

Did Antinatalism Precede Philosophy?

Abstract: The interview given by Matti Häyry, PhD, Professor of Philosophy of Management at the Aalto University School of Business. Prof. Häyry has been involved in reproductive ethics and antinatalist philosophy since 1984. His 2004 [A rational cure for prereproductive stress syndrome](#) is considered to be the first expression of the so-called risk argument against procreation. His most recent publications on the topic, with Amanda Sukenick, include [Imposing a lifestyle: A new argument for antinatalism](#) and [Antinatalism, Extinction, and the End of Procreative Self-Corruption](#). The origin and evolution of his views have been chronicled in detail on [The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast](#), especially in its episode #65 and in episodes #1, #2 and #3 of its subchannel [Hankikanto – Falling into the Anti/Natal Abyss](#).

Keywords: antinatalism, ethics, history, life, morality, procreation, rationality, reproduction, risk.



Konrad Szocik: You are one of the main representatives of antinatalist philosophy. Could you present your understanding of antinatalism? Which of the antinatalist arguments do you consider the most crucial?

Matti Häyry: I may be one of the main representatives of antinatalist philosophy but I have been aware of it only for a year or two. I published twenty years ago an article arguing that having children is irrational and immoral, and I returned to the topic sporadically, but it took an antinatalist activist, Amanda Sukenick, to invite me to a podcast interview and offer collaboration to get me up to speed. So I am still trying to understand what is what.

When I am at my most cautious, I say that, instead of an antinatalist, I am an [antinatalist philosopher](#). That, to me, means that I do not have children, that I do not intend to have children, and that I would have nothing against everybody else acting like me in this respect. When I let my caution go a little, I say that I would be pleased to see everybody else acting like me in this respect. There is a slight hint of Kantian ethics in the latter.

The next step would be to say outright that everybody has a duty to abstain from reproduction. But although I do have grounds for that I usually limit myself to saying that there is a very strong prima facie case to abstain but there can be mitigating factors. I have used a very complicated two-value-conflict-responsive-negative-utilitarian [theory](#) to justify that evasive view.

If asked what antinatalism more generally is, I have different answers on different levels. The most general is that antinatalism means being against reproduction on moral grounds. This leaves all the specifics to be determined later and only makes the claim that one should be opposed to organic or machine self-replication. The next one defines antinatalism as the philosophy and

social movement that questions reproduction. Nothing much added to the previous one, just the explicit inclusion of both theory and practice.

The most complex definition that I currently have in mind states that antinatalism means the abstinence from bringing or refusal to bring or prevention of bringing into existence sentience or life or objects of manipulation or hegemonic power. But that is for more advanced purposes within antinatalist scholarship.

The standard justifications for antinatalism are that all lives are bad (the person in the street disagrees), that we do not have the permission of those we are planning to bring into existence (philosophers point out that we do not have their permission not to bring them into existence, either), and that the future individual could have a horrible life.

My [article](#) twenty years ago gave the first official formulation of the last one, known as the risk argument for antinatalism. I am still working to hone it – that latest version, the Omelas argument, appears in *Antinatalism, Extinction, and the End of Procreative Self-Corruption* that I just [published](#) with Amanda Sukenick.

Konrad Szocik: The decision to procreate is perhaps the most important decision of one's life, because of its effects both on the reproducers and those brought into the world. Yet both non-philosophical people and even philosophers pay surprisingly little attention to it – or none at all. What do you think this is due to?

Matti Häyry: Reproduction is a very normal part of normal human lives, and most people want to have normal human lives. The model is culturally ingrained into our minds and difficult to avoid or fight. As for philosophers, however, I have an important revelation for you.

The first part of our book tells the story of antinatalism and its foes in European thinking, and we claim that Western philosophy since Plato is in fact just a long string of critical reactions to antinatalism. The underlying current in our culture is the lack of meaning in human lives, well detected by ancient Greeks. Our existence does not have a cosmic purpose, so why bring new beings into this valley of shadows?

Plato answered with a belief-defying myth about a demiurge who built the world out of imperfect materials and left us in charge to complete the job. The same idea is repeated, with variations, by Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, George Berkeley, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and many others. So philosophers – and theologians – have been extremely interested in reproduction; and one of their main jobs has been to justify bringing new sufferers into existence.

Konrad Szocik: What, in your opinion, are the advantages of antinatalist philosophy? And can you imagine the possibility of antinatalist education? Or antinatalist counseling?

Matti Häyry: The only advantage of antinatalist philosophy – remember who you are talking to – is that it is the only one that recognizes the truth. There is no meaning. Meaningless future suffering is inevitable if new lives are brought into existence. Wake up, world! Open your eyes!

Mind you, I was just [presenting](#) my views in a philosophical research seminar in Helsinki and experienced a revelation of my own. The host, after some hesitation, accepted that philosophers create theoretical narratives, and that the point of these narratives is to enable the continuation of human existence. He saw this as a triumph, though. Philosophy is the thin blue line between antinatalist chaos and pronatalist normalcy. I was stunned. But I suppose you can see it that way, if you are adamant about the survival of humankind for now.

You ask about antinatalist education and counseling. Maybe, but it is early days yet. People are only just beginning to realize that reproduction is (the availability of contraception) and should be (the recognition of procreative autonomy) in their own hands and that there is a certain responsibility attached to that. Some of them are already questioning reproduction in a horrible

world like [ours is](#) or [is becoming](#). Others are challenging traditional family models and lean towards adoption and childlessness. The future does hold promise for at least to a degree of antinatalism.

Konrad Szocik: Finally, I would like to ask you about the war in Ukraine. Can this war inspire some new philosophical and ethical reflections on, for example, human suffering, the fragility of life, unpredictability?

Matti Häyry: I think it would be terribly callous to think of the war in Ukraine as an opportunity for philosophical or moral growth. But this may be due to my antinatalist philosophy. I am more than a little allergic to the idea that suffering caused by dictatorial delusions of grandeur ennoble us collectively or individually.