

Antiantinatalism

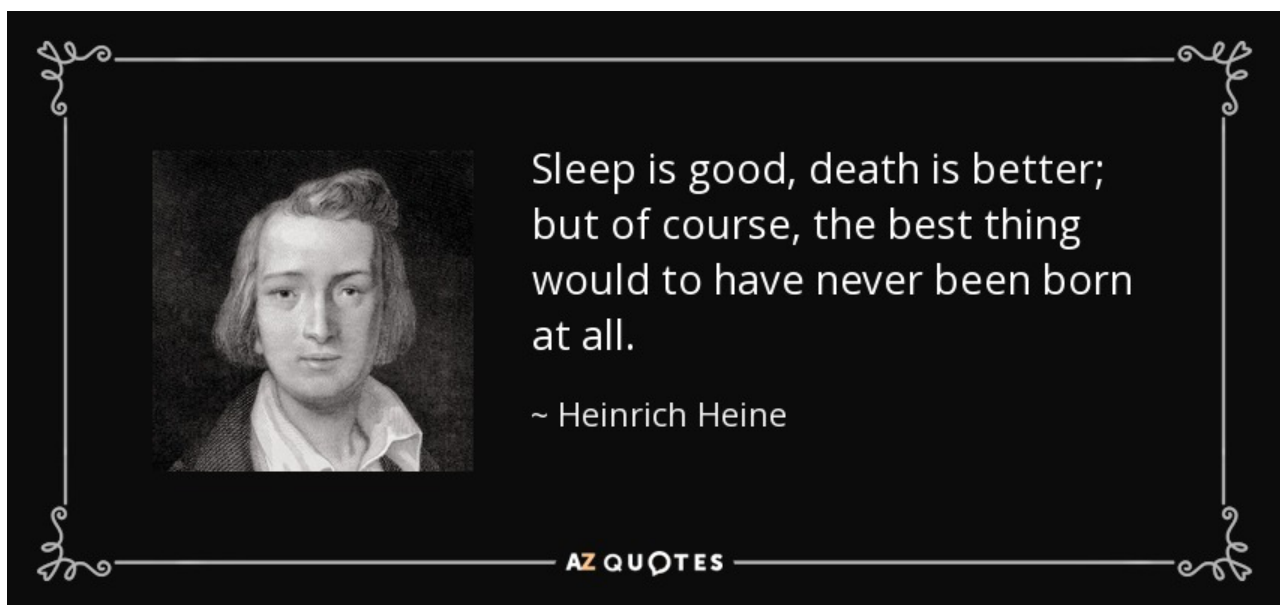
 putanumonit.com/2018/02/08/antiantinatalism/

View all posts by Jacob Falkovich

February 9, 2018

Does life suck? I think it does, somewhat. Others would say it sucks even worse than that. David Benatar thinks that life sucks so profoundly that bestowing it on anyone, like your child, is a grave crime. The antinatalist philosopher is having a moment: a profile in the New Yorker, an appearance on Sam Harris' podcast, and a reader emailing to ask me what I think of the case against being born.

I tried to make sense of antinatalism, and I think it's bad philosophy. But I also think it's bad *economics*, and plays on the widely held intuition that an extra person makes the rest of humanity worse off by taking up some space, some resources, some piece of the pie that would have gone to others. I hold that this zero-sum view is ignorant of the reality of the modern economy. Having children is good for the children, good for you, *and* good for the world.



Like a pirate cow, the philosophy of antinatalism stands on three legs:

1. Some conception of **negative utilitarianism**, i.e. the view that reducing suffering is the principal (or only) thing that matters morally, and that moderate pain weighs more than great joy.
2. The observation that life contains more bad things than good things.
3. A divide between existing and non-existing agents, and the assertion that the latter (i.e. unborn babies) have only an absolute preference to avoid the risk of any suffering, and no preference for enjoying anything at all.

I'll address these in order.

Negative utilitarianism

Negative utilitarianism isn't strictly necessary for the antinatalist argument, which is lucky for them because it's a pretty incoherent philosophy. However, antinatalists sometimes sneak it in by implication. For example, the reader asked me if I'll take 5 minutes of the worst pain imaginable for an hour of the greatest pleasure. Benatar presented Harris with a similar trade-off: would Sam be willing to have children and grandchildren who will lead lives of hardship if that will ensure a bright future for countless descendants after that?

Both questions expected an answer in the negative, and yet my answer to both is that I most certainly would.

Regarding the first question: evolution hasn't made great pleasure as accessible to us as it has made pain. Fitness advantages from things like a good meal accumulate slowly but a single injury can drop one's fitness to zero, so the pain of an injury is felt stronger than the joy of pizza. But even pizza, though quite an achievement, is far from the greatest pleasure *imaginable*.

Humankind has only recently begun exploring the landscape of bliss, compared to our long evolutionary history of pain. If you can't imagine a pleasure great enough to make the trade-off worthwhile, consider that you may be falling prey to the availability heuristic. Pain is a lot more plentiful and salient, but it's not a lot more important. The fact that pleasure is rare should only make it *more* valuable when offsetting pain, and an hour is a lot longer than 5 minutes.

As for the question about children and distant descendants, answering it negatively seems to me rather selfish. Should my goal be to avoid only that suffering which I can be blamed for and have to deal with? As a parent, I'm going to spend countless hours ensuring a better life for my children, while probably doing little to directly impact the far future. I'd be happy to balance this equation out a bit.

Life is net negative

The contention that life contains more suffering than happiness has to deal with the fact that almost everyone who's alive finds their life worth living. A big part of that is life looking much better in retrospect than in the moment: we remember both pleasures and ordeals fondly, the latter as meaningful, character-building experiences.

Pessimist philosophers are tempted to discount this positive reminiscing as an illusion, but it's as real as any other experience. All bliss and agony ultimately matter only as they are experienced in our subjective consciousness, whether we're reflecting on something happening around us in the moment or something we went through years before.

I don't see a good reason to separate the experiencing self from the remembering self by assigning one of them greater moral weight. A life's experience is just an integral over momentary experiencing selves, and in each moment I can choose whether to focus on immediate sensations or reflect on the past.

Taking seriously the position that life is not worth living should lead one to a philosophy of extinctionism – the stance that it would be pretty great if all humans died in their sleep tonight. On the podcast, Benatar desperately tried to wriggle out of the implication that antinatalism leads to extinctionism, and I’m not sure why. As my friend remarked: if you’re biting bullets, don’t just *nibble* on them.

Non-existing agents

To escape extinctionism, Benatar draws a sharp boundary between existing agents who have an interest in living and non-existing agents who have only an interest in avoiding suffering. Sam Harris reasonably took issue with this arbitrary assertion made on behalf of the non-existent. But as with experiencing vs. remembering, I want to attack the idea of the boundary itself between existing and non-existing agents.

I plan to get rich slowly because I want Jacob.2048 to have more money than he otherwise would have. But is Jacob.2048 an “existing agent”? I have some guesses about Jacob.2048’s interests, but the only thing I’m sure about is that the two of us will have different attitudes on many issues, like the making and spending of money, or moral philosophy. I changed my mind on those topics a lot just in recent years, but I’m still thankful for Jacob.2013 for making mostly good choices.

I know more about Jacob.2048 than I do about my unborn great-grandchildren, but less than I know about myself. Jacob.2048 is certainly less “existing” than I am: his preferences are uncertain, as is his actual physical existence – I could get hit by a bus tomorrow and all my sacrifices for future me will be to no one’s benefit. I care for Jacob.2048 the same way I care about my yet-unborn children, by anticipating what their preferences would be *when they’ll actually be around to have those preferences*. Calling one of them “existing” and the other not seems like a strange distinction to make.



Society thrives on trade simply because trade makes specialization possible, and specialization increases output, and increased output reduces the cost in toil for the satisfactions men live by. That being so, the market place is a most humane institution.

— Frank Chodorov —

AZ QUOTES

Imagine a planet just like ours, but with only 100,000 people on it. Let this group comprise the assembled best experts from every field, and let them be fully devoted to cooperating for the benefit of all. How good would their lives be, all by themselves on an uncrowded planet? You may be imagining a paradise, each person enjoying a life of luxury on their own huge estate in the midst of unspoiled nature.

I'm imagining a world without pencils.

It takes a lot more than 100,000 people to make a pencil. The graphite miner, the driver of the logging truck, the lacquer chemist, the pencil company accountant, each one makes a small and highly specialized contribution that makes the billions of pencils available to everyone who wants them. It's possible that 100,000 experts could make a pencil if they devoted all their resources to it, but then none of them could afford it.

How many people does it take to make a lightbulb? Or antibiotics? Or sour cream and onion Pringles?

Free trade allows workers to specialize, and specialized workers can create a lot more wealth than people who have to meet all their needs themselves. A cobbler who has to grow their own food is a lot worse off than a cobbler who can trade a pair of shoes for pizza. But they still have to tan their own leather, unless a third person joins who can specialize in doing just that. Every person added to the network may feel that their own job is becoming ever less consequential, but in fact, the benefits of integration keep growing as the size of the network grows.

With a billion people integrated into the global economy, we managed to produce solutions to most direct causes of suffering: food, medicine, power and sewage, porn. Add in a couple more billion, and we moved on to directly providing pleasure: video games, craft beers, great soap.

The fruits of the modern economy aren't distributed equally, but both the number and the percentage of people who have access to the good stuff has kept growing inexorably for a couple of centuries now. The more people there are, the more the wealth gets spread.

Having more people doesn't just allow for specialization of work, it also means specialization of fun. In ancient times, like in 1932 Philadelphia, your potential dating pool consisted of a single-digit number of people. Today, I can pick my wife out of thousands of OkCupid profiles in New York, which is itself a strongly filtered population. I'm much more specialized in making my wife happy than the best dude she could pick out of a lineup of 10.

Increasing population can be bad in Malthusian scenarios, but today there isn't a single resource that we're using anywhere close to its limit. There's enough potential energy in the sun and the nuclei of atoms, enough water in the seas, enough room, enough food, enough air. The only resource that's stretched thin is capable people that can make all that stuff happen.

If you're reading this, you're probably an educated person in a developed country, and your children almost certainly will be. You have every reason to believe that your children's lives will be better than your own, and that by joining the global economy they'll contribute to making everyone better off in ways we can't even imagine yet.

And if you're reading this, you're much more likely to be the kind of person who will personally be happier for having children, especially if you follow a few simple guidelines.

Now stop procrastinating on the internet and go make babies!