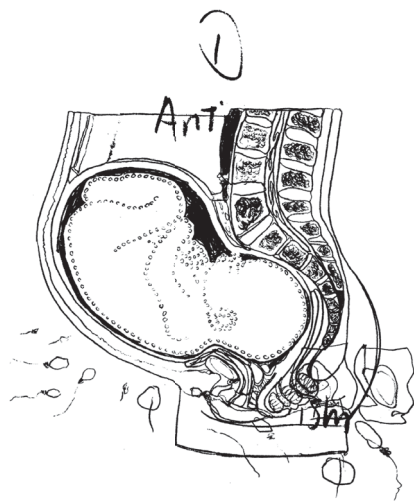


## Antinatalism

*A world without us*

by Trine Riel



In about five billion years, the Earth will meet its end in fire. As astrophysicist Katie Mack predicts, “the Sun will swell to its red giant phase, engulf the orbit of Mercury and perhaps Venus, and leave the Earth a charred, lifeless, magma-covered rock. Even this sterile smouldering remnant is likely fated to eventually spiral into the Sun’s outer layers and disperse its atoms in the churning atmosphere of the dying star.” In the meantime, visions of more imminent ends occupy the public imagination. Climatic disasters, collapsed ecosystems, mass extinction—it is believed that these future devastations, unlike the coming cosmic apocalypse, are to be the consequences of human behaviour and, as such, are preventable. According to widely cited academic reports, the most impactful actions an individual may take in order to offset their personal carbon footprint are: abstain from long flights and owning a car; eat predominantly plant-based foods; and at number one on the list, have fewer children. In high-consumption societies such as the US, the total emissions reduction of a single child not brought into the world is equivalent to 684 teenagers taking up comprehensive recycling for the rest of their lives. Despite the questionable logic of these equations, the idea that the human race could be in danger of breeding itself into oblivion has led to debate among the more privileged sections of the world’s population, for whom having children is a matter of choice and having none is a viable option. Considering the strain every individual lays upon the Earth’s resources, is it responsible to contribute to an already swelling population? And on a more existential level, can prospective parents defend the choice to bring new persons into a world of increasingly disastrous conditions for life?

As Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez asked her three million Instagram followers while chopping vegetables in her kitchen, “there’s a scientific consensus that the lives of children are going to be very difficult. . . is it still ok to have children?” But there are also those who have always felt that life per se is excruciatingly difficult, that it is never ok to have children, not now, not ever. As Gustave Flaubert exclaimed: “The idea of bringing someone into this world fills me with horror. . . May my flesh perish utterly! May I never transmit to anyone the aggravations and ignominies of existence.”

In 2019, Mumbai businessman Raphael Samuel, 27, made headlines when he attempted to sue his parents for having brought him into existence without his consent. His parents, Samuel explained to the BBC, had cared only for their own desire for a child, showing no consideration for the discomfort their offspring would have to endure. In response to her son’s charges, Samuel’s mother, a lawyer, warned: “I will destroy you in court”.

Samuel’s stunt brought attention to the until recently niche philosophical genre of antinatalism, literally ‘against birth’. Based on a passionate sympathy towards human suffering that borders on intolerance to it, antinatalists consider the value of existence to be highly overestimated. Life, in fact, is so bad, containing so much more pain than pleasure, that the sum of suffering in the world far outweighs that

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of happiness. “I’m not in denial that life contains good things,” explained David Benatar, Professor of Philosophy and Head of the Bioethics Centre at the University of Cape Town, in an interview with the New Yorker. But “unpleasantness and suffering are too deeply written into the structure of sentient life to be eliminated.” Benatar’s surprisingly popular book ‘Better never to have been: *The Harm of Coming Into Existence*, which was nominated for the Diagram Prize of Oddest Title of the Year, attempts a sober although fairly reductive argument for why we would all have been better off not having been born, and hence, why there exists a moral imperative to not procreate. While the views of Benatar and his peers may appear misanthropic in the extreme, their goal is ultimately altruistic: to avoid the infliction of harm upon future human beings and to lessen the suffering in the world at large. The strategy for bringing this about is simple. Every person must make the compassionate choice to stop breeding. And while antinatalism is currently resonating with a rising number of young people especially, the ideas are far from new. Arthur Schopenhauer, the most fashionable philosopher of late 19th century Europe, asked in all seriousness: “If the act of procreation were neither the outcome of desire nor accompanied by feelings of pleasure, but a matter to be decided on the basis of purely rational considerations, would the human race continue to exist? Would each of us not rather have felt so much pity for the coming generation as to prefer to spare it the burden of existence, or at least not wish to take it upon himself to impose that burden upon it in cold blood?”

On HBO, the grim news of Antinatalism reached millions of viewers via Matthew McConaughey in the hit series *True Detective*. In the role of homicide detective Rustin Cohle, he diagnosed our dire predicament, as condemned creatures labouring under the illusion of sense and purpose, with a heroic call to all: “I think the honourable thing for our species to do is to deny our programming, stop reproducing, walk hand in hand into the dark night of extinction, one last midnight, brothers and sisters opting out of a raw deal”. Cohle’s depressive monologues were heavily inspired by the renowned horror writer Thomas Ligotti’s non-fiction book, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, which subsequently became one of the most unexpected Amazon bestsellers. Ligotti’s presentation of life as not only pointless but malignantly useless is dedicated to the obscure Norwegian mountaineer and existentialist philosopher, Peter Wessel Zapffe, whose short essay from 1933, *The Last Messiah*, has become akin to holy scripture for antinatalist thought. Human existence, according to Zapffe, is nothing but the chronic spasm of a reeling, defunct species whose surplus of consciousness has made it unfit for life. Zapffe compares our situation to that of the *Cervus giganteus*, a giant deer of the paleontological era, thought to have gone extinct due to its antlers becoming too large. The overdeveloped human intellect, which Zapffe calls “an abomination, an absurdity, an exaggeration of disastrous nature”, can in a similar way be seen as the result of a blind, and

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highly unfortunate, organic mutation—unfortunate because it makes life existentially unbearable and, in the end, categorically unsustainable. As the only available cure, *The Last Messiah* recommends a gradual phase-out. A final emancipation from our blind organic instincts in a victorious route to self-chosen oblivion. “The life of the worlds is a roaring river, but the Earth’s is a stagnant pool. The mark of annihilation is written on your brow—how long will you keep fighting the inevitable? But there is one victory and one crown, one redemption and one solution. Know yourself—be infertile and let the earth be silent after you.”

Dreams of the Earth without us are shared by many other preachers of anti-birth. ‘Save the planet, kill yourself’ is the slogan of The Church of Euthanasia. An avant-gardist group based on one command, ‘Thou shalt not procreate’, and four additional pillars: abortion, suicide, cannibalism and sodomy. The motto of The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement is slightly more upbeat: ‘May we live long and die out’. The movement identifies as people “who care about life on planet Earth” and see voluntary human extinction as “the humanitarian alternative to human disasters.” Driving this mission is a utopian fantasy of Earth returned to a bountiful former state, the total cleansing of the biosphere and restoration of a lost paradise before we entered the picture. While antinatalism gives negative value to the human experience of existence, extinctionists view the human race as a parasitic presence, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Our species may be seen as a foul skin disease upon the Earth’s surface, or on a larger scale, as a

“blemish upon the cosmos that ought to be eradicated”, in the words of H.P. Lovecraft.

No less dramatic is a fragment from the Greek Gospel of the Egyptians. “I have come to destroy the work of women”, says Jesus. The ‘work of women’ meaning the ability to grow and birth children. Despite the vehement pro-life stance of the church today, early Christian literature is full of antinatalist sentiments. Saint Augustine, for example, took care to explain why it is “utterly foolish” to undergo the burdensome tribulation of bodily reproduction, since, in this day and age, “no service is done to Christ’s future coming by begetting offspring for him through the progeny of the flesh”. He goes on to describe how nothing would please him more than the discontinuation of sexual intercourse everywhere and hence the end of all life on Earth, because “Then the city of God would be filled much more speedily, and the end of the world would be hastened”. As the philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard rationalises “If, as Christianity teaches, this world is a sinful world that lieth in wickedness,” it follows that “the one who from a Christian standpoint is a good citizen, is, if I dare say so, the one who does not perpetuate this sinful race.” The goal of a truly devoted, uncompromising Christianity is an attempt to, as Kierkegaard puts it, “block” reproduction of the human species.

God made the most gifted people gay, Oscar Wilde quipped, in order that they may concentrate on loftier matters than the chores of marriage and child rearing. Nobel Prize nominee Karen Blixen agreed, proclaiming that no one reaches the pinnacles of art with a baby buggy in tow. The idea of the childfree lifestyle as befitting intellectually superior types was shared by those ancient Greek philosophers who would much rather pursue the love of wisdom within homosocial communities than reproductive love-making within marriage. As pedagogically explained by the woman Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*, one of the most influential works ever written on the topic of erotic love, while physical procreation for sure is “divine business”, there are also those whose minds are far more pregnant than their bodies. What they give birth to is mental offspring—like the great works of poets or philosophers that are left to eternity. This is the kind of procreation that is really to be admired and even envied: “We’d all prefer to have children of this sort rather than the human kind.”

A more radical take on a lifestyle without human heirs is exemplified by the Greek Cynics, lawless outsiders of Athenian philosophy. Most infamous of the Cynics is eternal bachelor Diogenes, “the dog”. Living on the streets, where in accordance with the Cynic maxim that no thing natural can be shameful, he masturbated and defecated wherever and whenever he wanted, Diogenes was keen to demonstrate a free existence: a life lived in fierce rejection of societal norms and indifference to discomfures of any kind. Family life was not only incommensurable with the Cynic ideal of autonomy and detachment, but antagonistically opposed to it. As Diogenes allegedly stated: “Whoever trusts us [the Cynics] will remain single. Those who do not trust us will rear children. And if the human species should one day cease to exist, there should be as much cause for regret as there should be if flies and wasps should pass away.”

Whether animated by dreams of a different life, an afterlife or no life at all, the history of antinatalist thought in the West inevitably leads back to a tragic revelation, known to the Greeks as the Wisdom of Silenus. As formulated by Sophocles:

“What foolishness it is to desire more life, after one has tasted a bit of it and seen the world; for each day, after each endless day, piles up ever more misery into a mound. . . Never to be born is the best thing. To have seen the daylight and be swept instantly back into dark oblivion comes second.”<sup>78</sup>