

# What Is Antinatalism?

## Definition, History, and Categories

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### 1. Introduction

The concept of antinatalism is now becoming popular on the Internet. Many online newspaper articles deal with this topic, and numerous academic papers on antinatalism have been published over the past ten years in the fields of philosophy and ethics.<sup>1</sup> The word “antinatalism” was first used in the current meaning in 2006, when the two books that justify the universal negation of procreation were published: one by David Benatar and the other by Théophile de Giraud. However, we can find various prototypes of antinatalistic thoughts in ancient Greece, ancient India, and modern Europe. You might recall the name Schopenhauer.

In this paper, I briefly summarize the history of antinatalistic thoughts and propose a set of categories on antinatalism and related thoughts. In October

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Jonathan Griffin “Anti-natalists: The People Who Want You to Stop Having Babies.” *BBC*, August 13, 2019 <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-49298720>; Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow “I wish I’d Never Been Born: The Rise of the Anti-natalists.” *The Guardian*, November 14, 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/14/anti-natalists-childfree-population-climate-change>; Cory Stieg, “Antinatalism: The Popular Reddit Movement to Stop Procreation.” *Refinery29*, August 15, 2019 <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/08/239978/what-is-antinatalism-childfree-movement-reddit>; Joshua Rothman “The Case for Not Being Born.” *The New Yorker*, November 27, 2017 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-case-for-not-being-born>.

2020, I published a Japanese book entitled *Is It Better Never to Have Been Born?*,<sup>2</sup> in which I delved into the philosophies of the Upanishads, ancient Buddhism, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Cioran, and Benatar from the perspective of contemporary antinatalism. Before going on to discussion, I would like to say that I am not an antinatalist, but I am not a pronatalist either. As a philosopher, I have been searching for the possibility of “birth affirmation,” but birth affirmation does not necessarily mean the negation of antinatalism. I will discuss it later again in Chapter 3.

From a linguistic point of view, the root word “natal” in “antinatalism” comes from the Latin word *nātālis*, the original meaning of which is “of or relating to birth.”<sup>3</sup> According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, “natal” is an adjective that means “relating to the place where or the time when someone was born.” This shows that the literal meaning of “antinatalism” is the negation of being born.

Taking this into consideration, I would like to define antinatalism as follows:

#### The Definition of Antinatalism

Antinatalism is the thought that all human beings or all sentient beings should not be born.

This definition has two implications: one is that looking toward the past, we can say that all human beings or all sentient beings should not have been born, and the other is that looking toward the future, we can say that we should not give birth to our children. (Sometimes the latter one includes the negation of procreation of some or all sentient animals). I want to call the former idea “birth negation” and the latter idea “procreation negation.”

Here, let us take a brief look at the definitions of antinatalism appearing in recent academic papers. Christopher Belshaw (2012) defines antinatalism as “the view that it’s better never to have been born and hence that procreation is wrong.”<sup>4</sup> Belshaw’s definition is similar to mine, which refers to both birth negation and procreation negation. J. Robbert Zandbergen’s (2020) definition is as follows: “Antinatalism is the conviction that human existence is not

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<sup>2</sup> Morioka (2020). This is the book I showed to an audience when I was interviewed by Exploring Antinatalism Podcast in February 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *Cassell’s Latin Dictionary*.

<sup>4</sup> Belshaw (2012), p. 117.

intrinsically more valuable than nonexistence. This incongruence at the heart of human reality may further inspire the conviction that human reproduction must be brought to an absolute halt.”<sup>5</sup> Zandbergen also describes the two aspects of antinatalism in a slightly different way. Blake Hereth and Anthony Ferrucci (2021) define it as follows: “Anti-natalism is the view that it is morally impermissible to bring a child into existence. Anti-natalism is a moral position concerning prospective procreation. As such, it is a moral thesis against procreation for the purposes of bringing new humans into existence.”<sup>6</sup> They interpret antinatalism with a special emphasis on procreation negation. In the same vein, Faith L. Brown and Lucas A. Keefer (2020) define it more simply: “Anti-natalism is the ethical view that it is morally wrong for people to reproduce.”<sup>7</sup> All four definitions do not mention the reproduction of sentient beings, which is a big theme of antinatalism among today’s grassroots antinatalists.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the Facebook group “Antinatalism,” which is one of the oldest networking sites for grassroots antinatalists, defines antinatalism as follows: “Anti-natalism (or antinatalism) is a philosophical position that assigns a negative value to birth.” Their definition seems to incorporate birth negation, procreation negation, and sentient beings’ coming into existence altogether.<sup>9</sup> The entry of “antinatalism” in the April 2021 edition of English Wikipedia writes, “Antinatalism, or anti-natalism, is the ethical view that negatively values coming into existence and procreation, and judges procreation as morally wrong.”<sup>10</sup>

As is evident from the above, there is no single, universal definition of antinatalism so far. By turning our eyes to the history of ideas and tracing the formation process of antinatalistic thoughts, we can shed new light on the concept of antinatalism.

## **2. A Brief History of Antinatalistic Thoughts**

The idea of birth negation is found in ancient Greece. It then influenced

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<sup>5</sup> Zandbergen (2020), online version.

<sup>6</sup> Hereth and Ferrucci (2021), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Brown and Keefer (2020), p. 284.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, the authors of the papers mention the lives of sentient animals, but the point here is the fact that they did not include the words “sentient beings” in their definitions.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/antinatalism/> (Accessed April 26, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antinatalism> (Accessed April 26, 2021).

European literature and philosophy up to the present day. The idea of procreation negation appeared in the 20th century. In addition to the above two negations, there was a third type — “reincarnation negation” — found in ancient India. Theravāda Buddhist practitioners are pursuing this kind of negation even today.

Kateřina Lochmanová and Karim Akerma call antinatalistic thoughts found before the 20th century “antinatalistic spirit” or “proto-antinatalism.”<sup>11</sup> I want to enlarge the concept of proto-antinatalism to include ancient India’s reincarnation negation. And I want to call the idea of universal negation of procreation that started from the 20th century “anti-procreationism.”

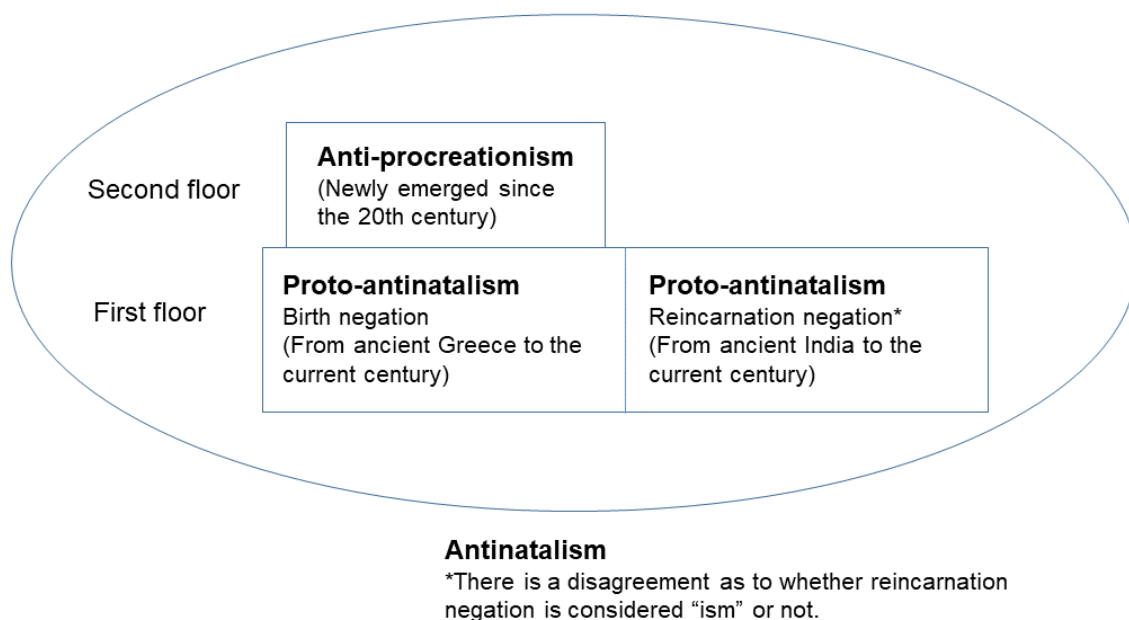


Figure 1

As you can see in Figure 1, antinatalism is composed of three groups of antinatalistic thoughts: 1) proto-antinatalism as birth negation on the first floor, 2) proto-antinatalism as reincarnation negation on the first floor, and 3) anti-procreationism on the second floor. The reason why the second floor is on top of the proto-antinatalism as birth negation is that while birth negation is frequently mentioned in the discourse on anti-procreationism (e.g., Benatar’s book), reincarnation negation is hardly discussed there.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Lochmanová (2020), p. 38; Akerma (2020), pp. 126, 130.

<sup>12</sup> In this sense, Coates (2014) is a rare exception.

Let us examine these three categories one by one.

### 1) Proto-antinatalism as birth negation

This is an antinatalism that emerged in ancient Greece. In B.C. Greece, Theognis, Sophocles, and many others wrote poems and plays about the idea that “the best thing is not to be born, and the next best thing is to return quickly to where we came from.”

For example, Sophocles writes in his *Oedipus at Colonus* as follows.

Never to be born is the best story.  
But when one has come to the light of day  
second-best is to leave and go back  
quick as you can back where you came from.<sup>13</sup>

This is a combination of the negation of human birth and the affirmation of human death. Please note that what Sophocles argues above is a *universal* negation of coming into existence, not just a personal regret of having been born. Similar text can be found in Theognis’s *Elegeia* 425-428. Those authors compare humans’ being born with humans’ not being born and conclude that not being born is better than being born. The idea of birth negation was prevalent around the Mediterranean region at that time. We can see an example of that influence in *Ecclesiastes* (Cohelah) of the *Old Testament*.

And I thought the dead, who have already died,  
more fortunate than the living, who are still alive;  
but better than both is the one who has not yet been,  
and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.<sup>14</sup>

Similar ideas are also found in the Gnostic scriptures. These ideas sometimes accompany a somewhat personal lamenting that “it would have been better never to have been born.” For example, we can find such an expression in Goethe’s *Faust*, Book One. The rejuvenated Faust visits his girlfriend Gretchen,

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<sup>13</sup> Sophocles (2005), lines 1347-1350, p. 84.

<sup>14</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 4:2-3. Coogan et al. (2010), p. 940. It is said that the author of *Ecclesiastes* must have read Theognis.

and he discovers that she has gone insane. Faust cries in despair.

I wish I had never been born! (*O, wär 'ich nie geboren!*)<sup>15</sup>

This is the most moving part of Book One of *Faust*.

The Greek type of birth negation further influenced Schopenhauer, Cioran, Benatar, and other antinatalists in the present day. For instance, Schopenhauer writes that the most important truth is the recognition that “it would have been better if we had never existed (*Wir besser nicht dawären*).”<sup>16</sup> Cioran writes, “Not coming into existence is, no doubt, the best possible formula (*Ne pas naître est sans contredit la meilleure formule qui soit*).”<sup>17</sup> Schopenhauer and Cioran make a universal statement concerning birth negation.

At the same time, a personalized expression of birth negation is widely seen in contemporary society. We sometimes encounter the lament of birth negation in current literature, comics, and popular music (Remember UK rock band Queen’s lyrics in *Bohemian Rhapsody*: “Mama, ooh, I don’t want to die, I sometimes wish I’d never been born at all”). It is still vividly alive today.

I think that a *universal negation* of birth (“Never to be born is the best story”) and a *personalized lamenting* of birth (“I wish I had never been born!”) should be theoretically separated from each other, although these two are actually closely connected. While the former is an authentic proto-antinatalism, the latter is not considered an authentic proto-antinatalism because it talks only about the speaker’s personal inner lamentations. The latter should rather be considered fertile soil that helps the former to flourish.

The combination of a universal negation of birth and a personalized lamenting of birth sometimes creates attitudes of looking at life and the world from a negative and pessimistic perspective. Benatar’s “pragmatic pessimism” might be one of them. He recommends us to “embrace the pessimistic view, but navigate its currents in one’s life.” He says, “It is possible to be an unequivocal pessimist but not dwell on these thoughts all the time.”<sup>18</sup> We may call such an attitude a proto-antinatalistic way of living.

Lochmanová offers a slightly different interpretation of the Greek type of

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<sup>15</sup> Goethe (1797), line 4596.

<sup>16</sup> Schopenhauer (1844), Bd. 2, Kapitel 48.

<sup>17</sup> Cioran (1973), p. 243.

<sup>18</sup> Benatar (2017), pp. 210-211.

birth negation. She writes that “the ancient antinatalistic reflections should be marked as rather passive, since neither of those lamentations result in a proposal for a concrete solution.”<sup>19</sup> She is correct in saying that ancient Greeks did not reach a pragmatic proposal for preventing procreation. She calls this type of birth negation the antinatalism “in the broader sense” and distinguishes it from “the narrow-sense antinatalism,” whose central theme is “the idea of extinction of mankind.”<sup>20</sup>

## 2) Proto-antinatalism as reincarnation negation

This is an antinatalism found mainly in ancient India. It is a negation of the re-birth of a person after death. The ancient Indians believed that after death, the human self (*atman*, *attan*) or the five *skandhas* reincarnate into other sentient beings (including humans) and that this reincarnation continues endlessly. This means that life with suffering continues forever. To avoid this, ancient Buddhist practitioners attempted to attain *nirvana* through various practices. When a state of *nirvana* is reached in this human world, a person’s *samsara* ceases, and he or she will not be born again into any world.

The *Sutta Nipāta* describes a Buddhist practitioner’s reaching a state of *nirvana* as follows:

Rebirth had been ended: a noble life had been led: what was to be done had been done and there was nothing else to be done in this earthly existence: Sundarika-Bhāradvāja had become one of the arahants.<sup>21</sup>

This is a unique type of antinatalism because the practitioner practices in the hope that he or she will not be born into any world in the future. Not only in ancient times but also today, this is the unchanging goal of Theravāda Buddhist practitioners. According to ancient Buddhism, all births are births into the world of suffering; hence, coming into existence must be evaluated negatively. If we focus on this aspect, we can say that ancient Buddhism is antinatalist. However, we can also interpret ancient Buddhism as saying that being born into this human world is affirmed because there is a possibility of reaching *nirvana* here.

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<sup>19</sup> Lochmanová (2020), p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> Lochmanová (2020), p. 112.

<sup>21</sup> *Sutta Nipāta* (1985), 3:4:32, pp. 54-55.

Therefore, if we pay attention to this aspect, we cannot instantaneously say that it is antinatalist.

As for childbearing, although the practitioners themselves do not procreate, they do not think that all humans should not procreate. Because practitioners who do not attain *nirvana* in this world will need to be born again in this world through reincarnation in the future, it is necessary that non-practitioners in our society continue to procreate children. Considering all the above, we can say it is true that ancient Buddhism contains the idea of reincarnation negation; however, we need further research to make clear whether it can be called an authentic proto-antinatalism. The Upanishads share the idea of reincarnation negation with Buddhism, but in a slightly different way. They believed that our world is a world of suffering and that those who know the sacred truth of reincarnation proceed on the “path to the gods” after death, escaped from reincarnation cycles, and reach the world of eternity. A majority of contemporary antinatalists in Europe and the English-speaking world do not seem to have taken these forms of proto-antinatalism into their perspectives. One thing we have to consider is whether we can call Indian reincarnation negation antinatal-“ism.” This is because they did not necessarily argue that *all* human beings should transcend reincarnation or stop procreation. The target of their enlightenment was basically restricted to each individual practitioner, not the human race as a whole.

One of the important gifts the ancient Indians gave to antinatalism is the idea of veganism/vegetarianism. Ancient Indian religions generally believed that sentient beings and human beings are deeply connected with each other through an infinite process of reincarnation. Among them, Jainism strictly refrained from eating animals and insects in order not to directly harm their lives. Their veganism is considered to have remotely influenced today’s vegan antinatalists.

By the way, it was Schopenhauer who boldly combined the above two types of proto-antinatalism: the Greek type of birth negation and the Indian type of reincarnation negation. He argues, on the one hand, that the most important truth is the recognition that it would have been better if we had never existed (the Greek type of birth negation); on the other hand, he argues that what is most important for us is to dismantle our will to life/live and reach a state of will-less-ness and the cessation of reincarnation (The Indian type of reincarnation negation). Schopenhauer is a unique philosopher who integrated two traditions of proto-antinatalism and prepared the 20th century’s



anti-procreationism.<sup>22</sup> It is worth noticing that Schopenhauer has a positive attitude toward universal procreation negation when he talks about Augustine's *On the Good of Marriage*.<sup>23</sup>

### 3) Anti-procreationism

This is an antinatalism that argues that we should not give birth to children and that the human race should become extinct by giving up procreation. This type of antinatalism appeared in the 20th century. The reason for this is that effective contraceptive methods were developed, the influence of religion was relatively weakened, and global environmental problems became more serious.

Karim Akerma considers Kurnig as the first modern anti-procreationist figure who was under the influence of Schopenhauer but succeeded in freeing himself from Schopenhauer's metaphysics. Kurnig published a book called *Neo-Nihilism* in 1903. According to Akerma, this was the first time in history that an entire book was devoted to anti-procreationism.<sup>24</sup> In his 1941 book *On the Tragic*, Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe argued that human beings should decrease their population to the "below replacement rates" and become extinct.<sup>25</sup> In the 1970s, population explosion and global environmental destruction became a huge international problem, and the idea emerged that the human race is the cancer of the earth. Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard writes in his 1971 novel *Gehen* that "the earth, on which there are no human beings, attained by gradual extinction, would be, needless to say, the most beautiful."<sup>26</sup> In 1991, Les U. Knight began The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT) and called for the extinction of the human race. They say "Phasing out the human species by voluntarily ceasing to breed will allow Earth's biosphere to return to good health" on their website.<sup>27</sup>

In 2006, David Benatar published the book *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, and he demonstrated that not being born is

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<sup>22</sup> I conducted a comprehensive examination of Schopenhauer's antinatalism in Chapter 3 of Morioka (2020). Eduard von Hartmann took over Schopenhauer's concept of will-less-ness and argued that when the human race succeeds in removing its will to life, all the will existing in the universe will disappear, and as a result, the universe itself will disappear. von Hartmann (1876), S.405.

<sup>23</sup> Schopenhauer (1844), Bd. 2. Kapitel 48.

<sup>24</sup> Akerma (2020), p. 126.

<sup>25</sup> Tangenes (2004).

<sup>26</sup> Bernhard (1971), p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.vhemt.org/> (Accessed April 18, 2021).

better than being born, based on the idea of philosophical asymmetry between pleasure and pain. According to Benatar, human beings' coming into existence is always a harm; therefore, we should not give birth to children. Benatar calls this way of thinking an "anti-natalist position" or an "anti-natalist view."<sup>28</sup> He says that his argument arises "not from a dislike of children, but instead from a concern to avoid the suffering of potential children and the adults they would become." He argued that the number of people should become zero, and "extinction within a few generations is to be preferred."<sup>29</sup>

The word "antinatalism" had long been used to refer to population suppression policies, such as China's One Child Policy, in the field of social science. (On the contrary, population growth policies had been called pronatalism).<sup>30</sup> At this point, the word did not yet have the connotations of today's anti-procreationism, where individuals should take the initiative to refrain from procreation and exterminate the human race. It was Benatar who introduced this word into philosophy and added an anti-procreationist meaning to it. This was an epoch-making event. The Wikipedia entry on "antinatalism" was created in 2007, a year after the publication of Benatar's book. In that entry, antinatalism was defined as "the philosophical position that asserts a negative value judgement towards birth."<sup>31</sup>

Another proponent of antinatalism is Belgian writer Théophile de Giraud. He also published a book in 2006, entitled *L'Art de guillotiner les procréateurs: Manifeste anti-nataliste* (The Art of Guillotining Procreators: An Anti-Natalist Manifesto), and expressed his view against procreation. The book, written in French, devotes its entire pages to the discussion of the negation of procreation and is considered one of the most important books about anti-procreationism, comparable to Benatar's. In the introduction of the book, de Giraud writes, "Philosophy has debated all the questions that came before the human mind, but there is only one exception: *the ethical validity of procreation*."<sup>32</sup> He goes on to argue that birth is one of the three major human sufferings, exposes the psychological mindset of birth advocates, asks whether children can really love their parents, says that children have the right to denounce their parents, says that ethics and birth are incompatible, considers global overpopulation,

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<sup>28</sup> Benatar (2006), p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Benatar (2006), p. 198.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Heitlinger (1991) and Cheng (1991).

<sup>31</sup> Wikipedia (English): the entry on "antinatalism."

<sup>32</sup> de Giraud (2006), p. 7.

considers the conditions for parents to have children, and discusses the relationship between feminism and antinatalism. His pessimistic view of being born seems to have been heavily influenced by Schopenhauer. While Benatar approached the subject with the logic of analytical philosophy, de Giraud approached the subject with the method of continental philosophy and literature.

He argues that the first articles of all charters aiming at protecting the interests of the child should be as follows:

1. The first right of the child is not to be born.
2. The second right of the child consists in being able to summon before the courts, if he considers it necessary, those who seriously harmed him by violating his first right.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, he holds that children should be able to sue their parents for giving birth to them. Also, de Giraud talks about the relationship between antinatalism and feminism in Chapter 10 entitled “Remedy through Feminism.” This is a perspective that is lacking in Benatar.

It is not clear when antinatalist activism emerged in the English-speaking world. The Facebook group “Antinatalism” was created in 2007, which was perhaps the earliest Internet site for the discussion of this topic.<sup>34</sup> EFILism is an early example of such activism. It was proposed by YouTuber Inmendham around 2010 and states that the DNA mechanism by which life reproduces itself and the emergence of sentient beings have caused ongoing suffering in this universe. Inmendham argues that the termination of the reproduction of human beings and sentient beings will be the solution.<sup>35</sup> The first four letters of EFILism are a reverse reading of LIFE. The publication of Benatar’s *Better Never to Have Been* in 2006 had a major theoretical impact on antinatalist activism. (However, it should be noted that many current antinatalists do not necessarily agree with Benatar’s ideas.) One of the places where antinatalism has been discussed in the English-speaking world is Reddit.com, which is a huge collection of posting forums, and the antinatalism thread (r/antinatalism) was created there in 2010. Cory Stieg writes that “Benatar’s concept has taken on a

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<sup>33</sup> de Giraud (2006), p. 82.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/antinatalism/> The name of the site when it was created was “Anti-natalism,” and then it was renamed “Antinatalism.”

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.efilism.com/> (Accessed April 5, 2021).

new life, so to speak, among Redditors, YouTube communities, and vegan advocacy groups. Online, antinatalists have created a safe space to talk about their experiences, share memes about natalism, and geek out about philosophy.”<sup>36</sup> According to [efilism.com](http://www.efilism.com), several of the above trends came together in a big wave in 2011, which gave birth to the antinatalism community.<sup>37</sup> A booklet entitled *The Antinatalist Manifesto* was published in 2016 by an author named Antiprocreation. It argues that we were created forcibly without being asked whether it was okay to give birth and that procreation is a violation of human dignity, human rights, and freedom.<sup>38</sup> Jiwoon Hwang, the real name of Antiprocreation, started publishing a magazine entitled *The Antinatalism Magazine* in 2017. He also published the blog post “Why it is always better to cease to exist (pro-mortalism, promortalism)” and advocated pro-mortalism in 2018.<sup>39</sup>

On September 18, 2017, the international academic conference “Antinatalism: To Be or Not to Be?” was held at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Ostrava, Czech Republic. Kateřina Lochmanová and others, who would later edit the book *History of Antinatalism*, gave presentations. It may be the first international conference on the subject of antinatalism. On May 30, 2018, the international conference “Antinatalism Under Fire” was held in Prague with participants including David Benatar, Iddo Landau, Saul Smilansky, and Jiwoon Hwang.

In 2020, an activist group called “Antinatalism International” was founded and began its vigorous activities on the Internet. According to them, the most succinct expression of antinatalism is “Antinatalism is a critique of procreation.” And they say that “[a]ntinatalism, in general, argues that creating life is unethical because of the existence of suffering and that the best outcome is extinction.” They exemplify the four schools of anti-procreative thought: antinatalism, EFILism, the VHEMT, and childfree (a lifestyle of voluntary childlessness).<sup>40</sup> They have published *An Antinatalist Handbook* on their website, refuting every question that is raised against antinatalism and every

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<sup>36</sup> Stieg (2019).

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.efilism.com/>

<sup>38</sup> Antiprocreation (2016). He also published Antiprocreation (2017).

<sup>39</sup> Hwang (2018). I met him at the First International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life, held at Hokkaido University in 2018. He attempted suicide and then passed away in the same year at the young age of 23. See Burmazovic (2018).

<sup>40</sup> <https://antinatalisminternational.com/what-is-antinatalism/#1601628649736-f2e278a6-0b08>

justification for procreation made by pronatalists. Antinatalist activism in the English-speaking world seems to have focused its campaign goals on the extinction of the human race that is achieved by the termination of all human procreations and, if possible, the extinction of all sentient beings. However, antinatalist activists' activities are diverse, and it is impossible to define them from a single perspective.

The academic study of the history of antinatalism has only just begun. Ken Coates's *Anti-Natalism: Rejectionist Philosophy from Buddhism to Benatar*, published in 2014, is perhaps the earliest example of such work. He located the origin of antinatalism in Hinduism and ancient Buddhism and overviewed the antinatalism of Schopenhauer, Eduard von Hartmann, Peter Wessel Zapffe, Benatar, Beckett, and Sartre. In 2017, Karim Akerma published in German the encyclopedic *Antinatalismus: Ein Handbuch* (Antinatalism: A Handbook). This 736-page book includes entries and quotations concerning antinatalism from a variety of literatures. In 2020, I published the Japanese book *Is It Better Never to Have Been Born?* In this book, I examined the history of antinatalism from a different perspective than Coates, starting with ancient Greece and ancient India, to Schopenhauer and other thinkers in the 20th century, and I criticized Benatar's harmful birth theory. I also proposed a basic framework of the concept of "birth affirmation," which will be a foundation of my future book *A Philosophy of Birth Affirmation*. Also in 2020, Kateřina Lochmanová edited the book *History of Antinatalism: How Philosophy Has Challenged the Question of Procreation*, which examined in detail the history of Western antinatalism from ancient Greece through medieval Europe to the present day. This book provides a rich source of information about antinatalistic thoughts that we have never been able to know before.

The academic study on antinatalistic topics has also just begun in recent years. Concerning the problem of non-existence of consent, Seana Valentine Shiffrin (1999) and Asheel Singh (2018) are important papers. Concerning the justification of procreation, Christine Overall (2012) and Rivka Weinberg (2016) are important books. Among them, Weinberg's "principle of procreative permissibility" is intriguing. She proposes two principles for procreation: the principle of motivation restriction and the principle of procreative balance. The former makes mandatory the parents' motivation for raising a child, and the

latter sets the range of reasonably acceptable risks for permissible procreation.<sup>41</sup> Although Weinberg's idea is not necessarily the one that can solve the problem of antinatalism, I believe it has the potential to inspire new ideas in the field of philosophy of procreation.<sup>42</sup>

Julio Cabrera, who has long advocated the concept of "negative ethics," argues in his 2020 paper "Antinatalism and Negative Ethics" that antinatalism should be strengthened by his idea of negative ethics. Generally speaking, antinatalism argues that our life is not worth starting, but it does not necessarily argue that it is not worth continuing. Cabrera does not think so. If we think that life can be considered worth continuing, then, "this can weaken the thesis that life is never worth-starting and give some force to natalism."<sup>43</sup> According to Cabrera, "human life should be regarded as ethically not worth-continuing *in general* even when sensibly tolerable."<sup>44</sup> However, he does not recommend immediate suicide motivated just by fear or weakness, because life-ending must be "morally guided."<sup>45</sup>

J. Robbert Zandbergen writes in his 2020 paper "Between Iron Skies and Copper Earth: Antinatalism and the Death of God" that antinatalism is "the most radically modern phenomenon that emerged after the death of God, and represents the most radical face of secular humanism."<sup>46</sup> He argues that after the declaration of the death of God by Nietzsche, humans had to reconstruct the foundation of their value system, and antinatalism provided us with its most radical answer, the extinction of the human race. However, Zandbergen does not think that the negation of procreation is the essential core of antinatalism. He writes that "it is a common misconception that antinatalism is unduly focused on reproduction and, more importantly, the cessation thereof. It is important to understand that the policy recommendation concerning reproduction only flows from a deeper concern with the state of human existence overall. As will be shown here, the conviction that human existence holds no intrinsic value over nonexistence is the core of antinatalism."<sup>47</sup> Thus, he suggests that the idea that not being born is better than being born, which can be found in

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<sup>41</sup> Weinberg (2016), pp. 176-180.

<sup>42</sup> In Morioka (2020), I added the third principle, "the principle of responsibility," to Weinberg's two principles to resolve the problem of non-existence of consent by a newborn child (p. 302).

<sup>43</sup> Cabrera (2020), p. 187.

<sup>44</sup> Cabrera (2020), p. 167.

<sup>45</sup> Cabrera (2020), p. 185.

<sup>46</sup> Zandbergen (2020), p. 2 (online version).

<sup>47</sup> Zandbergen (2020), p. 7 (online version).

proto-antinatalism as birth negation, might be the essential core of antinatalism, and anti-procreationism is a result that has emerged “inspired” by birth negation.

Faith L. Brown and Lucas A. Keefer’s paper “Anti-Natalism from an Evolutionary Psychological Perspective” (2020) discusses antinatalism in terms of evolutionary psychology. They think that there must be psychological reasons or factors that encourage people to accept or resist antinatalistic ideas. In addition to an optimism bias, which Benatar has already mentioned in his book, they point out four factors: a fast life history, sex differences, altruism, and attachment security. They conclude, respectively, that 1) higher-class individuals prefer antinatalism; 2) females are more attracted by antinatalism than males; 3) females in general and people who have experienced huge sufferings choose antinatalism because they think seriously about the quality of life of future children; and 4) people who have a distrust of others and avoid intimate attachment are likely to have pessimism and are likely to be drawn to antinatalism. Although these are still just hypotheses, they strongly emphasize that antinatalism research in psychology will be very meaningful. I hope that there will be some positive feedback from psychology to philosophy in the future.

### **3. Categorization of Antinatalist Concepts**

Here, I would like to leave the history of ideas and move on to a discussion of the concept of antinatalism itself. There is a wide variety of concepts of antinatalism. The following is a rough draft of my categorization. This is a categorization of antinatalism and its related concepts, not a categorization of antinatalists. One can have more than one of the following categories at the same time.

A: All births are bad. (Being born is bad. Giving birth is bad.)

\* All births are always bad.

[A-1: Benatar’s type] This argument claims that coming into existence is always a harm, which is based on the asymmetry of pleasure and pain that the presence of pain is bad, but the absence of pleasure is not bad.

[A-2: Pain avoidance theory] If we had not been born, we would never have felt pain. If we do not procreate, children who could feel pain will never come into being.

\* All births are bad as a whole.

[A-3: Russian roulette type] If we continue giving birth, at least one baby will be unhappy after growing up. Even if there are many children who will be happy, at least one child in the next generation will become unhappy, so we must consider childbirth to be bad as a whole in the sense that it will always produce that one child somewhere.

\*[A-4: Non-existence of consent] Consent from a newborn child is absent.

\*[A-5: Diversity tolerant type] All births are bad. All people should not procreate. But it must be acceptable for others to hold pronatalist views, and it must be acceptable for others to hold wrong views.

B: [B-1: “Birth negation” type] Being born is bad. I wish we had not been born. But I do not necessarily evaluate the goodness or badness of giving birth.

C: Being born is not necessarily bad.

\*[C-1: “Procreation negation” type] Being born is not necessarily bad, but giving birth is always bad.

\*[C-2: “Reincarnation negation” type] Rebirth in other worlds (or in this world) by reincarnation should be stopped. Rebirth in the next world has positive meaning only if a practitioner wishes to reach a state of *nirvana* after a series of succeeding reincarnations.

\*[C-3: Childfree] I do not give birth. I do not argue that all people should never procreate.

D: [D-1: Negation of the “promotion of procreationism”] Forcing someone to give birth is always bad. Procreation ideologies promoted by a nation, society, relatives, men, and others should be abolished.

E: Sentient being-oriented antinatalism. (This may include aliens and AI/robots that can experience pain).

\*[E-1: Domestic animal type] All cattle rearing should be abolished (before voluntary human extinction occurs).

\*[E-2: Sentient being type] All sentient beings should become extinct.

\*[E-3: Biotechnological approach type] All pain in sentient creatures should be artificially removed.

F: [F-1: Biological life-centered type] All living beings should become extinct.

G: [G-1: Non-existence type] No beings should exist. Complete nothingness is preferable. The strongest negation.

Using the above categorization, I consider the following grouping.



- \*Antinatalism in the narrow sense: A-1, A-2, A-3, A-4
- \*Antinatalism in the broad sense: A-5, B-1, C-1, C-2, E-1, E-2
- \*Anti-procreationism: A-1, A-2, A-3, A-4, A-5, C-1, E-1, E-2
- \* C-3, D-1, E-3, F-1, and G-1 are not antinatalism.

The above categorization is not intended to cover all patterns of antinatalism. Each category includes cases where there is a specific advocate (e.g., A-1) and cases where there is not necessarily a specific advocate (e.g., A-5). Since there could be various categorizations other than my own, I would be happy if you could use this as a reference when making your categorization.

I am not an antinatalist myself, although I hold the idea of “birth negation” deep in my heart. I myself am closest to the “birth negation” type (B-1). However, while the birth negation type of antinatalism makes a universal claim that “it would have been better if *we* had never been born,” I only have a personal view that “it would have been better if *I* had never been born.” In this single respect, I must say I am not an antinatalist. However, at the same time, I am not a pronatalist either, because I do not necessarily think that the human race should continue to procreate. I will discuss this point later in the Appendix.

By the way, to overcome my inner birth negation, I have advocated in my books and papers the concept of “birth affirmation,” which means that I am truly glad that I have been born. This “birth affirmation” is also a very personal one, and I do not believe that all people should affirm their own birth. I believe that the possibility of birth affirmation is open to all people, but it is up to each individual to decide whether to pursue this possibility, and I also believe that birth affirmation does not necessarily lead to a life of high value.

Furthermore, birth affirmation is not necessarily in conflict with anti-procreationism. It is possible that an anti-procreationist devotes all her life to the promotion of anti-procreationism, and, as a result, her attempt becomes successful, and she reaches a state of “birth affirmation” and feels happy to be able to achieve her ultimate goal. The relationship between birth affirmation and antinatalism includes many profound issues like this, so further research is needed. Those who are interested in the concept of birth affirmation, please read my paper “What is Birth Affirmation?: The Meaning of Saying ‘Yes’ to Having Been Born,” which is to be published in June 2021, and the English translation of Chapter 4 of my 2013 book *Manga Introduction to Philosophy*.

#### 4. The Validity of Antinatalism in the Narrow Sense

In this chapter, we will examine the validity of “antinatalism in the narrow sense.” Antinatalism in the narrow sense — that is to say, [A-1: Benatar’s type], [A-2: Pain avoidance theory], [A-3: Russian roulette type], and [A-4: Non-existence of consent] — asserts that all human births are universally bad and therefore all procreation should not take place. These four theories can be constructed as independent, consistent thoughts on human procreation. However, they are *not strong enough to be able to assert* that only their position is correct and that other ideas of affirming procreation are *universally wrong*. I would like to discuss this point very briefly in the following. Please keep in mind that I do not intend to say that antinatalism cannot be established as a meaningful philosophical theory on birth and procreation. It can. What I want to emphasize is that it is wrong for such a theory to claim that only its position is universally correct and that other theories affirming procreation are all wrong and should be abolished.

##### A-1: Benatar’s type

This argument claims that coming into existence is always a harm, which is based on the asymmetry of pleasure and pain that the presence of pain is bad, but the absence of pleasure is not bad. If there is a prick of a needle in a person’s life, the life of the person as a whole necessarily becomes a bad one. Therefore, it can be universally asserted that being born is always worse than not being born, and therefore all births should not be carried out. This idea, already found in Schopenhauer, was theorized by Benatar’s *Better Never to Have Been*, which took over the debates that had been conducted by Jan Narveson and Hermann Vetter in the 20th century.<sup>48</sup> Philosophers have debated whether Benatar’s argument is correct, and Benatar has attempted to refute their objections. In my observation, some of the objections made by David Boonin (2012) and Erik Magnusson (2019), especially Boonin’s argument of the Relational Symmetry Principle and Magnusson’s discussion of counterfactual conditionals, succeed in pinpointing Benatar’s weaknesses.<sup>49</sup> I made a criticism of Benatar’s argument in

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<sup>48</sup> Narveson (1967); Vetter (1969), (1971).

<sup>49</sup> Boonin (2012), pp. 15-25; Magnusson (2019), p. 4. But I do not necessarily agree with all the arguments in their papers.

Chapter 7 of my Japanese book (2020) from the perspective of *Sein* and *Werden*, and in my Japanese paper (2021) I argued that there can be a rival theory that is stronger than Benatar's asymmetry theory.<sup>50</sup> I believe that some of my criticisms there are critical to Benatar's argument.<sup>51</sup> I cannot show the details of the above discussions here because of the word limit, but putting all of them together, I believe that the Benatar-type defense of antinatalism is not as strong as Benatar himself claims it to be.

#### A-2: Pain avoidance theory

If people are born, they will necessarily experience suffering. If people are not born, they will never experience suffering. Therefore, to fundamentally prevent suffering, we should stop all procreation.

There are two problems with this.

The first problem is that although this theory is based on the premise that it is better to have no existence and no suffering than to have existence and suffering, there is no logical ground for this premise to be universally true. In other words, when someone argues that "a life that has reached a state of joy by overcoming past painful experiences is not inferior to the (hypothetical) state that there is no pain because a life does not exist," the pain avoidance theory cannot provide a basis for rejecting that argument as false. This is because the pain avoidance theory focuses only on the existence or non-existence of pain and does not take into account any positive sides that pleasure and joy can bring to life. The only way for proponents of the pain avoidance theory to refute the above argument would be to reply that the mere presence of pain in life makes that life unworthy of beginning, or that the mere presence of pain, no matter what great pleasure or joy there might be, ruins the entire positive value of that pleasure or joy. However, the former is unable to disprove the above argument because it still does not explain the reason why the absence of pain is considered universally "better" than the presence of both pain and pleasure. In other words, the pain avoidance theory argues that since we necessarily experience pain once we are born, it would be better if we were not born at all, but behind this argument is the hidden assumption that we do not need to take into account anything other than pain when we consider the goodness or badness of being born. However, this assumption is not proven to be correct at all. The latter is an

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<sup>50</sup> Morioka (2020), (2021).

<sup>51</sup> I will try to translate them into English and make it open to international readers.

argument for asymmetrical comparison of pain and pleasure; hence, it has the same difficulty as Benatar's type.

The second problem arises if the pain avoidance theory takes into account the amount of pain and argues that small pains can be cancelled out by pleasure or joy, but large pains can never be cancelled out no matter how much pleasure or joy there might be. First, if small pains can be canceled out by pleasure or joy, then the pain avoidance theory cannot conclude that birth is universally bad, because it is possible to live a whole life without experiencing large pains that cannot be canceled out by pleasure or joy. The pain avoidance theory cannot dismiss this possibility. And the line between small and large pain will be different for each person, which means that it is not possible to objectively determine what a universally bad life is. If we were to change the argument to the one that there will always be at least one person in the human race who will experience great pain that cannot be canceled out by pleasure or joy, it would become the Russian roulette type in the next section.

### A-3: Russian roulette type

This argues that if human beings continue to give birth, there will be at least one person whose life will be an unhappy one; therefore, all births should not be carried out in order to prevent that one unhappy life from emerging.

There are two problems with this.

The first problem is that the Russian roulette theory cannot refute the position that "even if there is a person whose life is likely to be unhappy because of suffering, all births are permitted to take place if there is an effective function in society in which people actively support her and bring her out of her unhappiness." If a Russian roulette theory advocate wishes to dismiss this, the advocate has no choice but to argue on the basis of possibility — i.e., that the practical possibility of establishing such an ideal society is so extremely low that it is pointless to set up such a position. However, such a counterargument allows for a counter counterargument of the same kind, namely, "Antinatalists say that if all births could be prohibited, there would be no suffering at all, but the practical possibility of such an ideal is extremely low, so it is pointless to set up such a position." Thus, the strength of the counterargument and that of the counter counterargument would be on par with each other. Therefore, the Russian roulette theory cannot refute the above position. A corollary of this argument is that birth advocates have a strong obligation to help the people

whose lives are likely to be unhappy to escape from the path to unhappiness. The fulfillment of this obligation should be a prerequisite for procreation. Thus, the Russian roulette theory does not function as an almighty defense of antinatalism, but rather as an imposition of a strict moral norm on birth advocates. It is the birth advocates who must place the Russian roulette theory as the foundation of their argument.

The second problem is the following. The Russian roulette theory is an argument that focuses only on the interests of the newborn and ignores the interests of the people who already exist in the world and are expected to bear children. However, it does not provide any logical ground that the interests of the existing people can be ignored when questioning the pros and cons of procreation. Of course, this point holds true for many types of anti-procreationism as well, but it is especially important for the Russian roulette type. The Russian roulette theory asserts that we must abandon the wishes of existing people that they want to experience the joy and happiness of bearing and raising children, that they want their children to experience the joy and happiness of living, and that they want to make every effort possible to achieve this, because there is the risk that at least one child will be unhappy. However, the Russian roulette theory fails to show a logical ground to support that “all hopes of childbearing among existing people” and “all possibilities of total happiness to be experienced by many children who will be born in the future” must be abandoned in order to prevent the birth of at least one child who will be unhappy.

Antinatalists sometimes argue that procreation is a parental ego, but in our society we tolerate a variety of egos that may lower the well-being of others (e.g., my living in a certain nice rental property lowers the well-being of an unknown person who could have lived a civilized life only by living there, or my passing an entrance exam lowers the well-being of someone else who did not pass it), and antinatalists have to explain why procreation does not fall into such an acceptable range. If they try to answer this by saying that procreation, unlike those social activities, is the creation of a sentient being out of nothing, then their objection again comes back to the problem of the pain avoidance theory. Also, it is sometimes said that “antinatalism is a gentle thought that puts the interests of children first,” but the mere fact that it is a gentle thought does not prove that procreation is universally wrong.

The following discussion may also be helpful. First of all, generally

speaking, there are cases in which the regulation of society by the Russian roulette theory is not feasible. Those are the cases in which (1) the benefits that would be lost by the regulation are so great that they would shake the whole society, and (2) there are no other alternatives to maintain the benefits. Example 1: The regulation of “sexual harassment in the workplace.” In this case, (1) is not significant, and (2) exists (e.g., the use of cosplay brothels), so the regulation can be established. Example 2: The regulation of “private cars that may cause serious traffic accidents.” In this case, in the city center, (1) is not significant, and (2) exists, so the regulation can be established. In the countryside, (1) is significant, and (2) does not exist, so the regulation cannot be established (but some measures are needed to reduce the suffering caused by traffic accidents). Regarding the regulation of procreation, if the interests of existing people are also taken into account, (1) is significant, and (2) does not exist, so the regulation cannot be established. However, whether this argument can be sufficiently applied to the case of creating existence from nothing remains unclear and thus requires further investigation.

In response to the above, those who say that not giving birth to any human being is the right answer because if we do not give birth to any human being, these problems themselves will not arise, are faced with the original question — “It is true that if we do not give birth to any human being, these problems will not arise, but why can we universally conclude from this that all of us should not give birth to any human being?” — and they are sent back to square one.

At the same time, we need to think about the case in which every child born will certainly become unhappy. For example, let’s consider a case in which the earth’s environment drastically changes and unknown radiation falls on the earth, and all children born will surely experience unbearable suffering for the rest of their lives (adults are not affected by radiation because they are already fully grown). This is a Russian roulette game where every magazine is filled with live ammunition. In this case, we should refrain from having children. It is only in this and similar cases that the plausibility of anti-procreationism is confirmed. In the current situation, we can say that humans are not placed in such an environment because there are many people who end their lives with satisfaction. We can conclude from this that those who try to defend birth must continue to make great efforts to prevent our natural and social environment from becoming like this. (However, I do not believe that people should continue to procreate, because I am not a pronatalist.)

#### A-4: Non-existence of consent

This is the argument that it is wrong to give birth to a child without the child's consent to be born. This faces the following problems. First of all, it is impossible to obtain consent because there is no subject of consent before birth. When a subject of consent exists, it can be wrong to force that subject to do something without consent, but that logic cannot be applied when there is no such subject. Thus, we are led to the conclusion that we cannot say that it is wrong to give birth to a child because there is no consent, nor can we say that it is not wrong to give birth to a child because there is no consent. If one argues that any born child will necessarily suffer the *pains* of life without consent, this brings us back to the issue of the pain avoidance theory. This shows that the non-existence of consent theory alone cannot lead to any conclusions about the goodness or badness of procreating children.

In response to this, it is sometimes argued that one should not give birth to a child in the first place, because after the child is born and grows up, the child may look back on her birth and raise the question to her parents, "Why did you give birth to me although I did not consent to it?" However, this is not a correct question to begin with, because it is based on the misconception that there is a subject of consent before birth. If it is not a misconception, then this argument again faces the problem of the previous paragraph.

If this argument is intended to point the finger at the parents and say, "If you hadn't given birth to me, I wouldn't have to suffer, but because you gave birth to me, I am now suffering like this," then we must say it is very one-sided. This resentment can be extended to further questions not related to procreation, such as, "Why didn't you kill yourself when you were young? If you had, I wouldn't have been born" and "Why did you choose to get married? If you hadn't gotten married, I wouldn't have been born." It can even be extended to a grudge against grandparents: "Why did you give birth to my parents?" It can even go so far as to say to the nation of Japan, "Why did you lose the war? If you had not lost the war, I would not have been born." It is extremely unbalanced in that although there is an infinite number of possible targets for resentment, it is focused only on the sexual intercourse of the parents at a certain point of time in their lives. While I can understand the sentiment of naming the parents who are closest to them, we have to say that their logic is weak and arbitrary. In addition, we can say that the mere personal grudge that "if you had not given birth, I would not

have suffered like this in the first place” does not reach the thought of antinatalism that “all births should not be carried out.” As I mentioned in Chapter 2, academic discussions on this topic are still going on; hence, further discussion is needed to settle the entire dispute on non-existence of consent.

From all the above, we can conclude that the four forms of antinatalism in the narrow sense are not strong enough to declare that only their own position is correct and the idea of affirming procreation is universally wrong. What I have discussed in this chapter is no more than a brief sketch of the whole picture. Many topics and counterarguments remain undiscussed.

Reading my discussion in this chapter, readers may wonder why the author of this paper is desperate to make a puzzle-solving of such absolute questions. It is easy to answer in saying that this is the very job a contemporary philosopher is supposed to do. But as a philosopher who has a flesh and blood body, I would like to say that the reason why I am doing this kind of messy job is that antinatalism is my own existential question. Since my childhood, I have been continuously repeating the question in mind, “Why have I been born even though I am destined to die someday?” and I have cried many times to myself, “If death is the unavoidable endpoint, I wish I had never been born!” For me, the question of birth negation has been an existential problem. And sometimes I have wondered why the extinction of the human race was not allowed because for me the happy death of a human being and the happy extinction of the human race were considered to be the best solution to my existential problem. At some point in my life, this idea changed into the idea of birth affirmation. And to make clear the concept of birth affirmation, I have been doing this kind of analytic and historical research. Basically, I am doing this for myself, not for anyone else.

Nicholas Smyth stresses in his 2020 paper “What Is the Question to Which Anti-Natalism Is the Answer?” that a discussion on procreative ethics should be more existential. This is exactly what I want to say. He criticizes contemporary procreative ethicists because they “have mainly followed Benatar in continuing to write in highly impersonal terms about sufferings, harms and duties, usually in impartial and quantitative terms.”<sup>52</sup> Smyth insists that we should be “existentially grounding”<sup>53</sup> when thinking seriously about antinatalism and the issues of meaning in life, and we should ask such true life questions to ourselves

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<sup>52</sup> Smyth (2020), pp. 77-78.

<sup>53</sup> Smyth (2020), p. 82.



who are living here and now. We should also make decisions ourselves, because no one will ever decide on our behalf. He writes that in the situation where a person is on her deathbed and looking back on her life asking whether it was meaningful, “there is absolute, categorical distinction between a person standing beside the bed and the person *in* the bed.”<sup>54</sup> This is what I have called a “solipsistic layer” or the “heart of meaning in life” in my 2019 paper “A Solipsistic and Affirmation-Based Approach to Meaning in Life.”<sup>55</sup> In this paper, I talked about the ontological status of a suffering person appearing in Viktor Frankl’s book, and I wrote that “whatever suffering this individual may experience her life occurs only once in this universe and can never be repeated in any other way in the future, and the manner in which this individual exists in this universe is unique and can never be compared with anything whatsoever.”<sup>56</sup> A person who is exiting in this manner should be the true target of philosophy of life’s meaning, and this is one of the basic backgrounds of my philosophical research on antinatalism and birth affirmation.<sup>57</sup>

## **Appendix: How Antinatalism and Its Research Began in Japan**

Contemporary discussion of antinatalism began when Shuichi Kato published his Japanese book *Life and Individuality* in 2007, one year after Benatar’s book. At that time, Kato did not know Benatar’s argument; hence, his book did not refer to it.

In his book, Kato took up the proposition “it is better not to have been born” and made a philosophical analysis of it. If we take antinatalism broadly, Kato’s book is considered the first example in Japan that comprehensively examined the topics of birth negation in antinatalism. After introducing antinatalistic thoughts in Theognis, Koheleth, and George Akiyama’s manga *Ashura*, Kato writes as follows:

It is meaningless to murmur gloomily, “I wish I had never been born,” or to sing cheerfully, “I am glad I have been born.” ... Since a person who

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<sup>54</sup> Smyth (2020), pp. 82, 85.

<sup>55</sup> Morioka (e2019).

<sup>56</sup> Morioka (e2019), p. 84.

<sup>57</sup> I have also called this a “life study approach” to the problem of life and death. See Epilogue of Morioka (e2005, 2017). If you find this touched your heartstrings, I recommend my 2017 paper “The Trolley Problem and the Dropping of Atomic Bombs” (Morioka, e2017).

has already been born can no longer do “that he was not born” — a strange way of putting it, but that is the only way to put it —, it is impossible to make a value judgment as to which is better or worse by comparing the situation in which one has been born (i.e., reality) and the situation in which one has not been born.<sup>58</sup>

In 2009, I published a paper on the extinction of the human race by abstaining from procreation. It is the second chapter of the paper “Is There an Obligation to Produce Future Generations?” (The entire paper was co-authored by Masahiro Morioka and Shinogu Yoshimoto, and the second chapter was written by Morioka). At that time, I too did not know of the existence of Benatar’s book or Knight’s VHEMT. Independently of Benatar and Knight, I conducted a thought experiment in that chapter on the possibility of a “gentle self-erasing” of the human race by the voluntary cessation of procreation by women, and I argued in favor of their choice. I would say that the discussion of anti-procreationism in Japan actually dates back to at least the year 2009. As far as this 2009 paper is concerned, I could be regarded as a sympathizer of anti-procreationism in the sense that I would allow the extinction of the human race by gradually stopping childbirth.<sup>59</sup> (As far as I know, the first scholar who discussed the planned extinction of the human race was Kazuyuki Kobayashi. He argued in his 1999 paper “Is Our Future Valuable?: A Strategy for Extinction” that the planned extinction would be a rational alternative for us, although his argument was not made from an antinatalistic point of view.<sup>60</sup>)

The above shows that two aspects of antinatalism — birth negation and procreation negation — were discussed in the years 2007–2009, independently of foreign discourses such as that of Knight, Benatar, or de Giraud. We can say that in Japan an academic discussion of antinatalism began at least in the period 2007–2009. At that time, neither Kato nor I knew the word “antinatalism,” so we did not use it in our publications. It is worth noticing that both Kato and I had conducted research on Japanese bioethics — ethics of abortion for Kato and

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<sup>58</sup> Kato (2007), pp. 19-20.

<sup>59</sup> I also made a sympathetic statement about human extinction in the 2019 dialogue for the magazine *Contemporary Thought* (Morioka and Toya, 2019, p. 19). Those who criticize me for being a pronatalist are probably unaware of these facts. For example, in the comment section of the February 2021 YouTube interview with me by The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast, someone named “maker rain” posted, “Masahiro Morioka is an infamous Pro-natalist here in Japan.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=123mtxZXck0> (Accessed February 21, 2021).

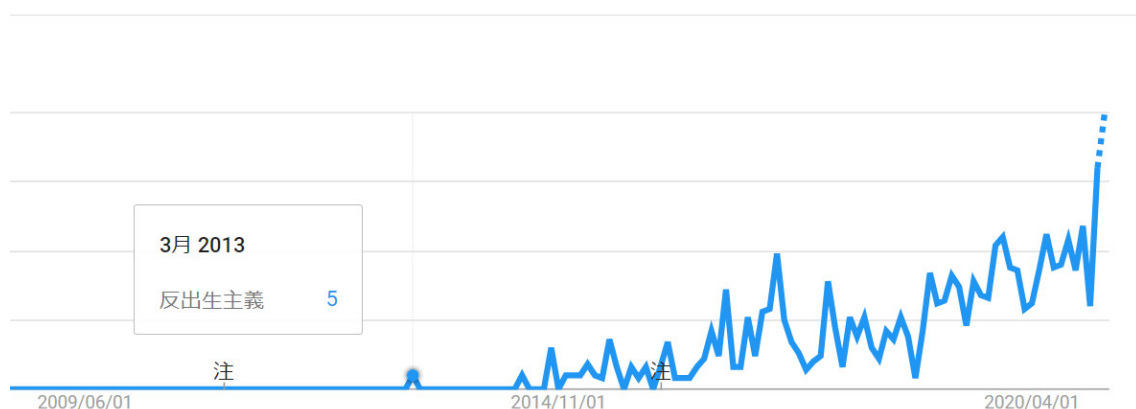
<sup>60</sup> Kobayashi (1999).

ethics of disability and feminism for me — and through our research we encountered the problem of wrongful life lawsuits, in which a child born with disabilities accuses the physician for not having provided information to her parents, thinking that if the information had been provided then she would have never been born. This way of thinking is similar to that of birth negation. A controversy of wrongful birth might have influenced the Japanese academic discussion of antinatalism in its first stage.

In 2010, Benatar’s asymmetry argument was introduced in Japan by Kato in his paper “Notes for ‘Freedom to Produce / Freedom to Be Born.’” In this paper, Kato cites Benatar’s asymmetry theory and writes that, “As Benatar says, we may have to accept the conclusion that procreation is always bad, and therefore the best thing is for all human beings to disappear from the earth. But frankly speaking, I am not able to fully understand his non-personal influence theory.”<sup>61</sup> This was probably the first time Benatar’s name appeared in the printed media in Japan. However, Kato did not yet use the term “antinatalism” there.

The Japanese word “反出生主義 (pronounced as *han shusshoh shugi* or *han shusseï shugi*),” which is the equivalent of the English word “antinatalism,” is considered to have first appeared on October 22, 2011, in the first edition of the Japanese Wikipedia entry “David Benatar.” This entry is believed to be created based on the same entry in the English Wikipedia. Since 2011, there have been many Internet websites or blogs that have dealt with antinatalism, but because their pages are constantly updated, it is difficult to pinpoint when the term “antinatalism” was first used on those sites.

Google Trends shows that the cluster of searches of the word started roughly around 2013.



<sup>61</sup> Kato (2010), p. 106.

In March 2013, my paper “Is Coming into Being Desirable?: On David Benatar’s *Better Never to Have Been*,” which is a critical review of Benatar’s book, was published in Japanese. There I wrote as follows.

This is a book that meticulously examines the proposition, “It is better never to have been born,” using the methods of analytic philosophy. As a result, Benatar draws the conclusion that it would have been better if all human beings had never been born, and goes on to argue that the human race should become extinct as soon as possible. Benatar’s position belongs to the category of “antinatalism” in analytic philosophy, and his reflections have recently attracted a great deal of attention in the philosophy of the English-speaking world. (The most famous advocate of antinatalism is Arthur Schopenhauer.)<sup>62</sup>

We can confirm from this quotation that in the Japanese academic world, the term “antinatalism” was introduced in 2013 as having two meanings: 1) “it would have been better if all human beings had never been born” and 2) “we must stop procreation and the human race must die out.” The above-mentioned paper was the first comprehensive introduction to Benatar’s argument, but looking back on it from the present point of view, we can find many incorrect understandings of his argument here and there. Also, the explanation of “antinatalism” there is not a good one. Anyway, it is important to note that the word “antinatalism” was introduced to Japan, along with Benatar’s philosophy, as a term for meaning both “birth negation” and “procreation negation,” which were discussed in the previous chapters.

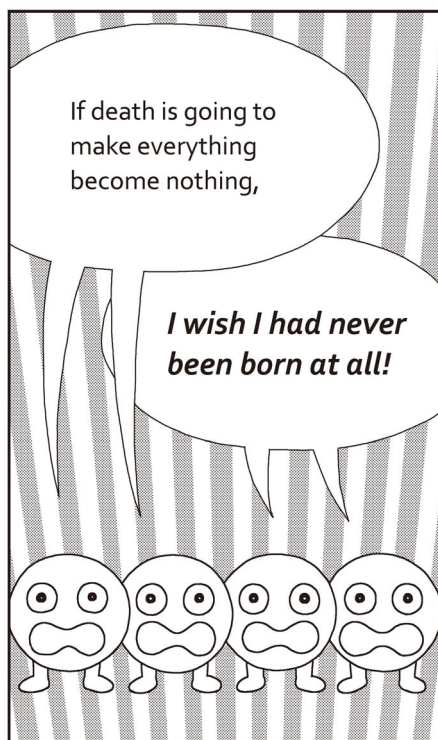
The first case in which the philosophy of Benatar was discussed at academic conferences was when I made a presentation entitled “Is There an Obligation to Produce Future Generations?” at a symposium of the 24th annual meeting of the Japanese Association for Bioethics held at Ritsumeikan University on October 27, 2012. The second case was Fumitake Yoshizawa’s presentation “Asymmetry Concerning the Value of Being Born: A Counter Proposal to D. Benatar’s Argument” at the 5th annual meeting of the Japan Association for the Contemporary and Applied Philosophy at Nanzan University on April 21, 2013. However, in both cases, the word “antinatalism” was not used in the

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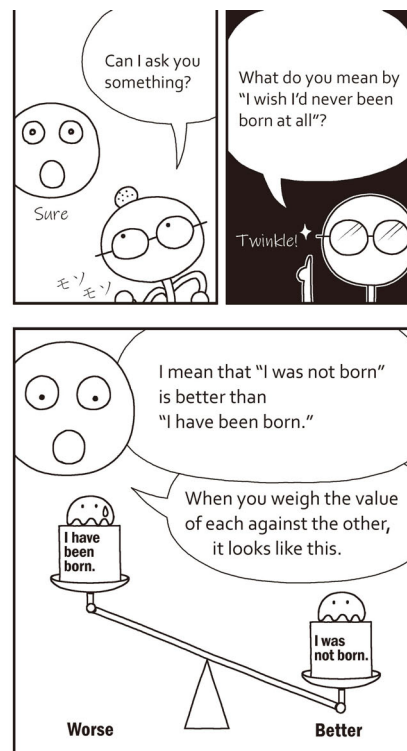
<sup>62</sup> Morioka (2013), p. 2.

presentations. In March 2014, Shinogu Yoshimoto published a Japanese paper entitled “Is Human Extinction Morally Appropriate?: David Benatar’s Theory of Harmful Birth and Hans Jonas’s Ethical Thought” in the philosophy journal *Gendai Seimei Tetsugaku Kenkyu*. This is a comparative study of the philosophies of Benatar and Jonas and is considered a pioneering work in this field. Yoshimoto uses the word “antinatalism” when talking about Benatar’s philosophy. This is perhaps the second case in which the word appeared in the printed media.<sup>63</sup>

In 2013, I published the book *Manga Introduction to Philosophy: An Exploration of Time, Existence, the Self, and the Meaning of Life* with cartoonist Nyancofu Terada. In Chapter 4 of the book, I discussed birth negation in antinatalism from a philosophical point of view. The following pictures are examples of such discussions in the English translation of the book:<sup>64</sup>



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<sup>63</sup> Yoshimoto (2014). A recent paper by Nao Murata (2021) is a comprehensive discussion of antinatalism from the perspective of philosophy of religion.

<sup>64</sup> Morioka and Terada (e2013, 2021), pp. 185-186.

In 2017, Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been* was translated by Kazuo Kojima and Takayoshi Tamura. With this publication, Benatar's arguments were available to a wider audience in Japan. The Real Argument Blog, a blog aiming at enlightening the public about antinatalism, was created on the Internet by anonymous (and possibly multiple) authors in 2017. They explicitly defined antinatalism as "the negation of procreation" and gave it the Japanese name "アンチナタリズム" (pronounced *anchi natarizumu*). This blog had a huge impact on the subsequent antinatalists on the Japanese Internet and Twitter. Antinatalist activism in Japan is considered to have become visible with the launch of this blog. They vigorously introduced articles and information on antinatalism that had been accumulated mainly in the English-speaking world. This blog expanded the scope of Japanese antinatalism to include not only humans but also sentient organisms. We can see the influence of EFILilism and veganism here. In their article "Introduction to Antinatalism: An Easy-to-understand Explanation of Antinatalism — What Antinatalism Is and What It Is Not," they define antinatalism as follows:

Antinatalism is the opposite position of natalism, which promotes having children. Antinatalists believe that people should not have children. The words "should not" usually mean that it is morally wrong, and therefore it must not be done.<sup>65</sup>

They define antinatalism as the position that "we should not have children." And as for "our having been born," they say the following:

Antinatalists are not lamenting the fact that they have been born. Some of them might be so, but that has nothing to do directly with the thought of antinatalism. As we explained at the beginning, antinatalism is "should not create," not the personal lament that "I wish I had never been born!"<sup>66</sup>

It is a little difficult to understand this statement, but it is clear that these authors refuse to equate antinatalism with the personal lament that "I wish I had never been born." However, it is not clear whether they believe that the proposition of

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<sup>65</sup> <http://therealarg.blogspot.com/2017/12/introduction-to-antinatalism.html> (Accessed April 10, 2021).

<sup>66</sup> <http://therealarg.blogspot.com/2017/12/introduction-to-antinatalism.html>

the harmful birth theory that “it is better not to be born” or “it would have been better not to have been born” is completely unrelated to antinatalism.

In any case, this declaration had a lot of power. It was the influence of this blog that led to the emergence of antinatalists who called themselves “アンチナタリスト” (the same meaning as antinatalist, pronounced *anchi natarisuto*). After this, the understanding that antinatalism is the idea that people should not have children became a standard interpretation among Japanese grassroots antinatalists. This can be proved by the fact that when someone uses the phrase “I wish I had never been born” in the sense of antinatalism on Twitter, it is immediately refuted by antinatalists, saying that it is not antinatalism.

In November 2019, the magazine *Gendai Shiso* (Contemporary Thought) published a special issue entitled “Considering Antinatalism: The Idea That It Would Have Been Better Never to Have Been Born,” which became the first book to feature the term “antinatalism” in its title. The focus of this special issue was philosophical examinations of the harmful birth theory using Benatar’s book as a starting point, and not much space was dedicated to the idea of anti-procreationism. This special issue became a hot topic in the reading world, and the public awareness of the term “antinatalism” advanced with the publication. The subtitle of this special issue, “The Idea That It Would Have Been Better Never to Have Been Born,” was taken from the title of Benatar’s book. The publication of the magazine may have helped broaden the understanding that antinatalism means birth negation, rather than procreation negation.

In 2020, my aforementioned book *Is It Better Never to Have Been Born?* was published. In this book, I pointed out that there are two aspects of antinatalism: birth negation and procreation negation. In this book, much emphasis was placed on the history of ideas of birth negation. An interview with me appeared on the web edition of the *Mainichi Newspaper* on January 2, 2021, which was the first time the term “antinatalism” appeared in a national newspaper headline (other than in a book review).

In January 2021, the Association of Anti-Procreationism in Japan was founded by Yuichi Furuno and Asagi Hozumi as a networking site for antinatalist activism in Japan. They state that they oppose “the creation of all beings that can feel pain.” They argue that all humans should not have children and should seek to become vegan. They also reject the production of sentient organisms by human hands, so it can be said that they have a broader

perspective than a type of antinatalism that targets only humans.

The above is an outline of the introduction process of the term “antinatalism” into Japan until April 2021. As we have seen so far, the meaning of the term “antinatalism” has fluctuated many times between “birth negation” and “procreation negation.”

It is also worth noticing that throughout Japanese history the idea of birth negation has not been a minor way of thinking. After Mahāyāna Buddhism was introduced in Japan in the 6th century, the reincarnation negation type of antinatalism became popular, and ordinary people believed the idea that this world was in its worst period. Many of them aspired to leave this hellish world and go to the pure land that is believed to exist in the western direction. This sentiment created an antinatalist layer in the traditional Japanese mindset. One hundred and fifty years ago, Japan opened its border and vigorously started importing Western ideas. The philosophy of Schopenhauer became popular among intellectuals and university students. Famous novelists such as Ryūnosuke Akutagawa and Osamu Dazai published novels that dealt with antinatalistic thoughts. Akutagawa wrote the Novel *Kappa* in 1927, in which the father of an imaginary creature, Kappa, puts his mouth on the genitals of the pregnant mother and talks to their fetus, “Reply to me whether you want to come out to this world!” and the fetus replies, “I do not want to be born because I do not want to inherit your mental illness and I believe that the existence of Kappa is bad.”<sup>67</sup> Dazai wrote the novel *The Setting Sun* in 1947, in which a protagonist says, “Human life is so miserable. In reality, everyone thinks that it is better we had never been born.” She goes on to say, “Every day, from morning till night, I am waiting for something that is not here. I am too miserable. I want to rejoice in life, in human beings, in the world, and I want to be glad that I have been born.”<sup>68</sup> Birth negation and birth affirmation have been among the most important themes in modern Japanese literature.

In the realm of contemporary subculture, the theme of antinatalism frequently appears in the works of manga and anime. George Akiyama describes in his manga *Ashura*,<sup>69</sup> published in 1970, the misery and resurrection of the life of a boy who cries alone, “I wish I had never been born. Gah!” (which is one of the most famous cries in the history of Japanese manga).

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<sup>67</sup> Akutagawa (1927, 1992), pp. 75-76.

<sup>68</sup> Dazai (1947, 2000), pp. 105-106.

<sup>69</sup> Akiyama (1970, 2006). *Ashura* is a Japanese translation of the Indian *Asura*.





© George Akiyama 1970. *Ashura*. Gentosha.

In the anime *Pocket Monsters: Mewtwo Strikes Back!*, released in 1998, Mewtwo, an artificially created Pokémon, says to humans, “Who asked you to give birth to me? Who asked you to make me? I have a strong grudge against all that have brought me into being,” and begins to fight back against humans.<sup>70</sup> This anime film became a big hit in Japan and other countries. In 2019, Mieko Kawakami published a novel entitled *Summer Stories*, which deals with the subject of antinatalism and reproductive ethics. In her novel, she lists Benatar’s book and one of my papers on antinatalism in the references.<sup>71</sup> Hajime Isayama’s manga series *Attack on Titan*, which was completed in April 2021, dealt heavily with antinatalistic thoughts in the last part of the story and made strong impressions on readers. One of the characters says, “If we hadn’t been born in the first place, we wouldn’t have had to suffer,”<sup>72</sup> and there were readers who interpreted it as an expression of antinatalism. I believe that these cultural backgrounds have facilitated the development of contemporary antinatalism in

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<sup>70</sup> Shudo (1998).

<sup>71</sup> Kawakami (2019).

<sup>72</sup> Isayama (2021).

Japan.

Finally, I would like to make two additional remarks.

Firstly, I am sometimes criticized by Japanese antinatalists that I am a pronatalist and have no interest in the ethics of procreation, but this is completely wrong. With regard to the first point (pronatalist), I have already pointed out that I published a paper that dealt with human extinction positively. With regard to the second point (ethics of procreation), I would like to add the fact that I conducted philosophical investigations of the concept of procreation, independently of the discussion of antinatalism. For example, in my book *Confessions of a Frigid Man: A Philosopher's Journey into the Hidden Layers of Men's Sexuality* (2005, 2017), I discussed childbirth as a key concept of male sexuality, and in my article "Philosophical Investigations on the Concept of Procreation" (2014), I examined the concept of "procreation" analytically, both of which were my original contributions to this topic.

Secondly, there are a lot of disagreements and fights in the antinatalist community on the Japanese Internet. 1) Antinatalists and anti-antinatalists sometimes accuse each other in offensive words. Some antinatalists accuse people who have procreated of practicing violence to their children; vice versa, some anti-antinatalists make derogatory remarks about antinatalists. The most common attack on antinatalists is, "Why don't you kill yourself?" 2) There is a conflict between vegan antinatalists and non-vegan antinatalists. The former argues that the suffering of all sentient beings, including humans, should be reduced, while the latter argues that antinatalism should be applied only to humans. 3) There is a conflict between antinatalists who deny intercourse and antinatalists who affirm intercourse. The former argues that no matter how much contraception is practiced, the possibility of pregnancy due to intercourse never becomes zero; therefore, intercourse should not be permitted. The latter argues that it is okay to have intercourse if you use contraceptives because you can have an abortion in case of emergency. 4) There are complex conflicts between antinatalists and feminists. Feminists criticize that male antinatalists do not take into account women's embodied experiences. Also, as for women's right to give birth, which is one of women's fundamental reproductive rights, feminists affirm it while antinatalists negate it. Furthermore, I once witnessed that on Twitter, when an antinatalist feminist accused men with offensive language, a non-antinatalist feminist criticized that antinatalist feminist's nasty words. 5) There is a conflict between antinatalists who support euthanasia and antinatalists

who believe that euthanasia and antinatalism should not be linked together. There are also various opinions on whether eugenics or eugenic thoughts should be linked to antinatalism.

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