a say in the matter, then we could argue that the lack of consent to procreative risk contravenes the *say-so principle* and is an independent wrong-maker. As per this stronger rendering of the *no-consent claim*, it is not merely that procreation involves risk-taking *without* consent, but rather procreation is a kind of coercive risk imposition that *violates* consent. A similar sort of story could be offered up to explain why the absence of procreative justification compounds and magnifies the wrong of procreation. It is one thing to impose the risk of significant harm without consent, but if it is done unnecessarily, then that makes it even worse. The stronger reading of the *no-necessity claim* would have it that the weakness of one's reasons for engaging in procreation are directly correlated with the moral wrongness of the act – just as stronger reasons make procreation morally *better*, weaker reasons make procreation morally *worse*.

[259] For more on the notion of enabling and disabling factors, see Dancy, J. (2004). *Ethics without Principles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

For the purposes of my argument, only the weaker reading of the *no-consent claim* and the *no-necessity claim* are adopted. The role that no-consent and no-necessity play in the story of procreative wrongness is that their absence fails to effect a moral transformation of the procreative act (from bad to good). However, in Chapter Five, I briefly return to the point of how the absence of consent could contribute to and deepen the wrongness of procreative risk-taking, beyond merely failing to exonerate it (see 5.3). Not a great deal turns on this though, as the weaker reading of both these claims suffices for the success of my argument and this is what I limit myself to unless otherwise specified.

Part I: A Recap

Before proceeding to Part II of this thesis and wading our way through the patchwork of objections, let us take stock of the ground we've covered thus far. I started by looking at the historical and contemporary body of antinatalist argumentation, splitting the latter into *child-focused* and *third-party* argumentation (Chapter One), before going on to develop new lines of criticism against the most popular contemporary *child-focused arguments*, identifying the ways in which an argument from risk could avoid these challenges (Chapter Two). I then situated the risk argument within the *child-focused* camp, and explained and defended this argument (Chapter Three). However, that my argument emerges as arguably the strongest form of *child-focused* antinatalism does not, in itself, show that my argument is successful. My task, therefore, is only half-completed. Only in Part II will we able to evaluate if the risk argument is able to withstand the weighty criticisms that can be lodged against it.

Part II – Responding to the Critics

In Part II of this thesis, I critically evaluate the gamut of critical responses to the risk argument. Over the coming three chapters, I examine and debunk a wide range of counter-arguments. I group these objections by the component of my argument that they broadly seek to undermine – the *risk claim* (Chapter Four), the *no-consent claim* (Chapter Five), and the *no-necessity claim* (Chapter Six). As each of these claims forms an essential premise of my argument, a critic who can successfully argue that any one of them is not satisfied would thereby topple the risk argument.

As we forge ahead, though, we shall see that these objections do not neatly sit within this simple tripartite categorisation, as they often target multiple premises of my argument. To give an example, whilst arguments within Chapter Four have been grouped there because they most explicitly target the *risk claim*, some aspects of these arguments could also be seen as undermining the *no-consent claim* or as challenging the core claim made in *P1*. I will highlight the premises questioned by each objection at the start of every chapter.

Another complication for my treatment of counter-arguments is that, as this thesis serves as the first presentation of the risk argument, there do not exist any published responses to *my* argument. However, as we have already seen, some of the core elements of my argument have previously received philosophical scrutiny and this permits me to map out criticisms of the view I defend. Thus, many of the pronatalist objections we will encounter have been put forward by other philosophers and I explain how they can be reimagined, extended, or adapted to put the brakes on the risk argument. In other cases, there are objections to my risk argument that have no known advocate (in the form of a professional philosopher whose published work I am familiar with), but I put these forward as new counter-arguments where I feel that they would be promising moves for the pronatalist to make (of course, I shall seek to show that they bear no fruit despite their initial promise).

4. Undermining Risk

Although the risk element of my argument may appear to be the most incontrovertible, it nevertheless could be, and has been, challenged on several different grounds. This section of my thesis explores the nature of these objections and aims to demonstrate why they are unsuccessful in invalidating the antinatalist claim that procreation involves the imposition of significant risk. In section 4.1, I evaluate objections that seek to resist *the risk claim* on both empirical and philosophical grounds, a form of response I title 'Denying Risk'. Section 4.2 considers arguments to the effect that the risks in life are the justified means by which some greater end is realised – 'Justifying Risk'. In section 4.3, I investigate the argument that the presence of good in our lives offsets concerns about risk – 'Compensating Risk'. Section 4.4 looks at the strategy of 'Normalising Risk', where critics aim to show that the kind of risk I seek to problematise in procreative contexts is acceptably present in our daily lives. Finally, I evaluate in section 4.5 an increasingly popular objection that holds that the risks of life can be substantially reduced – 'Mitigating Risk'.[260]

Whilst *Denying Risk* explicitly challenges P2 (the *risk claim*) of my argument, the other responses share a more complicated relationship with the premises of my argument. *Mitigating Risk* seeks to apply a major caveat to the *risk claim* – it doesn't deny that there is significant risk, but says that this risk can be managed in a morally acceptable way. *Justifying Risk*, *Compensating Risk*, and *Normalising Risk* appear to be denials of the core claim in *P1* as opposed to a denial of the *risk claim*. They don't oppose the idea that procreation imposes significant risk; instead, they deny that this risk imposition is morally problematic if it is justified or suitably compensated or acceptable in other moral contexts. Yet, given that they all engage directly with the core idea of procreative risk, their grouping in this chapter makes sense.

4.1 – Denying Risk

[260] It should be noted that many of these strategies overlap, and the boundaries of this broad division are rather flexible. This will become apparent as we proceed to examine the different objections.

There are many different attempts to deny that the risks outlined in Chapter Three should be deemed significant for the purposes of problematising procreation. Below, I respond to two of the most popular arguments.

The 'Only Some People' Objection

According to the 'only some people' objection, the riskiness of life is not in fact global, but is only true of the lives of a small number of people. As David Wasserman puts it, the average parent "can reasonably conclude that the odds of [horrible] fates are low enough to be acceptable".[261] This is especially so in the more developed nations, where the probability of creating a child who will lead a dreadful life is "very slight".[262] Wasserman concedes that this default conclusion can be overruled if one is able to "defend a specific calculus of risk that would reject it" or to defend a principle akin to the maxi-min rule.[263] In my detailed treatment of the empirics of risk in Chapter Three, I showed how even a paradigmatically fortunate person (Ralph) is exposed to significant risk and explained by appealing to thought experiments why we have good reasons not to impose that kind of risk. Therefore, I take myself to have met Wasserman's challenge in the preceding chapter. Despite this, there are two more points to make in connection with the idea that my argument falsely inflates risk.

Firstly, this risk-denialist strategy is based both on an under-estimation of the types of risk that exist and an over-estimation of our ability to predict and control them. For example, prospective parents persuaded by the 'only some people' objection will certainly argue that due to their parental love and care, their child will not suffer neglect, abuse, etc. However, this kind of optimism that their child will not be amongst the ranks of the *some people* is unconvincing, for it is unlikely that anyone conceives a child expecting such fates to befall them, yet these fates do befall hundreds of millions of people in every part of the world. Perhaps we are justified in believing that we or our partners will not be the ones to cause our child's misery, but love is clearly not an appropriate safeguard when harm hurtles towards us from forces beyond our control. Recall the many risks that Ralph had to contend, notwithstanding the best intentions of his well-resourced parents.

[261] Benatar and Wasserman 2015, p. 165.

[262] Ibid., p. 155.

[263] Ibid., p. 165.

Indeed, in contrast to the suggestion that I have overstated risk due to blinkered geo-temporal selectivism, it may very well be that my risk analysis, although informed by empirical data, is understated. This is because some of the very worst risks, like rape and sexual abuse, are underreported.[264] Furthermore, the lifetime risk of "mental diseases such as major depressive disorders" is underestimated, because "some of the subjects have not yet experienced the depression that will later affect them".[265]

Whilst it is certainly true that the harms of life are distributed unevenly across both space and time, I have contended that the risks are significant irrespective of epoch and location.[266] This is partly because of the second point I wish to make – that at least some of the components of risk that my argument exploits are universal features of the human condition (such as susceptibility to death and disease), notwithstanding the fact that they are exacerbated by geographic variation. If anything, such variation is actually an aid in conceiving of my argument. We are considerably more fortunate than many millions of people who have lived and died throughout human history (although not lucky enough, if my argument is correct), and imagining the alternative temporal and spatial possibilities in connection with our birth is a way of bringing the riskiness of life into sharp focus.

In short, whilst the risk varies, all procreative acts are wrong inasmuch as they involve the presence of significant risk. Whether we conclude that some instances of procreation are more wrong because the risks they entail are greater hinges on our approach to normative hierarchies. The binary threshold view holds that significant risk is the only consideration,

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[264] Data from the U.S. indicates that the majority of rapes are unreported. Rennison, C.M. (2002). 'Rape and Sexual Assault: Reporting to Police and Medical Attention, 1992-2000', *US Bureau of Justice Statistics: Selected Findings*, Retrieved from: https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rsarp00.pdf (Accessed: 26 August 2020). With child sexual abuse, it has been estimated only 38% of children disclose the fact that they have been abused. London, K., Bruck, M., Ceci, S., & Shuman, D. (2003). 'Disclosure of child sexual abuse: What does the research tell us about the ways that children tell?', *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 11 (1), pp 194-226.

[265] Benatar, D. (2017). 'Kids? Just Say No', *Aeon*, Retrieved from: https://aeon.co/essays/having-children-is-not-life-affirming-its-immoral (Accessed: 24 August 2020).

[266] In relation to space, it is a fact that there are cross-country differences in levels of poverty, life expectancy, disease prevalence, etc. With respect to time, see Pinker, S. (2011). *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined.* New York: Viking for the claim that certain kinds of existential risk have been decreasing.

and if this is present, then procreation is equally wrong in every case. The gradational view, by contrast, holds that all acts of procreation are morally wrong, but some are worse than others because they involve heightened risk. For the purposes of this thesis, it is not relevant which of these two views is accepted, as both yield the conclusion I wish to arrive at – that procreation is morally wrong.

The 'Inevitability of Risk' Objection

The second way in which risk can be denied is not by arguing that significant risk isn't present, but that it is somehow invalidated by the inevitability of much of that risk. Christine Overall, relying on a distinction offered by Sue Donaldson in personal communication, separates "'necessary human suffering' (death, incurable illness, psychological and mental pain from the inevitable exigencies of human life) and "contingent human suffering" (resulting from poverty, violence, and avoidable disease)".[267] Overall states that there is a legitimate concern as to whether and to what extent "the likelihood of contingent human suffering should count against the morality of procreation", but appears to deny that the unavoidable harms should count against procreation.[268] I say "appears to" as it is not entirely clear if Overall believes the necessary harms ought not to be considered significant risks by virtue of their inevitability, but even if she is not making this claim, we can see how such a claim could be made along those lines.

Are inevitable harms that flow from universal features of the human condition, such as mortality and biological susceptibility, less easily recruited in service of antinatalist conclusions about risk? There are two good reasons to think not. Firstly, it is difficult to imagine what justification could be given for this argument that doesn't beg the question against the antinatalist. If asked, "why shouldn't necessary harms count against procreation?", it seems that the defender of this objection must resort to the notion that the non-contingent harms are bound up with being human and, qua their necessity for human

[267] Overall 2012, p. 141.

[268] Ibid., pp. 141-142.

existence, acceptable. However, this simply begs the question against the global child-focused antinatalist, who is disputing precisely this idea.[269]

Secondly, we routinely and justifiably think procreation is impermissible on the basis of likely or certain harms resultant from inescapable biological facts. Consider the case of an infant who, we know prior to conception, will be born with a painful genetic disorder that will cause their death in early childhood. Most people hold the intuition that it would be preferable not to bring about the existence of such a child, notwithstanding the biological inevitability of the harms that it would have to endure. Indeed, if only eliminable suffering is morally pertinent for risk tabulation, then it seems that the ineliminable harms of life can never count against life-creation, no matter how great they become. This gives us a reason to think that necessary harms should be considered relevant in the assessment of procreative risk.

Furthermore, the 'inevitability of risk' objection might well collapse into a separate rebuttal to risk. This objection is perhaps mostly plausibly cashed out under a comparative account of harming – harms can only be evaluated comparatively, and as the necessary harms are perforce requirements for the existence of a life that is on the whole good (read: better or at least not worse than non-existence), they cannot be considered harms. However, this rendering of the argument is better classified as a compensating risk argument where intra-life bads are suitably recompensed, a move which is evaluated in section 4.3.

4.2 – Justifying Risk

The second class of counter-arguments to the risk premise relies on justifications of suffering to overturn the antinatalist reading of risk. Whilst such arguments function very similarly to a 'denying risk' strategy, there is a nuanced distinction. Those who seek to justify risk acknowledge the existence of the negative outcomes confronting the created person, but argue that these outcomes cannot straightforwardly be treated as morally bad. Below, I will

[269] Even if we maintain that antinatalists bear the general burden of proof, here it must be borne by the pronatalist because we are owed a reason for a distinction between necessity and contingency.

evaluate the most common justification defended by critics of antinatalism, and show why it is unsuccessful in demonstrating the non-existence of significant procreative risk.

This pro-natalist justificatory account should be familiar to anyone who has previously encountered proposed solutions to the problem of evil. It consists in the idea that the harms of life can be, and often are, instrumentally good; what initially appears to be a risk is, in fact, a means by which to realise the even greater end of personal happiness and fulfilment. Rivka Weinberg cites the case of Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, whose experiences in the Nazi extermination camps "enriched his understanding and appreciation of the meaning of life".[270] Weinberg also references her friend, for whom not only is suffering a means to a benefit, but is "itself a benefit".[271] There is an obvious parallel here with some spiritual views, in which suffering is seen as grace.[272] In short, Weinberg argues that many people claim that suffering can be meaningful or even enjoyable, and no vantage point permits us to authoritatively deny this claim.[273] Thus, what may superficially appear to be gratuitous risks are actually necessary harms for the achievement of some desirable end.

It is no doubt true that some people, usually reflecting on an episode of historic suffering in their lives, endorse the positive dimensions of that suffering (for instance, the role it played in the cultivation of certain virtues like stoical resolve). Can this, then, offer a strategy for justifying the risk imposed via procreation? Once again, there are several points counting against this kind of reasoning. Consider, first, whether this reasoning plausibly accounts for most of the risks spelled out in Chapter Three. Many gruelling episodes in people's lives – agonising diseases, subjection to violence, untimely bereavement, etc. – don't appear to even superficially be linked to beneficial outcomes like augmented meaning and well-being. The unwillingness to accept that much of the hardship encountered by the human species is gratuitous strikes me as the pronatalist corollary of Benatar's stubborn insistence on misery prevailing in our lives. Indeed, those pressing this line of argument wish to establish the

[270] Weinberg 2016, p. 129.

[271] Ibid., p. 129.

[272] See the views of the spiritual teacher, Ram Dass. Saunders, C. (1990). 'Suffering As Grace', *The Sun Magazine*, Retrieved from: https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/181/suffering-as-grace (Accessed: 17 October 2020).

[273] It should be noted that Weinberg presents this argument as a response to Benatar's QOLA. Nevertheless, we can see how it could be extended to cover my argument.

conclusion that antinatalism is unintuitive, but deploy a justificatory defence of suffering that overturns one of the most intuitive of all the building blocks of moral reasoning by claiming that bads might often be desirable.

Moreover, there is scant evidence that attitudes like those held by Frankl and Weinberg's anonymous friend are commonplace. One way to see this is by looking at the approach we take towards the vast majority of instances of suffering in our own lives. We try our best to ameliorate and eliminate the harms that ominously hang over our existence; taking medication and pursuing often discomforting treatment to repel disease, investing great sums in our education to guard against future poverty, and so on. Why strive to lessen the grip of suffering if it generally leads to goods? Consider, too, the way in which we view injustice, both historic and current. We reflect on the grimmest events in the human story, like slavery and the Holocaust, with moral disgust, and feel great sorrow for the plight of those affected. Yet if the view solicited by those seeking to justify risk were to be adopted, we are in fact mistaken in reacting in this way. For these reasons, the attempt to justify risk, whilst it might succeed in explaining why some negative experiences might offer benefits for certain people, fails as a general invalidation of the risk principle at the heart of *P1*.

4.3 – Compensating Risk

Arguably, the most common response to the risk claim is not denial or justification, but rather an attempt to defuse its potency by appealing to compensation. The recompense imagined by these critics is hedonic in character, with life's many and varied goods thought to constitute satisfactory indemnity for the harms of existence. According to this compensating benefits argument, the benefits sufficiently offset the negatives across a typical life and this guts the latter of any normative force in rendering procreation problematic. Many philosophers are inclined to reason in this way, contending that the general happiness and gratitude-for-life reported by most people give us an excellent reason to dismiss concerns about risk. For example, Overall argues that whether being alive "is a benefit or a harm *depends on the content of the life that is lived*", and as "most people are reasonably happy to be alive", we should not think people's lives are characterised by morally problematic risk.[274]

[274] Overall 2012, p. 107.

Does the alleged preponderance of joy over misery vindicate procreative risk-taking? One way to push back against this view would be to deny that happiness is present in sufficiently copious doses to cure the malaise of being, and to maintain that the only reason we are unable to see how miserable our lives are is because we are trapped behind the illusory veil of psychological conditioning. Were the antinatalist to avail himself of this response, though, his antinatalist argument transforms into Benatar's QOLA, which is not promising for reasons already met in Chapter Two. However, Benatar does make some points about our hedonic states that are nevertheless relevant here.

Benatar argues that there are pertinent empirical differences between pleasure and pain, which serve to impair any straightforward balancing exercise. He identifies a number of pain-pleasure factual asymmetries; including hedonic intensity, duration, stability, and moral significance. For example, whereas the worst forms of suffering can often be chronic and enduring, intense happiness is, in contrast, a relatively impermanent and short-lived phenomenon. This gap between the intensity and duration of goods and bads is also one that has philosophical pedigree. Schopenhauer famously entreated us to contrast the gustatory satisfaction of a predator with the fear and terror of its prey.[275] Though set in a non-human animal context, he purports to highlight the transience and emptiness of pleasurable states in light of truly horrific ones. It is also "much easier for things to go wrong than to go right", meaning positive states are inherently less stable.[276] Think, for instance, of how bad states are capable of snowballing, as when a severe mental illness can trigger other events like a relationship break-down, financial difficulties, and so on.

Another way of illustrating these phenomenological divergences is by considering whether we would accept the worst life could possibly offer – sexual abuse, debilitating terminal illnesses, and the like – if its greatest pleasures were included in the trade. Most of us would not. Call this the *Wouldn't Trade* position. It is probably our reflective reticence in this case that underpins our prioritisation of moral causes. If we were given a sum of money with the option of spending it either in the relief of a stranger's suffering or in the furtherance of a

[275] Schopenhauer 1891/2015, p. 2

[276] Benatar, D. (2017). *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, p. 77.

stranger's pleasure, we almost unhesitatingly choose the former – indeed, the latter is sometimes not even seen as a "moral" cause. Call this non-equivalent treatment of pleasures and pains the *Would Aid* position.[277] Perhaps both *Wouldn't Trade* and *Would Aid* are underpinned by some more general *priority principle* in which suffering-avoidance is prioritised over pleasure-creation (see 3.2), but we do not need to dig even deeper here and construct a general moral rule. Accepting the foregoing already shows that the risk of gratuitous harms befalling one cannot straightforwardly be offset against supposedly compensating goods, even if an all-encompassing *priority principle* is not true.

The compensating benefits argument would have it that pleasure and pain are two sides of the same coin; opposite in their experiential valence, but alike in moral significance. Yet this view is completely at odds with our intuitive judgments about the weight to be accorded to negative and positive states, as drawn out by *Wouldn't Trade* and *Would Aid*. This greatly complicates suggestions that only by means of a hedonic accounting in which the experiential content of a life is tabulated and the benefits and costs are simply traded off can we determine if procreation is justified. This, then, would reopen the door to a different approach to procreative risk, a door that I propose leads us directly to *P1*.

There is, however, a much deeper problem with the 'compensating risk' response, which is that it misunderstands the nature of my argument. This is because the objection seems to draw an implicit dichotomy between risk and reward, assuming that my argument focuses on the former and ignores the swamping effects of the latter. But I do not intend for the word, 'risk', in my argument to be interpreted as the antonym of reward. Rather, I take reward to be a function of risk-taking. When we introduce risk, loss and reward (here taking the subjective form of misery and happiness) are possible results *of* that risk.

Certainly, bringing someone into existence involves opening the possibility for a person to experience many goods, including pleasurable sensations, aesthetic experiences, the intellectual benefits of knowledge acquisition, the peaceful calm that accompanies perceiving and connecting with the natural world, forming rewarding and loving relationships with others, achieving one's goals, and so on. It also involves opening the possibility for many

[277] *Would Aid* is to be understood here as prioritising aid to those who are suffering over those who desire greater pleasure.

extreme bads that I have already outlined at length. Risk, as I have defined it, encompasses both experiential boons and curses; it is the exposure to that world of mixed fortune when the distribution and magnitude of benefits and harms are not determined before birth. My claim is that it is immoral to expose a new person to such risk without consent when there aren't overriding concerns which might serve to justify that risk. Indeed, *The Gamble* sought to illustrate that this kind of risk-taking is impermissible, even when there is high potential for greater benefits.

It is not surprising that someone might misunderstand this aspect of my argument, as philosophers writing on procreative ethics often assuredly assume that one's quality of life can be stipulated in advance. For instance, S. Matthew Liao distinguishes between two antinatalist strategies to neuter the supposed compensatory effect of benefits within a life. The first, he says, is the "Positives Are Not Relevant Approach", which holds that "unless a life contains absolutely no negative things at all, it is not relevant that life also contains positive things".[278] The second, the "Positives Are Not Enough Approach", maintains that although life is characterised by some positive qualities, "almost everyone's life contains more negative things than positive things".[279] These two approaches broadly map onto Benatar's asymmetry and QOLA, respectively. However, there is another interpretation of the second approach that Liao overlooks, which is that although the positive things might outstrip the negative things in many lives, the significant *possibility* that it may not can ground the moral dubitability of procreation. My risk argument, therefore, seeks to produce the conclusion that procreation is immoral even were one to accord weight to the positive experiences within a life, by focusing on the commingling of significant risk with the absence of both consent and necessity.

The Objection Reinterpreted: The 'Life Worth Living' Objection

Whilst the compensating benefits argument in its basic form is rather weak, it could be interpreted in a more compelling form. This repackaged response, like the original response, states that many (although obviously not all) people in whose lives the risks discussed in Chapter Three have materialised nevertheless feel that their lives are worth living. However,

[278] Liao, S.M. (2023). A Right Response to Antinatalism. *Res Philosophica*, 100 (4), pp. 449-471.

[279] Ibid.

it adds the stipulation that the "life worth living" condition is alone relevant for determining the riskiness of life and observes the chance of producing a non-worthwhile life as per this metric does not meet the significant risk threshold.[280] Whilst my risk argument would count as a significant risk the possibility of a painful terminal illness, the proponent of this modified objection would contend that as even those in the throes of such a fate regard their lives as having been (or perhaps even still) worth living, we ought not to view such an illness as a risk cautioning against procreation.[281] This position aims to do away with a sizeable number of the risks I identified in Chapter Three as many of them afflict people who nonetheless feel their lives are worth living. And if leading a life worth living is the only relevant datum for the purposes of assessing procreative risk, the critic presses that I cannot claim there remains a significant risk. It threatens, then, to significantly weaken my risk claim, if not completely derail it.

It is important to recognise that there are many ways to construe the notion of a life worth living. Under one conception, this is to be done by assessing "whether or not such a life has a favourable balance of satisfactions over miseries", a hedonic calculus that reduces to the kind of risk-compensation argument considered above.[282] Another standard for assessment adverts to a basic threshold of objective goods (the most obvious candidates being factors like financial stability, housing, long-term relationships), with the determination of whether a life is worth living based on whether that threshold is crossed.[283] For the purposes of this section, I respond to the self-reported standard of a life-worth-living – in simple terms, a life is worth living if the one living it says that it is – as the widespread subjective endorsement of being alive is what I regard as giving greatest impetus to this style of objection.

There are broadly two ways that antinatalists can resist this objection. The first way aims to show that even if the only procreative risk we ought to consider is the risk that our offspring lead a life that isn't worth living, this risk is still significant. The second way rejects the idea

[280] Although this might seem like a strategy better suited to section 4.1 (Denying Risk), it ultimately denies risk by appealing to the compensatory factors that make lives worth living.

[281] Benatar and Wasserman 2015, p. 162.

[282] Harris, J. (1990). *Wonderwoman and superman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 93.

[283] Archard, D. (2004). Wrongful life. *Philosophy*, 79 (3), pp. 403-420.

that whether someone's life is worth living is the only relevant consideration in the moral assessment of risk.

Let us explore the first route out of the objection and grant to the pronatalist that the prospect of leading an overall non-worthwhile life is the only relevant risk. There are good reasons to think that the large number of people who report that their life is worth living still cannot undermine my risk argument. Firstly, this number is not large enough (or as large as its proponent seems to believe). When asked to rank their life on a scale from 0 (the worst possible life) to 10 (the best possible life), the global average response is 5.27, suggesting that a considerable minority of people are at least somewhat dissatisfied with their lives.[284] Even in more affluent Western countries where evidence indicates life satisfaction is greater, a non-negligible number of individuals report dissatisfaction. Recent data from the United Kingdom shows that 5.7% of people reported low levels of satisfaction and 8.9% reported low levels of happiness.[285] At this juncture, one might claim that a low level of life satisfaction or happiness should not be interpreted as a belief that one's own life is not worth living. There is certainly some truth to this claim, as even amongst those who report that they are not happy or satisfied with life, a majority still feel their lives are worth living.[286] There are very few studies directly asking respondents whether they feel they lead a life that is worth living, but where such data is available, it doesn't favour the pronatalist. In the Netherlands, for instance, 8% of adults did not respond affirmatively when asked if their life is worth living.[287][288]

[284] Ortiz-Ospina, E., and Roser, M. (2024). Happiness and Life Satisfaction. *Published online at OurWorldInData.org.* Retrieved from: https://ourworldindata.org/happiness-and-life-satisfaction (Accessed: 7 March 2024).

[285] Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023). Personal well-being in the UK: April 2022 to March 2023. Retrieved from: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/april2022tomarch2023 (Accessed: 7 March 2024).

[286] Statistics Netherlands. Fewer young adults say they are happy. Retrieved from: https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2022/16/fewer-young-adults-say-they-are-happy (Accessed: 7 March 2024).

[287] Ibid.

[288] This data is static, but we should be mindful of the fact that our self-assessments are dynamic, with people able to regard their lives as worth living sometimes but then significantly doubt it on other occasions. See Benatar 2006, p. 72.

The true number is likely to be much higher, as many of those whose lives may not be worth living are unable to provide confirmation in survey data (e.g., those left incapacitated by a painful disease, isolated from society, etc.). Such data is also likely to underrepresent those lives not worth living because we can never be sure that our life is worth living until the very end, for one of the perils of aging is that horrible fates lie in store that could radically alter our judgments about our lives. Furthermore, as we saw when assessing Benatar's QOLA, there are cognitive biases that skew people's assessments of their lives in a positive direction (although not to the extent supposed by Benatar), correcting for which might well yield even more sobering figures than we saw above. Take, for instance, the near-future bias, where people fail to adequately consider risks and harms in the temporally distant future (a point especially important in this case, as many risks markedly increase with age).

In any event, even if we ignore everything in the above paragraph and limit ourselves to the presently available information, the number of people who lead non-worthwhile lives seems to be morally significant even if it appears to be statistically insignificant. If we cast our minds back to *The Game*, we saw that a 1-5% chance of a bad outcome in a scenario of needless, unconsented-to risk imposition constituted morally unacceptable odds. It is not so easy to shake for the pronatalist to shake the charge that accepting such odds in a procreative context is similarly immoral.

To see why, we need to tease out the implications of the understanding of goods and bads that underlies the reinterpreted 'life worth living' objection. This understanding faces what I term the *Specification Problem*. Suppose we ask one who feels that life's ills are adequately compensated how many lives-not-worth-living they are prepared to accept in the pursuit of generally happy lives. Other than committed utilitarians, many would want to resist endorsing a scenario in which securing great pleasures for thousands of people required a small group of people to suffer and die prematurely. Yet this is precisely the kind of calculation that people are committed to when they sanction procreation, reasoning that most children (including their own) will very probably lead a good life and that these odds justify the risk that a slim number of children (again, possibly their own) will die following a miserable life. Now, admittedly, there's a difference between the two cases – the above case involves definite benefits and harms, whereas the procreative case involves merely probable benefits and harms. However, accommodating this difference doesn't appear to change our

judgments, as many (possible or definite) high-quality lives do not compensate for a few (possible or definite) low-quality lives.

In short, the dilemma facing the pronatalist is that any number given in response to the *Specification Problem* seems cruel, with any number that isn't cruel not being remotely realistic. The idea at the heart of the *Specification Problem* pushes in a slightly different direction to *Wouldn't Trade*. That is, even if we were prepared to accept severe harms in order to secure meaningful goods *within* our own lives, even an exceedingly probable good life appears not to compensate for the low-probability world in which a life is bad when we are considering the lives of others.

There are those who may not be impressed by the available data on this matter, and so argue that whether the life worth living standard is met should not be derived from studies but rather from the very low number of people who take their own lives, a figure much less than 1% as we saw in Chapter Three. However, favouring an inference from completed suicides is unlikely to be a viable strategy for my opponent to pursue as a host of challenges immediately present themselves. For one thing, the percentage of registered suicides is a poor proxy of the percentage of people who renounce the worthwhileness of their lives. Suicide is a culturally-vetoed, psychologically demanding, highly risky, and socially devastating act (a point we shall revisit in the following chapter – see section 5.6) – it is entirely plausible that one could regard their life as undesirable but preclude suicide as an option. Furthermore, notwithstanding the various forces (familial duties, social conditioning, religious injunctions, the fear of death) discouraging suicide, a significant number either attempt or contemplate suicide, as we saw in Chapter Three.

We can now turn attention to the second strategy available to the antinatalist, one which involves claiming that the intra-life risks are morally problematic even if they surface in the lives of those who are grateful to be born. There is an obvious overlap here with the literature on the non-identity problem (NIP), which turns on whether one can be "wronged by an action that is the condition of his or her own worthwhile existence".[289] Consider, for instance, a prospective parent using in vitro fertilisation who screens embryos for a gene resulting in poor health – the selected embryo becomes a child who experiences suffering and hardships

[289] Gardner, M. (2015). A harm-based solution to the non-identity problem. *Ergo*, 2 (17), pp. 427-444, p. 429.

that a child with normal health would not, but this child nevertheless leads a life that is worth living.[290] Our instincts are to condemn the parent's actions as causing harm to the child, but the challenge raised by NIP is to explain how this can be the case when the child leads a worthwhile life (and, so, is not worse off than never existing) and would not have existed were it not for the selection of the health-impairing gene. Evident here is the commitment to the idea that that one can never be wronged by procreation, so long as a life meets the "life worth living standard".[291]

It would be too lofty a goal for this thesis to decisively settle the question of what model of procreative harming we should favour to satisfactorily address NIP, for this is a lively and hotly-contested area of moral philosophy over which a great deal of ink has been spilt. It is therefore sufficient for my purposes to note that most philosophers, struck by the wrongness of procreative acts that impose a harmful condition as part of a life worth living, reject the idea that a worthwhile life swamps all other considerations of procreative harm and have proposed popular solutions to the problem.[292]

One such account is the non-comparative account of harming, according to which a sufficient condition for an action being harmful is that it cause one to occupy a *bad* state (even if it does not make one worse off than some counterfactual state).[293] Elizabeth Harman, for instance, has pressed that a non-comparative worseness standard is possible, wherein an action being *bad* for a person is a sufficient condition for it to qualify as a harm. Should an action result in "pain, early death, bodily damage, or deformity", an individual can be harmed even if the person "would not have existed if the action had not been performed".[294] The many serious potential bads of life outlined previously, then, could be harmful states even if they are tied up with an overall good life. We might also cast our attention back to *Shiffrin's maxim*, encountered in Chapter Two, which aimed to problematise the imposition of non-consensual

[290] Ibid., p. 428.

[291] Hurley, P., and Weinberg, R. (2014). Whose Problem Is Non-Identity? *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 12 (6), pp. 699-730, p. 703.

[292] Of course, there are philosophers who believe NIP ought to be accepted. See Boonin, D. (2008). How to Solve the Non-Identity Problem. *Public Affairs Quarterly,* 22 (2), pp. 129-159.

[293] Harman, E. (2004). Can We Harm and Benefit in Creating? *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18, pp. 89-113. See also Gardner 2015 for a refined version of this kind of account.

[294] Harman 2004, p. 93

harms to secure an even greater benefit. We saw there that there are some good reasons to accept this maxim, which if true, provides another route to counting as morally bad the harms that arise within a life that is endorsed.

However, not too much hangs on this point, because even if one steadfastly adheres to a restrictive model of procreative harming that disbars from moral consideration all harms befalling one who leads a worthwhile life, my argument can still succeed via the first route – by demonstrating that procreation involves the imposition of a significant risk of an unconsented-to life that is not worth living.

4.4 – Normalising Risk

The normalising risk approach seeks to undermine the risk claim by adverting to the justified and ubiquitous presence of risk in our daily existence. The many philosophers who argue for the normality of risk contend that we regularly and justifiably wager with our welfare and the welfare of our existent children in the pursuit of greater goods, and procreation is not different in a relevant way. If the antinatalist wishes to object to procreative risk, they say, he must also object to the intra-life risks we take, but this kind of excessive risk aversion leads to wildly counter-intuitive implications.

A principle of risk aversion has been ridiculed as a guide for living because it paralyses all action, supposedly implying that we can never cross the street or wed a lover for fear of a car striking us or ending up in a disastrous marriage.[295] When the arguments are made directly in the procreative context, they take a similar shape. David DeGrazia states that we "faultlessly expose children to harm all the time, often as part of creating opportunities for greater benefits", such as by sending them to school.[296] Weinberg notes that we take on risk in our pursuits of valuable ends, such as when we "ride bicycles, eat at restaurants [and] shake hands with strangers".[297] Indeed, she takes our willingness to risk harm for benefits to be

[295] Harsanyi, J.C. (1975). 'Can the Maximin Principle Serve as a Basis for Morality? A Critique of John Rawls's Theory', *The American Political Science Review*, 69 (2), pp. 594-606, p. 595.

[296] DeGrazia 2012, p. 153.

[297] Weinberg, R. (2013). 'Is Having Children Always Wrong?', *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 31 (1), pp. 26-37, p. 32.

evidence against the *priority principle*.[298] Weinberg also observes that prohibiting all risk imposition would be "practically impossible" and cause life to "quickly grind to a painful and abrupt halt".[299]

Christine Overall is another philosopher who has argued against the adoption of what she calls a "small *c* conservative approach to existence", which she takes to have absurd social consequences.[300] She also draws upon some real-life cases of justifiable risk imposition to argue against antinatalism, observing that the mere fact that students on a Philosophy course may fail the course doesn't supply a reason not to offer the module to students.[301] According to Overall, the risk-aversion advocated by a thoroughgoing antinatalism necessarily implies that "we should never create any new roles or positions or at least never fill them", which she takes to be so absurd an implication that the theory must undoubtedly be deeply flawed.[302] Wasserman, following in this critique of extreme risk aversion and extending the scope to large-scale societal decisions, notes that we accept the "very small risks of disastrous outcomes on unknown individuals" when we socially sanction activities such as car-driving and road-building.[303] Again, the implications are clear – adopting the attitude to risk advised by antinatalism imperils much of our daily social existence.

Antinatalists like Benatar have generally responded to this kind of reasoning by arguing that whilst balancing harms and benefits may be a reasonable approach to risk within a life or in society, the avoidance of harms takes priority over bestowing benefits in the procreative case.[304] This, as it stands, is a rather unsatisfactory counter, as no explanation has been furnished as to what might ground this difference between procreation and the real-life cases of acceptable risk identified by DeGrazia, Weinberg, Overall, and Wasserman. As I see it, there are five main reasons why this collection of examples does not analogise the creation of new sentient beings, and therefore, cannot exculpate procreative risk-taking or commit the antinatalist to ridiculous conclusions.

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[298] Ibid., p. 33.

[299] Weinberg 2016, p. 134.

[300] Overall 2012, p. 101.

[301] Ibid., p. 101.

[302] Ibid., p. 101.

[303] Benatar and Wasserman 2015, p. 174.

[304] Benatar 2012, p. 136.

Firstly, when it comes to the interests of the person created by reproduction, a risk-free option exists – namely, not procreating. However, existent people who must navigate the treacherous terrain of life are not afforded the luxury of a path devoid of risk. In making decisions about the schooling of our children or driving or dining out, all options tend to entail double-sided harms – the cost of failing a course against the cost of missing out on an education, the cost of a potential car accident vis-à-vis the cost of being deprived of an outdoor activity best accessed by vehicle, and so on. This reality then thrusts upon us the need to engage in an exercise of balancing benefits against harms and are precisely the kinds of cases that cry out for utilitarian resolution, a calculus that is wholly unnecessary in a domain where a ready-made harm-free route exists.

Secondly, at least some of these intra-life actions cited by these philosophers involve a plausible claim of necessity for their performance. An immediate test of necessity is the *obligation test*. One kind of obligation lies in the promotion of human flourishing. Individual actions such as interacting with other human beings and social actions like offering opportunities for intellectual enrichment both seem to be activities that are essential to human flourishing, and this "essential" character is what partly helps to explain why the risk of harm is tolerated in these cases. Another kind, perhaps best regarded as the antonym of flourishing-promoting obligation, is the obligation to avoid bads. Abolishing all jobs or academic courses will result in significant losses for existing beings by hampering material well-being and frustrating opportunities for learning, which we have obligations to promote (or, conversely, it might be thought we have obligations to avoid causing ignorance, poverty, loneliness, etc.).

The avoidance of moral bads constitutes a plausible basis for many kinds of risk-accepting social decisions. Consider, for example, that although men are statistically more likely to be sexually predatory toward children and we cannot confidently determine which men will offend against children in advance, we nevertheless employ men whose work involves contact with children (e.g., as teachers).[305] We accept this social risk precisely because its avoidance (by rejecting all applications from men to teach children) would involve a serious

[305] Zanghellini, A. (2020) Philosophical problems with the gender critical feminist argument against trans inclusion. *Sage Open*, 10 (2), pp. 1-14, p. 6.

social and moral wrong – namely, systematic profiling and discrimination against individuals on the basis of their gender or sex.

By contrast to these cases, failing to create new beings does not result in the violation of any obligation.[306] We don't have to accept the Benatarian asymmetry to hold that we have reasons and obligations to ensure that the lives of existing sentient beings are pleasurable and productive (therefore mandating certain risks) in a way that we do not with creating a sentient being just so that his or her life will be pleasurable. Whilst I, obviously, maintain that compelling reasons to take the risk are simply not present in the procreative case, many philosophers disagree, thinking that a world without procreation entails significant costs. We will need to wait until Chapter Six to see whether my stance can survive the procreative reasons promoted by pronatalists.

Thirdly, many of the real-life cases of permissibly-undertaken risk involve some implicit consent on the part of the person(s) facing that risk. People either explicitly or tacitly provide their informed consent to studying Philosophy and sitting examinations as per the requirements of a given module. Similarly, consent to the risks is present when rational adults drive automobiles, walk on roads, consume food at eateries, and so on.[307] Given that no one consents to coming into existence, many of the existential cases fail to adequately simulate procreative-risk taking. However, it's certainly true that some people are not equipped to provide (informed) consent yet still faultlessly encounter risk. In DeGrazia's case, we justifiably expose young children to risk even though they lack the conceptual abstraction necessary to fully appreciate and approve the risk-entailing action (e.g., going to school). So, the difference with respect to consent cannot tell the whole story. Thankfully (for the antinatalist), the remaining differences between intra-life risk-taking and procreative risk-taking complete the argument.

[306] I explore in Chapter Six how a reason or obligation to procreate might be grounded, but at this juncture, we can simply note that the general opinion is that procreation is permissible, but not morally mandatory.

[307] Sometimes, the consent may not be explicitly granted, but may be thought to be implicit in the social contract, where individuals abide by the rules of society (mask-wearing, driving cars) and accept the risk of harm in exchange for liberty and social goods.

The fourth difference lies in the predictability of the risk. The risk assessment for cases of intra-life harm exposure almost always involves harms that can be more easily approximated. This is not to say that risk is absent, but evaluating the risks of sending a child to school involves a more manageable degree of uncertainty regarding the harms (here, I take it, imagined to be academic failure, severe boredom, bullying, etc.). For example, we will usually know the crime rate in the area, we can investigate the history and culture of the school, we are able to research the qualifications and skills of teachers, and so on. In contrast, estimating the risk that attends bringing a particular person into existence is a far more speculative endeavour, as there are an extraordinarily wide set of harms that might befall the person at any point in their life. Closely connected to the unpredictability of harms ensuant to procreation is their inability to be mitigated in the same way as intra-life harms. Many severe harms confronting a possible being, such as disease and disasters, are to a large extent outside human control, whereas the risk of failing an exam is significantly mitigable (through excellent preparation and instruction, for instance). In short, coming into existence involves exposure to pervasive, unpredictable, and inescapable suffering, in sharp contrast to risks like going to school. The extent of our epistemological and agential limitedness is not recreated in the intra-life cases.

Finally, consider the roles played by the probability and severity of risk. The risk in at least some of the real-life cases seems acceptable partly because the costs are not extreme enough, either in magnitude or likelihood. If the Philosophy class in Overall's example resulted in one student in every class dying, whether caused by being overwhelmed or underwhelmed by the content, then we might not wish to run the class, notwithstanding its clear benefits.[308] Similarly, in Wasserman's example of road construction, if the number of road accidents in a given year were as high as the number of people dying from cancer or suffering sexual abuse, then we might well reconsider whether roads are worth it after all.[309] Other cases of acceptable risk-taking – travelling overseas for greater opportunity, crossing busy roads to get

[308] In a more true-to-life example, we saw that that the value of in-person schooling took a back seat to considerations of serious risk in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic when face-to-face classes were cancelled,

[309] The statistics for cancer and sexual abuse were explored in Chapter Three. The numbers far exceed the number of deaths and serious injuries resulting from road traffic accidents. See Department for Transport (2020). *Reported Road Casualties in Great Britain: 2019 Annual Report*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

to school – also seem less justifiable when the probability and severity of risk is heightened. Take, for example, the following cases:

Migrant: A loving parent travels abroad in perilous circumstances to improve the life prospects of their child.

Jungle: A loving parent must take their child through a predator-filled jungle in order to reach school.

It seems like, in these cases, the risk of a bad outcome is sufficiently significant to warrant an alternative course of action (staying in the home country or home-schooling). Even if one's intuitions point in favour of the risk-taking action, it is almost certainly because it is felt that some notion of necessity (the necessity of fulfilling human potential or securing the well-rounded development of a child) trumps the risk, a kind of necessity absent in the procreative case as argued above. Simply put, raise the stakes, and it may be the case that many of the supposedly acceptable intra-life risks are no longer acceptable. As I argued in Chapter Three, the odds of risk at play in the procreative case are very grim ones, both in terms of likelihood and magnitude. For all these reasons, procreation cannot be defended by simply appealing to the risky actions we quite happily accept in the course of living our lives.

4.5 – Mitigating Risk

The fifth class of objections to the risk claim takes seriously the risks I have set out, but argues for their mitigation and eventual elimination through social and technological change in lieu of procreative abstinence. There are two different arguments of this kind that I shall consider in this section. First, there is what I label the optimists' wager, which defends the view that ongoing and likely future progress offers satisfactory mitigation. The second argument (the acquiescence objection) goes further, positing that the antinatalist's total disavowal of procreation is immoral because it cravenly cedes to injustice rather than combatting it.

4.5.1 – The Optimists' Wager

The optimists' wager (OW) can be simply defined as follows: *It is probable that the risks motivating antinatalism can be currently mitigated and will eventually be significantly ameliorated or eliminated through social and technological change.* This is optimistic because it assigns a high likelihood to human progress and suffering-reduction, and is a wager because, when deployed against the antinatalist, amounts to the claim that procreation is presently a justified gamble given the probability of risk mitigation. OW can, itself, be understood in two different ways – the claim that the risks can presently be mitigated, and the claim that the risks will be mitigated in the future (e.g., after several centuries). Let's call these the present-oriented and future-oriented versions of OW, respectively. We will now examine the case for each of these responses to my risk claim.

4.5.1.1 – Present-Oriented OW

The proponent of this arm of OW argues that we can and do take a number of prophylactic and reactive actions to thwart the most pernicious risks from actualising. By way of examples, our imagined interlocutor spotlights the development of modern medicines to manage and treat many causes of ill-health, the existence of social movements combatting discrimination and violence, the work done by charities and governments to address poverty, and advances in engineering and science that allow us to predict and contain natural disasters. In addition to these institutional forces of risk-reduction, we might also think factors such as parental skill and affection keep many harms at bay. What are we to make of this argument that, although existence is risky, we are presently able to mitigate many of those risks?

The most immediate concern I have with this argument is that it misunderstands the risk profile I presented in Chapter Three by treating mitigation as an extrinsic consideration. This is mistaken because it is not the case that the significant risks rehearsed there were obtained from a pre-mitigation data set, such that they ignore the corrective efforts championed by the critic. Rather, the risks were so abundant and severe *in spite of* these mitigating factors. The statistics showing the ghastly consequences of cancer, war, oppression, and destitution incorporate the love and training of parents, and the work of researchers, social activists, non-governmental organisations, etc.; inasmuch as those are the grim statistics despite the work of these actors.

At this point, the defender of present-oriented OW has two moves. First, he can acknowledge that the risk profile is a reflection of mitigation, but assert that this now makes the risks acceptable. This move, it should be noted, would now collapse into a denial of risk, which was already addressed earlier in this chapter. Second, he could argue that although the risks are still very great, the growing efficacy of present-day mitigation measures indicates that we are moving in the right direction. This move, however, also faces the problem of collapse, reducing to future-oriented OW, and it is to this strategy that I now turn my attention.

4.5.1.2 – Future-Oriented OW: The Argument From Future Technology

The basic idea of future-oriented OW is captured by John Leslie, who writes that "human lives are likely to become happier than ever before if humankind manages to survive for long".[310] Most accounts of future-oriented OW are fleshed out in terms of the potential of future technology. I shall consider such arguments through the lens of transhumanism, as this is the most ambitious and richly-developed account of how this future-oriented, technologically-based mitigation might work.[311] Transhumanism is a broad philosophy that advocates the use of sophisticated technologies, many envisaged rather than actual, to transform the human corpus and environment, bringing about a radical technologically-inspired enhancement of the human condition and a death knell to the ugly effects of significant risk.[312]

Transhumanists are normally keenly attuned to suffering, and may at first glance appear to be sympathetic to antinatalism. However, transhumanism can be deployed against the risk argument, as critics of a transhumanist bent may grant that the risks are presently too great, but contend that my argument is weakened by the likelihood of welfare-enhancing technologies proliferating at a sufficiently rapid rate in the future. Some antinatalists, themselves, have noticed this, and used the prospect of the substantive enhancements

[310] Leslie 1996 p. 180.

[311] However, some of my criticisms will also apply to more modest programmes of risk-reduction.

[312] See More, M. (2013). 'The Philosophy of Transhumanism' In M. More and N. Vita-More (Eds.), *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future* (pp. 3-10), New York: John Wiley & Sons for a short overview of the history and philosophy of transhumanism.

potentially awaiting humanity as a future-oriented consideration against "empirical and utilitarian" attempts to establish antinatalism.[313]

Before evaluating the transhumanist counter, we should first aim to get a rudimentary handle on some of the possible technologies championed by transhumanists. One set of technologies pertains to the efficacious detection and treatment of disease through artificial intelligence, bionics, and the like. More ambitiously, we might even think genomic rewiring opens the possibility of preventing diseases, such that the world were populated by super-immune and cancer-resistant humans. Other technologies help us respond to threats, such as by enabling thermal regulation in light of climate change.[314] However, not only can we protect ourselves from the threats confronting us, we can also dilute the threats we pose to one another by enhancing our "existing capacities for impulse control, sympathy, altruism, or moral imagination, through pharmaceutical or other biomedical interventions".[315]

Some transhumanist proposals extend much further, to the eradication of suffering and death. David Pearce, for instance, has written about suffering abolitionism, which involves the use of microelectrodes, neuropharmacology, and/or gene therapy to alter the architecture and physiological functioning of the nervous system and eliminate negative sensations.[316] Selecting and modifying alleles of genes (the SCn9A gene involved in congenital analgesia, the COMT gene whose alleles have varying hedonic set points) will allow prospective progenitors to calibrate the hedonic states of their child and dull pain sensation.[317] Even the seemingly inescapable scourges of aging and death can be delayed with biotechnology, life extension programmes, and cryogenics, as part of a project of scientific immortalism.[318]

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[313] Cabrera uses this argument against Benatar's QOLA. See Cabrera 2011, p. 32.

[314] Buchanan, A.E. (2011). *Better Than Human: The Promise and Perils of Enhancing Ourselves*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 78.

[315] Ibid., p. 77.

[316] Pearce, D., and Vallinder, A. (2011). 'Transhumanism 2011'. *Manninska Plus*, January 2011. Retrieved from: https://www.hedweb.com/transhumanism/overview2011.html (Accessed: 29 December 2020).

[317] Ibid.

[318] See de Grey, A., and Rae, M. (2008). *Ending Aging: The Rejuvenation Breakthroughs That Could Reverse Human Aging in Our Lifetime*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press for one account.

Confronted by this bold vision for our species' future, should we conclude that the statistics in Chapter Three fail to place the risk claim on stable footing because those statistics are susceptible to being rendered obsolete by technological progress in due course? I do not think so for three main reasons.

Firstly, I see no reason to grant that many of the mooted technologies will be developed. As Alison Stone notes in her philosophical study of birth, a defining feature of coming into being is our vulnerability to distress and harm.[319] Risk is closely tied to the inherent nature of the sentient and human condition – the fact that we are biological organisms that decay and die, that our evolutionary inheritance predisposes us (at least in part) to tribalism and lethal interpersonal violence, that our sociality leads to us bearing the loss of those with whom we share social ties, and so on. Given this, we would be justified in remaining suspicious of any claim that all of this can be significantly overridden. One further point is worth noting here. It is not enough to show that such technologies *could* be developed, as the critic must show that they *will* be developed. Of course, we can always stipulate that everyone's life might be nearly perfect in any timeframe we fancy, but one must adduce evidence or arguments to show that the stipulation holds. This is a significant argumentative burden, and despite the fact that transhumanists are brimming with ideas and grand visions, I do not think the burden has been discharged.

Secondly, even granting that the technological advances will be achieved, it is not clear that a majority of persons would welcome and adopt them. For example, Bernard Williams wrote that the human quest for self-improvement and transcendence of our species' self-conception lies "dangerously close to the risk of self-hatred…a hatred of humanity".[320] As Wasserman puts it when approvingly citing Williams, we might prefer our "human imperfections" to a "smarter, stronger, kinder, and longer-lived" existence, if the latter is achieved "at the price of estrangement from our human ways of life".[321] Michael Sandel is of a similar view, arguing that, when it comes to our capacities, the transhumanist project prioritises dominion over

[319] Stone, A. (2019). *Being Born: Birth and Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 5.

[320] Williams, B. (2006). "The Human Prejudice" In B. Williams and A.W. Moore (Eds.), *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, (pp. 135-152), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 152.

[321] Benatar and Wasserman 2015, p. 160.

reverence.[322] By eroding our self-image – as beings gifted with distinctively human powers – genetic self-improvement threatens to undermine humility, responsibility, and solidarity.[323] Leon Kass, too, locates the menace of this bold post-humanism in the rupture it causes to the biological order. By assailing what is "natural", the transhuman world disconnects us from our very humanity and corrodes our dignity.[324]

Now, I find this prioritisation of being biologically human and retaining our naturally-selected endowments over leading a better life to be deeply mistaken.[325] However, it is enough for my purposes here to note that ingrained opposition to the ethics of transhumanism not only exists, but is pervasive. Arguably, many would sooner give up procreation than become a genetically-modified pseudo-cyborg. Proliferating transhumanist ideology to the point that the brave new technologies are universally implemented is likely to be an immensely difficult task, which should again give us pause should we wish to turn transhumanism into an anti-risk argument.

Thirdly, even supposing that the technologies will be developed and adopted, we must realise that the timeframe is unlikely to be years or decades, but rather centuries or millennia. With stagnating social mobility, accelerating climate change, and a plethora of other rapidly worsening problems, the pronatalist transhumanist is prepared to accept a great deal of suffering over several generations before the post-human panacea arrives. If my risk argument is successful, at least as long as we live in a non-transhumanist world, then the transhumanist must accept that billions of human beings will be subjected to significant, unconsented-to risks in the pursuit of a utopian future. And if this is a major harm, as per the success of my argument, we perpetrate this wrong on billions for the eventual greater good, a form of mass human sacrifice that all but the most committed hard-line utilitarian would surely want to reject.

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[322] Sandel, M.J. (2007). *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 85.

[323] Ibid., pp. 86-92.

[324] Kass, L.R. (2002). *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*. San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books.

[325] For more, see Doyle, D.J. (2018). *What Does it Mean to be Human? Life, Death, Personhood and the Transhumanist Movement*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, pp. 133-148.

Moreover, once we see that this is what the pronatalist transhumanist is committed to, his argument faces a kind of argumentative collapse, much like present-oriented OW. At this point, his argument becomes a kind of "future goods to humanity" justification. The idea that future goods enjoyed by created persons constitutes a compelling reason to procreate is one that I think is extremely shaky, and we will explore the reasons for this in Chapter Six.

4.5.2 – The Acquiescence Objection

So far, we have looked at two different ways that OW can be marshalled against the risk argument and found them both wanting. There is, however, another version of the mitigating risk argument that deserves attention here. This argument does not claim that the risks of existence will inevitably dissolve, but instead presses that the time spent defending antinatalism is better devoted to tackling social problems, human rights violations, and healthcare inequalities. Christine Overall has defended the view that the prevention and amelioration of the suffering experienced by existent beings is to be preferred to the non-creation of beings who are vulnerable to suffering.

Her motivation for such prioritisation appears to be evaluative as opposed to pragmatic. For instance, she writes that "to choose not to have a child because of the dangers from sexism, racism, or other forms of oppression is to acquiesce in the continuation of those oppressions."[326] Overall cites the example cases of "sexual harassment and racial bias" encountered by a prospective employee, and notes that we think the appropriate way to tackle this is to work towards ensuring the person does not face such discrimination, as opposed to "refusing to fill the position or...abolishing the job altogether."[327] The basic idea here is that antinatalism, in virtue of its inappropriately excessive response to risk, involves a meek surrender to social injustice in lieu of its mitigation.

I think the acquiescence objection suffers from a number of shortcomings. For one, it is plausibly applicable only to the categories of interpersonal, violence, and social risk I spelled out in Chapter Three. It cannot be used against the categories of death, biological, and natural risk because the relevant risk must have a moral character in order for the acquiescence

[326] Overall 2012, p. 142.

[327] Ibid., p. 101.

objection to be coherent – surely it makes little sense to say that one immorally submits to his genes if he decides not to procreate on the grounds that his child may inherit his cystic fibrosis. Nevertheless, we might worry that even if the acquiescence objection goes through against only some of the risks, it nonetheless undermines my claim of significance.

There are far more significant flaws with this argument, though. First, just like OW, it presupposes that the injustices under scrutiny *can* be rectified. After fifty thousand years of behavioural modernity, we still wrestle with the same demons that our Palaeolithic ancestors confronted. To endorse the antinatalist route out of our propensity to otherise and subjugate is to accept our moral imperfections and our limitedness as biological creatures subject to evolutionary pressures. Overall may insist that this is a concession to injustice, but I see no reason to label it existential humility instead. Second, even if the relational problems highlighted by Overall can be fixed, any fix would, at best, be unstable, forever subject to being compromised or overturned. Antinatalism respects the prophylactic adage that prevention is the best cure, and is thus the ultimate corrective to injustice. Third, I see no reason to think that antinatalism must enter into conflict with efforts to remedy various societal ills. Of course, resource allocation is a zero-sum game, yet this does not appear to have thwarted intersectionality in other domains. Antinatalism can be reconciled with other social efforts to ameliorate and, if possible, eliminate suffering. Fourth, it's not apparent to me why antinatalism needs to be assessed by the standards of anti-racism campaigns or other social justice movements. Antinatalism isn't promoted as a tool to address social injustice; rather, it looks at the reality of current social injustices and draws implications for our procreative behaviour. For the above reasons, I conclude that the acquiescence objection fails.

5. Undermining Consent

This chapter covers the numerous challenges that can principally be raised against the second element of my argument – the *no-consent claim* – which holds that the unconsented-to nature of existence is partly an explanation why procreation is unjustified. Despite the general suspicion engendered by talk of consent in prenatal contexts, it has actually received relatively little attention from philosophers to date. Therefore, I seek not only to deal with the key existing objections, but also to develop more promising lines of rebuttal, with a view to constructing consent-talk of an antinatalist flavour that is as robust as possible.

There are various moves open to the pronatalist who wishes to undermine the *no-consent claim*. The pronatalist could argue that requiring consent in the procreative case, where there is no one who can offer or withhold consent, rests on metaphysical confusion (5.1). The pronatalist might also charge that the antinatalist's fixation on consent is guilty of a category error that sentences it to incoherence (5.2). Closely linked to this is the idea that talk of consent is not meaningful or lacks significance in the procreative case, as the non-existent cannot benefit from the exercise of this normative power (5.3). One might also be tempted to charge that the lack of consent should only trouble us in cases where the unconsented-to act is done to one who possesses consent rights, which the non-existent do not have (5.4).

These aren't the only options available to the pronatalist. Rather than denying consent-talk downstream of worries about metaphysics or consent rights, he could instead claim that some suitable analogue of consent *is* available such that absent consent is morally unconcerning. He might, for instance, adduce from the general endorsement of coming into existence that consent will be supplied after birth, and on this basis, posit that we can reasonably hypothesise consent or get it retrospectively (5.5). Or, it might be thought that concerns about consent are defused by the existence of a "get-out clause" in the form of suicide (5.6).

Much like with the objections in the preceding chapter, these consent-focused objections are not exclusively focused on challenging *P3* (*the no-consent claim*). Arguably, only the hypothetical and retrospective consent arguments (5.5) directly deny *P3*, tackling this premise head-on by saying that some morally acceptable analogue of consent-to-procreation is available. By contrast, objections that claim the antinatalist's talk of pre-natal consent is

metaphysical nonsense (5.1) or logically incoherent (5.2) or morally forceless (5.3 and 5.4) appear to challenge the *no-consent claim* more indirectly. This is because they resist *P3* – the premise that procreation involves an absence of consent – by questioning the legitimacy of even applying the concept of consent in procreative cases. As for the notion that suicide is indemnification for our consentless birth (5.6), I think it best to think of this as a response to *P1*. This is because one could accept the *risk*, *no-consent, and no-necessity claims*, but nevertheless think the option to exit an unchosen and unnecessary risky predicament defuses our moral concerns. Having taken stock of how these objections track the premises of my argument, let us now investigate each of these objections in turn.

5.1 – The 'Metaphysical Absurdity' Objection

There has been considerable philosophical attention paid to the ontology of consent – some hold that consent is entirely subjective and consists in a mental state,[328] some that consenting is essentially communicative or performative in nature,[329] and yet others adopt a hybrid view requiring both subjective assent and a performative speech act.[330] Whichever conception of consent we adopt, though, it is not present in the procreative case, for the would-be person has no mental states and cannot engage in a pre-natal communicative or performative act. So, this cannot be what we mean by the metaphysical challenge. Rather, as I see it, the problematisation of the metaphysics of pre-existential moral claims-making typically takes the form of what I label the *empty referent* problem.

This problem can be quite easily stated. The basic idea is that when we normally speak of consent, there is an existent person who stands to be affected by the harms and risks they would be consenting to. Consent is normally taken to apply to cases where an act is done to *someone*.[331] In contrast, no one is picked out by the risk argument. The antinatalist is accused of being unable to meaningfully respond to the following questions – whose consent is absent

[328] Alexander, L. (2014). The Ontology of Consent. *Analytic Philosophy*, 55, pp. 102-113, pp. 107-109.

[329] Wertheimer, A. (2000). 'What Is Consent? And Is It Important?'. *Buffalo Criminal Law Review*, 3 (2), pp. 557-583.

[330] Healey, R. (2015). The Ontology of Consent: A Reply to Alexander. *Analytic Philosophy*, 56 (4), pp. 354-363.

[331] Gardner, J. (2018). The Opposite of Rape. *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 38 (1), pp. 48-70, p. 48.

and for whom is the absence of consent bad? As I am not able to point to any identifiable being in response to this question, my argument fails to refer and thus talk of pre-natal consent is not metaphysically intelligible.[332] To affirm an account of harming in the case of procreation, in the words of Christine Overall, "misuses our moral language", for there is "no grammatical object" to whom the moral language I am using applies.[333] Consequently, we may doubt that anyone can be harmed or wronged by an act of consentless creation.[334]

Here, our discussion again intersects with the philosophical literature on NIP. In 7.3, we considered NIP in connection with harms imposed as part of a life that is worth living, but a deeper commitment of NIP, as noted by Michael Cholbi, is the idea that no one can be harmed or benefitted by being brought into existence.[335] There are many arguments to this effect in the literature, drawing on the idea that existence is a precursor in order to predicate properties such as being harmed or wronged.[336]

One immediate problem we might note with this objection is that we regularly speak of duties, even when they concern an as-yet unspecified person. Consider, for example, moral duties to treat applicants for a job fairly, even though we are unaware in advance who these applicants will be. The difference between this example and procreation, however, is that the relevant persons in the former case exist, and therefore, there is still someone we are talking about even if we may not be able to pick out a specific individual. The critic charges that the antinatalist's appeal to the absence of consent does not refer to existent people in the same way and that's what grounds the alleged metaphysical confusion.

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[332] I am dealing with this metaphysical objection in this section, but it is equally applicable as a counter-argument to the risk claim (i.e., in the preceding chapter). In other words, we could just as easily ask whom the risk is being imposed on and how we make sense of the claim that such an imposition is harming or wronging anyone.

[333] Overall 2012, p. 104

[334] See Algander, P. (2019). 'The Harmlessness of Existence'. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 22 (4), pp. 841-852 for an argument of this type.

[335] Cholbi, M. (2011). *Suicide: The Philosophical Dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 50.

[336] See Smajdor, A. (2014). How useful is the concept of the 'harm threshold' in reproductive ethics and law? *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, 35(5), pp. 321-336. See also Williams, N. J., & Harris, J. (2014). What is the harm in harmful conception? On threshold harms in non-identity cases. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, 35 (5), pp. 337-351.

Now, it seems to me that there is a relatively easy solution to this problem, one that involves adjusting to the future tense. That is, the person whose consent is absent is the child who *will exist* in the future if one procreates. Joel Feinberg has provided a number of cases where the "harming act occurs before conception".[337] In the most well-known case, a dastardly misanthrope conceals a bomb in a kindergarten classroom, and sets the timer such that it goes off in six years.[338] In such a case, we want to say that the criminal acted in such a way as to harm future children who were not even conceived at the time of his immoral act.[339] Indeed, that we routinely consider the welfare of future people (e.g., our own children and future generations in general) in constraining our behaviour indicates that we do engage in moral reflection about the not-yet-existent. And, if we don't limit the scope of moral acts on metaphysical grounds only to instances where some moral patient currently exists, why ought we to limit the relevance of consent only to instances where some consent-giving being exists?

By way of an answer, we might note that there is a difference between Feinberg's case and the procreative case, as in Feinberg's case, the children will exist, whereas my consent claim is about a future person who I am saying should not come into existence. However, we can easily modify Feinberg's example to accommodate this worry. Consider, for instance, that spaces in the bomb-rigged school have been reserved for select parents who, having recently read antinatalist literature, are weighing up whether to have a child. In this case, it might be that no child ever ends up attending the school. It nonetheless strikes me that the bomb-planter acts impermissibly and we cash out this impermissibility by appealing counterfactually to the interests of the would-be child(ren). My consent claim parallels this way of thinking, as in both cases, we are engaging in moral reflection about would-be people and we avoid concerns about ontological reference failure by forward-pointing to the interests of the child whose creation we are contemplating. As Shiffrin puts it, moral reasons for action

[337] Feinberg 1994, p. 12.

[338] Ibid., p. 12.

[339] It is certainly true that whilst we can judge the criminal's intent at the time the bomb is planted, any consequentialist judgment is suspended until the explosion actually occurs. My point here is simply that there is nothing metaphysically absurd in pointing towards a future being's harm as the basis for a moral claim.

emanate not from any quality or right "predicated to be held by non-existent persons", but from "the force…future rights exert on us now".[340]

My *no-consent claim* states that any would-be person would come into existence without signing up to the risks. The only way to prevent this moral problem is by never actualising that child. Suppose, for example, that the bomb victims in Feinberg's case never come into existence. In this case, no harm ever comes to pass, but we would still wish to morally proscribe the act at the time it was committed by saying that the intended victims were the future children who did not exist at the time the bomb was planted. In the same way, we can say that the consent of the future person who does not currently exist (and may never exist) is absent, and this absence of consent is morally problematic.

Another potential difference is the nature of the interest at stake. Future children, as sentient beings with the capacity for suffering, clearly stand to have their interests thwarted by the bomb's detonation. What is less obvious is that a future being has an interest in not being exposed to life's risks without signing up pre-natally. Whether and how we can make sense of such an interest will be explored in section 5.3. For now, let us remain focused on the worry that the antinatalist disrespects metaphysics by talking of absent consent.

Of course, this kind of locution departs from the way in which we routinely talk about consent involving concrete persons, but a stubborn insistence that the referent for procreative claims exactly match daily existential cases will obviously generate metaphysical absurdity. It doesn't seem like violence has been done to the discipline of metaphysics by claiming the following: of those who enter into existence, it can be said that no permission was given to be brought into being. Sentience or attitudes are not being attributed to the unborn. Rather, the claim is that, at the moment one is brought into existence, one is subjected to the unconsented-to state of life-long consciousness and its concomitant grave existential risk. It is true that consenting is only possible after one is born, which is why I hold that procreation is a unique case that confers the interest that it also frustrates.

[340] Shiffrin 1999, p. 138. Although Shiffrin's claim is couched in the language of rights, we could easily make a similar claim in terms of interests.

I am uninclined to afford much weight to the recalcitrant critic who continues to voice cries of metaphysical curiosity in spite of the account given above, for it is hard to see how moral reasoning about a case with no known parallels – namely, the act of creating a conscious being – cannot generate some degree of metaphysical strangeness. I have given an account of how a general principle about a moral act (in this instance, that the act be traceable to a concrete person) can be adapted to a rare situation (an act involving the transition from no one to someone). The critic is entitled to demur with this metaphysical account, but they would be biting a deeply uncomfortable bullet in the process. This is because pronatalists are equally committed to a metaphysics under which moral claims can be made about future persons. It is widely agreed there can sometimes be sub-optimal behaviour on the part of procreators, such as when they knowingly create a child whose prospects are poor and will likely suffer terribly.[341] If these intuitions are to be retained, the pronatalist will likely have to avail themselves of a similar response to the charge of metaphysical absurdity upstream of worries about *empty referent*s.

Indeed, noting this, some pronatalist philosophers have adopted strange explanations of why it is bad to create a suffering child. For example, Christine Overall argues that the reason it is bad to produce such a life is not because of any purported interest possessed by the would-be child, but is instead because of the moral benefit to the "individuals who make the decision not to bring suffering children into existence."[342] David Heyd, whose view is that the interests of future offspring cannot ever weigh into a progenitor's moral calculus on account of the fact that we can never harm or benefit through the act of creation, similarly holds that only the "interests, welfare, ideals, rights and duties of those making the choices" are to guide procreative decisions.[343]

These explanations seem obviously misconceived. We do not think it is better to prevent the existence of children who will lead miserable lives purely because "some person or group of persons or institution...avoids causing a painful existence".[344] This strictly agent-focused

[341] As we will see in the following chapter, some philosophers think progenitors can benefit their children by having them, and they too will wish to dispute the *empty referent* problem.

[342] Overall 2012, p. 105

[343] Heyd, D, (1994). *Genethics: Moral Issues in the Creation of People*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 96.

[344] Ibid., p. 106

account misses the subject-based reasons a person would give for acting in such a way, which would centre on the belief that it would be all-things-considered beneficial *for the child* not to be born given that they stand to live a horrible life. If we would like to enjoy the trappings of such talk, we are likely to offer an ontological story in which the moral disquiet stems from a compromised interest lying in the future. Inasmuch as we do this, it parallels the kind of account I present, so sidelining *the no-consent claim* on the grounds of metaphysical absurdity threatens to be self-defeating.

5.2 – The 'Logical Incoherence' Objection

Another objection to the no-consent element of my argument is that it is logically incoherent. As pre-natal consent is necessarily impossible, the critic alleges that the antinatalist's reliance on absent consent as a contributor to the wrongness of procreation is incoherent. Although consent is important in intra-life situations like *The Gamble* and *The Game*, the charge here is that requiring consent in a natal context is to make a category mistake by taking consent from its rightful domain of governing interpersonal relations (between actors and existing subjects) and applying it wrongfully to the procreative domain. Now, surely the critic cannot discharge the burden of substantiating this allegation simply by alluding to the inability to obtain prenatal consent. If the charge of incoherence is to stand, there must be something more at play here than *just* the inability to obtain prenatal consent, as we are owed a story of why incoherence falls out of impossibility. I think what is doing the work in the incoherence objection is, in fact, the idea that we cannot move from intra-life cases (where consent is important) to cases involving the creation of a life (where consent, it is claimed, fails to be a meaningful consideration). In other words, I believe the compositional fallacy underlies many of the dismissals of the *no-consent claim* as incoherent.

This fallacy, in the words of David Hume, is committed when "a conclusion…[is] transferred from parts to the whole", despite the "great disproportion" between the two barring "all comparison and inference".[345] Bertrand Russell provided arguably the most famous example of this kind of mistaken conflation of parts and the whole in a 1948 debate with the Catholic priest, Frederick Copleston. He wrote, accusing Copleston of the fallacy of composition,

[345] Hume, D. (1947). *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, Pt. II*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., p. 147.

"Every man who exists has a mother, and it seems to me your argument is that therefore the human race must have a mother, but obviously the human race hasn't a mother."[346] Similarly, the pronatalist might argue that just as it is incoherent to demand that a cause within the world be matched by a cause of the world, or that the origins of a member of a species be replicated by the origins of the species, it is incoherent to demand that consent to events within a life also be supplied to the creation of the life, itself. To do so would be to fall into the trap of a category error.

Now, there is some sense in which I make the above kind of move, in that I use intra-life examples (see *The Gamble* and *The Game* in Chapter Three) to provide intuitive support for a principle (*P1*) that I then apply to procreation. However, it would be far too quick to claim on this basis that I am making a category error, for one because there are some instances in which the parts-to-a-whole reasoning is valid. Suppose one were to claim that every tile in the floor is brown, and that therefore, the floor is brown. Here, we are not inclined to think there is any conceptual mistake at play. In any case, even if we claim that *the no-consent claim* does not closely resemble the tile-floor example, my moral argument is not subject to the compositional fallacy.

Note that what is indicative of a category error – taking a concept that holds in one domain and mistakenly applying it to another – in Russell's example is his interlocutor's commitment to the metaphysically impossible phenomenon of a species, a taxonomic category, coming into being not unlike a concrete entity. In the case of procreation, one would be guilty of committing a similar fallacy if they made a descriptive claim that because we can consent to things within our life, we can also give consent to our overall lives before experiencing it. However, I am not making a factual claim about the existence of pre-natal consent to the risks of life; instead, I am making a claim about its normative significance. I agree that consenting to birth is logically and metaphysically impossible, so I am not committed to affirming the existence of an impossible phenomenon. On the contrary, I exploit the necessary impossibility of prenatal consent in order to argue for antinatalism.

[346] Transcript of the Russell/Copleston radio debate. Retrieved from: http://www.scandalon.co.uk/philosophy/cosmological_radio.htm (Accessed: 20 June 2021).

If I am to bear a label, it is likely to be that of normative compositionalism – the view that if we think it is morally desirable to consent to high-risk episodes within one's life, it is morally desirable to consent to the state of living in this high-stakes predicament at all. Whether it is a viable strategy to morally prize that which can never obtain in reality will be the subject of the next section. For the time being, we are concerned only with incoherence, and it is sufficient to note that there is no necessary logical misstep in holding that the impossibility of natal consent ethically problematises procreation. After all, there are many things that might be practically infeasible due to human nature, but which we still think are morally preferable – greater degrees of altruism, elimination of violence, and so on.

We might worry that procreative consent is disanalogous to these cases, because it is not just contingently infeasible, but necessarily infeasible. However, the absolute impossibility of consent-to-birth can only be thought to render my argument fallacious if we fail to distinguish between the incoherence of a philosophical argument and the incoherence-qua-impossibility of the feature exploited by the argument. It's not the antinatalist's argument that is incoherent, but rather the phenomenon that I contend is required for procreative justification. The fact that something can never be actualised (e.g., consent to being brought into existence can never be granted) does not imply that a claim that its existence is morally desirable or necessary is misconceived. Indeed, the necessary impossibility of prenatal consent-provision is exactly why I take my argument to be so forceful – the conditions required for procreative justification can never be satisfied. Unless my opponent can show how argumentative incoherence or a category error follows from the claim that an impossible phenomenon is needed to exonerate an act, I believe my argument survives the compositional fallacy objection.

5.3 – The 'Significance' Objection

According to the significance objection, because the non-existent are necessarily incapable of granting or refusing consent, consent simply fails to be a morally significant consideration when deliberating the ethics of procreation. For example, Rivka Weinberg has argued that the fact that children (and the non-existent) are never capable of providing rational consent largely neuters any worries we might have about the lack of consent, opening the door to

interest-attentive paternalism.[347] There are two different routes to establishing the significance objection. The first intersects with the logical incoherence objection, inasmuch as it straightforwardly reads off the insignificance of consent in this context from its impossibility. The second turns on a deeper idea – that the reasons why consent is thought to be important are not present in the case of creating someone. Let us first examine the argument that the impossibility of prenatal consent demonstrates that it is not something worth having.

5.3.1 – Insignificance from Impossibility

At the end of the previous section, we saw that the pronatalist sought to derive the argumentative incoherence of the *no-consent claim* from the logical impossibility of obtaining consent prior to birth. A similar move can be made by my critic here, but this time generating the moral insignificance of natal consent from the logical impossibility of consent provision by the non-existent. Before proceeding to scrutinise this move, we must first become clear on exactly what kind of impossibility we are talking about. Consent provision in this case is not impossible because of some contingent incapacitating feature of the kind that might make obtaining consent from comatose humans impossible. Rather, the impossibility stems from the fact that the non-existent are not the kind of entities who can give or withdraw consent, nor is birth the kind of phenomenon that one can ever consent to. One cannot consent to procreation because there is no one there to give consent and one cannot give consent to life before living – that is what makes consenting to birth prior to being born logically impossible.

The statement that consent cannot be obtained from the non-existent will be endorsed by pronatalists and antinatalists alike. The dispute revolves around whether this absence of consent can be meaningfully mobilised to show that procreativity is morally problematic. The pronatalists' core point seems to be derivative of Kant's old dictum that "ought implies can", which holds that if one is morally obligated to perform an action, then one should be able to perform it. This proviso in its direct form need not perturb the antinatalist because it is obvious that we *can* refrain from procreating. However, the pronatalists' commitment here appears to be that if a moral principle is to be binding on us, it must fall within the remit of

[347] Weinberg 2016, p. 6.

human capability. Simply put, something that is not possible is not worth having or demanding. The thought may be captured by the following modus tollens:

Pronatalists' Possibility Principle (PPP): We ought only to be morally concerned by that which is metaphysically, logically, or humanly possible. Obtaining consent from someone before creating them is not metaphysically, logically, or humanly possible. Therefore, we ought not to be morally concerned by whether or not we can obtain consent from someone before creating them.

By contrast, the antinatalist, embodying the spirit of Hilary Putnam's famous motto that "one man's modus ponens is another man's modus tollens", endorses the following inversion of *PPP*:

The Antinatalist Inversion (TAI): We ought not to procreate if we cannot obtain prior consent to life's risks. Sadly (for those who are created and for pronatalism), obtaining consent from someone before creating them is not metaphysically, logically, or humanly possible. Therefore, we ought not to procreate.

Are we to favour *PPP* or *TAI*? Similar debates exist in other domains (e.g., free will), with some adopting a stance akin to *PPP* that an impossible phenomenon is morally insignificant, whilst others hold, in the vein of *TAI*, that we sometimes regrettably find that something which is morally important fails to be realised in the world. Indeed, some philosophers who are sceptical of free will reason in exactly the manner of *TAI*. They argue that because we have independent reasons to believe that that the (supposedly) impossible phenomenon of free will is required for moral responsibility, we should deny moral responsibility.[348]

The pronatalist, abiding by the view that modality and morality cannot come apart, fixes the moral irrelevance of natal consent on the basis of its impossibility. However, it seems to me that the correct sequence of reasoning is one that moves from an independent assessment of the moral value of a given phenomenon to considerations of real-world application. In other words, we reason about morality and take ourselves to have independent grounds for thinking that something is morally required. We then apply it to a real-world case and find that which

[348] See Pereboom 2001.

we thought was required cannot ever be instantiated. It strikes me that a morally desirable feature of an act need not share a one-to-one relationship with metaphysical possibility, and it is hard to see how a critic could decisively disbar this style of reasoning. Therefore, in the absence of a clear defeater, we are justified in maintaining that the necessary impossibility of consent-to-life's-risks doesn't neuter its significance.

5.3.2 – Insignificance from Inability

The second version of the significance objection does not emphasise the impossibility of pre-natal consent provision, but instead presses that one's absent consent is only problematic if one possessed the ability to consent. Conversely, according to the antinatalist who is supportive of the *no-consent claim* and its role in a moral argument against procreation, the inability to give consent is tantamount to the absence of consent, which very much remains a moral problem. Again, we are forced to choose between two divergent conceptions of the moral force of the ability to consent.

Now, it might seem that defeating the critic's position is easily done by simply appealing to existential cases where consent remains relevant despite the subject's inability to offer or withhold consent. For instance, in a modified version of *The Gamble* where the one subjected to risk was comatose (see 3.2), the absence of consent seemed to be a morally relevant consideration even though such a person is obviously unable to consent. We do not think consent loses its moral potency because one is unable to consent – often, we think this heightens or even underpins its moral potency. Such examples, in my view, demonstrate that wrongness of risk-taking is not function of whether the person could consent, but rather a result of the fact that the person didn't consent – i.e., consent was absent. However, perhaps one could respond by introducing some additional clause that retains the significance of consent in cases like *The Gamble*, but not in procreation. For example, one might say that it is the subject's ability to offer or withhold consent "under ideal circumstances" that is necessary for consent to be a weighty factor, which could safeguard the relevance of consent in existential cases where one is unable to consent due to contingent factors, whilst blocking the procreative case where the non-existent necessarily cannot consent. The two differing takes on consent, then, cannot be so quickly dissolved.

The critic will likely press ahead, noting that even if consent *seems* like it might or should be relevant to procreative decision-making, it simply is not significant or meaningful if there is nobody who can exercise or benefit from powers of consent. We are led, then, to a direct confrontation of consent's importance. This topic has been engaged with by a wide range of academics, and it is this literature that is most relevant for the *no-consent claim*. This is because the picture of consent's significance that one subscribes to is a key determinant of whether one thinks the ability to consent really matters and, consequently, how readily one accepts the applicability of consent to the procreative context. Although many different accounts have been proposed that aim to ground the strong role consent plays in our moral worldview, I think we can broadly reduce them to three main categories:

The Agency Model: The agency model of consent significance holds that the importance of consent lies in the fact that its granting or withholding permits the agent to choose the direction of their own lives, maximising their choices and shaping their interpersonal relationships. The violation of consent as per these accounts threatens to impinge on some interest in agency.

The Protective Model: The protective model of consent significance emphasises the subject-protecting role of consent. According to this view, consent is significant not because it permits an agent to achieve a particular end through their choices and actions, but rather because its provision ensures that a subject has control over significant harms they could suffer.

The Social Model: The social model of consent significance emphasises the role consent plays in ensuring a well-functioning society and promoting happiness for the greatest number of people.

I shall not focus further on *The Social Model*. I shall simply observe that I find it an implausible account of the importance of consent, not least because we would value consent even if psychosocial research were to find that respecting consent didn't lead to beneficial social or net utilitarian outcomes. In my view, the significance objection almost entirely rests on *The Agency Model*. Indeed, many explanatory accounts of the significance of consent in the literature are broadly sub-types of *The Agency Model*. Below, I explain the main flavours of this way of thinking about consent.

Directional Autonomy – According to Ruth Faden and Tom Beauchamp, the importance we place on informed consent "is rooted in concerns about protecting and enabling autonomous or self-determining choice by patients and subjects".[349] Why is consent important? According to this model, it is because its granting or withholding permits the agent to make free choices about the direction of their own lives. David Enoch, in considering why "actual consent matters", also suggests that it's to do with autonomy.[350] One of the deeper reasons he provides for why autonomy might matter is similar to that identified by Faden and Beauchamp – to avoid alienating one from writing their "own life story according to [their] deep commitments".[351]

Relational Benefits – Richard Healey defends a relational theory of consent, according to which, consent acquires its normative significance from the fact that it "allows agents to interact in useful and valuable ways whilst standing in a relation of mutual recognition".[352] Healey draws on notions of rights to argue that people have rights against interference in central spheres of their own lives. Consent works, then, by enabling agents to fruitfully interact with one another whilst recognising that others have control over domains protected by rights.

Interests in Shaping Normativity – A third reason for the significance of consent has been advanced by David Owens. Owens, much like Healey, holds that consent is a "social tool", one that enables us to declare whether "something constitutes a wronging".[353] Building on Joseph's Raz ideas about human attempts to shape the normative landscape,[354] Owens argues that the holder of this power must have an interest in moulding what he calls a "normative niche".[355] What grounds this permissive interest ("an interest in its being the case that certain

[349] Faden, R.R., Beauchamp, T.L., & King, N.M. (1987). *A history and theory of informed consent.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 235.

[350] Enoch, D. (2017). Hypothetical Consent and the Value(s) of Autonomy. *Ethics*, 128 (1), pp. 6-36, p. 22.

[351] Ibid., p. 31.

[352] Healey, R. (2016). *The Power of Consent*, PhD Dissertation (University of Sheffield), p. 113.

[353] Owens, D. (2011). The Possibility of Consent. *Ratio*, 24 (4), pp. 402-421, pp. 411-412.

[354] Raz, J. (1988). *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[355] Owens 2011, p. 412.

acts wrong us unless we declare otherwise")?[356] Owens suggests that this normative interest may be irreducible, but also acknowledges that it bears a connection to a more general interest in controlling what happens to one's body.[357]

Interests in Choice – Another account of why consent is significant pertains to our interest in having the occurrence of certain actions depend on our choices.[358] Owens provides many reasons why having control over our choices should be accorded this significance, including that the agent is often best placed to determine what is in their interests, that choosing itself enhances the value of some course of action, and that choice is associated with preferable cultural meanings (e.g., bodily exposure or nudity is often seen as humiliating when unchosen but completely unembarrassing when it is).[359]

Are any of these models of the significance of consent amenable to an antinatalist reading that seeks to establish the significance of pre-natal consent? The directional autonomy account places emphasis on the capacities of the consent-provider as an agent. That is, it emphasises the subject-promoting role that consent plays in ensuring that agents are able to achieve their chosen ends. This view does not seem overly friendly to those of an antinatalist persuasion, for it seems fairly obvious that the non-existent do not possess such an interest in self-determination due to their inability to make decisions. For similar reasons, the relational benefits account, which explicitly sets consent in an interpersonal context, appears to be hostile to an antinatalist interpretation. Owens' interest in normativity account also does not look favourable to the antinatalist, as Owens argues that the "possession of a normative power must make some difference to a person's life if it is to count as a benefit to them".[360] In general, if one rigidly and exclusively adheres to *The Agency Model*, the significance of natal consent appears to be off the table.

It shouldn't surprise us that none of the existing accounts of consent can fully accommodate the antinatalist's desire to count (the absence of) pre-natal consent as morally significant,

[356] Ibid., p. 402. Elsewhere, Owens calls this interest a deontic interest – Owens, D. (2012). *Shaping the Normative Landscape.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 6.

[357] Owens 2011, p. 420.

[358] Ibid., p. 408.

[359] Ibid., pp. 408-409.

[360] Owens 2012, p. 8.

precisely because these accounts have been designed to account for the role of consent in interpersonal contexts involving existent humans. Unfortunately, the issue of pre-natal consent has been largely ignored in the literature, so the antinatalist is tasked with developing a coherent and internally consistent account of the significance of consent in this context.

In light of this, what route should be taken by the antinatalist who maintains that it is bad to create someone, and leave them vulnerable to monumental jeopardy, without their consent? I believe there are two moves that should be (and very conceivably can be) made. First, the antinatalist could avail himself of any of these models, simply by arguing that the relevant interest at stake in the procreative case is not some present pre-natal interest, but rather a future interest that will be acquired only via the procreative act. That is, the person-to-be-created will have a future interest in self-determination or choice or sovereignty that will be thwarted by the fact that they will find themselves navigating an unchosen predicament where the stakes are extraordinarily great. Even when the antinatalist talks of the badness of procreation, they do so with reference to forward-pointing interests (i.e., they refer to how procreation jeopardises the post-natal interests of the subject). Why should talk of consent be any different?

The second move is to construct or refine a conception of consent that can plausibly explain what future interest is compromised by an unchosen birth. I argued above that the significance objection turns on a deeper exclusive commitment to the agential dimensions of consent, which leads it adherents to place attention on the capability to consent and, consequently, dismiss the moral importance of natal consent. For those wedded to such accounts (which, as we have seen, tend to cash out consent as facilitating self-determination, facilitating some normative interest, promoting optimal relations, etc.), they will likely still remain hostile to forward-pointing to such interests in the case of procreation, given that these interests are so tied up with consent's significance in interpersonal contexts. This is why the antinatalist needs to tell a plausible story about what makes the absence of consent to birth problematic.

This can be done by grounding the compromised future interest in the case of procreation in *The Protective Model*. This antinatalist-friendly version of *The Protective Model* draws on two core ideas:

1) *The Overturning of Default Impermissibility* – The idea that the agent conferring consent transforms what would otherwise be an impermissible act into a permissible (and even desirable) one is one that is a virtually omnipresent feature of theorising about consent. Hallie Liberto, for instance, writes that consent has an almost magical power to turn "thefts into gifts, murder into euthanasia, and rape into lovemaking".[361] We have negative duties toward people, and the provision of consent releases the recipient from these obligations or waives the right of the consenting party.[362] Richard Healey also writes that "valid consent serves to cancel a directed duty owed to the consenter", such that one "will no longer wrong the consenter by acting in the consented to manner".[363] As Heidi Hurd puts it, consent can be thought of as a "moral-game changer" by serving as a "liberty-enhancing permission" that eliminates "obligations on the part of those to whom consent is given".[364] For David Owens, whose ideas we shall revisit later, declarative consent similarly has the function of legitimising "bare wrongings".[365]

Thus, for the antinatalist who wishes to argue for the wrongness of a risk-filled creation in the absence of the created person's consent, their default presumption would refer to the idea at the heart of *P1* that exposing someone to significant and unnecessary risk is impermissible. Consent, then, is a relevant consideration in this context, inasmuch as its provision would overturn this default impermissibility. Indeed, in the specific context of risk imposition, there is a voluminous body of literature in a wide range of fields indicating that consent plays precisely this "overturning" role. In medical ethics, for instance, the exposure to risk when participating as a participant in a research study is thought to demand the provision of

[361] Liberto, H. (2022). *Green Light Ethics*: *A Theory of Permissive Consent and Its Moral Metaphysics*. Oxford: OUP Oxford. I note here that the idea that rape is the same kind of act as sex but without consent has come in for considerable criticism – see Brison, S.J. (2002). *Aftermath, violence, and the remaking of a self*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; and Woollard, F. (2019). Promiscuity, pedophilia, rape, and the significance of the sexual. *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 33 (2), pp. 137-158.

[362] Liberto, H. (2017) Intention and sexual consent. *Philosophical Explorations*, 20 (2), pp. 127-141.

[363] Healey, R. (2019). Consent, Rights, and Reasons for Action. *Criminal Law and Philosophy*, 13 (3), pp. 499-513, p. 499.

[364] Hurd, H.M. (2018). The Normative Force of Consent. In P. Schaber (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Ethics of Consent* (pp. 44-54), Routledge Press.

[365] Owens 2012, pp. 44-67.

informed assent (understanding and acceptance of the harms and benefits).[366] In law, the defence of *volenti non fit injuria* seeks to absolve a defendant of culpability by pointing to a claimaint's understanding of, and willing consent to, the risk of injury. Should the antinatalist's claim that procreation involves the imposition of significant risk go through, then the role consent would play here would similarly be that of a moral tool sanctifying what would otherwise be forbidden. In other words, consent has a cancelling function that overturns a default prohibition on acts that could be welfare-compromising – in this case, the act being procreation and the potentially welfare-compromising result being a suffering-filled life. Of course, this cancellation can never be issued. To see what interest that thwarts, we turn to the second feature of *The Protective Model*.

2) *Control Over Welfare-Affecting Acts* – The relevant interest compromised by risk imposition is an interest in retaining control over welfare-affecting acts, as opposed to a more demanding interest in determining one's life course according to a set of personal values or commitments. According to *The Protective Model*, consent matters simply because it enables the consent-provider (or withholder) to exercise control over actions and events that may affect her, rather than because it allows an agent to act in accordance with her goals or ends.

Although this conception of consent seems to be a big deviation from the more popular agential accounts, it is not without precedent in the literature on consent. Even David Enoch, who we saw earlier provided an agency-focused explanation of consent's moral weight, has offered a supplementary explanation of this weight relating to ensuring sovereignty, wherein people are given "the last say" over particular decisions.[367]. A similar notion of control has been defended by the legal scholar, David Feldman, who has argued that subjecting one to treatment without one's consent constitutes an affront to that person's dignity, doing "things to him which remove from him any control over his own destiny".[368] Emily Jackson has drawn on Feldman's ideas to argue that this kind of account would explain why the non-

[366] Bromwich, D., and Rid, A. (2015). Can informed consent to research be adapted to risk? *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 41, pp. 521-528.

[367] Ibid., p. 30.

[368] Feldman, D. (2000). Human Dignity as a Legal Value: Part II, *Public Law*, pp. 61-76. This quote, by adverting to the idea of writing one's own destiny, also seems to demand some interest in self-determination of the kind favoured by *The Agency Model*. However, I explain below why the control interest does not have to pass the buck to an interest grounded in *The Agency Model*.

consensual treatment of adults who lack capacity may constitute an interference with their human rights.[369] And if consent remains a relevant concern even in cases where a subject is not a rational, autonomous agent, then it may not be too much of a reach to think it could be invoked to explain how we can meaningfully talk about the consent-less nature of birth being bad.

The antinatalist can emphasise the importance of retaining control over acts that interfere with our wellbeing and cash this out in terms of the *say-so principle* – those whose wellbeing stands to be directly affected by an act should have control over whether or how that act should take place. In other words, the fact that a future person doesn't consent to existence is morally relevant because the person who will come into existence lacks control (or doesn't have any say) over potentially welfare-compromising events they must endure and the significant harms they are now liable to suffer. Unlike the conceptions of consent typifying *The Agency Model*, this interest doesn't require that one be an embodied agent with goals and ends. This is because protective consent doesn't turn on agential interests in shaping one's normative or interpersonal world; it only turns on being owed the basic courtesy of not being thrust into situations of great peril without any control or input (i.e., being *protected* from such a fate).

The relationship between these two features of my model of consent is as follows – the absence of any pre-natal say-so means the default duty to avoid the unnecessary imposition of significant risk is never overturned. It is true that the non-existent cannot exercise any control or normative power in this instance, but abstention from procreation is a highly unusual case, where the antinatalist contends that the beneficiary is the person that is never created. So, although a future person cannot currently exercise control over welfare-affecting acts, they have a future-predicated interest in not being subjected to such an act without their control. The eternal absence of their permissive consent is precisely why the antinatalist believes the default impermissibility has not been, and can never be, overturned.

The upshot of this two-part version of *The Protective Model* is that if X is to perform some action which imposes the risk of significant and unnecessary harm on Y, then for all Ys,

[369] Jackson, E. (2017). From 'doctor knows best' to dignity: placing adults who lack capacity, *Modern Law Review*, p. 17.

consent needs to be present. This view also has implications for non-agents such as children, mentally incapacitated adults, and non-humans. This is not just a procreation-specific principle, but a principle that can explain why consent cannot be discounted when we impose risks on non-agents who are unable to give consent. Making decisions without the consent of incapacitous adults or children, then, can be *bad for them* (even if this badness is often overridden by other considerations of the kind we saw in section 4.4). The version of *The Protective Model* developed above explains why.

This might strike some as strange because we naturally adopt a paternalistic stance when considering the moral treatment of humans who are unable to provide consent. This has led some authors to argue that paternalistic action can replace concerns about consent in the procreative case too. For example, Rivka Weinberg argues that as there is no competent autonomous agent prior to birth, paternalism is called for, wherein the prospective procreator acts in the best interests of the would-be child.[370]

Again, there is an element of truth to this objection. Paternalism is certainly required in one sense, as prospective procreators, unable to consult their potential offspring for their views, must make the decision for the would-be child. This kind of first-order descriptive paternalism is trivially true and morally uninformative, because it is entirely consistent with a paternalistic antinatalism in which acting in the prospective person's best interests involves not taking the risk. It is the second-order normative statement that our need to make the decision for the possible child eliminates any concern we might have about the absence of consent that is the pertinent paternalistic counter-argument.

This view – that consent is an unimportant or irrelevant moral consideration against procreation – I take to be false. That we alone make the decision to expose a potential child to the risks of life without their consent is a morally undesirable fact that should lead us to make the first-order paternalistic decision to refrain from procreation. It is certainly true that parents often take decisions for the betterment of their child's development, such as enrolling the child in classes and making healthcare decisions on their behalf. In these cases, the decisions are either low risk or have plausible necessity. This does not mean, though, that the child's lack of consent is of no moral concern. Rather, any worries we may have about this

[370] Weinberg 2016, p. 6.

are drowned out by other considerations. In other words, we make decisions for children when the consequences of not doing so are bad enough that the protective control interest is overturned.

In everyday cases involving standard adults, both these models might be at play, whereas in the procreative case (and in other cases involving non-agents), it seems like only *The Protective Model* is relevant. The significance objection rests on the view that *The Agency Model* is a necessary condition for consent to be morally important. However, we have seen above that *The Protective Model* alone can be made to work as a plausible standalone explanation of the significance of consent in the procreative context (and, consequently, an explanation of the reason why its absence should perturb us). Therefore, the significance objection does not imperil the antinatalist's consent-based argument.

5.4 – The 'Consent Rights' Objection

The fourth objection changes tack slightly, locating the fault in the *no-consent claim* in its purported neglect of consent rights. The opponent of my stance here contends that the non-existent lack the kind of rights that *The Protective Model* seeks to safeguard. David Wasserman has defended the view that the non-existent have no rights that can be violated, in sharp contrast to existential cases of risk violation without consent where there is some "physical incursion on an individual with a right against such incursion".[371] Given that would-be children are not possessors of rights that could constrain the actions of other agents, Wasserman concludes that creating children without their consent is not wrong. There are two different ways in which we could buttress this denial of pre-natal rights with a view to blocking antinatalist concerns about absent consent. The first is that there is no relevant interest at stake that could ground any pre-natal right against non-consensual action. The second is that as the non-existent lack the ability to waive duties they are owed, they cannot be possessors of rights. We shall begin by examining the first strategy of denying a pertinent interest underpinning the right.

[371] Benatar and Wasserman 2015, pp. 170-171. See also Healey 2019, p. 502 where he claims that the provision of consent by X serves to cancel a duty owed to X, a duty grounded in a "claim-right" of X.

One way of responding to this idea is by making a similar move to that already made when dealing with the 'metaphysical absurdity' objection. This move involves arguing that the antinatalist's case is an atypical one, in which one is opposing the creation of a rights-bearer for the sake of that future rights-bearer. The antinatalist contends that one should not create a human being and is making that argument with concern for the future interests of that potential person. If we understand rights as conceptual devices constructed to protect fundamental interests,[372] and we take the salient fundamental interest here to be the interest in not being exposed to unagreed significant risks, then we might well claim that there is a fundamental interest (which would typically be protected with a right) counting against the creation of a rights-holder. To refuse the antinatalist this move is to fail to appreciate the distinctive qualities of procreation, where the interests of the affected party arise only after the creative act takes place.

In fact, it is far from uncommon to premise a right on an interest to be realised in the future. Joel Feinberg has proposed that a child possesses a right to an open future, with the thought here being that the child should not have important decisions made for her before she has the ability to make those choices herself. In effect, this grounds the child's right in a future adult interest in autonomy. Whilst obvious dissimilarities exist between this kind of right possessed a child and any purported right possessed prior to birth, such as the child's concrete existence, the extent to which these disanalogies are morally forceful will depend on whether the material I have thus far presented in this chapter is convincing. In any event, the basic point I wish to make here is that rights-talk is not substantiated solely by pointing to currently existing interests and that this opens the door for the antinatalist to respond in the way I have in the foregoing paragraph.

Wasserman gives a secondary role to consent, treating it merely as an overlay on rights, with the moral wrongness of consent-violating acts stemming from a negative right possessed by the one whose consent is in some overridden. However, as we saw when examining the significance objection, it is entirely conceivable to reverse this reasoning and claim that a right is a moral device that can be used to protect an interest in not being subject to welfare-affecting acts without consent. After all, if we think about why an act that potentially

[372] For a defence of this way of thinking about rights, see Francione, G. (1995). *Animals, Property, and the Law*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, pp. 91-114.

compromises the welfare of a person is wrong, we would want to give an explanation that makes reference to the absence of permission to be subjected to such acts. If this is correct, then non-interference rights do not stand independently of considerations of consent. Instead, these rights are postulated to protect the subject from being deleteriously affected by actions that they do not consent to. The value of non-interference rights, then, are predicated on the importance of avoiding cases where consent is absent. And consent is absent in the case of procreation.

We must note that not any consent-grounding interest could do the work desired by the antinatalist, as what are we to say in cases where the relevant interest underpinning the right is the sole preserve of existent beings? After all, existential consent-violations involve interfering with others' choices and bodies, a transgression that impinges on the interest in self-ownership (which we safeguard with a right). In reasoning so, one ties the wrongness of acts-without-consent to the subject's rights, which, in turn, are based on interests in not being interfered with. The non-existent have no such non-interference interests and so there is no reason to be bothered by consentless creation.

As we have already seen in the previous section, however, whilst the self-ownership model is certainly a plausible explanation of why many intra-life cases of consent violation are wrong, it is not the only way in which the absence of consent can make an act wrong. The *Protective Model* of consent, grounded in the *say-so principle*, serves as an explanation that functions independently of the self-ownership/non-interference account (or, even better, underpins it). Recall that, according to this way of theorising about consent, when somebody's welfare stands to be affected by a particular action, they should have some say in whether the action occurs. Procreation, of course, cannot satisfy this principle, and so creating someone without their consent is wrong.

It is therefore important to reflect on the nature of the right and what it is seeking to safeguard or promote. There are certainly some rights that are only plausibly attributed to one if they can be exercised, such as the right to vote and the right to sexual autonomy. This is because such rights aim to promote the activities of agents towards particular ends. However, other rights, like the right to bodily integrity or the right not to be tortured, are not best conceived of as exercise-connected rights, but rather rights that are focused on harm-protection. My invocation of consent to problematise living in unchosen risk is more akin to the latter.

Wasserman is perfectly correct to state, as a reason for his stance, that "a merely possible person has no values or preferences to override".[373] But I see no reason why the verb of choice should be "to override". Why can it not be "to impose", where such imposition is not done (and can never be done) on the basis of the values or preferences of the possible person? Procreation does, as I have argued already, involve deliberately creating a sentient being vulnerable to fluctuations of fortune – this might not involve overriding, but it does seem to me to be an act of imposing. And insofar as this imposition is interest-compromising, we still have good reason to retain the *no-consent claim*.

Another articulation of the rights-based objection reverts again to the pre-natal inability to consent. Karamvir Chadha neatly encapsulates the foundations of this objection. It rests on a *waivability premise*, according to which X only has a right against Y's f-ing if X can waive the duty Y owes to X not to f, and an *inability premise*, which holds that X cannot waive the duty Y owes X not to f.[374] Whilst the *inability premise* seems to be true of the procreative case, it is hard to see why we should accept the *waivability premise*. That is, why should one's inability to waive a duty defeat their possession of a right? Plausibly, the attribution of a right to X against some action helps to protect some core interest that is held by X, and if X cannot communicate that they no longer wish to be protected in this way, then we ought to revert to the default of not engaging in the action. To argue otherwise in defence of the *waivability premise* threatens to throw the baby out with the bathwater, undermining any moral rights of children, the cognitively impaired, and non-human animals in service of weakening the antinatalist's case.

Finally, even making the concession that the non-existent lack rights that are transgressed by non-consensual acts of creation, we do not vindicate the consentless nature of procreativity. This is because features of acts can be morally considerable even if they are done to individuals who do not possess a right. The overwhelming majority of people believe that inflicting suffering on non-human animals is wrong, but many of them also do not commit to a robust theory of animal rights on account of their lacking some (typically cognitive) human characteristic. Thus, being thrust with no say in the matter into the maelstrom of being,

[373] Benatar and Wasserman 2015, p. 169.

[374] Chadha, K.S. (2021). Essays on Consent. PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, p. 166.

always on the precipice of its drawbacks and intense hardships, could be morally bad even if the interest of the one being so thrust was not protected by a right.

5.5 – The 'Consent Simulation' Objection

5.5.1 – The Hypothetical Consent Objection

This objection essentially proceeds as follows. Most people, the pronatalist charges, consider themselves fortunate to have been born – they see their birth as an occasion deserving yearly celebration, regard themselves to be leading good lives, and are generally grateful that they exist. Given this widespread life affirmation, can we not reasonably assume that consent will be retrospectively provided by the person who comes into existence?[375] And given the likelihood of retrospective consent provision, can we not hypothesise consent on the part of the would-be child in a way that defuses my consent claim?

Before proceeding, it would be helpful to clarify the relationship between hypothetical consent and retrospective consent. In what I've said above, I have assumed that general retrospective consent underpins hypothetical consent. That is, we move from the observation that most people are happy to be born and consequently come to endorse their creation (retrospective consent) to the belief that the child we create would consent to their one birth if they could given the high probability of their life satisfaction (hypothetical consent). Asheel Singh distinguishes between the retrospective consent objection and the hypothetical consent objection, noting that general life-endorsement and hypothetical consent are different.[376] Whilst he is correct to note this difference, I believe an appeal to widespread life endorsement best constitutes an objection to antinatalism when it is connected to some further argument that explicitly motivates procreation – for example, to argue that creating more life-endorsers

[375] See Noggle, R. (2017). A Chip off the Old Block: The Ethics of Shaping Children to Be Like Their Parents. In J. Ahlberg and M. Cholbi (Eds.), *Procreation, Parenthood, and Educational Rights: Ethical and Philosophical Issues* (pp. 94-112), New York: Routledge, p. 102.

[376] See Singh, A. (2012). *Assessing Anti-Natalism: A Philosophical Examination of the Morality of Procreation* (MA Diss., University of Johannesburg), p. 40. Retrieved from: https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/vital/access/services/Download/uj:7429/CONTENT1?view=true (Accessed: 14 June 2021).

is morally valuable or, as in the current case, to argue that the child we create would want to be created. Furthermore, I believe framing the argument in this way – with widespread retrospective endorsement constituting the grounds for hypothesising prenatal consent – captures how many people reason about procreative justification. Later in this section, I examine the problems for an independent argument from retrospective consent alone.

For now, let us look at the reasons to be sceptical of the idea that we can hypothesise consent on the basis of probable life-endorsement (i.e., other people's retrospective consent). One reason to think that hypothetical consent cannot represent an acceptable substitute for what we might call 'proper consent' has already been encountered in Chapter Three of this thesis, where we saw that there are empirical grounds to question the claim that happiness is quite as widespread as the pronatalist takes it to be. Indeed, self-reported gratitude is a skewed metric, as excluded from its ambit are those who have been at the receiving end of the very worst fates, for they either aren't alive or in a state to inform us of their attitudes towards having been born. Furthermore, we don't have to run a Benatarian argument that casts aspersions on the integrity of self-reports of wellbeing in order to observe that expressing discontent with birth is strongly socially disincentivised. Indeed, laypeople and philosophers alike are likely to associate such an expression with a mood disorder. In any event, I will assume for what follows that the pronatalists' claim about the social extent of life-approvement is true. All I will assume is that there is some non-negligible proportion of the population who are not happy to have been born, a claim that I take to have been evidenced in Chapter Three.

Given this, one of the biggest problems with the hypothetical consent argument is that it is not so much consent *to* risk as it is consent *via* risk. The consent-to-risk required to undermine the *no-consent claim* is a form of consenting to existential uncertainty. Even armed with probabilities, we do not know in advance what hand we will be dealt in life. That is the essence of procreative risk, and that is what one would need to consent to in order to defeat the *no-consent claim*. Note, however, that the provision of consent under the hypothetical consent framework is based on what most other people end up saying about their lives. To put it another way, we look at the majority of people for whom the risk pays off and we then say something along the lines of, "the child I intend to create would consent to living if they could". The widespread retroactive life-endorsement that gives us the epistemic warrant to hypothesise consent in this way is a product of risk, as it is produced by many instances of the risk playing out favourably. But this kind of post-risk consenting, heavily

biased by the positive outcomes of risk-taking, cannot form the basis for the kind of ex ante consent required to beat back the risk argument.

At this point, the defender of the hypothetical consent argument might turn to a paradigmatic real-world case to show that hypothetical consent can provide justification of a sort that parallels the justification it is supposed to provide when it comes to procreation. Consider the following case:

The Surgery: Maria has suffered a serious injury, leaving her in a temporarily comatose state where she is unable to provide consent. Unless Maria receives immediate surgical intervention, she will be paralysed. The risk that the surgery goes wrong and leads to Maria's death or an even more serious condition is low, but still present.[377]

It appears to many people that the surgeons whose care Maria is under may hypothesise consent on Maria's part and accordingly perform the surgery. So why are we not justified in deploying a similar procedure in the case of procreation, assuming the likelihood and net benefits of successful paralysis-prevention vis-à-vis grave surgically-induced harm mirror the risks of a good life and a bad life, respectively? I think those who are inclined to reason in this way are failing to recognise that we do not rely on hypothetical consent to justify operating on Maria in *The Surgery*. Rather, it seems that much of the justificatory work is done simply by the fact that "something of great objective significance is at stake", to return to one of Shiffrin's phrases from Chapter Two.[378]

As Asheel Singh rightly notes, the motivating principle for performing operations in cases like *The Surgery* that supplies this "objective significance" is to prevent a great harm from befalling the subject, such as the physical and emotional pain caused by paralysis.[379] This is reflected in the GMC's Consent Guidance, which states that a doctor can treat someone without consent if "it is immediately necessary to save their life or to prevent a serious

[377] For more on the reliance on hypothetical consent in cases like this, see Kuflik, A. (2009). Hypothetical Consent. In F. Miller and A. Wertheimer (2009). *The Ethics of Consent: Theory and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[378] Shiffrin 1999, p. 132.

[379] Singh 2012, p. 35. See also Singh 2018.

deterioration of their condition".[380] There is no similar reason in the procreative case that could plausibly represent the prevention of greater harm. It is not so much that we actually hypothesise consent in *The Surgery*, and even if we do, it is unclear how much moral work this actually does. Rather, as I see it, appeals to hypothetical consent in cases like this serve as a general principle to guide action in the absence of consent. In *The Surgery*, the relevant work to morally justify operating on Maria without her consent is done by the moral importance of preventing her from becoming paralysed, given the damaging impact this will conceivably have on her quality of life.[381]

Could it not be the case that providing an opportunity for a prospective child to enjoy some of life's benefits may fulfil this requirements of "objective significance"? Or, alternatively, could the goods that procreation delivers to parents and to the species not constitute reasons of "objective significance"? Evaluating these denials of the *no-necessity claim* must wait until the next chapter, but for the time being, we only need to note that it is moral necessity, as opposed to hypothetical consent, that makes action permissible in *The Surgery*.

However, suppose one remained insistent that something akin to hypothetical consent was really playing a role (or could play a role) in approximating consent in cases like *The Surgery.* If hypothetical consent, as opposed to objective significance alone, were really supplying some independent justification in this case, then our rationale (even if only in part) for performing the surgery must stem some person-specific reasons to think Maria would provide consent if she were able to. In other words, a plausible principle for hypothetical consent would be something akin to the following:

The Hypothetical Consent Principle: Hypothetical consent can be attributed to a person (X) in the event that:
i) X is unable to supply meaningful consent to some action (A);

[380] General Medical Council (2020). *Decision Making and Consent*, p. 29. Retrieved from: https://www.gmc-uk.org/-/media/documents/gmc-guidance-for-doctors---decision-making-and-consent-english_pdf-84191055.pdf (Accessed: 15 June 2021).

[381] I do not deny that paralysed persons can lead fulfilling lives. I seek only to argue that preventing paralysis is a weighty moral reason to perform a given intervention.

ii) A is certain, or at least very likely, to have received endorsement from X would they have been able to consent.

With this mind, we are equipped to see the no-consent claim is immune to the hypothetical consent counter-argument. In cases like *The Surgery*, we typically have access to the previous wishes and desires of the temporarily incapacitated person (perhaps relayed by their next of kin or others intimately acquainted with them), and are thus able to make claims about the likelihood of consent provision based on specific attitudes or beliefs held by that person. Maria's family members could inform the surgeons about her attitude towards factors such as life prolongation, living with a diminished quality of life, medical intervention, and so on. This is the most plausible way of satisfying ii) of *The Hypothetical Consent Principle*.[382] This is very different from the way in which hypothetical consent is deployed in the procreative case, where the likelihood of consent provision is inferred from what the majority of other people think.

The hypothetical consent argument against *the no-consent claim* assumes that retrospective consent is likely to be given based on other people's endorsement of (i.e., consent-giving to) life, and this widespread post-natal consent is treated as consent on the part of the created being at the time at which the procreative decision is made. That is, the hypothetical consent procedure involves moving from a general case of public opinion to a specific attribution of consent to an individual.

The problem with an approach where the evidentiary basis for hypothetical consent is based on population-level preferences is highlighted by Seana Shiffrin, who notes that employing the hypothetical consent procedure in such cases is "not based on features of the individual who will bear the imposed condition."[383] In other words, the decision to bring someone into existence entails making a judgement for this new person that life is worth living – that the attendant costs are not too severe (a claim about the absolute significance of "badness")

[382] Of course, if the doctors were unable to obtain insights into Maria's attitudes towards medical intervention and disability, or if the individual at risk of paralysis were not an adult but instead a young infant, we would still think that the surgery were morally permissible. It's just that we would think so because necessity was at play (i.e., we want to prevent great harm from coming about), not because we were able to hypothesise consent.

[383] Shiffrin 1999, p. 133

and/or suitably compensated for (a claim about the relative quantities of "good" and "bad"). This violates what we take to be a central feature of meaningful consent, namely that such consent be informed by the preference or value set of the affected party.[384] Hypothetical consent, if it is to simulate legitimate consent, cannot be settled by population-level inferences. Instead, it should be case-specific and reflect the values and goals of a given persons. Of course, case-specific prenatal consent is impossible.

To sum up, the hypothetical consent argument flounders on a number of fronts. It gives us a consent-to-risk motivated by a consent-after-risk. Even if we accept this, the real-world cases where we are likely to appeal to hypothetical consent are better explained by necessity than by hypothesised consent, and where hypothetical consent actually makes a difference, it does so because it reflects a person's deeply-held and previously-expressed values. In the case of procreation, neither of these conditions are satisfied.

5.5.2 – The Retrospective Consent Objection

Having encountered some reasons to doubt the hypothetical consent argument, let us now turn our attention to the retrospective consent argument. Remember that I argued that the latter is best understood as the motivational basis for the hypothetical consent argument, but as Asheel Singh stated, one might be able to advance an argument from retrospective consent alone. This argument, if it is to not simply lead to the hypothetical consent argument, must state that the moral status of procreative consent be deferred until retrospective consent is either provided or withheld by one's offspring. Should such consent be given, then the antinatalist's concerns are neutered and procreation is off the hook. Given that we have no particularly strong reason to think consent will not be provided down the road, we similarly have no reason to refrain from procreation.

This approach, in my view, suffers from some serious shortcomings. The proponent of this objection wants to say that the moral status of procreation will be settled in the future by the

[384] In section 5.3, we consider different models to explain the significance of consent – what we shall see is that the importance of consent can be grounded either in protecting the subject from harm or in ensuring that some core person-specific interest, such as autonomy, is enabled or promoted. Inferring pre-natal consent based on other people's consent cannot be explained by the former and is actively violated by the latter.

presence or absence of retrospective consent. However, it does not seem like we defer the question of moral warrant in other intra-life cases. In *The Surgery*, we would not think that the ethical rectitude of the surgery would have been undermined if Maria subsequently became conscious and lamented the operation. In *The Gamble*, we again do not postpone our moral assessment until the non-consenting party delivers a verdict. Using such a consent-neutering principle in the procreative case, then, seems ad hoc.

There are also some further reasons to reject the moral force of ex post gratitude. For one, pinning procreative justification to retrospective gratitude is irresponsible, because it leaves open the possibility that people's consent will remain absent after their birth. Such unconsenting persons are left in a miserable catch-22 predicament, where they must either carry on with the unconsented-to state or make the agonising decision to remove the unconsented-to state by committing suicide. Of course, the retrospective consent argument would say that creating such a life was morally wrong, but it can only ever render that verdict after the harm has been incurred. One cannot fix the outcome in advance and stipulate that consent will be given if one is considering the morality of real-world procreation, precisely because procreation in the actual world is a risky activity without a determined result. Where the result isn't as the pronatalist imagines, the retrospective consent argument leaves the unfortunate in a hopeless dilemma.

Even if the procreative act came to be postnatally sanctioned by one's child, it's not clear to me that the act is thereby justified. Those who are inclined to think that subsequent life-approval can stand in for the initial lack of consent in this way appear to be accepting a problematic kind of moral luck. To see this, imagine that a man were to perform a sexual act on his sleeping wife, in the belief that his act will probably come to be endorsed by her when she awakes. Many of us are inclined to argue that the man acts impermissibly in this instance. Further suppose that his wife, upon later learning of this, does in fact give retrospective consent. Has her acceptance now disabled the man's wrongful action? I would suggest that most of us think not because her consent-at-the-time was absent and only luck prevented a terrible outcome from manifesting. In situations of uncertainty where the welfare of others is at stake, we ought not to rely on moral luck unless we really have to. Such a verdict, then, would undermine the force of retrospective consent in overriding the initial consent-ignoring act.

The critic might point out that we ought not to confuse an assessment of the blameworthiness of the husband with a moral assessment of the husband's act. This certainly is true, but if we were asked to morally opine on what the man does to his wife, it seems like our assessment should be that his act is bad, not that it is ethically indeterminate. We don't believe that we can only pass moral judgement on the permissibility of actions after events have unfolded and the results are in. To adopt such a strategy only in our moral evaluation of procreation in order to escape the *no-consent claim* would be intolerably arbitrary. For all these reasons, a standalone argument from retrospective consent faces too many issues to be a viable counter to the *no-consent claim*.

5.6 – The 'Get-Out Clause' Objection

According to this objection, the absence of consent to creation is not morally troubling, for those who are born into circumstances where life's abundant risks are realised are able to avail themselves of a get-out option. This release clause is, of course, suicide, which functions as a redressal mechanism built into the consent-less nature of procreation. Simply put, the absence of consent is acceptable, as if one is displeased with the state of their existence, they retain the option to end their lives. This kind of reasoning is not at all uncommon amongst philosophers. For example, Saul Smilansky in defending the claim that the risk of generating life is "reasonable", writes that "if life is so bad, the badness can be stopped … there is, almost always, a way out".[385]

I believe we have powerful reasons to reject this viewpoint. Firstly, to my mind, it is patently cruel to take the risk of having a child, seeing that child's life turn out badly, and then telling them to kill themselves to escape the suffering. As Benatar puts it, views like Smilanksy's "underestimate how appalling it is to face the choice of either taking one's own life or endure terrible suffering".[386] The "way out" envisaged by Smilansky comes at a great cost, as the decision to end one's life is usually marked by substantial psychological distress. The prospect of bringing about the end to one's life involves the fear of death, whilst failing in such an attempt might lead to permanent disability or disfigurement. Also, a large part of this

[385] Smilansky, S. (2012). Life is Good. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 31 (1), pp. 69-78, p. 72.

[386] Benatar 2012, p. 155.

distress is caused by the recognition of the significant negative impact one's suicide is likely to have on loved ones. A dire predicament such as this is hardly a "way out".

Furthermore, in many cases, the suffering and death of the most unfortunate humans will predate the ability to complete suicide or to be assisted with dying. Even when the person is able to exercise this option, it's hardly a clean escape route, as the harms have already manifested to a considerable degree (indeed, horrendous suffering is likely what has prompted the decision to seek release in the form of suicide). Exercising the exit clause that suicide is supposed to represent will also postdate severe harms in the case of young children who bear terrible hardships, as suicide is obviously not an option for them. An ex post facto opt-out clause, then, is wholly unsatisfactory protection from bad rolls of life's die.

Although many readers, I suspect, can see the callousness in suggesting suicide as a solution to an identified problem, it is important to realise that the underlying attitude – that the risk is worth taking, and the chance that one's offspring leads a miserable existence is an acceptable potential price to pay – in fact underlies virtually all pronatalist positions. In the last chapter, I titled this the *specification problem* – the difficulty the pronatalist faces in answering the question of how many terrible lives we can tolerate in pursuing the project of extending our species' 'lifespan'. The best solution to this problem – an answer of zero to ensure that no one suffers a horrible fate – is delivered by adopting an antinatalist stance.

6. Undermining Necessity

Even if we were to agree that the previous two chapters substantiate the charge that procreation problematically endangers the welfare of a non-consenting person, we might well believe that we nonetheless possess good reasons to engage in the act. This chapter of my thesis is dedicated to critically interrogating these positive reasons to procreate that seek to impair *P4* of my argument – the *no-necessity claim*, which holds that procreative risk is imposed unnecessarily (or without a compelling reason). Of course, the most obvious reason for procreation is desire-related – simply put, we procreate because we want to. However, we do not normally think that satisfying a desire, even a deeply-held one, automatically provides a good reason to engage in an act that could harm another person. In order to see whether the desire rises to the level of a necessary reason to engage in an other-affecting act, we ought to probe the desire and reflect on what more foundational interest the desire is aimed at fulfilling.

To this end, I focus on three main ways one might try to defend the claim that we have a compelling reason to procreate. The first reason is grounded in procreation's connection to furthering our species' existence. The second is grounded in our own strong interests in having and raising biological children. Thirdly, I consider the view that having a child is necessary for the sake of the child itself. In short, I look at three different loci of procreative necessity – the human species (and the world more generally), prospective parents, and the created child.

Before delving into the particulars of these arguments, it would be helpful to map out the three principal strategies that the antinatalist can take in response to necessity arguments. One option is to deny that the procreative reason presented captures a meaningful interest, either because there is no interest at all or because the interest does not reach the bar for a compelling reason to reproduce or because satisfying the interest incurs other significant costs. Let us call this *the undermining strategy*. Another way to push back against a purportedly compelling interest in procreation is to show that a viable alternative exists that is equally capable of satisfying the interest – call this *the redirecting strategy.* The third route open to the antinatalist is to bite the bullet and grant that a given reason to procreate is strong and not otherwise achievable, but maintain that this is trumped by considerations of imposing

unconsented-to risk on the person we create through procreation. Such a response to the *no-necessity claim* then concedes that there might well be compelling reasons to procreate, but argue that these are superseded by even more compelling reasons not to procreate, such that the procreative reason is not all-things-considered "compelling". This way of dodging the counter-argument by means of utilitarian one-upmanship, which we may call the *trumping strategy*, is always available to the antinatalist, and this chapter will aim to identify weaknesses in the reasons-to-procreate, and show where it is appropriate (or, perhaps, necessary) for the antinatalist to play the *trumping strategy*.

6.1 – Averting Human Extinction

Many think we have excellent reasons to act in such a way as to promote the long-term survival of the human species, and insofar as some degree of procreation is a pre-requisite to achieve this desirable end, they think we have excellent reasons to engage in procreation to continue our species. The argument for the survival of the human species can also be conceived of as the argument to avert human extinction. Extinction is, in the words of Richard Kraut, "a catastrophe that makes all previous catastrophes pale in comparison".[387] Or as Jonathan Glover puts it, bringing about the end of our species 'would be about the worst thing it would be possible to do'.[388] Why think so? There are three reasons one might offer. Firstly, in a local form, one could argue that extinction involves the death of valuable cultures, practices, and states. Secondly, and more globally, extinction brings about the end of the human species, with many believing the continuation of mankind is of tremendous moral importance. Thirdly, extinction might be thought to destroy the meaning in human lives.

6.1.1 – Social, Political, and National Preservation

An increasing number of thinkers have pinpointed that fertility rates are on the decline across many developed nations, with some countries enacting state policies to support procreative activity and resurrect their falling population levels.[389] The state, interested in its own

[387] Kraut 2011, p. 163.

[388] Glover, J. (1977). *Causing Death and Saving Lives*. London: Penguin Books, p. 170.

[389] Japan represents one of the starkest cases. See Sato, M. (6 October 2023). Funding the Policies to Boost Japan's Birthrate. *The Tokyo Foundation.* Retrieved from:

survival, clearly has an interest in child bearing.[390] Some philosophers have argued that reproducing our political and economic structures can underpin a duty to procreate. Saul Smilansky, for instance, argues that people sometimes have a "moral requirement" to try to create and raise children.[391] One of the reasons cited by Smilansky to ground this obligation points to the benefits to society and the nation-state (by creating a new generation of workers, voters, and cultural-preservers).[392]

Should we procreate so that our children can labour and vote and themselves procreate, thereby sustaining our state and society? The strength of a procreative reason on these grounds will obviously depend upon how much weight we ought to place on the continuation of the human species itself, so in one sense, the localised form of this argument reduces to the kinds of arguments we will examine in the coming sections. Nevertheless, we can make a few points here about why this kind of argument is unlikely to serve as a compelling reason to procreate.

Firstly, it is hard to see how the maintenance of social, political, and economic structures has the kind of moral value that could plausibly constrain or embolden the procreativity of others, at least when we are engaged in an exercise of balancing these supposed benefits against the very substantial forms of suffering that are thrown into the mix when we procreate. Creating and participating in stable political systems, being productive in a workplace, and upholding cultural traditions are valuable to existing beings who exist within the frameworks of democracy, capitalism, and nationalism. Yet it is difficult to conceive of such things as inherent goods that we must use our reproductive capacities in service of.

Secondly, the perils of my position *for* nationalism may well be seen as a positive, in that it protects against the perils *of* nationalism. In order to ground a reason to procreate for the

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https://www.tokyofoundation.org/research/detail.php?id=958 (Accessed: 8 March 2024). See Morland, P. (2024). No One Left: Why the World Needs More Children. Swift Press for a recent globally-focused account.

[390] Lotz, M. (2017). Liberalism and the Status of Family Making. In J. Ahlberg and M. Cholbi (Eds.), *Procreation, Parenthood, and Educational Rights: Ethical and Philosophical Issues* (pp. 113-136), New York: Routledge.

[391] Smilansky, S. (1995). Is There a Moral Obligation to Have Children? *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 12 (1), pp. 41-53, p. 41.

[392] Ibid., pp. 46-47.

benefit of a state and its associated institutions and practices, we must first establish the justness of the state. For instance, no one generally thinks procreation would be justified in order to sustain a state like Nazi Germany or Pol Pot's Khmer regime. However, this argument may extend to many modern states, whose actions involve initiating wars, passing laws that restrict the rights of some of its citizens (e.g., anti-LGBTQ laws), and so on.

Finally, if we are looking for a really good reason to procreate that is global in scope, then our reason should try to match reality. Of course, there are places in the world where people have been coerced or persuaded to reproduce in order to aid their country or benefit the economy or replenish the electorate. However, at least for those of reasonably liberal sensibilities, we do not find such states particularly attractive. It would be unusual if the societies in which my argument is even to receive a fair hearing would also be especially sympathetic to this form of procreative justification. Rather than parochially pinning procreative necessity on transient national borders and political systems, a more potent strategy might be to extend the beneficiary from the state to the species. We look at this tactic next.

6.1.2 – The Value of the Human Species and the Human Project

Arguably the most common objection to human extinction posits that the human species is morally valuable and worth preserving. Any philosophy that advocates the termination of our species, and all our pursuits, is therefore to be shunned. The notion that perpetuating our species is a core plank of morality has great precedent. Aquinas' natural law, for instance, took the *telos* (purpose) of the human body to be reproduction. He advocated five primary precepts (or foundational moral laws), one of which claimed that humans should act for the survival of mankind by procreating.[393] Modern versions of the argument that the survival of mankind is morally significant take many different forms. Here, I will focus on two of the most well-developed accounts, explaining why they both face problems.

[393] Elders, L.J. (2019). *The Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas: Happiness, Natural Law and The Virtues*. The Catholic University of America Press, p. 26.

Thaddeus Metz spells out one way to make sense of the moral threat of extinction, capturing it in terms of the Kantian and Catholic notion of human dignity.[394] Conceding that the Kantian principle of respect doesn't require procreation, Metz nevertheless suggests that "the ethic of respect for human dignity…would arguably forbid letting them [*humans*] go out of existence altogether, and might, more-over, require ensuring they are populated to some sort of adequate degree."[395] The value of continuing the human species, then, rests on a more foundational concept in ethics (in this case, dignity).

Where does Metz go wrong? Firstly, it is difficult to see how antinatalism undermines human dignity. Dignity, arguably, explains why a human being is a member of the moral community. As Mette Lebech argues, there are many competing theories of what grounds the dignity of human beings, but they all express the idea that a human being is fundamentally valuable.[396] However, there is a difference between claiming that "X exists and is valuable" and "it is valuable that X exist".[397] Dignity could help to explain why existing human beings have moral value, but it cannot by itself generate a reason to create morally valuable beings. Put another way, it is not the case that we need to maximise the number of subjects who matter morally, but rather that we should act to promote the interests of those subjects who matter morally. Metz, thus, misconceives the subject of the duty of respect.

Secondly, were we to claim that the duty of respect generates an obligation to propagate the human species, then we face the challenge of explaining what a species is supposed to consist in. This, it turns out, is a demanding task, with biological, ecological, phylogenetic, and morphological conceptions of species all having received their fair share of criticism.[398] Whilst the view that species don't have mind-independent existence cannot be defended here, the existence of the live debate is enough to at least stymie the pronatalist who wishes to make such an argument, as he must give some robust account of what a species consists in if

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[394] Metz, T. (2012). Contemporary Anti-Natalism, Featuring Benatar's Better Never to Have Been. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 31 (1), pp. 1-9, p. 8.

[395] Ibid., p. 9.

[396] Lebech, M. (2004). *What is Human Dignity?* Maynooth Philosophical Papers (ed. by M. Lebech, Maynooth). pp. 59-69.

[397] For another example of a philosopher who misses this distinction, see Smilansky 1995, p. 46.

[398] For example, see Mayr, E. (1996). What Is a Species, and What Is Not? *Philosophy of Science*, 63 (2), pp. 262-277.

it is to have any ontological, and consequently ethical, relevance. This increases the argumentative workload for a proponent of this kind of argument.

Thirdly, even supposing we flesh out a species concept that survives criticism, it is doubtful that any of the provided species definitions have any moral cash value, such that a species could be the recipient of moral consideration. It is difficult to see why morphological similarity, interbreeding potential, or a shared genetic history should carry with it any ethical importance, especially of the kind that distinguishes it as worthy of dignified treatment. Indeed, there are good reasons to think that the notion of an 'obligation-to-the-species' is incoherent. This is because the most sensible picture of morality is one in which we are constrained by the actions that affect morally relevant persons. What makes a person morally relevant is contentious, with traits such as rationality and sentience often being invoked, but it's unclear how a taxonomic classification intended to capture differences in the natural world, independent of characteristics possessed by individuals in that category, can be a locus of value.

So much for species preservation arguments from dignity. A potentially more promising argument for the moral importance of humanity focuses on the valuable nature of human beings and their characteristic activities – *the 'human project' response*. Humans are organisms whose lives have moral value, but they are also moral agents who can perceive value and modify their actions accordingly. Humans have powers of self-reflection and abstraction, enabling them to acquire knowledge and make discoveries about the world. In addition to their moral and intellectual gifts, humans are also creative and artistic beings who are able to generate and appreciate beauty. The end of humanity, then, is the death of all value in the universe, for there will no longer be any perceivers of value or any knowers engaged in a pursuit of higher truths. Avoiding such a fate is morally necessary according to those who have faith in the human project response.

Is the cessation of the human project bad for these reasons? For one thing, we might ask, "for whom is this bad?" Were we to answer that this is bad for currently existing humans (or perhaps all humans who will come into existence before the species' extinction), then this argument simply seems to reduce to Scheffler's meaning-depletion argument against extinction that is considered later. Moreover, it is obvious to me that when people run this

kind of argument, they are not saying that the end of humanity is bad *for* someone, but rather that is bad simpliciter (i.e., absolutely bad).

There are two main issues with this stance. First, it appears to unreasonably assume that the universe or some independent realm of moral truth has a perspective on humanity – that there is a cosmic loss of moral import when humans depart the scene. Such a view seems hard to sustain as whilst it is easy to make sense of the idea that the death of humanity (and its achievements and potential) is bad *for* some set of humans, it is hard to see how it could simply be bad.[399] Second, as Richard Kraut points out, claims about absolute badness of this sort seem to give rise to a double counting problem, where there is both disvalue from the badness *for* someone and from the badness simpliciter. When we typically deliberate about whether to undertake some course of action that would involve a bad like pain, we do not suppose that there is a "double disvalue", such that it would be "bad *for* those who feel it" and that it would be "bad absolutely".[400] That is, we do not think the latter possesses a reason-giving property further to our recognition of pain's effect on its sentient sufferers. Why, then, should we think there is a double disvalue at play in the extinction case?

There is another problem facing *the 'human project' response* that also plagues other appeals to the third-party benefits secured by procreation. The problem is that these arguments that locate the necessity of reproduction elsewhere from the child appear to instrumentalise the lives of individual children, by claiming that such lives are merely means to the end of some extrinsic greater good (in this case, species survival). Such an approach regards future children as a vessel through which to realise the impersonal good. We shall return to how much this should perturb us in section 6.2.4.

Finally, this response is unjustifiably cheery about humanity's achievements. Whilst there clearly is, as Seana Shiffrin puts it, "shared dismay occasioned by the prospect of collective nonexistence",[401] I think that such dismay is unwarranted. This is because it is not plausible that humanity is inherently desirable or that its project is one about which we should be proud

[399] Of course, much here turns on one's broader commitments in normative and meta-ethics.

[400] Kraut 2011, pp. 45-46.

[401] Shiffrin, S.V. (2013). Preserving the Valued or Preserving Value (pp. 143-158). In S. Scheffler (2013). *Death and the Afterlife*. Oxford University Press, p. 144.

or optimistic. The human species has, by and large, not been a force for good on this planet. We kill hundreds of billions of animals every year; more people are enslaved today than at any point in human history; countless genocides and two brutal world wars took place in the last century alone; rape and sexual violence has been widespread throughout human history; and we are on a trajectory to irreparably destroy the planet.[402] Indeed, in Chapter 3, we saw that the experiential content of a human life was fraught with risk in large part because of human-caused actions. In light of these concerns, the end of artistic output and scientific advancement look comparatively trivial. This, then, seems like a point in the dialectic where it is entirely appropriate for the antinatalist to resort to the *trumping strategy*.

6.1.3 – Avoiding Meaninglessness

One particularly sophisticated argument for the badness of human extinction has been put forth by Samuel Scheffler. This argument exploits an idea common to the lay aversion to antinatalism – namely, that the spectre of antinatalism threatens to undercut the meaning and purpose in our lives. It should be noted that Scheffler is primarily concerned with the collapse of goal-oriented projects in doomsday or infertility scenarios. However, his argument can be extended to criticise antinatalism, as voluntarily abstaining from procreation is functionally akin to the foregoing, inasmuch as they all (if realised) result in the extinction of the human species.

Scheffler invites us to imagine the imminent extinction of the human species due to the Earth's destruction and asks us to think about our response to this. He notes that we would likely feel sadness for our loved ones who are to die and even fear our own potential violent and premature death. But Scheffler believes that such a doomsday event would also considerably undermine our current life goals and plans, for it would weaken not only our reasons to engage in them, but also our emotional investment.[403]

According to Scheffler, this is explained by the deflationary effect that the non-existence of the human species has on meaning, for the latter is very closely connected to the existence of future generations and the continuation of our species. In his words, "the imminent

[402] A fuller treatment of many of these harms as supplied in Chapters 2 and 3.

[403] Scheffler, S. (2013). *Death and the Afterlife*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 23.

disappearance of human life would exert a generally depressive effect on people's motivations and on their confidence in the value of their activities…[reducing] their capacity for enthusiasm and for wholehearted and joyful activity across a very wide front."[404] Shiffrin identifies two key themes that appear to underpin Scheffler's argument that the meaningfulness of our life projects is connected to the persistence of our species. First, there is what she calls the "conservatism thesis",[405] according to which there is a "conceptual connection between valuing something and wanting it to be sustained or preserved".[406] Second, there is the idea that meaning is connected to human history, inasmuch as what we take to a 'good life' and the value of our activities is connected to the place that it occupies "in an ongoing human history, in a temporally extended chain of lives and generations".[407]

Should it be successful, this response has devastating consequences for my antinatalist argument, for surely securing meaning and purpose in our lives is a compelling reason to procreate. Indeed, if one stubbornly fails to grant this, then it is hard to see what could be a good reason to procreate. Therefore, the antinatalist either needs to show why accepting this loss of meaning isn't a significant cost or that extinction needn't carry with it a loss of meaning.

One possible strategy of a nihilistic bent is to argue that as we must confront the necessary loss of meaning in some domains of our life, the loss of further meaning isn't a big deal. As David Benatar argues in *The Human Predicament*, terrestrial meaning is possible insofar as life can have meaning from the perspective of a human individual (*meaning sub specie hominis*), a human community (*meaning sub specie communitatis*) or even the entirety of humanity (*meaning sub specie humanitatis*).[408] However, Benatar argues that our lives lack meaning when viewed from a cosmic point of view – that is, from the "perspective of the universe" (*meaning sub specie aeternitatis*).[409] A different account of the meaningless of human lives has been proposed by Rivka Weinberg, who suggests that our lives lack

[404] Ibid., p. 43.

[405] Shiffrin 2013, p. 144.

[406] Scheffler 2013, p. 22.

[407] Ibid., p. 43. See also p. 54.

[408] Benatar 2017, pp. 27-32.

[409] Ibid., p. 35.

"ultimate meaning".[410] According to her, there is no point to the efforts we put into structuring and leading our lives, because a valued end for the project of living a life must lie external to the life itself, but this is not possible since one's life encompasses all of one's ends. It's not just analytic philosophers who have addressed the meaninglessness of human lives, as this has also been the subject of much of twentieth century continental philosophy. According to Alison Stone, "the facticity of our existence is radically contingent and ultimately groundless", with the lack of ultimate explanation for our lives producing "natal anxiety".[411] Meaninglessness might well be an essential aspect of the human condition, not something merely brought about by the non-survival of the human species.

Whilst I don't have the space to examine the plausibility of these arguments, its success, if established, would be independent of the truth of antinatalism. And given that we would be forced to accept this significant loss of meaning anyway, we might not find it too high a price to pay to go a step further and also accept the demise of some terrestrial meaning. After all, antinatalism is not intended to comfort. Indeed, its practice might be thought to be a sobering 'red pill' that awakens us to the pointlessness and futility of our existence.

This, though, is not an overly satisfying response, for even if we must confront the absence of meaning in some domains of our life, it is unclear why we should welcome the sweeping decimation of meaning that Scheffler thinks human non-existence brings about. An alternative way of showing that this loss of meaning is acceptable is by demonstrating that the pronatalist already accepts it. We can begin by noting that it is extraordinarily probable (if not certain) that, at some point, our species will become extinct, whether it be because of the sun's death or because of calamitous terrestrial events (of either natural or self-inflicted origin). Yet the seemingly inevitable end of our species is not typically taken to be a meaning-destroyer, so why should the prospect of a sooner conclusion to our species' story radically undercut meaning?

If we don't follow Leo Tolstoy in thinking that there is a loss of meaning in our lives given that one day, all our accomplishments would be totally forgotten to a barren or extinguished

[410] Weinberg, R. (2021). Ultimate Meaning: We Don't Have It, We Can't Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad. *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, 1(1), 4, doi:10.35995/jci01010004.

[411] Stone 2019, p. 5.

planet, then we ought not to be unduly perturbed by the consequences that antinatalism would have for human meaning. Perhaps it might be argued that events thousands or millions of years in the future need not concern us in the same way as the loss of future generations in the timeframe of decades and centuries. Distant events, this response goes, have a lesser effect on meaning in our lives than proximate ones. Perhaps there are particular kinds of life projects that are more susceptible to a relatively proximate extinction. Scheffler gives the example of finding a cure for cancer as a project that is vulnerable to being rendered meaningless, for its success lies in the distant future and rests on benefitting a large number of people over a large period of time.[412] Although it is plausible that an asteroid impact event in the next thirty days might cause a cancer researcher to reassess the meaning of her life's work, given the consequent futility of research devoted to the eradication of cancer, it is much less plausible that antinatalism should have this effect.

Firstly, the success of global antinatalism is far from certain, as it rests upon successfully convincing everyone to voluntarily cease procreating. In the presence of uncertainty, goals revolving around the long-run presence of human beings might still retain their meaning. Even if antinatalist rhetoric were to persuade the masses, its success is likely to be extremely gradual, meaning that any extinction secondary to adoption of antinatalism will realistically be a distant event. Thus, whilst the purpose of the cancer researcher's work might be threatened by the kind of apocalyptic scenarios involving a sudden extinction event imagined by Scheffler, there is no reason to believe the steady social success of antinatalism should similarly imperil her project.

Secondly, the motivations for antinatalism would be the same ones that underlie the work of cancer research – namely, the reduction or elimination of suffering. Insofar as a cancer researcher is motivated by the desire to see that no one suffers from the disease, as opposed to the activity of finding a cure, they could easily redirect their efforts to antinatalist advocacy, the success of which guarantees that future generations do not suffer from cancer. Indeed, this point nicely segues to another option open to the antinatalist – that of sketching out a revisionary account of meaning, explaining what forms it can take in a world without procreation. This kind of project would not be dissimilar to the one undertaken by Derk Pereboom in *Living Without Free Will*, wherein he attempts to show how interpersonal

[412] Scheffler 2013, p. 24.

relations and satisfactorily addressing criminality are feasible in a world devoid of free will. A comprehensive antinatalist account of procreation-free meaning merits a separate thesis, but I propose below some sensible moves that can be made towards this goal.

Firstly, *meaning sub specie communitatis* and *meaning sub specie humanitatis* remain available to the antinatalist. This is because one can derive meaning from positive acts of assistance even if one were to learn that there will be no more humans at some point in the near future. For instance, if we consider the motivational profile of those who find meaning in helping suffering people in a particular region, it is implausible that they would find their aid meaningless were they to subsequently discover that the people of that region were infertile. Moreover, the foreseeable extinction of the human species would give greater impetus and urgency to some of our moral projects. Consider, for instance, initiatives to counteract the effects of climate change. Although one might typically think extinction strips away the meaningfulness of environmentalism, one might actually be pressed to take rectificatory action whilst we still can (rather than leave the planet to "clean up the mess").

Secondly, as mentioned further above, extinction-via-antinatalism would allow people to create new types of meaning via antinatalist activism. For example, I find tremendous meaning in writing this thesis, as its potential for converting even one person could result in the aversion of extraordinary suffering. Antinatalism can create and sustain meaning because it promotes goal-motivated moral action, much like any other area (combatting climate change, humanitarian aid, etc.). It is true that such action would not involve the perpetuation of human history (recall that Scheffler believes this underlies what makes life's activities meaningful) – however, there is arguably greater meaning to be found in writing a happy ending to a sad story than in endlessly continuing it.

Thirdly, a wide range of terrestrial forms of *meaning sub specie hominis* remain relatively inoculated from the implications of extinction. Many people find personal and familial relationships to be immensely meaningful, and this does not appear to be threatened by an extinction brought about by procreative abstention.[413] When engaging with fiction, for example, we readily recognise and accept that individuals are able to sustain meaningful

[413] Of course, the meaning associated with parenting a biological child would not be available to the antinatalist, a concern that will be dealt with in the next section.

interpersonal engagements in apocalyptic scenarios where the fate of humanity either hangs in the balance or is doomed. Other kinds of individual, self-directed human pursuits that are commonly thought to be meaningful inasmuch as they are constitutive of a 'good life' – the search for knowledge, intellectual development, personal growth, the cultivation of moral virtues, cultural engagement – also don't appear to be directly impacted by a realisation that extinction is on the cards. It is hard to see why the enjoyment I derive from reading philosophy, for instance, would be jeopardised by the future non-existence of humans.

Fourthly, even those forms of meaning that appear unfavourable to being sustained without the human species continuing to populate the Earth (or, indeed, any planet) into the distant future can be reconceptualised. Take, for example, acts of creativity in the arts or intellectual achievement in the sciences and humanities. These are ideal candidates for the *conservatism thesis* and the *human history thesis* we encountered earlier. For example, the value of a great painting one produces is connected to its preservation (such that future humans can engage with it and endorse it). Similarly, some great advancement in the natural sciences is made meaningful by the part it plays in "an ongoing human history" (in this case, the story of the natural sciences - past failures, future work building on this advancement, and so on).

It is true that extinction would lead to the loss of future-directed, temporally-extended meaning of this sort, but it's far from obvious that the promise of such meaning is essential or even primary to the value we gain from undertaking activities of this sort. For even if some meaning in the creation of an artwork is tied up with posthumous adulation, it is obvious that there is a great deal of meaning that is not temporally extended. For example, one may wish to create the painting as a creative outlet (for the pure thrill of artistic expression), to impress one's family, to promote reflection and enact social changes in one's community in the present day, to accomplish some life goal independent of third-party response, and so on. Thus, there is still a tremendous amount of meaning, purpose, and joy that is accessible under an antinatalist scenario, even for the kinds of activities that prima facie appear to be the best candidate examples for Scheffler's argument.

6.2 – Interests in Biological Parenthood

6.2.1 – Parenthood-Related Reasons to Procreate

A second strategy to establish the necessity of procreation focuses on the distinctive benefits available to biological parents. There is great value in exploring the viability and philosophical merits of this argument, as the desire to parent a biological child explains in large part why many people do in fact procreate, notwithstanding any moral or environmental concerns they may have about procreation. As James Lenman writes, even if "in every generation very many people will lead lives of at best highly compromised happiness and some people will lead quite terrible lives…our interest in having children is such that we may find the risk acceptable".[414] Although the compelling reason to procreate here is associated with an interest in parenting our biological children, this is better seen as an umbrella position that houses a number of different views. I believe there are seven key ways to conceive of this kind of interest in procreativity:[415]

- ***Qualities-of-the-child interest*** – This is an interest in "reproducing valuable genetically heritable traits of ancestors, partners, or gamete donors".[416] The interest consists in parenting a child having a particular set of physical or psychological traits, generally conceived of as DNA-encoded appearance and temperament that sufficiently resembles the genetic parents.[417] In other arguments, the resemblance that matters is not parental resemblance, but rather family resemblance.[418]

[414] Lenman, J. (2004). On Becoming Extinct. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 83(3), pp. 253-269.

[415] This taxonomy differs slightly from the other major framework in the literature, provided by Tina Rulli. Rulli also casts her eye over eight possible explanations for favouring procreation over adoption (at least some of which could plausibly function independent of adoption as justifiers for procreation): *parent-child physical resemblance, for family resemblance, for psychological similarity, for the sake of love, to achieve a kind of immortality, for the genetic connection itself, to be a procreator, and to experience pregnancy*. Rulli, T. (2014). Preferring a Genetically-Related Child. *Journal of Moral Philosophy,* pp. 1-30. I propose a different taxonomy that I find sleeker and simpler.

[416] Brake, E. (2015), "Creation Theory: Do Genetic Ties Matter?," in Hannah, Brennan, and Vernon 2015, pp. 129–149, p. 129.

[417] As Rulli notes, normative significance is given to having children who physically resemble the parents, as evidenced in the compliment given to genetic parents that one's children "looks like" them. See Rulli 2014, pp. 11-12.

[418] Velleman, J.D. (2008). Persons in Prospect II: The Gift of Life, *Philosophy & Public Affairs,* 36, pp. 245–266, p. 259.

- ***Lineage interest*** – This is a future-oriented interest in continuing one's genetic lineage. As the philosopher, Tina Rulli, puts the argument, it is a way for mere mortals to achieve a kind of immortality.[419] John Robertson endorses this idea, arguing that reproduction connects us with "future generations", and therefore "gives solace in the face of death".[420]

- ***Pregnancy interest*** – In contrast to the above genetic conceptions of the interest in biological parenthood, here the focus shifts to gestation.[421] The interest, as the name suggests, is an interest in experiencing the challenges and rewards of pregnancy, with this interest often acquiring the status of a core life project[422] that is central to some women's conception of themselves as a woman.[423] The interest may also be thought of as fostering a pre-birth relationship with one's child, an argument developed in the work of Anca Gheaus.[424] Or, in a different version of the argument, it might be thought that the value of pregnancy is in some way tied to its facilitation of a deeper interest in loving one's child maximally, with the experience of growing the foetus in one's body heightening the love that is experienced (at least on the part of the birthing parent).

- ***Loving interest*** – In addition to genetic and gestational conceptions of biological parenthood, we may also think the interest stems from the creative nature of procreativity. That is, there is something valuable about intentionally creating a child with a view to lovingly parenting them, because the act of creation produces an

[419] Rulli 2014, pp. 19-21.

[420] Robertson, J.A. (1994). *Children of Choice: Freedom and the New Reproductive Technologies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, p. 24.

[421] Although I am here considering gestation as an element of the case for biological parenthood, I note that other philosophers have persuasively argued that what distinguishes gestation's role in parenthood is its social role. See Ettinger, D.J. (2012) 'Genes, Gestation, and Social Norms', *Law and Philosophy*, 31(3), pp. 243–268.

[422] Rulli 2014, p. 28.

[423] Mullin, A. (2005). *Reconceiving Pregnancy and Childcare: Ethics, Experience, and Reproductive Labor*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 31.

[424] Gheaus, A. (2012) 'The Right to Parent One's Biological Baby', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 20(4), pp. 432–455.

intimate and special parent-child connection. Love-based arguments of this kind have been developed by Christine Overall, Rivka Weinberg, and Luara Ferracioli.[425]

- ***Meaning pursual interest*** – John Robertson most sharply captures this species of procreative reasons, arguing that barring procreativity is to deny "a crucial self-defining experience, thus denying persons respect and dignity at the most basic level".[426] For Robertson, procreative liberty, defined as "the freedom to choose whether or not to have offspring" (which is inclusive of the freedom to choose to have biological children),[427] is "central to personal identity…and to the meaning in one's life".[428] Many people report that procreativity is deeply meaningful to them, and they should be entitled to pursue personal projects, such as bearing a child and rearing that child, that are fundamental to their conception of themselves.[429]

- ***Harm-avoidance interest***[430] – The interest in procreativity here stems from an interest in avoiding the harms associated with involuntary childlessness. Those who are desirous of biological children but unable to have them often experience deep feelings

[425] Overall 2012, Weinberg 2016, Ferracioli, L. (2018). Procreative-parenting, love's reasons and the demands of morality, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 68 (270), pp. 77–97. We need to distinguish between three different stances on the justificatory role that such love can play. First, there is the view that love provides a justification for the moral permissibility of procreation. Second, that love provides a justification in the sense of a compelling reason to procreate. Third, love provides no justification, but is merely a constraint on procreation (i.e., a necessary condition but not a sufficient one). Note that the third stance is compatible with antinatalism and an impairment of the second claim would also destabilise the first claim. Furthermore, to defeat the *no-necessity claim*, it is the second kind of stance that is at issue. I therefore restrict my analysis here to the second kind of justification.

[426] Robertson 1994, p. 4.

[427] Ibid., p. 3.

[428] Ibid., p. 24.

[429] See Williams, B. (1973). Integrity. In J. Smart & B. Williams (Eds.), *Utilitarianism: For and against* (pp. 108–117). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for more on the moral importance of safeguarding personal projects of this sort.

[430] In a sense, all the reasons could be considered variants of the harm-avoidance reason, inasmuch as there is a loss or harm suffered in the absence the desired good (qualities-of-the-child, lineage, meaning, etc.) if the biological parent-child relationship is not realised.

of failure and disappointment.[431] One could even extend the argument further and claim that voluntary childlessness is injurious to physical and social wellbeing. The childless suffer social stigma on account of their choice, and there is evidence that nulliparous women have a higher risk of postmenopausal breast cancer than parous women.[432]

- ***Sexual interest*** – One interesting route to procreative warrant appeals not to our strong interest in biological parenthood but rather to our strong interest in engaging in sexual intercourse of the kind that creates (or has the potential to create) a child. I believe there are three distinct ways of thinking about this sexual interest. One, we might champion the Catholic ideal, wherein contraceptive-free sexual intercourse in a loving relationship represents the highest or purest expression of romantic love and unity, which antinatalism forecloses.[433] Two, we might believe prospective parents have an interest in producing a child from an act of love that is core to the relationship, with there being "a special significance to conceiving a much-wanted child by making love; it is a significant part of their relationship and their first steps to parenthood."[434] Three, we might locate the sexual-reproductive interest in a deeper interest in being connected with nature, given that gene transmission via reproduction is a "species urge closely linked to the sex drive".[435]

In the following sections, I examine these interests, explaining why I believe they do not satisfactorily establish procreative necessity. My strategy is three-fold, mirroring the *undermining, redirecting,* and *trumping* strategies seen at the start of this chapter. First, I attempt to weaken some of the procreative reasons. Second, I show that even in cases where there is an interest that survives my attempts to impair it, there is an alternative that suitably satisfies the interest. Third, I argue that even if an interest is strong and not capable of being otherwise fulfilled, the considerations in favour of antinatalism trump the interest (recall my

[431] Prior, S. (2022). *Childless: A Story of Freedom and Longing*. Melbourne, Australia : Text Publishing Company.

[432] Sweeney, C., Blair, C.K., Anderson K.E., et al. (2004). Risk factors for breast cancer in elderly women. *Am J Epidemiol.*, 160(9), pp. 868–875.

[433] This argument is adapted from Robertson 1994, p. 24.

[434] Overall 2012, p. 128.

[435] Robertson 1994, p. 24.

earlier discussion of the *trumping strategy*). I intend for each stage in this argumentative process to work in unison, such that a potential procreative reason could be partially undermined by the presence of counter-arguments and alternatives, with the trumping strategy "finishing off the job", as it were. I begin by detailing why some of the procreative reasons outlined are not as compelling as one might be inclined to think.

6.2.2 – Undermining the Reasons

Tina Rulli, in her excellent analysis of arguments for having genetically-related children, finds all reasons except for the interest in pregnancy wanting.[436] She notes that a reason grounded in the desire for a child to instantiate particular physical traits is trivial, as mere physical resemblance does not significantly impact the parenting experience or constitute a deep life project.[437] She dismisses similarity in psychology and talent, too, noting that even if two musicians desire that their offspring possesses similar musical ability, they must not be overly frustrated or disappointed if this fails to transpire, for good parents must allow one's child to become an "independent, autonomous person" and find satisfaction in this.[438]

Lineage-based reasons, too, suffer from serious shortcomings. As we shall see in the next section, the deeper desires underpinning this procreative reason can be satisfied in other ways (e.g., through adoption or engaging in other projects). Only if the lineage interest is wholly reducible to an interest in genetic immortality or continuity is there no alternative to procreation, but conceiving of the interest in this way actually renders even procreation relatively ineffectual fairly quickly. This is because, for each successive generation of one's descendants, the purportedly valuable genetic material is halved, with one's grandchildren having a quarter of one's genes, their children having an eighth, and so on.[439] Furthermore, it's not clear that conceiving of a lineage in purely biological terms adequately captures the phenomena that are worth propagating, for surely it is our commitments and customs, if anything, whose persistence is morally valuable, as opposed to our genes.

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[436] Note that Rulli, a defender of the pro tanto duty to adopt, is evaluating these reasons in the context of whether they defeat an adoption duty.

[437] Rulli 2014, p. 12.

[438] Ibid., pp. 16-17.

[439] See also Rulli 2014, p. 21.

We shall consider some of the empirical literature pertinent to the psychological version of the harm-avoidance interest in section 6.2.4, but for now, we can note a number of points that destabilise its social and physical versions. Recall that the social harm of childlessness is supposed to consist in the stigma that the childless face. It is clear, however, that remaining childless is not maligned or condemned in the way that it once was, and some researchers have even argued that this stigma has disappeared in at least some segments of society.[440] Furthermore, surely the correct response to the unjustified stigmatisation of a particular choice is to challenge and eradicate it, rather than use its presence as an argument in favour of its non-stigmatised rival.

The physical harms linked to childlessness generally stem from the greater period of endogenous oestrogen exposure from increased menstrual cycles. Whilst this prolonged exposure might increase the risk of certain cancers, it is evident that it is only one of many different factors (diet, genetics, alcohol use, age, etc.) that affect this risk, and in isolation (or when combined with protective behaviours or factors), its effect is relatively minimal. Secondly, clearly there are adverse health outcomes associated with pregnancy and birth – pre-eclampsia, complications during childbirth, post-natal depression, pelvic floor defects, and so on – and it is far from clear that these pose a lower health risk than childlessness. Whatever option we choose carries significant risks, and the inescapability of risk is what motivates my claim that we ought not to expose someone else to that same predicament.

As we saw, the sexual interest can take different forms, but two of them face major issues.[441] The argument that contraceptive-free intercourse represents a highly valuable form of love that is inaccessible to antinatalists cannot constitute a compelling reason to procreate (or engage in the kind of activity likely to lead to procreation). Firstly, it is hard to see how undergoing a vasectomy procedure or taking oral contraceptives would significantly frustrate opportunities for partners to engage in loving sex – to claim otherwise is to mistakenly attribute more weight to internal physiology than to the psychological and emotional states of

[440] Fine-Davis, M. (2016). *Changing Gender Roles and Attitudes to Family Formation in Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 95-113.

[441] I believe only Overall's argument (that it is valuable to produce a child from an act of sexual love) has significant merit. This argument will need to be defeated via *the trumping strategy* in 6.2.4.

the sexual participants. Secondly, the argument, in taking vaginal penetration to be the only valid form of unprotected intercourse, appears to privilege a particular heteronormative sexual act – why is the kind of sex most likely to lead to fertilisation a more legitimate or meaningful form of sex than the myriad other sexual activities open to human beings? Furthermore, even if unprotected sexual intercourse exists on the highest plane of meaningful and intimate sexual relations, is it significantly more meaningful than other sex? The critic needs to show that potential parents' interest in avoiding contraceptives in the furtherance of their love justifies procreativity, and it is difficult to imagine that the mere use (or lack thereof) of contraceptives could have such an enormous moral pay-off in the antinatalism debate.

Another defence of the sexual interest – the idea that having sex with a view to creating a child connects us with nature – lacks explanatory power or moral force. The naturalness of this activity is plausibly the underlying explanation for why humans have a strong drive to reproduce, but nature hardly figures in most people's articulation of the significance of procreation *for them*. Also, the spectre of the appeal to nature fallacy looms large when running any argument about how acting in accordance with nature might carry moral significance.

6.2.3 – Alternatives and Adoption

Many of the procreative reasons surveyed in 6.2.1, such as interests in love and meaning, are not easily dismissed as trivial or on demonstrably shaky footing. Nevertheless, these reasons can be challenged in another way – namely, showing that alternative behaviours provide adequate opportunities to satisfy the interest. There are two main alternatives that could represent appropriate substitutes to procreativity and satisfactorily fulfil many of the relevant interests. First, there is the option to parent a child one has not created – this is typically pictured as adopting a child with whom one shares no biological relation, but it could also take the form of fostering, co-parenting a family member's child, and so on.[442] Second, there is the option of pursuing replacement projects, such as the creation of cultural meaning and participating in other-directed activity (e.g., volunteering and caregiving).

[442] Clearly, there are many different ways to acquire parental interests and rights – see Bayne, T. and Kolers, A. (2003), Toward a Pluralist Account of Parenthood. *Bioethics*, 17, pp. 221-242.

The interest in having a loving parent-child bond, for instance, seems like a prime candidate for an interest that can be met by adoption.[443] Where the love must manifest in the form of a caring relationship, there are other individuals (e.g., the elderly, the sick, animals) towards whom one could direct one's love. The interest in individual meaning, where this meaning is deemed to derive from parenting than from the genetic material of the child one is parenting, also appears amenable to being satisfied by adoption. The meaning, satisfaction, and delight one derives from witnessing the rounded development and successes of one's child does not seem the sole preserve of those who have created the child. Such an interest could also arguably be satisfied by replacement projects – we have already seen, in our discussion of extinction, the wide array of meaning-creating activities available to human beings. Even if none are perfect analogues for procreation, the point remains that procreation is not the only way to achieve meaning.

Even the reasons that have already been challenged in 6.2.2 can be attacked again using a similar logic. Take, for instance, the lineage interest. The most plausible rendering of this interest is in terms of the propagation of meaningful values, behaviours, and cultural practices. However, adopted children are equally capable of being heirs to "our projects, values, commitments, traditions, and customs", as well as "familial and cultural legacies" (language, values, beliefs, etc.).[444] If our desire for immortality rests on a desire to be remembered and leave a mark on the future, then again, procreation hardly appears to be a necessary or even optimal way to achieve this, as one would be better off imparting one's values on one's loved ones, performing good deeds, and establishing or contributing to certain institutions (e.g., a charity or cultural foundation) that exist beyond one's death.

Let us return to adoption, arguably the most obvious alternative route by which to satisfy some of the parental interests discussed above. After all, the adoptive process is widely recognised as a way to acquire the parental role with the "intent, rights, and obligations of raising a child".[445] Nevertheless, many, including the involuntarily childless, do not see

[443] We shall shortly consider challenges to this idea.

[444] Rulli 2014, p. 21.

[445] Najand, N. (2015). "Voluntarism and Adoption: Understanding Parental Obligations" (PhD diss., Queen's University, 2015, Accessible at:

adoption as a viable alternative to procreation. Why is adoption in lieu of procreation an inadequate or infeasible option for those who harbour the desire to be parents? Weinberg, in *The Risk of a Lifetime*, summarises, as I see it, six different reasons, which we shall tackle in turn.

Firstly, she makes an argument about availability, noting that "not everyone can adopt rather than procreate biologically because someone has to create the children who are adopted".[446] This much is certainly true, and any antinatalist advocate of adoption must recognise that the possibility of adoption is conceptually dependent on procreativity. Moreover, the long-term success of antinatalism would render adoption impossible.

However, this cannot invalidate the claim I am defending here, which is that adoption provides an alternative avenue to satisfy some of the interests in biological parenthood. For one thing, any success enjoyed by antinatalism is likely to be gradual and the global orphan crisis shows no signs of abating, which means that a shortage of available adoptees is unlikely to be provided as a reason for rejecting parents desirous of adoption. Furthermore, where the social success of antinatalism accounts for a reduction in the number of children who need to be adopted, it is unclear that the interests in biological parenthood would be subjectively prized in the way that they are in a society deeply hostile to antinatalism.

Of course, there will be individuals in the future who will not be able to adopt, and in those cases, I do maintain that the risk argument simply trumps the harm caused by the unmet parenting interests (we shall analyse the trumping strategy in the next section). In situations where adoption is not possible, the interest in raising a child and the benefits derived from that may have to be supplanted by other interests, such as the interest in taking care of existing humans.

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https://qspace.library.queensu.ca/bitstream/handle/1974/12764/Najand_Nikoo_201502_PhD.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.). See also Millum, J. (2017). *The Moral Foundations of Parenthood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 78-106 for a voluntarist account of the acquisition of parental responsibilities.

[446] Weinberg 2016, p. 43.

Secondly, Weinberg makes an argument from access, remarking that adoption is "expensive and often exclusionary".[447] Again, there is certainly some truth to this argument, but it ignores a great deal of complexity. Whilst adoption in the United States can cost tens of thousands of dollars, adopting a child from the foster care system is often free or only incurs minimal financial costs.[448] Similarly, adopting in the UK, whilst a lengthy process, is much more affordable due to agencies being prevented from charging fees, whilst international adoptions are much more costly. A much fairer summation would be that adoption *can be* expensive, but to martial this as an argument against adoption is to ignore that fact that raising any child to a satisfactory standard *is always* expensive. Figures from 2022 indicate that the average cost (inclusive of basics like food and housing, and not luxuries like gifts and hobbies) of raising a child to the age of 18 in the UK is between £150,000 and £200,000.[449]

Weinberg's claim that adoption is exclusionary is not developed further, but one can presume she means that prospective adopters are turned away or encounter greater obstacles on account of their race, financial status, sexual orientation, etc. Adoption law and practice in this respect will vary greatly from country to country, but certainly, the process of adoption can be exclusionary. However, in at least some cases where people are prevented from adopting a child, it may well be that the exclusion is justified in the child's interests. It surely is no benefit of procreativity, for instance, that it gives parental access to those who do not have the financial security or parenting skills to raise their child. Moreover, unfair exclusion is symptomatic of a society in which unjustified discrimination and economic injustice remain prevalent. Surely, the appropriate corrective to such exclusionary practices is to challenge and eliminate them wherever they are found, and not to use them as a basis on which to dismiss the possibility of adopting children.

Thirdly, Weinberg opines that adoption incurs a significant opportunity cost, namely missing out on "biological joys and the biological connection".[450] We might well wonder what these biologically-based interests consist in. If they are reducible to an interest in sharing physical

[447] Ibid., p. 43.

[448] Mushro, A. (2022, 25 July). How much does the average adoption cost? A breakdown by state and country. *Today.* Retrieved from: https://www.today.com/parents/parents/adoption-cost-rcna39872.

[449] Moneyfarm (2023, 1 February). How much does it cost to raise a child in the UK? *Moneyfarm.* Retrieved from: https://blog.moneyfarm.com/en/financial-planning/how-much-does-it-cost-to-raise-a-child/.

[450] Ibid., p. 43.

characteristics with one's child or an interest in experiencing pregnancy, then this is dealt with in the preceding and following section, respectively. Weinberg's argument, though, at least partly seems to be that a biological connection may have inherent value, independent of other interests that it promotes. Does relinquishing this good mean that adopters face a considerable disadvantage?

There are three good reasons to think not. Firstly, we readily recognise the irrelevance of biology in many of our relationships – we don't, for example, think that a friendship or romantic partnership is weakened by the absence of biological relatedness. If this kind of relatedness is sufficiently significant to mark the relationship between a biological parent and their child as uniquely valuable, then we deserve an explanation as to why and which biological factors have this significance in the parent-child relationship. Secondly, even if we grant that there are certain goods that biological parents enjoy that are unavailable to adoptive parents, there are also distinctive goods tied to adoption. Adoption can lead to more diverse families, forging connections that transcend lineages. It can also be a way in which parents can be part of the solution to a moral catastrophe, one in which millions of children live without love, a home, or a family. It is difficult to know how to assess these goods against the purported good of a biological connection, but in the absence of some decisive consideration in favour of the latter, we ought not to regard adoption as an unviable alternative. Thirdly, if the biological connection does affect the quality of the parent-child relationship, then we should expect parents who have both an adopted child and a biological child to cite this as a relevant factor. However, research suggests that there is no statistically significant difference in how these parents feel about or treat their biological and adopted children.[451]

Fourthly, Weinberg argues that adoption is "a harsh solution to a problem that could often be more humanely resolved by enabling biological parents to care for their children".[452] This is no doubt true in some cases, and indeed, the harshness of adoption may sometimes be much

[451] Glover, M.B., Mullineaux, P.Y., Deater-Deckard, K., and Petrill, S.A. (2010). Parents' Feelings Towards Their Adoptive and Non-Adoptive Children. *Infant Child Dev*, 1, 19(3), pp. 238-251. Segal, N.L., Li, N.P., Graham, J.L., and Miller, S.A. (2015*). Do parents favor their adoptive or biological children? Predictions from kin selection and compensatory models*. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 36 (5), pp. 379-388.

[452] Ibid., pp. 43-44.

greater than even Weinberg contends.[453] However, to some extent, her argument appears to trade on the myth that social workers are eager or quick to take children into care. In actuality, the majority of adopted children have experienced significant trauma within their birth families, and have suffered abuse and neglect.[454] Although it will sometimes be possible to resolve this and facilitate continued parenting by the biological parent(s), it will often not be possible, and there is no evidence to indicate that there are systemic failings when the decision is taken to separate children from their birth parents (indeed, the systemic failings more often concern when the decision is taken *not to* separate abused children from their birth parents).

Furthermore, some parents voluntarily give up their child because they are not in a financial or psychological situation to be able to care for their child or because they don't wish to be parents, which is hardly surprising when nearly half of all pregnancies are unplanned and unintended.[455] In many other cases, especially with international adoptions, children are orphaned, with UNICEF estimating that there are 147 million orphaned children worldwide.[456] The claim, then, that adoption is a "harsh solution", when mobilised as a general argument against adoption, ignores the ongoing need for it.

Fifthly, she comments that adopted children often feel "abandoned and rejected".[457] It is undoubtedly true that this characterises the experience of some adopted children,[458] and adopted children face unique challenges in overcoming early life stressors as well as the loss

[453] In its most extreme form, well-intentioned adopters may be contributing to child-trafficking, with a corrupt "orphanage industry" having flourished, with children being taken from their birth parents under false pretences. See Cantwell, N., and Werner Gillioz, E. (2018). The Orphanage Industry: Flourishing When It Should Be Dying. *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care*, 17 (1).

[454] Department for Education (2017). *Meeting the Needs of Adopted and Permanently Placed Children*.

[455] UNFPA State of World Population (2022). Seeing the Unseen: The Case for Action in the Neglected Crisis of Unintended Pregnancy. Retrieved from: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN_SWP22%20report_0.pdf.

[456] Retrieved from: https://data.unicef.org/topic/hivaids/orphanhood/.

[457] Ibid., p. 44.

[458] For issues, including rejection, that adopted children struggle with, see Roszia, S. K., & Maxon, A. D. (2019). Seven core issues in adoption and permanency: A comprehensive guide to promoting understanding and healing in adoption, foster care, kinship families and third party reproduction. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

of their biological family.[459] Much also depends on the age at which one is adopted, with adolescents more likely to have more conflict and be less close to their adopted parents than non-adopted adolescents.[460] However, the empirical literature is not supportive of Weinberg's position. Most adopted children are happy, well-functioning, and close to their adoptive parents.[461] It is also implausible that feelings of abandonment on the part of adopted children owe to being adopted, as opposed to the trauma associated with the loss or neglect of their birth parents.

Nevertheless, this argument hints at the idea that there is a certain goodness for the child in a biological parent-child relation, which adoption cannot recreate. The most well-known version of this argument has been presented by David Velleman, who claims that "knowing one's biological origins and being intimately familiar with one's genetic parents is essential to self-knowledge and a healthy self-identity".[462] Velleman's most prominent critic, Sally Haslanger, has responded to Velleman's arguments, noting that knowledge of biological kin is not as crucial to self-identity as Velleman takes it to be, as there many sources of self-identity besides a relationship with one's progenitors.[463]

In any case, we do not need to adjudicate on this dispute, as it has no bearing on the current discussion. This is because, even if it is ideal for children to live with their birth parents, many children presently need to be adopted. Indeed, even Velleman does not appear to oppose this, as his criticism is targeted at conceiving a child from anonymous gamete donation. If Velleman's arguments are correct even in an attenuated form, then it means that we should strive to promote open adoptions where birth parents have greater involvement, but it does not mean that adoption does not represent a way of satisfying important interests in parenthood.

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[459] Zill, N. (2018, 26 March). The Adoptive Difference: New Evidence on How Adopted Children Perform in School. *The Institute for Family Studies.*

[460] Walkner, A.J., and Rueter, M.A. (2014). Adoption status and family relationships during the transition to young adulthood. Journal of Family Psychology, 28(6), pp. 877-886.

[461] Benson, P. L., Sharma, A. R., & Roehikepartain, E. C. (1994). *Growing up adopted: A portrait of adolescents and their families*. Minneapolis: Search Institute.

[462] Velleman, J. D. (2005). Family history. *Philosophical Papers*, 34(3), pp. 357-378.

[463] See Haslanger, S. (2009). 'Family, Ancestry and Self: What is the Moral Significance of Biological Ties?' *Adoption and Culture*, 2, pp. 91-122, pp. 107-108.

Sixthly, and finally, Weinberg claims that adoption "can result in parents temperamentally poorly matched with their children", an outcome that is less likely in biological procreativity "given the heritability of temperament".[464] We may well wonder whether temperament carries the importance that Weinberg attributes to it, for variations in temperament do not frustrate the strength of a bond, even if they raise particular challenges. Furthermore, whilst temperament clearly has a genetic basis, it is also malleable and greatly influenced by parental and environmental factors, especially in a child's early years. However, even if we grant that it is desirable to bring about a state of affairs in which parents and children enjoy a basic template of temperamental similarity, procreation seems like a highly inefficient way of achieving this.

Given that temperament is only moderately heritable, with estimates placing the genetic influence on temperament at between 20% and 60%,[465] it would be fairly risky endeavour to bear a child in the hopes that they possess the relevant degree of psychological resemblance. Indeed, with more rigorous matching by adoption agencies and input from psychologists on the child's personality traits, it would seem that a matching process from a wide pool of potential adoptees would produce a better temperamental fit.

Antinatalists should acknowledge that adoption is associated with unique challenges and intersects with complex social and ethical issues that prospective adopters must navigate. However, in principle, it offers a happy and loving home to a human with an uncertain future, a moral good that procreation cannot rival. More pertinently, adoption remains a viable way for many prospective parents to satisfy at least some of the core interests that motivate procreativity, such as interests in loving and parenting a child, achieving greater personal meaning, and carrying on a (non-genetic) legacy.

Inasmuch as this is true, I have met my relatively modest goal in this section, for it is not my intention to claim that adoption is always preferable to procreation (recall the third-party argument to that effect) or that adoption is problem-free. Rather, I claim only that adoption (and corollary forms of child-rearing) represents a means by which many prospective parents

[464] Ibid., p. 44.

[465] Saudino, K.J. (2005). Behavioral genetics and child temperament. *J Dev Behav Pediatr.*, 26(3), pp. 214-223.

can satisfy at least some of their interests in biological parenthood, thereby discharging some force from an attempt to ground procreative necessity in the interest in biological parenthood.

6.2.4 – Trumping

Even if the undermining and redirecting strategies above go through, we are still left with some procreative reasons, such as the interest in experiencing pregnancy, that survive attempts to undermine them and cannot be satisfied by adoption or other alternatives. Here, I would need to employ the *trumping strategy* and show that considerations pertaining to the imposition of consentless risk on the created person outrank the parental interest in procreation. The potentially dire consequences of an unfortunate roll of the procreative dice shall not be recounted, as I take myself to have already shown that the risk we introduce when we create people ought to be accorded serious moral weight. Instead, I shall give two reasons why any parental interest in procreation that remains in the reckoning ought not to override my calls for procreative caution.

Reason One – Procreative Reasons and Relative Harms

The first reason why antinatalist concerns aren't trumped is based on two empirical claims: the first being that the convincing interests in procreativity do not ground actual attitudes and the second being that the harms of involuntary childlessness are overstated. Determinations of whether to favour parents or potential offspring will rest on an assessment of the relative benefits and costs of antinatalism and procreative reasons. Thus, if one were to show that these reasons do not track with real-world procreativity, or that childlessness is not as grave an outcome as it is often thought to be, one might tip the balance in favour of antinatalism.

When we examine people's motivations for having biological children, we find that sometimes there is no reason. This is because, in a considerable number of cases, the pregnancy is unplanned and so there is not a pre-specified reason to procreate – 44% of worldwide pregnancies between 2010 and 2014 were unintended,[466] and 34% of pregnancies

[466] Bearak, J., Popinchalk, A., Alkema, L., and Sedgh, G. (2018). Global, regional, and subregional trends in unintended pregnancy and its outcomes from 1990 to 2014: estimates from a Bayesian hierarchical model. *The Lancet. Global health*, *6*(4), e380–e389.

in Western Europe were unplanned.[467] Even when a pregnancy is planned, the empirical literature on why people actually have children paints a more complicated picture than the abstracted reasons presented at the start of this section. Reasons cited by procreators for their decision include financial conditions,[468] social conditioning and pressures,[469] and personal hardships.[470] Nevertheless, the pronatalist may maintain that an interest in pregnancy, say, grounds the strong positive reason to procreate, even if this is not in fact what motivates most procreators according to sociological data. However, even if we maintain that there is something objectively desirable about experiencing pregnancy, our conviction that this interest trumps antinatalist considerations ought to be dulled by the fact that most people do not subjectively endorse this reason for reproducing.

The costs of childlessness are also commonly overestimated by those who believe that an interest in biological parenthood can trump moral concerns about the kind of life our child will lead. According to one study, whilst some who are involuntarily childless do experience sadness and distress, 54% experience moderate wellbeing and around 34% lead lives in which they flourish, exploring new possibilities and finding identity and meaning outside of parenthood.[471] Thus, it's far from clear that the harm of involuntary childlessness outweighs the possible harms that the child might suffer in a way that can embolden our risk-taking. However, even if it is too simple to state that a failure to satisfy a particular interest in biological parenthood would result in a life without purpose or happiness, it would be implausible to claim that there is no harm suffered by a prospective parent who wants to procreate but cannot.

Here, though, it is important to become clear on whether the kind of involuntarily childlessness typically surveyed resembles the childlessness attendant to widespread

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[467] Sedgh, G., and Hussain, R. (2014). 'Reasons for Contraceptive Nonuse among Women Having Unmet Need for Contraception in Developing Countries'. *Studies in Family Planning*, 45 (2), pp. 151-169.

[468] Edin, K., and Kefalas, M. (2011). *Promises I can keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[469] Hertz, R. (2006). *Single by chance, mothers by choice: How women are choosing parenthood without marriage and creating the new American family*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 4.

[470] Ibid.

[471] Burke, J., and Meehan, T. (2023). Childlessness as a springboard for post-traumatic growth. *The Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 23 (1), pp. 4-9.

acceptance of antinatalism. After all, I am not advocating for the legal enforcement of antinatalist beliefs, so any childlessness resultant from my argument would be voluntary. One who is troubled by the child-focused arguments I have presented so far and is deliberating abstaining from reproduction might well feel disappointed that morality curtailed their procreative desires, but it does not appear likely that forgoing a desire on account of living by a moral conviction would produce similar psychological costs to a desire remaining unsatisfied because of biological or social misfortune.

Thus, if we recast the childlessness in my antinatalist vision as a voluntary one, it turns out even more clearly that the harms are far lesser than the pronatalist has us believe. We have already seen that procreation is a costly affair, and refraining from participating in the act will certainly result in a considerable saving over the course of one's lifetime. However, this is one of only several considerations that figure in the decisions of those who refrain from procreation. Motivational data from a meta-analysis of the voluntarily childless indicates that the most commonly cited reasons for so refraining, averaged across all studies, were freedom from childcare responsibility, greater opportunity for self-fulfillment and spontaneous mobility, achieving a more satisfactory marital relationship, female career considerations, and monetary advantages (interestingly, "concern for children" was the least common reason for remaining childfree).[472] How easily one who reluctantly forgoes procreation could come to embrace these reasons must remain the realm of speculation for the time being, but it is clear that a wide variety of perceived benefits are available to the non-procreator.

One need not only appeal to the beliefs of those who decide not to have children, but could also draw upon data that appears to support the view that those who remain childless are happier than parents. The sociologist, Robin Simon, who has explored the correlation between parenthood and wellbeing, writes that "parents experience lower levels of emotional well-being, less frequent positive emotions and more frequent negative emotions than their childless peers".[473] When compared to non-parents, parents are also more likely to report

[472] Houseknecht, S. K. (1987). 'Voluntary Childlessness'. In Sussman, M. B., and Steinmetz, S. K. (Eds.), *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (pp. 369–395). New York, NY: Plenum Press, p. 377.

[473] Simon, R. (2008). 'The Joys of Parenthood, Reconsidered'. *Contexts*, 7 (2), pp. 40-45, p. 42.

symptoms associated with depression (such as sadness and loneliness).[474] There is also evidence to indicate that the birth of a child exerts greater strain on a relationship or marriage[475], with those couples that remain voluntarily childless displaying "higher levels of dyadic cohesion and dyadic satisfaction".[476]

Two important caveats are necessary at this juncture. Firstly, the literature on the psychology of happiness as relates to parenthood is highly complex and far from settled – there are also benefits associated with parenting (such as the meaning it imbues to one's life), and whether positive or negative experience dominate is largely situation-dependent.[477] Secondly, childlessness is positively correlated with other variables (higher levels of education, higher income, reduced religiosity, less traditional interpretations of gender roles, etc.), and these factors could be partially (or perhaps even wholly) explanatory of the findings that non-parents enjoy greater well-being.[478]

In any event, those who remain childless do not report a dearth of meaning in their lives, nor is there evidence that, experientially speaking, they fare any worse than parents.[479] Furthermore, as per the above, there is at least some evidence that abstaining from parenthood, when contrasted to becoming a parent, preserves more of one's resources, promotes hedonic well-being, and improves the quality of a romantic relationship. However, this might not be the case for everyone – we can moderate the strength of the necessity claim, so that it's the weaker contention that "procreation is necessary for *at least some* people to

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[474] Evenson, R., and Simon, R. (2005). 'Clarifying the Relationship between Parenthood and Depression'. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 46 (4), pp. 341-358.

[475] Doss, B. D., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2009). 'The Effect of the Transition to Parenthood on Relationship Quality: An 8-Year Prospective Study'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 96 (3), pp. 601-619.

[476] Somers, M. (1993). 'A Comparison of Voluntarily Childfree Adults and Parents'. *Journal of Marriage and Family,* 55 (3), pp. 643-650, p. 643.

[477] Nelson, S.K., Kushlev, K., and Lyubomirsky, S. (2014). 'The pains and pleasures of parenting: When, why, and how is parenthood associated with more or less well-being?'. *Psychological Bulletin,* 140 (3), pp. 846-895.

[478] Park K. (2005). 'Choosing Childlessness: Weber's Typology of Action and Motives of the Voluntarily Childless'. *Sociological Inquiry*, 75 (3), pp. 372–402, p. 375.

[479] See the views of the economist of happiness, Andrew Oswald, in Senior, J. (2010, 2 July). 'All Joy and No Fun'. *New York Magazine*. Available at: http://nymag.com/news/features/67024/. [Accessed: 29 December 2019]

lead meaningful and happier lives". That is, even if most people do not reproduce for philosophically robust reasons and childlessness has benefits, some people will experience harms if their interest in procreativity remains unfulfilled. To address these leftover cases, we must turn to the second basis for *the trumping strategy*.

Reason Two – Imposing Harms to Secure Benefits

The second reason why I believe the *trumping strategy* works here is that self-interested reasons should be accorded less weight than the kinds of interests I claim are at play for the created person. Unquestionably, we have strong moral reasons to promote actions that lead to the well-being of people and we have seen above that some interests in procreation (that cannot be undermined or satisfied by other means) warrant the belief that procreation produces well-being. Unless we adopt strict consequentialism, however, we do not normally think this well-being ought to be pursued when it risks compromising the welfare or interests of others. There are a number of domains in which we believe (or at least could be persuaded to believe) that we ought to sacrifice some degree of personal well-being in order to avoid harming others or promote their welfare. Becoming vegan, donating to charities, voting and social activism, and so on all represent good examples of this.

Pursuing procreative goods, if my argument is generally correct, comes at a moral cost to the created person. Here, then, the classic worry of treating the person we create as a "means to our ends" arises, as in order to satisfy the interest in parenthood, the biological parent must wrong the person they create. Whilst this might not move thoroughgoing utilitarians, for the majority of people who find this kind of instrumentalisation morally bothersome, we are owed an account of why the parental interest ought to be promoted even when it endangers the welfare of the created person in the process.

There are two main ways to deny the claim that procreation involves treating the person we create as a means to an end, on the understanding that we impose unconsented-to grave risk on them to satisfy our own interests. The first, advanced by Meijers, claims that a child cannot be treated as "an end in itself before it exists" and that what matters is the child is

treated as "an end in itself once it exists".[480] This response, however, jumps too quickly from the view that one cannot be treated as an end in oneself prior to birth to the view that one cannot be treated as mere means when one is brought into existence. It does not follow from the impossibility of treating a non-existent person as an end that self-interested procreation that endangers the welfare of the created person does not treat the latter as a means, unless one adopts some supplemental commitment in the previously discussed area of the metaphysics of procreation.

The second, more interesting, answer draws on parental motivation and intent. According to this response, even if we create people to satisfy an existing parental interest, the intent to love and rear the person we create ought to inform our appraisal of procreation and attenuate concerns about instrumentalisation.[481] Weinberg, for instance, thinks that procreation can be permissible given our strong interest in procreativity, but it's only acceptable when done respectfully with a view to fostering a loving parent-child bond.[482] She formulates a *Motivation Restriction* on procreative justification, according to which "procreation must be motivated by the desire and intention to raise, love, and nurture one's child once it is born".[483] Similarly, Wasserman contrasts the servile role played by a child created to save their sibling (a more obvious case of creating someone as a means to an end) with the two-way reciprocal good enjoyed by both the child and the existent benefactor when one is created with the intent of being lovingly raised.[484]

I agree that procreative motivation matters, insofar as being appropriately motivated is arguably a necessary condition for procreative justification. However, it does not follow from this that noble procreative intent is sufficient for procreative justification such that antinatalist worries about instrumentalising the child are quashed. If one accepts that it is wrong to expose another to significant risk without consent, then we wrong our child by bringing them

[480] Meijers, T. (2020). The Value in Procreation: A Pro-tanto Case for a Limited and Conditional Right to Procreate. *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 54, pp. 627–647, p. 647.

[481] Wasserman, D. (2005). The Nonidentity Problem, Disability, and the Role Morality of Prospective Parents. *Symposium on Disability (October 2005)*, 116 (1), pp. 132-152, p. 136.

[482] Weinberg 2016, pp. 154-155.

[483] Ibid., p. 176.

[484] Wasserman, D. (2003). Having One Child to Save Another: A Tale of Two Families. *Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly*, 23 (1), pp. 21-27, p. 24.

into being even if we intend to love them. Although it is plausible that bad intentions could make an otherwise permissible act impermissible, it is not typically reasoned in other domains of ethics that being well-intentioned can salvage a practice that we have independent reasons to object to.

Indeed, many of the worst crimes in human history were perpetrated by those who took themselves to be acting on the basis of justifiable motives (national self-determination, economic prosperity, and so on), for very few explicitly embrace a conception of themselves as an evil-doer. At best, good intentions can mollify the wrongness of the act or count towards a more lenient assessment of the one performing the act. What seems implausible is that they could effect a transformation of a practice from independently bad to morally permissible. Thus, inasmuch as we acknowledge that parental goods are secured at the expense of placing the created person in a state of lifelong unconsented-to risk, we do not evade the charge of immorality by simply pointing to the love the child will receive.

It seems, then, that there is no way for the pronatalist to easily escape the conclusion that we endanger our offspring as a byproduct of satisfying our own interest in biological parenthood. Some of those interests, such as experiencing sexual love with reproductive potential and experiencing pregnancy, can be poignant and powerful ones that have no substitutes. Even so, I find it hard to believe that the cost of leaving those interests unfulfilled can possibly match the landscape of risk I charted in section 3.3. To nevertheless insist on satisfying these interests at the expense of the person we create betrays a self-serving dismissal of the risk argument and all I have said in its defence. Of course, this will not be the final word on so complex a subject as this – the gauntlet is thus thrown down to the pronatalist to prepare their rejoinder and show that *the trumping strategy* ought to rule in their favour.

6.3 – Goodness for the Child

We have already assessed counter-arguments to my claim that procreation is unnecessary that rest on arguing that procreation delivers an essential benefit to the species, other existing humans, and prospective procreators. Now, we shall consider the more controversial view that procreating benefits the being(s) brought into existence, and that this gives us compelling reasons to engage in the act. This view, which has the benefit of avoiding instrumentalising

the created child to deliver goods to others, has attracted a number of extremely prominent philosophical supporters.

Generally, the position that we have a compelling reason to procreate on account of the kind of life our offspring will lead turns on the idea that by creating good lives, we increase the amount of value in the world. What that value looks like will of course depend on one's pet normative ethical theory or theory of wellbeing, as it might consist in happy lives[485] or satisfied preferences,[486] but the upshot of these views is that procreating adds to "the sum of values in the universe".[487] In short, a worthwhile life is a good thing, and more of a good thing is better (at least better than nothing).[488] Some of these views run the risk of viewing children as vehicles to secure an instantiation of goodness, and we have previously considered why it makes more sense to value happiness for the sake of people, rather than value people for the sake of happiness.

Thus, a more plausible rendering of this style of argument is that we have excellent reasons to procreate in order to promote goodness *for* future people. Call this the procreative beneficence argument. Richard Kraut makes an argument in this vein, adverting to the many advantages one's children would enjoy should they exist.[489] Peter Singer, similarly, has argued that conceiving a child with a pleasant child does "confer on that being a benefit".[490] Molly Gardner, extending this idea, claims that future persons, whom she views as being just as real as present persons, are owed a pro tanto duty of beneficence, with the creation of a fulfilling life representing a form of such beneficence.[491] These views may be seen as a

[485] Rachels 1998.

[486] Hare, R.M. (1988). Possible people. *Bioethics*, 2 (4), pp. 279-293.

[487] Ross, W.D. (1930/2002). *The Right and the Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 132.

[488] Parfit 1984, p. 487. See also Huemer, M. (2008). In Defence of Repugnance. *Mind*, 117 (468), pp. 899-933, p. 923.

[489] Kraut 2011, p. 134.

[490] Singer 1993, p. 228.

[491] Gardner 2016.

secular version of the view that life is a gift we bestow on those we create, an argument that has generally been put forward by those of a religious persuasion.[492]

Where do all these thinkers err in reasoning that the creation of either absolute or person-relative goodness is a reason to ensure the existence of future generations. Although I cannot respond to the specific arguments of the many authors surveyed above, I spell out below why, even if we accept that we can benefit our progeny by creating them, it is unlikely that this can generate a compelling reason to procreate.

Firstly, the argument stipulates in advance that the child will lead a pleasant life, but the crux of my argument denies the possibility of certainty (to the required standard) that procreation will produce such an outcome. The inherent riskiness of procreation means that an argument from procreative beneficence must be framed not as the delivery of a definite and unequivocal boon, but rather in terms of *probably* benefitting (and potentially compromising) those we create. When the argument is thus re-framed to account for the uncertainty of procreative outcomes, our obligation to engage in procreation for the sake of the child loses considerable force.

Secondly, even if we hold that it is desirable to create a sentient human whose interests are subsequently satisfied or promoted, we still ought to think there is a morally relevant difference between creating an interest to satisfy it and satisfying an existing interest. One way to motivate this idea is by considering the following case proposed by Christopher Fehige:

Red Tree: Suppose we paint the tree nearest to the Sydney Opera House red and give Kate a pill that makes her wish that the tree nearest the Sydney Opera House were red.[493]

Whilst we of course think it is a good thing that Kate's induced wish is fulfilled in *Red Tree*, I propose that many would think that any beneficence here is of a strange character (or at least

[492] Cholbi 2011, p. 47. For a take on the view that life is a gift, see Marsh, J. (2012): Creating and Raising Humans: Essays on the Morality of Procreation and Parenting, *PhD Dissertation*, University of Western Ontario.

[493] Fehige 1998, pp. 513-514.

of a stranger character than if Kate organically harboured her wish and we set about painting the tree to please her). This is because even though we have reasons to attend to the want of another, our reasons to create a want in another and then attend to it are weaker.[494] As discussed in Chapter Two, Fehige argued that cases of this sort show that satisfied preferences are morally equal to absent preferences, with only frustrated preferences being of moral concern. I argued then that Fehige's anti-frustrationist position generates wildly counter-intuitive implications, but perhaps a more attenuated form of his position still has explanatory power. This weaker version of the argument does not endorse an asymmetry between satisfied and frustrated preferences – it does not deny that satisfied preferences are superior to absent preferences and that frustrated preferences are worse than absent preferences. Rather, it holds that the normative strength of a dual act of interest creation and satisfaction is of lesser moral force than the satisfaction of an existing interest. If this distinction is true, it again dulls the strength of the litany of arguments from procreative beneficence.

Thirdly, we saw in our assessment of Benatar's support asymmetries a way to get at the idea that procreation is not a case where any purported beneficence appreciably moves us despite our belief that we have general moral reasons to benefit others. To avoid retreading old ground, I will only summarise the core argument. To explain the popular asymmetry of procreational duties – an asymmetry consisting in a negative duty to refrain from creating lives that are not worth living, but the absence of a positive duty to create lives worth living – I appealed to the Detrimentality of Duties (DOD) principle. This principle held that our duties only exist where the failure to act on them is to the detriment of actual or future persons. If we accept this principle, then a purported duty to procreate for the good of the child is not a duty at all, for failing to reproduce would not be to the detriment of any would-be child (of course, we saw various efforts in sections 6.1 and 6.2 to show that it can be to the detriment of some existing humans).

The option of bullet-biting, as always, remains available to the pronatalist. They could simply reject all I have said so far in this section and insist that we do benefit (or likely benefit) our offspring by creating them. After all, this is precisely what the defenders of a positive reason

[494] Whilst this example concentrates on desire-satisfaction, a similar point can be made about whatever the *good* is thought to consist in.

to procreate for the sake of the child are getting at. The trouble is that even were this bullet-biting response to succeed in showing procreation could be preferable, it would not establish that this reason to procreate has the requisite weight to be a *compelling* reason. That is, the reasons I've presented above, even if they do not dismantle a reason to procreate grounded in the interests of the child, at least show that such a reason cannot reach the standard of a compelling basis to procreate that could swamp the sizeable considerations counting against procreation that I laid out in my presentation of the risk argument.

Conclusion

Summary

This thesis has defended the view that human beings err in procreating because procreation imposes on the person brought into existence a multitude of serious risks without consent or adequate justification. I began the first part of my thesis by proposing a distinction between *third-party arguments* for antinatalism that focus on procreativity's damaging impact on the people and world around us and *child-focused arguments* concerned with what procreation does to the created child. Situating my own argument within the child-focused camp, I first explained the major weaknesses confronting the three most well-known *child-focused arguments* – Benatar's asymmetry argument, Benatar's quality-of-life argument, and Seana Shiffrin's argument – before formally laying out my own argument to overcome some of these difficulties.

In particular, I presented two thought experiments – *The Gamble* and *The Game* – and an explanatory principle – the *say-so principle* – in order to motivate my core claim *(*simplified to *P1* in the thesis) that it is wrong to impose significant risk on someone in the absence of consent or a sufficiently compelling reason to impose the risk. I then went on to lay out the three additional premises of my argument, which showed how *P1* applies to procreation. These premises were that procreation entails the imposition of significant risk (the *risk claim*), that it involves an absence of consent (the no-*consent claim*), and that it is imposed without moral or practical necessity (the *no-necessity claim*). I recruited a wide array of statistics and studies in order to empirically substantiate the *risk claim* that even the very best lives started by procreation stare down the barrel of significant risk. I deferred a fuller defence of the *no-consent* and *no-necessity* claims to Part II of the thesis, contending that the plausibility and coherence of the twin claims that procreation involves the absence of pre-natal consent and lacks adequately strong justification can only be established by engaging with the many counter-arguments that immediately come to mind.

In the second part of my thesis, I investigated a wide range of pronatalist complaints, some developed in the literature and others being promising potential objections that have not been discussed elsewhere. I showed how responses to my argument can broadly be split into three

main categories – arguments seeking to undermine the *risk, no-consent,* and *no-necessity* claims, respectively (noting throughout where there was an overlap between these categories and where a given response challenges the more central idea expressed in *P1*). We met along the way a wide variety of strategies to push back against my conception of risk; including critics who denied it, justified it, normalised it, and argued for its compensation or mitigation. In the realm of consent, we encountered criticisms that consent talk in procreative contexts is metaphysically unintelligible or logically incoherent or morally forceless or easily hypothesized or easily escaped if not retrospectively supplied. Finally, we saw how opponents of the *no-necessity claim* sought to defend procreation as necessary for the species (to avert the valuelessness or meaninglessness of a world without humans), for parents (to realise the good of pregnancy or prolonging one's lineage or cultivating a loving relationship with one's child), and for the child itself (by gifting the good of a worthwhile life). I showed how all these arguments fall short of the mark, leaving my argument still in the running as a serious and novel case for the wrongfulness of creating new people.

Future Work

Although I believe I have shown that my version of antinatalism can withstand all these criticisms, I have also tried to identify points at which further antinatalist projects are needed to more fully repel specific objections, complete my responses to them, or further develop my own argument. In particular, I think there are five major areas for future work to develop the risk-based case for antinatalism. Firstly, I think there is scope to further strengthen the ethical underpinnings of *P1* in my argument by drawing upon other ethical principles. I appealed to a relatively simple idea – the *say-so principle* – in order to lend support to *P1.* There are, however, other notions that one could appeal to in order to give further intuitive pull to *P1*. For instance, a sustained defence of a hedonic priority principle, in which suffering prevention is to be given greater moral weight than pleasure creation; or a precautionary principle, in which we ought to always adopt cautious risk-averseness when potentially great suffering is thrown into the mix; would lend greater credence to my argument. Although I have at times appealed to similar ideas, the scope for a robust integration of such ideas into a risk-based case for antinatalism must be deferred until a future project.

Secondly, there is much more work to be done to develop an antinatalist account of meaning should antinatalists have their way and we head down the path towards self-extinction. In

section 6.1.3, we considered the concern that committing to antinatalism would require us to sacrifice important forms of meaning. At that point, I rejected this idea by sketching a broad account of what forms meaning in antinatalist world could and would take, but I see great potential for a more thoroughgoing articulation of the shape of this meaning in the event of antinatalism gaining a foothold in society.

Thirdly, although I tried to be comprehensive in my treatment of the panoply of reasons given to justify procreation to promote parental goods (section 6.2), it was impossible to fully address every avenue of debate given space constraints. For example, I dismissed relatively quickly arguments turning on the value of parenting a child bearing resemblance to oneself, but it was not possible for me to consider all the possible responses that an advocate of this view might pursue. A sustained argument-by-argument take-down of different lines of justification that could be provided by pronatalists, then, would help to more decisively defeat the idea that procreation is necessary to secure essential parental goods. The taxonomy I provided at the start of 6.2 would provide a useful framework for this systematic rebuttal.

Fourthly, a project that strikes me as extremely promising involves drawing together my own argument with other antinatalist arguments with a view to building a robust cumulative case for antinatalism. The goal of this thesis – to position my argument as the most attractive and plausible version of child-focused antinatalism – ought not to detract from the merits of adopting a pluralistic, multi-pronged antinatalist line of attack. I believe many of these other arguments, of both the child-focused and third-party flavour (see Chapter One), can be made to work and unified with the risk argument to further reinforce the strength of the conclusion that one ought not to procreate. This grander academic check, too, remains to be cashed at a later date.

Finally, once again for reasons of space, I have not been able to engage with more general objections to antinatalism. These *reductio*-style objections generally turn on the idea that the implications of antinatalism are morally or socially dangerous – consider the view that a philosophy centred on the problematisation of birth will have troubling consequences for the status of women in society or could easily slip into worrying solicitations to kill ourselves or others. Other objections focus on the unworkability of antinatalism, either because its core prescription is overly demanding (the demandingness objection) or so counter-intuitive that

its demise in the court of public opinion is guaranteed (the futility objection). In future work, I hope to be able to address some of these broader objections to antinatalism.

Where To From Here?

Whilst I have engaged throughout with fears that the acceptance of my antinatalist position threatens to undermine much that is valuable about human lives, some final reflections on what my conclusion entails for us (and does not entail for us) are in order. If my argument is correct, we do something seriously wrong when we reproduce. This means that, inasmuch as we are motivated by a desire to avoid doing the morally indefensible, we all ought to make the choice not to procreate, resulting in the collective outcome of voluntary self-extinction.

What does not follow from this conclusion is that we ought to be unkind to those who procreate or adopt strongly pronatalist stances; or that we should engage in political repression in order to enact antinatalist policies; or that we should invade bodily autonomy to end pregnancies or prevent births; or that we should engage in mass murder to bring about a human-free world. Any individual or institution wishing to take up any of these actions would have to supply some further rationale, for a defence of these practices cannot be found in the risk argument. Of course, much like any ethical belief system that has prescriptive implications for human behaviour, antinatalism raises political and legal questions. For example, what policies and laws will best achieve the goals of antinatalism? Which of these policies and laws are morally justified? These are important and interesting questions, but they too must remain sidelined for a separate antinatalist project. For now, I wish only to note that there is no way to directly read off a political commitment from the risk argument, a point worthy of emphasis in an age where violent or liberty-restricting mobilisations of ethical beliefs are increasingly prominent.

I shall end with a brief word about the possibility that I am wrong in the conclusion that I have delivered. It would betray great intellectual hubris to not consider this possibility, especially given the highly revisionary account of procreation I have defended over the last 75,000 words. To the extent my argument fails, I am hopeful that this will be shown via careful argumentation that pushes the philosophical debates on antinatalism in new directions. If this is the case, my argument would have succeeded in prompting much deeper and more original engagement with the world we finds ourselves in and the decision we make

to bring others into it. This kind of reflection on the decision to procreate, even if it eventually culminates in an affirmative act, is the very least we owe not only to those we create, but also to ourselves. As a consolation prize for a misfired argument, then, I can think of worse.

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