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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The End of Sentience

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Abstract

While David Benatar's 2006 book *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* remains the most influential formulation of contemporary academic antinatalism, numerous other iterations, both academic and nonacademic, have emerged since its publication. These newer forms reflect differing styles, motivations, and normative commitments across a range of issues, none more contentious than the question of what duties human antinatalists may hold toward nonhuman animals or life more broadly. This debate has produced a significant division within antinatalisms. Anthropocentric forms endorse the voluntary extinction of humanity while allowing other life to continue. Sentiocentric forms recommend the eventual extinction of all sentient life. While humans could voluntarily choose to cease reproducing, sentiocentric antinatalism implies, sometimes explicitly requires, active human intervention to end the reproduction of other sentient beings, potentially involving coercion or violence. This paper builds upon Patricia MacCormack's critique of Benatarian antinatalism and efilism in her 2020 book *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene.* By widening the scope of inquiry to include multiple antinatalist traditions, the analysis maps how and why some formulations of antinatalism come to endorse forceful or promortalist positions aimed at achieving the extinction of certain, even all, species.

Keywords: antinatalism; David Benatar; efilism; extinction; sentiocentrism

Introduction: Better never to kill?

Contemporary antinatalism is not a single, unified doctrine but a diverse and evolving philosophical landscape, spanning an increasing number of both academic and nonacademic forms.[1,2,3] While all antinatalists share a fundamental opposition to human procreation, they diverge sharply on many issues —most notably on the ethical responsibilities humans may bear toward nonhuman animals, sentient beings in general, and beyond.[4]

Before David Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence* (2006),[5] antinatalist thinking largely focused on human reproduction and the inherent harms of human life. Forms of antinatalism that recommend human-only extinction are often colloquially referred to as anthropocentric antinatalism.[6] These iterations range widely in their consideration of other species—some disregard nonhuman animals entirely, others adopt rigorous commitments to animal welfare and veganism, and a few others advocate that nonhuman animals inherit the Earth following human extinction.

However, Benatar's formulation of the doctrine—often referred to as Benatarian antinatalism—marked several dramatic shifts. Not only did Benatar coin[7] for the first time in known history a term for the concept of morally grounded antiprocreation, but he also generated some of its most influential contemporary arguments, the Benatarian *axiological asymmetry* chiefly among them.[8] Most contentious, though, was Benatar's extended scope of antinatalist concern to include the suffering of all sentient beings, thereby creating the first known, fully developed form of what is sometimes called sentiocentric antinatalism.

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Twenty years since the publication of *Better Never to Have Been*, two of the most important versions of antinatalism to emerge are the anthropocentric academic antinatalism of continental philosopher Patricia MacCormack's *ahumanism*, as described in her book, *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism At The End of The Anthropocene*,[9] and the infamous nonacademic, sentiocentric *efilism*,[10] which grew out of the YouTube videos of Inmendham.[11]

While the ethical contours of antinatalism remain deeply contested among pro-natalists, philosophers, bioethicists, and others who have come to know of antinatalism since the dawn of its growing media presence,[12,13] the most philosophically generative frictions often arise not between natalists and antinatalists, but within antinatalism itself—particularly where anthropocentric and sentiocentric commitments, axiologies, and norms collide.

Efilism poses an interesting challenge. If humans die out through antinatalism, should it then be the duty of humanity, as the only beings who could intervene, to end the suffering of the rest of sentient life before we are gone, even if it meant ending those lives?

Most anthropocentric and sentiocentric forms of antinatalism alike, Benatar's included, find this notion to be abhorrent. It is not at all hard to understand why these tensions have created hostility between the various groups that espouse or advocate for either endmost conclusion—in their most extreme binaries, the possible choices represent paternalism versus autonomy, reductionism versus vitalism, philosophy versus activism, and total Kantian pacifism versus negative utilitarian benevolent omnicide.

In *The Ahuman Manifesto*, MacCormack provocatively claims that David Benatar is an "Efilist Philosopher."[14] This is a categorization that, though technically inaccurate, highlights the conceptual and ethical overlaps of Benatarian antinatalism and efilism and reveals a weakness in Benatar's theory neutrality,[15] leaving the door wide open to all manner of axiological and normative interpretations. The resulting blurring effect between sentiocentric antinatalist manifestations in the eyes of anthropocentric antinatalist varieties like MacCormack's is a predicament that I have previously called, Benatarian Efilism.[16]

Through an analysis of a wide range of different antinatalist philosophies, positions, identities, and iterations, this paper will examine how anthropocentric and sentiocentric forms of antinatalism alike often end up advocating the use of some type of force, and how it could be argued that the more antinatalism expands its scope of concern, particularly when coupled with its propensity for activism, the more it risks endorsing forceful or ever promortalist interventions, whether acknowledged or not. Can consistent, suffering-focused, extinctionist antinatalism remain nonviolent? Or are forceful and deliberate actions to end some or all suffering an inevitability of antinatalism? And what does this mean for the future of antinatalist thought and action?

Better never to eat them

While these internal ideological wars within antinatalism are mainly waged in the realm of online, nonacademic, informal groups, some of these divides have crossed over into academia, as various collaborations between academic antinatalist philosophers, and nonacademic antinatalist activists, artists, and influencers have increased.[17,18] Few academic thinkers, however, have driven head on into this collision more provocatively than Patricia MacCormack, whose *Ahuman Manifesto* offers a striking critique of efilism's prescription for wild animal intervention, which she believes to be the prohibited logic of "efilist philosopher,"[19] David Benatar.

Despite her critical distance, MacCormack begins *her continued commentary on efilism in The Ahuman Manifesto*, by identifying a radical yet familiar ethical promise in efilism's uncompromising commitment to suffering reduction. She writes:

> Efilism's redeeming feature is that it promotes antinatalism, and often veganism, in its aspirations to a reduction in suffering, and this attitude promises potentials for opening the world through the cessation of the human.[20]

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At first glance, this seems to be a rather generous appraisal of what MacCormack *perceives to be efilism's more offsetting factors*. Despite their many differences, efilism and ahumanism do have much in common, not only in their firm antinatalist and vegan principles but also in that they each affirm the ethical centrality of extinction, and are arguably the two most overtly influential of the contemporary iterations of the doctrine to also combine these positions with activism[21] and art.[22]

The conceptual entwinement of antinatalism and veganism significantly predates their articulation in more contemporary academic or nonacademic incarnations. The writings of eleventh-century Syrian poet Abu al-Ala al-Ma'arri, for instance, combined an austere veganism with a pronounced antinatalist stance. In one well-known verse, he condemns the exploitation of nonhuman animals, urging abstention from flesh, dairy, eggs, and even honey on the grounds that such consumption constitutes injustice against sentient life.[23] In a separate poem, he declares, with a *surprising level of anthropocentric extinctionism:*

> It is better for a people, instead of multiplying, to perish off the face of the earth.[24]

Such historical precedents underscore a longstanding impulse to link dietary and reproductive abstention as mutually resonant ethical refusals, and in a sense, MacCormack's ahumanism could be seen as the contemporary inflection of al-Maʿarri's ancient ethical gestures.

Drawing from a lineage of continental and posthumanist thinkers—Gilles Deleuze,[25] Felix Guattari,[26] and Jean-François Lyotard[27] among them—MacCormack's veganism is a refusal not only of human-centered moral hierarchical frameworks—it is abolitionist in the strongest sense. A complete and uncompromising cessation intended to render human society obsolete. For MacCormack, antinatalism and veganism are acts of esthetic and ethical sabotage against malzoan[28] systems of harm.

> No individual's self-stylization, vegan or not, trend-follower or not, posthuman or not, can argue with the murder on the plate. There is simply no way to turn this into a symbol without denying the nonhuman their material living. Abolitionist vegans are not accusers. They may bear witness and make the malzoan without denying the nonhuman their material living. Abolitionist account, but the act has occurred. The victim is on the plate, in the zoo, in the laboratory, starving in their decimated environment, hanging on the wall, worn on the human body.[29]

In addition to ahumanism, efilism, and a few other notable historical examples like al-Maʿarri, the connection between animal rights and antinatalism, while controversial, can be equally central to many forms of both anthropocentric and sentiocentric antinatalism. With some exception,[30] nearly all, David Benatar included,[31] of the most prominent antinatalist philosophers are vegan, and other nonacademic antinatalist activist identities, like Vegantinatalism[32] and Aponism,[33] continue to emerge and thrive in online spaces.

The inherent antinatalism of abolitionist veganism reflects a conscious objection to any participation in factory farming or other practices that exploit nonhuman animals, encapsulating the central duty of antinatalism not to create new lives, for moral agents not to create moral patience, not to perpetuate or contribute to suffering, and not to create other sentient beings.

However, efilism's stance on veganism, while perfectly adamant, may quickly begin to resemble something MacCormack finds less than *redeemable after all.* According to Inmendham, life can be understood as four interlinked forces: consumption, reproduction, cannibalism,[34] and addiction. Of these, addiction functions as our primary motivator of desire, binding need and want to nearly all human behavior, including natalism and carnism. These drives exploit and obligate us, often against our reflective interests, and to the extent that we recognize their influence, we may diminish their grip, thereby reducing both our own suffering and the harms we inflict on others.

Addictions are not easily overcome, however, and attempting to do so often involve suffering. Efilism acknowledges this with empathy. It is bad not to have what you desire, even if what you desire is bad.[35] While it might be best and necessary that we work to overcome these needs no matter the discomfort, the

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sincerity of conviction outweighs one's ability to consistently enact the principle. Efilism does not place an ethical onus in punishing addicts for their inability to become unaddicted:

> Yeah. Somebody can be an animal empy-ithist, and still be an animal eater. […] I mean, you can want lots of things that you physically aren't capable of being obedient to. […] So, I don't even have a problem with somebody being antinatalist and having a kid tomorrow. […] I just care that you understand the principle. […] Whether or not you're able to be a good soldier or not, that's not really what I care about. I just care that you want to be. Do you want to be? Well, that's all that matters.[36]

Finally, McCormack's phrase, "opening the world," is drawn from her 2020 essay, Embracing Death, Opening the World.[37] For ahumanism, this means freeing the nonhuman animals from the existence of people, but for efilism, the only way to open the world is by closing the door to that world forever, through the cessation of humans, animals, and all else that could ever have the capacity and possibility of feeling.

All sentient creatures, except for them—Definitional sleight of hand?

Shattering the notion of a fragile truce between these opposing antinatalisms is the subtle implication that can be drawn from McCormack's statement—that though efilism redeems itself by "promoting" positions like veganism and antinatalism, it does so only as something *other* than as a form of antinatalism itself. This indication is further corroborated within a slightly earlier paper written by MacCormack, in which she directly claims that

> Similarly, antinatalism is not efilism which hijacks Buddhist philosophy by claiming all life is suffering so all life must cease.[38]

From this passage, a reasonable question then emerges: What is antinatalism? If efilism is a form of antinatalism, then antinatalism itself carries with it a set of radical implications that for many, untenably complicate its ethics. And if MacCormack's statement is true—that efilism is not in fact antinatalism, and that one can only at best "Promote" the other, they what are antinatalisms definitional boundaries, and how have these boundaries been negotiated previously and currently?

Though no known scholarly study of the history of the word antinatalism has yet been conducted, the history of defining antinatalism is simultaneously both a long and short one. No antinatalist philosopher had defined the term until David Benatar at last posited his own in 2024, and the word remained outside of any known English dictionary until the same year, when it was finally defined by Cambridge.

> *anti-natalism noun* (also antinatalism) UK/ˌæn.tiˈneɪ.təl.ɪ.zəm/ US/ˌæn.tiˈneɪ.ţəl.ɪ.zəm/
> the belief that it is morally wrong to have children or that people should be encouraged not to have children:
>
> - Antinatalism, the belief that it is morally wrong to have kids, often comes from the negative perspective that all life is suffering.
> - Antinatalism may sometimes be motivated by environmental concerns.[39]

The Oxford English Dictionary[40] indicates that the first usage of the word "antinatalist," arrived in Katherine Organski and A.F.K Organski 1961 book, *Population and World Power*.[41] The second time it is used, on page 191, seems to indicate something resembling a definition for the word at that time.

> It [an antinatalist policy] would thus aim at improving conditions where they are bad without imposing any serious handicap or sacrifice on those dwelling in the more fortunate and sparsely peopled regions.[42]

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By the 1970s, antinatalism and antinatalist (or antinatalism and antinatalist with a hyphen) had established themselves, albeit in quite obscure fashion, within a variety of languages, as a term to describe various population practices and policies.[43,44,45] These earlier iterations of what antinatalism was and meant, though decades before the invention of antinatalism as a philosophical position, greatly inform how individuals outside of contemporary antinatalist circles know and think about the idea even today. This was reflected in one of the first two[46] known definitions of "antinatalisme," the French entry of the word "antinatalist," in the French dictionary Le Robert:

> Qui cherche à limiter la natalité. → malthusien. nom Partisan d'une politique antinataliste.[47]

Which translates to, "Who seeks to limit the birth rate. → Malthusian. noun Supporter of an antinatalist policy." While this definition could still be true of an antinatalism or antinatalist today, the definition is lacking, both in the fact that is only seeks to define what adherents of such a cause might be, and not the idea itself. It also fails to encapsulate any key features of what antinatalism has become within the last 20 years.

Though ever changing due to the nature of the platform, the closest and most consistent offering to exist as an official definition of antinatalism for many years came from the Wikipedia page[48] on the subject.

> A philosophical position and social movement that assigns a negative value to birth.[49]

Comparing this to the far later Cambridge definition, which seems like it could be a description of anthropocentric antinatalism, this definition could in turn be interpreted as describing some species of an activist sentiocentric antinatalism. The inclusion of "social movement"[50] denotes that people might wish to do something about "birth"—a condition of all sentient creatures, having "negative value."

During the 2024 How to Define Antinatalism? A Panel Discussion Event on YouTube,[51] four antinatalist philosophers,[52] including Benatar, and two activists gathered to discuss the then newly released Cambridge definition, in addition to sharing their own proposed definitions of the idea. Within this panel discussion, Benatar proposed his own definition of antinatalism:

> *Antinatalism:*
> Abstract noun: The view that it is morally wrong to bring sentient beings into existence.[53]

Several key words like "morally" and "bring" denote a far more conditionally anthropocentric or sentiocentric antinatalist view. "Bring" is the optimal word signaling this fact. "Bring" indicates the morality of deliberate action, which can only mean the willful creation of new human lives, or in the case of animals, those we breed for the purposes of food, entertainment, companionship, or to serve other human needs.

In *Better Never to Have Been*, David Benatar specifies that he would be making a conscious decision to make human lives the primary focus of the book.[54] Factory farmed animals and a recommendation that humans also desist from those practices are clearly specified. Regardless, Benatar makes it clear that his antinatalism has a sentiocentric scope, with a preference for an earlier sentient extinction as opposed to a later one.[55,56]

Many years later, however, Benatar's sentiocentrism seems to have shifted from an unconditional view to a conditional one.[57] In a video entitled, Are Animals Included in Antinatalism?[58] by popular antinatalist activist and YouTube influencer Lawrence Anton,[59] Benatar is quoted as saying this:

> Whether my argument for anti-natalism also applies to wild animals depends in part on what exactly one means by anti-natalism. If it is the view that bringing a sentient being into existence is *wrong*, then (as you note) anti-natalism cannot usually apply to wild animals given that procreating wild animals are not moral agents. (There would be exceptions where humans played a role in helping wild animals to procreate. Those humans would then do wrong.)[60]

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If antinatalism as a moral stance against procreation can only apply to instances of procreation that humans are responsible for—moral agents creating moral patience, or more specifically, the production of new human beings and factory farmed animals, then those are the types of lives that antinatalism is limited to, and the only ones that can comprise antinatalist considerations. They are not the "fault" of humanity. This suddenly relegates antinatalist extinctionist duties toward wild animals to be outside the bounds of antinatalism and effectively expels efilism as an unwelcome intruder.

Later on in Anton's video, Benatar goes on to describe a second way of defining antinatalism, which again opens the door to all sentience, and a path toward permissiveness to wild animal interventions.

> However, if the term anti-natalism is understood as the view that coming into existence has negative value, then anti-natalism could also apply to wild animals. If that's the case then while we cannot blame wild animals for procreating, we could say that it would be better if they did not procreate. We might even say that such procreation is pro tanto preventworthy (assuming that there are not sufficiently strong countervailing considerations not to interfere.)[61]

This definition—quietly but decisively—dispenses with the requirement of moral agency. Though efilism has never been officially defined, the placement of evaluative weight on the act of coming into existence *itself* aligns closely with efilist logic. While Benatar stops short of advocating for active intervention, the door is no longer closed—Pro tanto prevent worthy *is* normative. Once antinatalism is defined in terms of the *intrinsic disvalue* of existence, the moral symmetry between human and nonhuman procreation becomes difficult to ignore or draw lines of demarcation through.

The virtue of anthropocentric humility versus sentiocentric hubris?

Though Patricia MacCormack acknowledges that the aspiration to reduce, even abolish, suffering may be a shared ideal across different, even opposing antinatalist frameworks, *MacCormack's continued commentary on efilism in The Ahuman Manifesto expands on key* fundamental tensions—a more restrained, anthropocentric humility, which confines obligations to beings whose existence is the direct result of human agency, and the possibility of sentiocentric overreach. MacCormack continues her reflections by saying that:

> However, efilism's claim that all life, human and nonhuman, should be ceased is a hubris I am not convinced humans have the right to exert. While the cessation of suffering animals cause is already manipulated in a way that could come under an efilist rubric, these "management" tools usually come in the form of culling populations of nonhumans to redress an imagined environmental balance most usually caused by humans in the first place. *Domestic efilism such a neutering rescue animals is necessary, especially when rescuing can involve the speciesism of feeding one slaughtered animal to sustain another, and neutering humans is the logical way to prevent the perpetuation of the practice as well.*[62]

The debate regarding if human beings should or should **not intervene in nature for a variety of reasons** has deep historical roots, but extinctionist antinatalist frameworks, anthropocentric or sentiocentric, have become a part of the broader conversation only recently. A pioneer of this development was Les U. Knight, the founder of the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), and his contributions exemplify one pole of this divide.

Grounded in environmentalism and deep ecology, the legacy and conclusions of VHEMT, that animal life should be freed from humanity so that it may thrive without us, resonates in much of MacCormack's own ahumanist thinking, albeit hers with a stronger poststructuralist, occult and feminist flavor. On the VHEMT website, Knight describes the kind of world he believes will be possible should humanity leave the planet to nonhuman animals.

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> When every human chooses to stop breeding, Earth's biosphere will be allowed to return to its former glory, and all remaining creatures will be free to live, die, evolve (if they believe in evolution), and will perhaps pass away, as so many of Nature's "experiments" have done throughout the eons.[63]

Knight has expressed sentiments toward efilism, very similar to McCormack's:

> *Efilism. More human hubris, thinking we know what's best for the natural world.*[64]

Forms of sentiocentric antinatalism are not a monolith either. *David Benatar's antinatalism, though similarly sentiocentric to efilism, also has voiced similar critiques of efilist like actions and motivations.*

> What hubris. […] You look at the human track record, and we have got no reason to think that we are the great mitigators of suffering in the world.[65]

For Benatar and perhaps for others, it is not only that the suggestion is paternalistic, hubristic, and potentially violent, but also that the proposal of action is not in line with philosophical pessimism—efilism is optimistic, while antinatalism is more accurately and academically pessimistic.[66]

However, while not intervening into nature, and leaving wild animals alone after human extinction may be the more intuitive view, a need for an antinatalism that address the suffering of all sentient creatures finds itself in demand regardless.[67] Though not an antinatalist himself, prolific author and suffering-focused ethicist Magnus Vinding published a short book in 2017 entitled, *The Speciesism of Leaving Nature Alone and the Theoretical Case for "Wildlife Anti-Natalism*[68] in which he states:

> The current literature on anti-natalism, including the work of Benatar, focuses almost exclusively on human procreation, and thus says precious little about "wildlife anti-natalism" in particular, although Benatar makes clear that his argument favors it (Benatar 2006, p. 2). This must be considered a missed opportunity for anti-natalists for at least two reasons: 1) because non-human beings in nature comprise the vast majority of sentient beings on the planet, more than 99 percent of them, [6] and 2) because, regardless of how strong one thinks the case for anti-natalism is in the human context, the argument for an anti-natalist conclusion is much stronger when it comes to non-human beings in nature.[69]

This tenancy toward a broader scope for antinatalist extinction concerns, even ones espousing roughly the same prescription of force, while rare, is not unheard of in the history of antinatalist thinking.[70] In 1892, the French animal rights activist, feminist and Neo-Malthusian Marie Huot, author of *Le Mal De Vivre*, seems to have possessed views very similar to efilism. In an interview, she remarks that:

> I'm not a bad person, but if one day I had the means to blow up the whole universe and myself with it, well, that day I would be a criminal.[71]

This statement is extremely evocative of efilism, which often advocates for something resembling a Benevolent World Exploder,[72] or as it is more colloquially called, the Big Red Button.[73]

An interesting and inciteful reframing of the dilemma to act or not act in matters concerning nonhuman animals, their consumption and extinction, has come in several recent contributions by antinatalist bioethicist and philosopher Matti Häyry. Häyry's academic contributions to antinatalism date back as far as the 1980s with inquiries concerning all manner of both pro- and antiprocreation, from abortion,[74] procreative fairness, ectogenesis, male wombs, cloning,[75,76] as well as antinatalism and extinctionism.[77,78,79]

The scope of Häyry's work yields many fascinating dualities, showcasing the width of his moral considerations, and the pursuit of a strong reflective equilibrium. Unlike David Benatar, Patricia MacCormack, and other academic antinatalist philosophers, Häyry's philosophical background is shaped by an expansive history of utilitarian inquiry, with a strong inclination toward negative

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utilitarianism. Throughout many of his works,[80,81] he has sought to balance, revise, and temper positions like negative utilitarianism with principles of autonomy based on a need-based axiology.[82]

In a 2024 video essay, Häyry launched his own version of antinatalism called Vexan.[83] Vexan, which stands for Voluntarily Extinctionist Antinatalism, begins with statements of Häyry's personal principles of procreative abstinence and voluntary childlessness but reveals how his position goes a step further to a universalized form, in the hopes that others, indeed, everyone, will follow suit.

Both Häyry's antinatalism and extinctionism are voluntary—though extinction is desired, it must be chosen. Rational persuasion[84] is alright, cunning of reason[85] welcomed, but he advocates an extinction strictly without coercion or manipulation—a free and informed autonomous choice.

Häyry's Vexan is informed by several interlocking dimensions: Kantian morality and rationality as informed by Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative,[86] negative utilitarianism, and a Kantian-based aversion to manipulation. He measures these perspectives placed against human reproduction, factory-farmed reproduction, and wild animal reproduction and intervention respectfully. While Häyry finds the cessation of human life, and the ending of factory farming to be all or mostly in line with all the constituent parts of Vexan, he stops short of wild animal intervention by saying that:

> As for animals in the wild, I remain skeptical. A utilitarian should not engage in an activity that cannot be expected to produce a benefit. Trying to stop the reproduction of animals not in human captivity seems to fall under that category. We should know more about the means and effects of reducing wild animal birth rates before taking action on it.[87]

Under the lens of manipulation and its avoidance, an even stronger principle of caution is expressed regarding interventions into the lives of wild animals. Häyry's hesitance significantly mirrors McCormack's expressed concerns about "management tools" and the unfortunate human tendency to eliminate wild animal species not for their benefit, but for our own. Häyry continues:

> As for nonhumans in the wild, the caveats against interfering in their lives and reproduction are even more pronounced here than in the case of suffering and its removal. By promoting infertility among wild animals, humans would manipulate others for their own human/e ends in an attempt to ease their own minds. Or that is one way of seeing the matter.[88]

Häyry salient principle of circumspection in animal interventionalism, and the wish not to make their situations worst, could be an expression of another concept originally formulated by Häyry, dissense, defined as:

> *Dissense* is a realization that other living beings have their own life directions and that I should not impose my own ways of thinking and being upon them. It is a reminder to respect limits.[89]

Conversely, Häyry also presents the interplaying concept of *copathy*, which he defines as follows:

> *Copathy* is a calm sensation or awareness that I am one with all other sentient beings, and that I should not by my actions or choices make their lot worse. It is a fellow feeling.[90]

Through the dual application of dissense and copathy, Häyry negotiates a reasoned balance between restraint and care. He endorses voluntary cessation of human and captive-animal procreation to reduce suffering (copathy) yet refrains from interventions in wild populations where manipulation could be harmful or ethically questionable until more is known (dissense). This measured approach resonates with MacCormack's critique of efilism, which cautions against human overreach, and with perspectives from Les U. Knight and David Benatar, who similarly emphasize the limits of human moral authority. Benatar's more potentially copathy-inflected view in his second definition of antinatalism—that wild animal procreation might be considered "pro tanto preventworthy (assuming that there are not sufficiently strong countervailing considerations not to interfere.)"—are also accommodated within

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Häyry's framework. In doing so, Häyry models a powerful moral calibration between restraint and ethical concern, showing how extinctionist antinatalism can be both conscientious and cautious, and systematically balanced between its moral ambitions and prudence.

The limits of anthropocentric extinctionist autonomy

The antinatalist positions of ahumanism, VHEMT, and Vexan are all primarily extinctionist frameworks. Despite their differences, they each annunciate strict principles of autonomy and consent as central to their ethical orientations and in pursuit of their extinctionist aims.

While critics often emphasize the ambitions of efilism, particularly in its willingness to impose infringements to the autonomy and consent of nonhuman animals, anthropocentric models of antinatalism are not without interventionalist prescriptions of their own, potentially challenging these fundamentals. *Without proposing specific actions*, Häyry readily acknowledges this:

> Stopping factory farming would remove the need to breed more production animals. For the animals, the end of reproduction would not be technically voluntary, but neither would its continuation be. A negative utilitarian can stretch other rules a little to minimize future suffering.[91]

The dilemma as expressed above is clear: within a context already defined by human domination, curtailing the procreation of nonhuman bred species may be justified for the sake of prevention, even though such actions inherently compromise their autonomy and consent. In MacCormack's 2020 interview on *The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast* however, MacCormack goes quite a few steps further than Häyry and suggests that in the circumstance of imminent human extinction, all production animals should be sterilized:

> I think the first and foremost thing we have to do are stop the very obvious things, such as, all use of animals. So the things where the most animals are suffering, right now, right this second, as a direct result of us. And also that would mean sterilization of all animals currently exploited for their meat their milk their, whatever, all of that. I think that we're talking about a decelerated extinction, so, say, in a perfect world, no one breeds, starting now, we would also have to use a very artistic eye to observe the different environments that are re-instated, and we would have to reinstate through various forms of replanting and diminishment of a variety of environments, adaptation of a variety of environments, and to me, the artistry involved in that, see animal life flourish in ways that we have never perceived before. That is because animal life, even wildlife will be different, as we decrease, diminish, depopulate, and disappear, hopefully.[92]

Though MacCormack's makes this recommendation with great reluctance,[93] her willingness to contemplate sterilization of nonhuman animals in human care prior to human extinction is striking, given her earlier criticisms of efilism's alleged use of "management" tools and its aim to "redress an imagined environmental balance most usually caused by humans in the first place."

Les Knight has also voiced similar thoughts regarding the phasing out of human-bred animals before human extinction. Though he does not specifically propose the method of sterilization, he has said that

> The non-human animals that are domesticated by us, I think we should phase out, including our companion animals. When we're gone, they won't fair as well, and maybe wouldn't fit into the ecosystem.[94]

Knight's observation about the limited ability of such animals to survive independently in these environments is well taken. Yet, given that both Knight and MacCormack regard the lives of domesticated animals as already deeply exploited, brutalized, and manipulated by human hands, it is worth asking by what right anthropocentric human antinatalists would commit further transgressions. Forcibly

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sterilizing these animals, though a kindness to their potential offspring, would nonetheless inflict inevitable further pain, distress, and dependent on the methods employed, possibly even death on those already in existence.

From the perspective of autonomy, the issue is fraught. To sterilize or phase out animals is to deny them both reproductive potential and the chance—however slim—of survival in posthuman ecosystems. To refrain, however, may condemn their descendants to prolonged suffering, exploitation, or ecological maladaptation. Either path risks undermining the principles of consent and noninterference that anthropocentric antinatalists prize.

This debate can again also be framed through Häyry's concepts of *dissense* and *copathy*. The proposals of Knight and MacCormack may be understood as acts of dissense: limited interventions designed to prevent further suffering among beings whose existence is already contingent upon human interference. By curtailing reproduction in contexts of entrenched exploitation, they aim to minimize future harms while leaving other domains of nature untouched. Yet, these measures fall short of copathy, which requires the prevention of suffering as well as a genuine improvement of the lives already here.

At this juncture, the ethical dilemma intensifies. Is sterilization preferable to euthanasia? Would ending the lives of domesticated animals swiftly, and perhaps painlessly, be a greater act of compassion than denying them reproduction while extending their dependence? Conversely, is euthanasia risking a far greater violation, foreclosing lives that could contain joy alongside suffering?

What emerges is less a clear prescription than a recognition of the profound limits of anthropocentric extinctionist autonomy. Even when explicitly rejecting efilist ambitions to intervene across all sentient life, human-centered antinatalisms are unable to fully extricate themselves from interventionist dilemmas. Whether by sterilization, phasing out, or environmental "artistry," they remain entangled in the contradictions of managing the lives of others while professing noninterference. Whether through sterilization, euthanasia, or phasing out, any such proposal exposes the fragile coherence of autonomy as a guiding principle—interventions appear both necessary and impermissible all at once.

Marzipan

Benatarian antinatalism as far as can be detected makes no recommendations involving the sterilization of animals. However, given the sentiocentrism of Benatar's antinatalism, questions regarding the limits and boundaries of ending the lives of nonhuman animals in antinatalist human extinction scenarios have remained, that rightly or wrongly, efilism has attempted to address.

Within *Better Never to Have Been*, David Benatar describes two forms of possible extinction. He first posits "phased extinction," which could be brought about by either "dying extinction," meaning an extinction in which a species gradually dies out, or "killing extinction" or "Pro-mortalism,"[95] meaning that a species is brought to extinction through killing, until none are left. He also briefly talks about how these two methods could "overlap."[96]

Though Benatar would not choose, nor does he advocate for killing extinction, or pro-mortalist extinctionist methods, others have regardless come to a variety of other conclusions. Häyry, seeing the variety of interpretations, and prompted by an increased demand for clarity on these issues, responded by devising the Marzipan thought experiment, resulting in a video series exploring the case in several dimensions, finally culminating in the fourth and final entry, which was an interview between David Benatar and Matti Häyry.[97]

The central premise of the Marzipan thought experiment is as follows:

> Imagine that you are the last human being alive. Imagine further, that you share your life, with a non-human companion, a guinea pig. Her name is Marzipan, and you are inseparable. She's also the last guinea pig alive. You are dying. Marzipan is in good health, and can live for quite some time yet. For all you know, Marzipan's life in the end of the world scene would not be nice. It would, in fact, without your care and support be quite miserable.

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> You have a choice, however. Before you die yourself, you can painlessly end Marzipans life, no more suffering for her, end of human kind, end of guinea pigs. What should you do?[98]

Häyry initially hypothesized that given the conditions and circumstances of Marzipan's predicament, Benatar would surely allow the prevention of Marzipan's misery. This prediction was further substantiated by the knowledge that Benatar takes a pro-death view on early abortion, going even so far as to recommend that abortion before 28–30 weeks be morally required.

> What I argued with my co-author in that paper on fetal pain, was that it's likely that sentience emerges much later in gestation, around 28 to 30 weeks of gestation. So I think that's the crucial point of which, or the crucial stage at which, the being comes into existence, as a sentient being. And so before that I think abortion would be morally required, I don't think it ought to be legally required, I think we morally required, because you still at that point preventing a sentient being from coming into existence. But once the sentience emerges, now you're dealing with an existing being and I think it has some at least rudimentary interest in continuing to exist. And it's not that abortion would never be justified in that later stage but, now there's some considerations needs to be weighed up against the interests of the fetus in continuing to exist.[99]

To Häyry's surprise, however, many antinatalists, including David Benatar objected.

> I think if Marzipan was suffering unspeakably now then euthanizing her would be the right thing to do. But the fact that she's going to lead a normal life for a significant period and then succumb to suffering makes this harder.[100]

The crucial distinction lies in whether an action infringes upon whatever morally relevant "interests" might exist for the being in question. While Benatar's antinatalism primarily concerns the ethics of preventing existence, Häyry's Marzipan experiment extends the inquiry into the moral permissibility of ending existing lives under extreme extinctionist conditions. Because, according to Benatar, Marzipan possesses morally relevant interests in continuing to live, Benatar's logic holds that euthanizing her would be wrong.[101]

Häyry's dissense, in this instance, might recognize that for Marzipan, there are few limits left to be respected—the world in this scenario is coming to an imminent end. The otherwise significant notion of her life's morally relevant interests, and her own life direction, will soon be over. She will soon be all alone. She may still yet have moments of happiness. What food and water has been left for her, she may yet enjoy, but it cannot reasonably last long. Though she is not in misery now, and though she could still have the possibility of some positive experiences yet to come, her suffering is imminent, and that suffering could, if one were to choose to, be prevented forever.

At the heart of the Marzipan chronicles, is the question—can the ending of a life, be antinatalism? Does coming to such conclusions require additional beliefs, or does it follow that sometimes ending lives can be part and parcel of antinatalism itself? Whether this conclusion belongs within antinatalism proper, or instead signals a promortalist supplement, remains deeply contested.

Häyry began his Marzipan investigation by saying that his case, "will make no explicit claims about antinatalism,"[102] and while this is true, it is also a bit of a red herring, as the entire context of the conversation revolves around the permissibility of killing or preemptive euthanasia in the context of antinatalism.[103] Regardless, Benatar rejects the notion that Häyry's Marzipan has any connection to antinatalism at all.

> I think the question you you're posing to me about Marzipan, that case that dilemma, is really not distinctively antinatalist at all.[104]

Though Häyry seems to agree with this, it might be worth re-examining this against Benatar second definition of antinatalism, that, "Antinatalism is the view that coming into existence has negative value."

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If the individual in Häyry's Marzipan thought experiment were herself an antinatalist who defined the position in terms of preventing imposed sentient welfare, then the very fact that Marzipan had been brought into existence at all, could, under these circumstances, be regarded as sufficient reason to end her life. Given the implications of Benatar's secondary definition, it becomes difficult to see why the promortalist choice to terminate Marzipan's life should be considered anything other than an antinatalist one, or how such an act of "killing extinction" could be clearly distinguished from antinatalism itself.

Though euthanizing Marzipan will prevent no further guinea pig lives as she is the last, she is alive, a victim of life's "negative value." One might interpret euthanasia in this scenario as a form of preventive care, though whether this constitutes moral kindness remains a disputed question.

If defined in this way, then antinatalism does not necessarily need the circumstances of imminent birth or procreation to be immediately involved for euthanizing her to be an act of true antinatalism. If life has been imposed at all, and life has "negative value," then antinatalism can carry postnatal, prodeath conclusions quite naturally.

Conclusion

The convergence of these divergent antinatalist positions underscores the profound complexity of the moral dilemmas confronting the future of antinatalism. Whether the most vulnerable among us should be left to exist or prevented from coming into existence at all is not merely a question of moral preference, so much as one of competing ethical imperatives. Each position—from Benatarian sentiocentrism to efilism, Ahumanism, Vexan, and VHEMT—reveals different ways in which ethical reasoning can come into tension with itself, particularly when the stakes involve life, procreation, suffering, and extinction.

To refrain from acting in the face of foreseeable harm may be to abdicate the responsibility that underpins ethical commitment, leaving potential suffering unmitigated and allowing the consequences of inaction to perpetuate injustice. Yet, active prevention carries its own, equally weighty risks. Deliberate intervention, even when intended to reduce suffering, may inflict new harms and morally strain those who undertake them, challenging the very ideals of harm reduction that motivate antinatalism in the first place.

In navigating this tension, antinatalists confront a paradox at the heart of their philosophy. The desire to minimize harm collides with the unavoidable ethical consequences of action. Choices that may prevent future suffering simultaneously impose burdens and perhaps even inflict harm on existing beings. In this sense, the ethical landscape of antinatalism is not defined solely by the avoidance of harm but by the careful calibration of competing duties—duties to prevent suffering, duties to respect existing life, and duties to act with moral integrity in the face of uncertainty.

Ultimately, the future of antinatalism may demand a nuanced embrace of ethical humility. The responsibility it entails is vast, and the moral terrain is treacherously complex. Recognizing the limitations of any single approach—whether that be passive restraint or proactive intervention—may be the only reliable guide through a philosophical domain in which every path carries profound consequences. The ostensibly safer course of nonintervention may itself constitute humanities greatest ethical failure, yet active prevention risks its own indelible harms, staining the hands of antinatalists—the very agents most committed to harm reduction—red with blood, when theirs should be the ones most free of it.

Notes

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3. r/Athkneovism. *Reddit.com/r/Athkneovism/*; available at https://www.reddit.com/r/Athkneovism/ (last accessed 28 July 2025).

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4. *The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast #100—Efilism 1.0 versus Efilism 2.0.* Online video clip. 2024 Dec 29; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KD0Skl1rEV0.
5. Benatar D. *Better Never to Have Been*. Oxford: Clarendon; 2006.
6. The precise origins of the terms *Anthropocentric Antinatalism* and *Sentiocentric Antinatalism* remain uncertain, as neither appears in the formal academic literature on antinatalism. Their widespread colloquial adoption in online discourse suggests that they were likely first introduced by efilists and antinatalists, on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, or Reddit—all of which have, at various times over the past two decades, served as central hubs for antinatalist exchange.
7. In 2006, David Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been* and Belgian author-activist Théophile de Giraud's *L'art de guillotiner les procréateurs* (*The Art of Guillotining Procreators: An Anti-Natalist Manifesto*) each simultaneously introduced the term *antinatalism* as a philosophical concept, and without prior knowledge of one another's work.
de Giraud T. *L'art de guillotiner les procréateurs: manifeste anti-nataliste.* Nancy: Editions Le Mort-Qui-Trompe; 2006.
8. The Benatarian Axiological Asymmetry holds that while the presence of pain is bad and the presence of pleasure is good, the absence of pain is good even if no one experiences that good, whereas the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is someone deprived of it.
9. See note 1, MacCormack 2020.
10. Efilist. youtube.com/@Efilist; available at https://www.youtube.com/@efilist (last accessed 28 July 2025).
11. Inmendham. youtube.com/@inmendham; available at https://www.youtube.com/@inmendham (last accessed 28 July 2025).
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14. See note 1, MacCormack 2020.
15. Theory neutrality allows a concept to stand independently of any single moral framework, and Benatar has consistently maintained that his antinatalism preserves this theoretical flexibility. This enables his position to be interpreted through multiple conceptual lenses while avoiding commitment to any overarching, unifying moral theory.
16. Sukenick A. *Benatarian Efilism?* In peer review.
17. Häyry M, Sukenick A. *Hankikanto: Falling into the Anti/Natal Abyss #1 on being Antinatal before Antinatalism* 2023 Mar 23; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEEp4jOzR3w (last accessed 8 Aug 2025).
18. Häyry M, Sukenick A. *Antinatalism, Extinction, and the End of Procreative Self-Corruption.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press; 2024.
19. See note 1, MacCormack 2020.
20. See note 1, MacCormack 2020.
21. School of Materialist Research. *Patricia MacCormack: Fuck the Anthropocene or Activism for the End of the Anthropocene (Seminar 1)* 2025 Feb 22; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0auA51fyHWE (last accessed 8 Aug 2025).
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24. See note 23, Nicholson 1921.
25. Gardner C, MacCormack P, eds. *Deleuze and the Animal*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; 2017.
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29. See note 1, MacCormack 2020.
30. Of the confirmed academic antinatalist philosophers, David Benatar, Matti Häyry, Patricia MacCormack, Karim Akerma, Raja Halwani and David Pearce are all vegan, whereas Julio Cabrera, Gerald Harrison, and Miguel Ángel Castro Merino are not. It is unknown if Tufan Kiymaz and Alberto Giovanni Biuso are or are not vegan.
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    This definition was officially added to the OED in June 2024:
    "Opposition to people having children or large families; advocacy for the control or lowering of birth rates, esp. through state regulation; (in later use also) spec. a philosophical position that it is morally wrong or indefensible to procreate."
    In 2018, antinatalists online had campaigned to have the word added into the OED through a Change.org petition.
    Change.org. 2018. Make Antinatalism a word in the dictionary [Petition]. (Retrieved August 27, 2025) https://chng.it/8Tt57SnSNh
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49. The current definition of antinatalism given by Wikipedia is "Antinatalism or anti-natalism is the philosophical value judgment that procreation is unethical or unjustifiable. Antinatalists thus argue that humans should abstain from making children."
50. At one time, this definition did not include the addition of 'social movement'. It's not clear to me when exactly it was added, but this change was very controversial in its time.
51. Sukenick A, Häyry M. *How to Define Antinatalism? A Panel Discussion* 2024 Aug 18; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99B4ZzgkftQ.
52. The How to Define Antinatalism? A Panel Discussion, event, featured antinatalist philosophers, Karim Akerma, Matti Häyry, David Pearce and David Benatar, and was also joined by two antinatalist activists, Lawrence Anton and Amanda Sukenick, hosted on The Exploring Antinatalism Youtube channel.
53. See note 51, Sukenick, Häyry 2024.
54. See note 5, Benatar 2006.
"Although I think that coming into existence harms all sentient beings and I shall sometimes speak about all such beings, my focus will be on humans. There are a few reasons for this focus, other than the sheer convenience of it. The first is that people find the conclusion hardest to accept when it applies to themselves. The focus on humans, rather than on all sentient life, reinforces its application to humans. A second reason is that, with one exception, the argument has most practical significance when applied to humans because we can act on it by desisting from producing children. The exception is the case of human breeding of animals, from which we could also desist. A third reason for focusing on humans is that those humans who do not desist from producing children cause suffering to those about whom they tend to care most—their own children. This may make the issues more vivid for them than they otherwise would be."
55. See note 5, Benatar 2006.
"My arguments in this chapter and previous ones imply that it would be better if humans (and other species) became extinct. All things being equal, my arguments also suggest that it would be better if this occurred sooner rather than later."
56. Graytaich0. *Unintellegent Design* 2011 June 22; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEmWn0KGNxo (last accessed 8 Aug 2025).
The metaphysical core of Efilism posits that sentient life is the product of unintelligent design—a tragic accident, and an outgrowth of abiogenesis and blind evolutionary drives, ensnaring sensitive feeling beings in a cycle of life, death and suffering. It's sentiocentrism is absolute, as are the implications that humanity must act in order to stop it.
"The dilemma of the true atheist, is that he's part of a big waste engine. An engine that has 99x's more friction than function. Crude forces in control of precious commodities."
57. See note 58, Anton 2023.
I have not with great confidence pinned down exactly when Benatar began to express a more conditional sentiocentric view, but it seems at least that the first time this occurred was with Lawrence Antons video.
58. Anton L. *Are Animals Included in Antinatalism?* 2023 July 30; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YW8fCWd7i5U(last accessed 8 Aug 2025).
59. Lawrence Anton; available at https://www.youtube.com/@LawrenceAnton; https://www.youtube.com/@LawrenceAnton (last accessed 8 Aug 2025).
60. See note 58, Anton 2023.
61. See note 58, Anton 2023.
62. See note 1, MacCormack 2020.
63. The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement. *Website* 1996; available at www.vhemt.org/.
64. Knight LX. 2022 Dec 17; available at https://x.com/lesuknight?lang=en.
65. Martin G. | Carnism Debunked. *Podcast Episode 24 | Dr. David Benatar | Could Anti-natalism Harm Animals?* 2024 Feb 22; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhwt2WOUQlY (last accessed 8 Aug 2025).
66. Efilism departs from the philosophical pessimism that grounds Benatarian antinatalism. Philosophical pessimism is typically wary of activist projects to "solve" existence, regarding such

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inclinations as vulnerable to naïveté, overconfidence, and at risk of amplifying harm. Whereas antinatalism, in Benatar's view, is rooted in a sober recognition of the limits of human intervention, Efilism is here characterized as "optimistic" in its belief that suffering can be actively eradicated.

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82. Efilism under certain interpretations could also be said to possess a need-based axiology of its own.
83. Häyry M. Call me VEXAN then. *The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast. Online Video Clip* 2024 June 27; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXTcxixHIg8.
84. See note 18, Häyry M, Sukenick A 2024.
85. See note 18, Häyry M, Sukenick A 2024.
86. Kant I. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Gregor M, trans. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1998.

    "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."
87. See note 83, Häyry 2025.
88. See note 83, Häyry 2025.
89. See note 78, Häyry 2024.
90. See note 78, Häyry 2024.
91. See note 83, Häyry 2024.
92. Sukenick A. *The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast #11—Patricia MacCormack* 2020 May 15; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfQH-uUjVxE (last accessed 28 July 2025).
93. See note 92, MacCormack 2020c.

    "BUT. Simultaneously, I feel like that kind of intervention verges on a god complex. That humans, even with the best of intentions, still believe that they are the fathers of the earth. And that they decide what's best for the earth, and that they're the ones that are doing it for your own good. And so in a way they are making the earth their child. But also, it's like, the earth is made for them. And I think that conceptually and philosophically that is deeply problematic."

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94. Brother Markus. Les U. *Knight &* @LawrenceAnton *Discuss VHEMT (Voluntary Human Extinction Movement) & Anti-natalism* 2021 Jan 26; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_3FeOSuj5A (last accessed 28 July 2025).
95. See note 5, Benatar 2006.
The exact word used in the book is, 'pro-mortalists'.
96. See note 5, Benatar 2006
97. Häyry M. *We Have to Talk about Marzipan—David Benatar & Matti Häyry* 2025 Mar 28; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpcEdBRX0ZM (last accessed 28 July 2025).
98. Häyry M. *The Case of Marzipan: What Would Benatar do?* 2025 Feb 4; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSrGMwk9Jww (last accessed 28 July 2025).
99. Sukenick A. *The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast #5*; 2020 Mar 9; available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yH-M_s5UqI (last accessed 28 July 2025).
100. See note 97, Häyry 2025.
101. Benatar also holds the view that though life is bad and to be avoided, so too is death also bad and also to be avoided. The broader Benatarian philosophical predicament concerning the dual badness of both life and death is not a subject which will be fully explored in this essay, but the dichotomy of Benatar's pessimism is a subject of forthcoming investigations.
102. See note 97, Häyry 2025.
103. Häyry later posits that the human in the thought experiment may be driven by the logic in *Better Never to Have Been*, making the connection between the challenge and Benatarian antinatalism solid.
104. See note 97, Häyry 2025.

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