

# BETWEEN IRON SKIES AND COPPER EARTH: ANTINATALISM AND THE DEATH OF GOD

*by J. Robbert Zandbergen*

*Abstract.* The proclamation of the death of God came at a pivotal time in the history of humankind. It far transcended the concerns of the religious faithful and dented the entire fabric of human existence. Left to its own devices, humans intended their consciousness to replace God's. This proved to be a terrible mistake that collapsed the entire modern project. One of the worldviews that emerged in the wake of this eruption was antinatalism, which refers to the conviction that human reproduction should be brought to an absolute halt. This is the most modern outgrowth of the death of God and represents the most radical face of secular humanism. In spite of the admittedly dark fumes that leak out from the term 'antinatalism', this philosophical position emerges quite naturally when we consider the depletion of our traditional sources of philosophical enquiry.

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Man with his hopes and pitiful illusions, is he not pitiful, grotesque, forlorn? White with desire for that life cannot proffer, must we not weep that ever we were born?

Ernest Dowson, "Awakening" (Dowson 2003, 43)

## INTRODUCTION

Humankind's death sentence has never been written more boldly on the blackboards of philosophy than it is now in the twenty-first century. We can think of rapid climate change, weapons of mass destruction, pandemics, overpopulation and the overall increase in human destructiveness over the past centuries. In addition to these mounting threats, there is another, deeper cause for our demise. There is an emptiness at the heart of spiritual and intellectual existence that makes matters much, much worse.

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This was brought about by the death of God. The proclamation of this death far transcended the concerns of the religious faithful and dented the entire fabric of human existence. Left to its own devices, humankind intended its consciousness to replace God's. This proved to be a terrible mistake that collapsed the entire modern project.

One of the worldviews that emerged in the wake of this act of decide is antinatalism, or the conviction that existence is not intrinsically more valuable than nonexistence. This conviction is so powerful that it impels some to believe that human reproduction should be brought to an absolute halt. The cessation of human childbirth will ultimately lead to the deconstruction of the entire human project. This is the most radically modern phenomenon that emerged after the death of God, and represents the most radical face of secular humanism. It is inconceivable that a conviction like this could have emerged in an atmosphere defined by the presence of God.

In the work below, I first analyze the contours of the modern project and its desperate failure coincident with the death of God in the late nineteenth century. I will argue that this paved the way for all sorts of new, radical and secular worldviews. The most radical of these is the modern phenomenon of antinatalism. I will argue that we cannot but view its emergence as a direct consequence of the yearning for secular humanism that led up to the death of God and that heralded in our post-modernity.

While the ultimate conclusions recommended by antinatalism are tragically unattainable as we will see below, it is important to view this modern phenomenon in the shadow of the death of God. It is but the most desperate wail heard at God's funeral that occasioned the celebration of newfound, human-centered modernity. As such, we have to take antinatalism seriously for what it is, as this understanding enables us to better grasp the shockwaves that emanated from the death of God and that have placed all human artifice on a shaky, sandy foundation even in the twenty-first century.

#### SECULAR HUMANISM AND (THE FAILURE OF) THE MODERN PROJECT

Although the declaration of the death of God is most easily associated with Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, it did not originate in these writings (von der Luft 1984; McCullough 2017). Although there is no clear sense of kinship on this point, it makes sense to look at Hegel's ruminations about the death of God earlier in the nineteenth century. Scholars remain divided over the ultimate place that this motif has in his philosophy overall, something which Paolo Diego Bubbio refers to as "...the reality of the death of God problem [,]" which can be represented as a spectrum from the allegorical to the real (Bubbio 2015, 696–97, emphasis removed).

However we wish to value the motif, we have to look at it in the context of the Hegelian understanding of history. For William Franke, Hegel's offers an "...optimistic interpretation" of the death of God (Franke 2007, 217), according to which the Crucifixion marked the point in space and time where God manifested as fully human, only to die fully human as well. This injected God into the fabric of humankind. Consequently, Franke continues, God "...is resurrected in the Spirit that lives in the community of believers, the congregation of the church" (Franke 2007, 217) The ultimate act of self-sacrifice activates the divine gist of humankind. As such, the death of God forced a new reality of the Divine upon humankind. While this is interesting from a theological and sociological point of view, Nietzsche's later diagnosis of the death of God is more relevant to the discussion of values undertaken here.

For Nietzsche, the death of God marked the end of the old and the potentially glorious beginning of the new. Interpreted as such, it "...[signaled] the liberation of the human spirit toward creating something better out of itself." (von der Luft 1984, 270). But, this was terrifying as well, and the risk of failure was momentous. Right after proclaiming the death of God and "our" complicity in this act of murder in *The Gay Science* §125, Nietzsche's Madman wonders, "[w]hat were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually?" (Nietzsche [1882/1887] 1974, 181) The transcendental order had fallen away, and this exposed humankind to a value-vacuum it now set out to fill with values of its own. This train of thought would later be taken over by Sartre, who first referred to "la mort de Dieu" in 1943 (Gillespie 2016, 44). Not only did Sartre take the death of God for granted, he exulted in it. Much like Nietzsche before him, Sartre saw opportunity here, as the eclipse of the transcendental framework attendant upon the death of God bestowed humankind with the unique responsibility to create value for itself. But at the same time, Sartre, too, saw this is a terrifying quest (Gillespie 2016, 50–53).

Indeed, the turn from the transcendental value-system directed by God to an immanent value system run by humankind itself was no easy matter. As Franke writes, "...taking immanent structures as absolutes—as is necessary if the secular world is going to be in and for itself—inevitably leads to collapse or implosion." (Franke 2007, 222) It is in this respect that the motif of the death of God, as reflecting the eclipse of a transcendental value-system long relied on, crashed the modern project, rooted as it was in the lofty ideal of a secular humanism. When we take the modern project as more than a *Hirngespinnst*, the implications of this implosion of immanence brought about by the death of God are vast.

French historian Rémi Brague has mapped out the unseen consequences of the proclamation of the death of God in a previous age of modernity. In spite of undoubtedly deeply rooted humanist ambitions, this proclamation set in motion a lethal chain reaction: in our own turbulent modernity, the result of the death of God is the death of the human itself. This is a dangerous chain reaction most likely unintended by the pallbearers of old world morality.

Nonetheless, coming to terms with the radicalism of our ancestors, Brague wonders, "...might the 'death of God' lead to the actual death, the extermination, of the human species? Does the eclipse of man necessarily accompany the eclipse of God?" (Brague 2015, 39). In both cases Brague answers in the positive. Although the "idea" of the human has suffered throughout the ages, we are faced now with the very real possibility that it is not merely the concept, or icon of the human, but the human species as a whole that faces extinction (Brague 2015, 42). In another work, Brague gives the gloomy formulation that "[t]hus the idea of a death of man appeared, as the ineluctable consequence of the death of God" (Brague 2018, 206). Given the omnipotence of God, God's eventual death collapsed the very structure of human civilization. We read that

...death was able to defeat even God...the death that triumphed over God is the sole true and definitive god. After the death of God, it is not the kingdom of man that comes, but that of the last god, which is death. (Brague 2018, 199)

In other words, the hope humanity had of a brighter future devoid of God, radiant only with the brightest inventions and innovations of human hands and minds—this hope has been shattered. With all our machinations we are not able to glue the parts back together again. Even if we could, it is highly doubtful that a reconstruction of this lost hope would actually constitute the same hope at all. We must preclude, then, the possibility of a meaningful existence fueled by human-centered ideology in the aftermath of the death of God, because the implications of this act of murder far transcend the reasonable scope of diegesis. The failure of the modern project should, therefore, not be taken lightly.

In Jens Peter Jacobsen's 1880 novel *Niels Lyhne*, the protagonist meditates on his solidified atheism when he speaks the powerful words "[t]here is no God, and the human being is His prophet!" (Jacobsen 2006, 106). While the young Niels had been a devout Christian in his early life, he gradually sheds his devotion over the years. Although his powerful statement cited above was meant to inaugurate a vision of the wonderful world brought into existence and nurtured solely by the human being, without any input from God, we can actually see how it gestures in the opposite direction, and points to a world much less rosy.

The protagonist argues that when humankind is firmly in control over its own affairs it will be beyond the reach of the talons of a God that has unfairly held back human progress for so long. As heroic as this vision of a godless modernity might sound, what could truly be heroic at all about the prophet of a dying God? If God does not exist and we are nonetheless God's disciples, are we not the prophets of doom? Do we not worship the silent terror of a vacuum? Are we, in other words, not still in the clutches of the religion we try so hard to eradicate from the fabric of our societies? It is clear that no matter how confidently we might proclaim the death of God we are, nonetheless, blown away by God's last breath.

Writing long after Jacobsen, contemporary English philosopher John Gray explains why this might be so. In his 2003 *Straw Dogs*, Gray meditates on the passage of time and the special segment within this movement clouded by the fear of death so prevalent in life. It is this that inspires modern man to aim an arrow analogous to the passage of time. This arrow, however noble the aims of the archer, is wont to lose its battle against nature's own gravity time and time again. It is the pertinacious faith that man attaches to this constant calibration, this asymptotic striving, that deliquesces into the loose notion of progress, which becomes but a new type of faith.

It is asserted that this belief in progress consists of a radical movement away from religion and toward science. Yet, the faith that we have in progress was brewed in exactly the thick resin left behind by the Christianity of our ancestors. As such, our belief simply moves back whence it came. But, the Christian pedigree of our modernist faith goes largely unnoticed. Gray argues that Christian values like free will survive today, albeit in a different guise, that serve the same purpose of putting humankind on a pedestal over and above all the rest of animal life. And this is nothing new. He writes that while "[f]or Christians, humans are created by God and possess free will, for humanists they are self-determining beings. Either way, they are quite different from all other animals" (Gray 2003, 41). Science plays an important part in this act of unjustified hubris.

Our scientifically inspired worldview affirms that we are master of our own destiny, and as such stand taller than all other life forms. Yet the narrowing down of scientific precision in our observations of the universe all around us does fairly little to justify this new creed. In fact, it seems that we are simply blinded by our own scientific successes, and do not see that the trajectory that we are on is not solely treaded by us and does not necessarily lead upwards either. This new faith dictates that humankind necessarily stands at the very center of existence, with everything else slipping deeper and deeper into the background until everything clusters together into one irresolute, cosmic lump of insignificance that orbits around us like a greasy disc of unbelief. This picture vastly overstates the importance and prestige of the human species.

Moreover, the meteoric rise of human-centered, progress-oriented, atheistic worldviews coincides with an exponential grow in human destructiveness. Gray writes that

[t]he destruction of the natural world is...a consequence of the evolutionary success of an exceptionally rapacious primate. Throughout all of history and prehistory, human advance has coincided with ecological devastation. (Gray 2003, 7)

While ecological devastation and the overall impact humans have had on the planet are one thing, Gray argues that the asymptotic rise of human destructiveness will, in fact, slant sooner or later. This will coincide with humankind's *own* destruction, after which Earth itself will live on unabated (Gray 2003, 151). While it cannot be proven that this will actually all happen, the death of God has opened up the possibility that it might. And this is already drastic enough.

The death of God, therefore, represents more than just the climactic death-scene at the end of a long and exciting narrative. There is no absolute round of applause or baroque act of sadness that brings us back to the real world again. We cannot just gather our belongings and go on with our lives, discussing which part of the story of divinity we liked or disliked most. This is so because there is no space in which we can hide the guilt attendant upon this horrendous murder. Importantly, though, there is no statute of limitations on the act, and the human species must be implicated in it sooner or later. This does not merely concern the religious faithful—the ultimate crime against God concerns the human species as a whole. But rather than retributive punishment, we are subject to something worse: the spectacle of the death of God has revealed the fundamental failure of the entire modern project. This failure now inaugurates new avenues of possibility. The ribbon of one of these is cut by the contemporary philosophy of antinatalism.<sup>1</sup>

#### ANTINATALISM DEFINED

Antinatalism is the conviction that human existence is not 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. A variety of reasons are given for this drastic last resort. Most notable among these is the idea that procreation subjects any new human being to a suffering that is immense and gratuitous. Human existence and suffering are but two sides of the same coin. Since suffering cannot be prevented, it is immoral to subject anyone to this fate. But, in spite of the overall bad reputation enjoyed by this new philosophical movement, it will be argued here that antinatalism is not rooted in the villainous design of certain morbid and twisted minds, but

rather partakes in a radical critique of consciousness that is important in its own right. The policy recommendation concerning reproduction (for which antinatalism is infamous) is only the terminus of this critique, not its starting point. No antinatalist begins with the assertion that human beings should not reproduce. This is, rather, the outcome of a process of philosophizing that is both extremely modern, and extremely radical.

Writing under the pseudonym Ken Coates, Indian professor Ramesh Mishra relates the strange, contemporary rise of antinatalism to the increased secularization that inevitably spread with the death of God. According to Mishra,

...there is little doubt that a secular world provides a favorable context for the spread of anti-existential ideas and attitudes. At least we can expect this to result in the spread of the philosophy and practice of *anti-natalism* based on the rejection of existence. (Coates 2016, 85, emphasis in original)<sup>2</sup>

The death of God made it necessary for humankind to open up new possibilities of meaning. The place of the human vis-à-vis the world around it had to be drastically overhauled. No longer could meaning be supplied by God, and the undying faith that people had in the decrees of Providence had to be directed elsewhere. As we have seen above, the transcendental structure of values had collapsed and in its ruin humankind now set out to construct a value-world of its own. This led to a spectacular eruption of human-centered thinking in which there was no longer any place for God. Antinatalism, it is contended here, emerged from the fertile soil left in the wake of this eruption. It is also the clearest lens through which to view the great confusion that has infused human existence in the absence of God.

In spite of the linguistic hint—"anti" and "natalis" simply mean "against birth"—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. This may or may not inspire the further belief that human reproduction should be halted in order to slowly but surely effect human extinction. Consequently, not everything that is solely directed *against* childbirth can be called "antinatalist." In the same vein, not everything promoting childbirth can be called "natalist" or "pro-natalist."

In his study on "natalism" in conservative Protestant communities in the United States, James McKeown makes an interest point when he writes that his "...use of the word natalism does not include accidental effects on birth rates but only refers to intention and ideology" (McKeown 2014, 3). In other words, not all human reproduction can rightfully be called "natalist." In other words, natalism in McKeown's use of the word refers

to an ideology or conviction that people willfully adhere to that motivates childbearing. An overbearing concern might be the glory of God or the preservation of the fatherland. While reproduction is still central, it must be fueled by something deeper than just accidental childbearing, fulfillment of sexual needs, or the desire to start a family. The idea must be present that reproducing is good for any of a variety of reasons. Someone who accidentally gets pregnant is not a “pro-natalist” per se. Similar things can be said about *antinatalism* as well.

In his study on the latent antinatalism in the writings of Victorian poet Thomas Hardy (1840–1928), Aaron Matz writes that “...we should disentangle two topics: procreation and population” (Matz 2014, 8). While under normal circumstances procreation leads to an increase in overall population, the conscious decision not to reproduce does not have to flow from a concern with overpopulation. This important distinction is epitomized in Hardy’s novel *Jude the Obscure* (1895). On the one hand, reproduction is reproached from a Malthusian, resource-oriented point of view, according to which the supply of goods, and the demand of new members of the human race for such goods simply do not match. Things become scarce, and overpopulation makes the production of new children questionable for practical, logistical reasons.

But on the other hand, we also get “...the gnawing feeling that any kind of reproduction should be scrutinized and possibly resisted” (Matz 2014, 8). This latter concern is detached from worries over environmental degradation or hereditary poverty and directed toward the unjustified phenomenon of childbearing as the means to perpetuate the human species for its own sake. While we can only approximate Hardy’s motivation for his alleged antinatalist views, his work shows that any “antinatalism” must spring from something significantly deeper than practical concerns.

In the case of antinatalism, an unfortunate defect in one’s reproductive organs may make it biologically impossible to reproduce, but this does not make one an antinatalist per se. Similarly, a disgust of sexual intercourse or a hatred of babies may dissuade one from reproducing, but this would also not immediately make one an antinatalist. On a larger scale, state-imposed policies limiting the rate of childbirth, such as China’s former one-child policy, also cannot justifiably be called antinatalist. We can think of further reasons not to reproduce, such as enhancing career possibilities or saving money, but these are all practical considerations that do little to justify antinatalism as it is viewed in the present work.

These practical considerations can only ever call for a temporary halt on human reproduction until a certain plateau is reached where procreation becomes desirable or otherwise permissible again. The underlying idea is that having children at a certain time and place is disadvantageous and should be postponed. If an external trigger causes us to suffer in whichever way, we can work to remove it from our surroundings. Afterwards we can



live on unabated again. But, if the problems associated with humankind are not circumstantial, but *essential* to the human species, these stopgap solutions will not be enough. Total problems require total solutions.

The crumbling of the modern project has revealed that suffering might not be incidental and, in fact, might attend the very existence of the human species. This means that we are, somehow, programmed to suffer. If this is so, then no calibration of our everyday lives will change this. If there is an intrinsic part of human existence that attracts immense suffering, then we can only relieve the human species of suffering by extracting this trigger from inside us. But, if this part is deemed so important to our lives that we cannot live on without it, we reach the sad conclusion that we must get rid of ourselves in order to get rid of suffering. This is ultimately the position forwarded by antinatalism.

Humankind is, sadly, condemned to suffer. There is no way around this. The newborn baby enters a trajectory of suffering that it only exits upon death, whenever it may come. This means that we can only stop the systematic torture of the human race by our slow, but steady, annihilation. As radical as this sounds, this position is held to be the most moral solution to the human predicament. This is ultimately the opinion of South African philosopher David Benatar, who spearheads the modern movement of antinatalism.

#### BENATAR'S ANTINATALISM

For Benatar coming into existence is *always* a harm and not just for those born into, say, abject poverty, debilitating illness, warfare or other extenuating circumstances. And this is a bitter pill to swallow. For history is clearly on the side of procreation, and the future consequently cannot but cheerfully welcome it either. Benatar formally began his antinatalist quest with the 1997 publication of "Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence" in an American journal. The ideas expressed in this short essay would be refined and expanded, and eventually published in his 2006 book-length study *Better Never to Have Been*, which still stands as the most serious work of antinatalist philosophy. Since then Benatar has stayed true to his intentions and continues to publish on the topic. Admirably, already in his 1997 article Benatar foresaw the hostility to his arguments, and ever since then has used a number of media to vindicate his antinatalist conviction against the score of his critics.

Benatar makes it very clear that he does not hate human beings themselves. As we will see, his theory is not meant to impel people to kill themselves. Rather, his views spring forth from great moral concern with the state of being of humankind. Throughout his work he maintains that he is, above all, interested in morality. For Benatar, then, antinatalism represents the pinnacle of moral theory as it is primarily occupied with eradicating

suffering, the fact that his requires the eradication of the human species is another problem.

Toward the beginning of his 2006 work Benatar makes the uncontroversial assertion that people have no hand in their own birth which is purely a matter of chance. He writes that “...*nobody* is lucky enough not to be born, *everybody* is *unlucky* enough to have been born—and particularly bad *luck* it is[.]” (Benatar 2006, 7, italics in original). As a pessimist, he argues that our enquiries into human nature reveal that we are unnecessarily exposed to an indomitable suffering. It is clear that we are cast into this without our own consent. Frankly, nobody would give such consent if the parameters of our everyday lives would somehow be made clear beforehand.

Much more controversial than his assertion that our own birth is subject to the permutations of chance is his claim that we do not even have much control over the further course of our lives either. Benatar argues that there is so much unnecessary suffering that passing through life unscathed is virtually impossible. For him this “...shows that they [procreators] play Russian roulette with a *fully* loaded gun—aimed, of course, not at their own heads, but at those of their future offspring” (Benatar 2006, 92). Accordingly, it would not just be morally questionable, but outright wrong to bring new creatures into existence, as these will be condemned to the same unwarranted punishment of suffering.

As a self-professed analytical existentialist (Benatar 2010, 2), rejecting the often-fanciful methodology and colorful language of Continental philosophers, Benatar, annoyingly, does not give a clear-cut definition of suffering. This has been noted by George Rossolatos, too, who writes that Benatar’s

...foundational major premise is incumbent on the assumption that life is equal to suffering. However, no definition of suffering is provided to begin with. Suffering is employed as some sort of primordial state-of-Being that may be intuitively resonant with a theological discourse about the fall of Man due to transgressing divine orders. (Rossolatos 2019, 212)

This does not mean that we cannot reconstruct a working definition of suffering. Oddly enough, Benatar’s definition of suffering seems to be given by supernatural short story writer Thomas Ligotti who writes that “...by “human suffering,” the pessimist is not thinking of particular sufferings and their relief, but with suffering itself...Human suffering will remain insoluble as long as human beings exist” (Ligotti 2018, 60). Like Ligotti, Benatar views humankind and suffering as parallel trajectories. Consequently, we cannot minimize the incidence of suffering as long as we are alive.

A large part of suffering is brought about by the necessarily open-ended plot of desire-fulfillment. Desires are formed throughout life, and the vast majority of these can only temporarily be fulfilled, or not at all (Benatar

2006, 73–81). Nonetheless, we are inculcated with thoughts that the fulfillment of desires, no matter how long in the making, is ultimately worth it. This quest takes on almost heroic proportions. For Benatar, this merely hides from view the tragic reality that we are constantly torn apart between the carrot and the stick. Unfortunately, “[r]ather little of our lives is characterized by satisfied desires and rather a lot is marked by unsatisfied desires” (Benatar 2006, 74).

Ultimately these desires are all subjected to the overbearing desire for the continuation of life, which cannot but be thwarted by our inevitable encounter with death. No matter how well we satisfy whatever desires emerge over the course of our lives, we all die and take these desires (and their gratification) with us when we go. We cannot leave behind a legacy of gratified, personal desires in any real or useful way. These simply evaporate. What remains, however, is this necessarily open-ended plot of desire fulfillment, which will hang over the heads of our children and all future human beings as heavily as it does over ours. Perpetuating the human species perpetuates this dilemma as well. This is not so because humans are simply beings that desire, like other animals; that need basic food, water and shelter. There is a constellation of evermore complex desires that floats around the basic, animalistic desires that we share with other species. These range from success to glory, and from art to opulence. There is in humans not so much the desire for autarky as there is for conquest. This exposes us to harms ranging from heartache to hunger for most of our lives.

These desires are all related to an intrinsic human faculty. Consciousness, in one way or another, becomes the berth of all these desires, and the larger, immutable desire to remain alive is its flagship. As a primarily moral system, antinatalism is therefore focused on the emergence and operation of human consciousness as the crux of suffering. Procreation enlarges the circumference of consciousness on Earth. This is so because “[i]n creating a child, one is creating a new center of consciousness, a new subject of desire” (Benatar and Wasserman 2015, 130). It is because we create a “...new center of consciousness” that will sooner or later be enmeshed in innumerable unfulfilled desires that we cruelly perpetuate suffering.

#### THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT AS THE CONSCIOUS CONDITION

Benatar writes that “[a]lthough sentience is a later evolutionary development and is a more complex state of being than insentience, it is far from clear that it is a better state of being” (Benatar 2006, 2). Consciousness is the lowest, noticeable vibration in any systematic account of morality. As such, anything devoid of consciousness altogether cannot be (meaningfully) considered from a moral perspective (Benatar 2006, 141). No moral philosopher has ever looked at the dilemmas that might emerge from the

comradery of rocks or the coexistence of bacteria or germs. Some of the manifestations of the latter might become morally problematic, but in itself the association of these nonconscious building blocks of existence cannot be a preoccupation of moral philosophy.

Consciousness does not just refer to the conscious direction toward this or that goal (a thing, feeling, person, etc.) to make up for anything perceived as a lack. Rather, it is the overall state of consciousness (or the potentiality thereof) that matters. The fact that we, as humans, are conscious beings that derive our self-image from this. Without consciousness we could not formulate anything pertaining to an image in the first place. As has been mentioned above, this conscious self-image is painted with the flying colors of (unfulfilled) desires.

Benatar further writes that “[c]onscious life, although but a blip on the radar of cosmic time, is laden with suffering—suffering that is directed to no end other than its own perpetuation” (2006, 83). While human consciousness does not stand out against the background of the universe at large it nonetheless directs an endless sequence of suffering to us on earth. But, this suffering cannot exist beyond our consciousness. It is attracted to consciousness and continues to be so as long as consciousness exists. Consequently, suffering does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of consciousness. Otherwise we would have to agree with Rossolatos (cited above) that for Benatar, “[s]uffering is employed as some sort of primordial state-of-Being that may be intuitively resonant with a theological discourse about the fall of Man due to transgressing divine orders” (Rossolatos 2019, 212). This would inadvertently turn Benatar’s antinatalism into a Manichaeism according to which some autopoeitic suffering would constantly grapple onto to any and every life form that comes into existence. In reality, human beings suffer because they are conscious creatures.

The bond between consciousness and suffering is so strong that the palliation of suffering in everyday life is insufficient, and the only way to sever the two is by relinquishing consciousness altogether by the phased extinction of the human species as a whole, as we will see shortly. Clearly this coincides with an emptying of the cosmos of all human consciousness. But, the implosion of human consciousness as the final solution to the human predicament can only be warranted if there is an inherent mistake at the heart of humankind that renders the whole of human existence an excrescence that must be rectified by the extinction of the species. As we have seen above, otherwise we might well find a solution much less radical than the one offered by antinatalism. If the problems faced in life are simply circumstantial we might well redesign our strategy to tackle these anew. Life could, then be made better; no matter how much effort this will take.

On the antinatalist view, however, it is our very consciousness that triggers suffering. Any attempt at palliating the symptoms of suffering are superficial and naïve and fail to prevent the same patterns from developing over and over again. This is the broken design of the human species. Peter Wessel Zapffe writes on “[t]hat a species thus becomes unfit for life by reason of an overdevelopment of a single faculty is a tragedy that has befallen not only man” (in Reed and Rothenberg 1992, 43). He compares this to a species of deer now extinct because its antlers had, by a gamble of nature, become too big for it to successfully manoeuvre through life. By chance it had entered existence, and by the same chance it had exited it again. And so it is with human consciousness. While basic doses of consciousness may have served a purpose when humans were still on an equal footing with other animals, it has now left the orbit of survivalist efficacy, and has gone its own path like a rogue satellite serving nothing other than its own expedition carved out among the stars. In order to keep going on this cruel campaign of consciousness, we dumb down the horror that this evokes in the brightest and blightest minds alike. Benatar writes that

[t]here are a number of well-known features of human psychology that can account for the favourable assessment people usually make of their own life’s quality. It is these psychological phenomena rather than the actual quality of life that explain (the extent of) the positive assessment. (Benatar 2006, 64)

People continually deceive themselves into thinking that life is much better than it actually is. Part and parcel of this strategy is the traditional evaluation of consciousness as the fuel of modern humankind’s ascent to greatness, the engine of modernity and the muse of Enlightenment itself. Consciousness was elected to follow in the footsteps of God, but quickly lost track of its destination, which was the construction of a new system of values that relied solely on human endeavors. For a moment, humankind was blinded by the light of a bright and godless future. There is an almost poetic quality to the tragedy that underlies the human attempt to shove aside the Covering Cherub of self-delusion that convinces us that all life is all meaningful. And with its bloodshot eyes and grinding teeth, this Cherub is an almost impossible foe.

Antinatalism recognizes the tragic double-nature of consciousness as both peril and prodigy. But it is the very nature of consciousness that now makes human life impossible, or at least impossibly difficult to carry on. It is only when we articulate more clearly that consciousness is in fact responsible for suffering and, moreover, that this represents a gross and unfortunate error that cannot otherwise be rectified than by the slow but steady, extinction of the human species. Ironically, antinatalism cannot survive without this pronouncement.

## DISSOLUTION AS SOLUTION

Antinatalists will be asked about suicide as often as a comedian will be asked to tell a joke. Indeed, given the indelible pessimism of the antinatalist view we easily feel justified in asking those who hold this view why they do not simply kill themselves? The running assumption is that anyone dissatisfied with life to the degree that its prolongation becomes unbearable can simply choose death. But there is, Sarah Perry avers, less freedom here than meets the eye. Although there is no legal injunction against suicide (in Western states at least), she writes that “[a] person is not “free” to do something that he must either get away with in secret or be forcibly prevented from doing if caught” (Perry 2014, 21). Later on, she adds that “[s]uicide is tabooed in a unique and unfortunate way” (145). In addition to the clear social stigma on suicide, a stronger force against suicide is our biology. Furthermore, our bodies are extremely resilient in the face of death, and fervently resist any attempt at ending life prematurely. The suicide-threshold is therefore naturally high, and it is remarkably difficult to actually kill oneself.

We can see, then, that antinatalism is not pro-mortalism, and pro-mortalism is not antinatalism. While not advocating suicide, Benatar can also not condemn it. And this reveals some companionship with the often-neglected discussion of suicide in Buddhism, which might, ultimately, lead us back to Schopenhauer as well. Carl Becker writes that, in the Japanese context at least, the Buddhist view was that “...there is nothing intrinsically wrong with taking one’s own life, if it is not done in hate, anger, or fear. Equanimity or preparedness of mind is the main issue” (Becker 1990, 548). On the other hand, assuming that suicide will give out a golden ticket to enlightenment will be unpardonable and useless.

Although suicide, euthanasia and abortion are not prescribed, death ultimately has an important part to play in Benatar’s scheme of things. He affirms that nonexistence is preferable to existence given the great deal of suffering concomitant with life on earth. Therefore, it *would* have been better had we not come into existence, in order to avoid the suffering coincident with the emergence of the human species. Although Benatar is not oblivious to the practical implausibility of his view, he argues that his theories are not all air, and have (or can be made to have) some bearing on reality. This is, he argues, a serious conviction, and not just a fatalistic, yearning for the empty or oceanic. Rather than muse endlessly over nonexistence as an alternative to existence on Earth, Benatar argues for the slow dismantling of the human species. He insists that this takes time, but that it should not take too long either, for the longer we postpone the extinction of the human species, the more suffering accumulates. It is therefore imperative to get on with it sooner, rather than later. And thus, “...earlier extinction guarantees against the significant harm of future lives

that would otherwise be started” (Benatar 2006, 164). This is the painful truth for Benatar, and he admits that the mere thought of human extinction would bring discomfort to most.

But, rather than kill all members of the human species, humankind is to slowly but surely bring its production of children to an absolute halt. Benatar makes an important distinction between “killing-extinction” and “dying-extinction” (Benatar 2006, 195–6). While both ultimately refer to the extinction of the human species, different avenues toward an empty Earth are laid out. In the case of the former, a large-scale project would have to be launched that forcefully and violently eradicates the human species in a conclusive act of mass-murder. In the case of the latter, the human species would be stopped voluntarily by the mass-abstention of procreation by all members of the human race. While the outcome is the same, we can surmise that “killing-extinction” would be the faster option. At the same time, it would also be more immoral than its counterpart, as it clearly includes the wanton murder of all individuals on Earth. As such, it would be grossly immoral.

In spite of the grimness of his views, Benatar continually insists on the morality of his work. Therefore, he opts for “dying-extinction” according to which humans will eventually all sway to antinatalism and cease reproducing. This will slowly, but surely, effectuate the extinction of humankind by, more or less, peaceful means. This sequential dismantling of the human species will result in an implosion of the human edifice. And although there is no way to gauge whether that world would be good or bad, Benatar affirms, again, that since there will be no human beings in that uninhabited universe, there will also be no human beings that would miss out on potential existence, because it takes exactly such human beings to be alive in the first place to experience anything, suffering included (Benatar 2006, 199).

#### THE INHERENT LIMIT OF RESTITUTION

It is evident to most readers that thoughts (let alone expectations) of the end of the human species are tragic. James Lenman writes that “[t]oday there are no longer any sabre-tooth tigers or Irish elk and, one day, certainly, there will be no human beings. Perhaps that is a bad thing but, if so, it is a bad thing we had better learn to live with” (Lenman 2010, 139). Human extinction seems inevitable, and the only reasons against learning to cope with this harsh reality are emotional ones. When we think of future generations it is difficult not to think in terms of our own bloodline extending into the future. Consequently, it becomes saddening to think about this particular line of individuals perishing. But, other than this emotional defense mechanism against internalizing the coming extinction of humankind, Lenman argues that most other reasons fall away. One of

those epitomizing this emotional attachment is John Leslie who writes for instance that “[t]he extinction of the human race before galactic colonization could begin would be immensely tragic because of the vastly many worthwhile lives that would then have no possibility of being lived” (Leslie 2010, 449).

A second level of tragedy is superimposed on this primary layer when we consider that the annihilation of the human species might not sufficiently make up for the problems brought about by its existence in the first place. Although there will not be any human observer to ascertain that this “will” be the case, we may try to establish the insufficiency of the act of annihilation before it would occur. Only the total restitution of the nonhuman by the complete unoccurrence of the human would satisfy the demand for a universe emptied of consciousness.

If the emergence of consciousness, however, has already affected the world around it to such a degree that nothing could make up for this, we might as well choose not to eradicate it. But, since it would be impossible to verify beforehand whether the destruction of all consciousness would be worth it, as all means of ascertaining this would have disappeared too, the antinatalist conclusion preempts the possibility that it is not ultimately worth it. The radicality of antinatalism does not lie in its desire to eradicate human consciousness—this desire has been expressed much more enduringly by poets and writers throughout the ages—but in the tremendous collateral damage it is willing to factor in for its accomplishment. According to the ancient wisdom of Silenus, our options are limited as we already *are* in existence, and this is lamentable. This story, which has been with us since antiquity, tells of the quest of King Midas to find and interrogate the holy fool Silenus who had long been hidden from civilization. When the King finally finds him, he asks him about the meaning of life and its course. He receives the stupefying answer that although it would be best for man not to have been born, it would be second best to die as soon as possible. Death, in other words, takes precedence over life. This is the doleful cave man finds himself in. Our own extinction may make up for this, but this will only *approximate* the universe as it was before humans entered the scene.

Benatar gives the example of being released from prison after a long spell of incarceration. He writes, “[f]reedom may be valued more if it were long desired or the result of a protracted struggle, but it would still be better not to have been deprived of freedom all that time” (Benatar 2006, 79). It is hard to disagree with this. While the mounting desire for freedom might be overwhelming, its gratification will not endure. Ultimately, it will not outweigh the years spent incarcerated. We can make up for our past mistakes, but this is not the same as never having made these mistakes (or “mistakes”) that led to our imprisonment in the first place. Benatar also writes that “...in considering the question of phase extinction from a large



population base, I am not discussing what will ever happen but only what should happen or what it would best to have happen” (184). Bettering our lives (or that of the world around us) does not enable us to travel back in time.

While certainly not writing about antinatalism, the voice of German philosopher and psychologist Ludwig Klages (1872–1956) can be added to the chorus here. In a recently translated work he writes,

...if I think about the past, then I think about a *reality* which has been; on the other hand, if I think about the future, then I think about something *un-real*, or to be more precise, a fact that has its existence merely in thought! If all thinking beings were to disappear in an instant, then the past which actually took place still remains precisely as it was before; however, the word “future” would simply lose all meaning as soon as there were a lack of beings to *think* about the future! (Klages [1922] 2018, 169)

We can never actually return to the space and time in which we did not exist, because we would have to be inexistent. Like a perilous journey both strange and uncannily familiar, in the absence of any confirmation that the implosion of the human project will lead anywhere, the antinatalist can only hope that it does. And this is a pendulous thing for one willing to inaugurate the final solution to the human predicament and the conscious condition.

Given the above, we can see that any retroactive restitution of the damage done by the human species might not be enough. The damage has been done already and cannot simply be undone. In the case of the death of God, Nietzsche’s madman proclaimed “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (Nietzsche [1882/1887] 1974, 181). We can atone for our sins but can never return to the space and time where God was not (yet) killed. This is tragic but not simply aesthetic: the situation, into which the death of God has forced us, empowers us to have another look into the clockwork of our very existence.<sup>3</sup> The heightening of reason has pushed us, not just away from God, but away from our very existence. The idea is gaining ground that we, as a species, must not have come into existence and must now retroactively make up for the fact that we *did* come into existence. This could only have occurred in the vacuum left by the death of God.

The radical conclusions drawn by antinatalism, then, offer not so much a reliable exit plan but a new opportunity to evaluate what we are, now that God is dead. It is this excrescence of atheistic, humanist radicalism that reminds us most viscerally of the murder committed in the nineteenth century, and of which humankind still carries the guilt. Accordingly, antinatalism would be important not because it is very realistic, but because it offers us a rare moment of introspection that we would otherwise not have obtained. Similar concerns have also been voiced

by a number of commentators. Lee Doyal argues that “[w]hether you agree with [Benatar’s] conclusions or not—and he accepts that few probably will—his arguments force one to examine deep seated presumptions about the value of life and the moral significance of human existence” (Doyal 2007, 575). Yujin Nagasawa somewhat similarly wonders why Benatar opted for serious philosophical argument based on rational, analytical soundness rather than (perhaps, equally introspective) philosophical puzzle. He writes that “...in arguing positively for his astonishing thesis rather than framing it as a source of counterintuitive puzzlement, Benatar keeps away those who are willing to see their moral intuitions in a new light” (Nagasawa 2008, 677).

### CONCLUSION

The death of God opened into a devastating crisis of value. While some saw potential here, the impotence that this event caused in the body of humankind cannot be ignored. The death of God was therefore not just catastrophic for the religious faithful. The legitimacy of transcendental values had fallen away and an immanent system of values now had to be built. While some so-called existentialists optimistically accepted the challenge of establishing a new, human-centered system of values, the window of opportunity is now slammed shut by contemporary antinatalists who claim that nonexistence is not less valuable than existence. This claim is absurd from a historical standpoint, as it is not only antithetical to God, but to nature itself, as evolution stimulates the perpetuation of human life forms. Only the value-crisis crowned by the death of God could have introduced the possibility that existence has no sharp edge over nonexistence.

Antinatalism—and particularly David Benatar’s variety—has been described as partaking in the radical critique of consciousness according to which consciousness is far from the ideal of progress and modernity and, in fact, forms the trigger of all human suffering. Since humans are, nonetheless, all endowed with consciousness (or, in the case of, say, the comatose or mentally impaired, at least with the potentiality for it), they are all condemned to suffer. Since the human project is but one face of the coin and the conscious condition another, humankind cannot relieve suffering without the liquidation of the human species. This is radical, but all the more pertinent in our current day and age. Not only have we exhausted many of the more traditional philosophical enquiries, we are literally faced with the possibility of the extinction of the species.

In spite of its aims, antinatalism occupies a corner in the shadow of the value-crisis that emerged in the wake of the death of God. As such, it operates in the same value-vacuum that has animated intellectuals for the past hundred and fifty years or so. Antinatalism cannot, however, impose its claims as if were not thus confined, as but one of the more vociferous

mourners in the funeral procession of God. In other words, antinatalism launches claims against a foe vulnerable only to meta-claims. These “mere” claims, consequently, will ricochet right back into its face. The radicalism of this modern phenomenon can only pick up as much momentum as a muscle car on a race track; and in the end, it will not get anywhere real. Viewed as such, its radicalism becomes the taunt of trolls measured in bytes or decibels, but never measured for its actual success. For whatever we do with the chapels of old, no matter how we decide to use them in the twenty-first century, it is evident that the eyes of God nictitate behind the stained glass of human efflorescence.

## NOTES

1. This is not to say that antinatalism is the only outcome of the historical-philosophical process that led up to the death of God. But, as is argued here, it is a particularly insidious new development that could not have occurred without the death of God. It is inconceivable to turn the question of value upside down in the presence of Divinity. Moreover, evolution itself is on the side of (human) reproduction. It therefore took the momentous value-crisis associated with the death of God to present the conditions for the birth of antinatalism. This does not disregard the optimistic, life-affirming tendencies that also gained momentum after this act of murder. But, since antinatalism may inspire people to actually refrain from reproducing, the effects are far more serious than, say, Sartre’s assertion of radical freedom.

2. To my knowledge, Ramesh Mishra, Amy Paris Langenberg and William LaFleur are the only ones who discussed antinatalism in a non-Western intellectual setting, most notably in the context of classical Indian religions. Amy Paris Langenberg writes about “Buddhism’s deep-seated antinatalism” (Langenberg 2018, 571), while William LaFleur talks about Buddhist “anti-fecundism” (LaFleur 2002, 56–60). While both make for interesting reads, these accounts refer more to crowd-control measures aimed at Buddhist laity, keeping them “pure” and undistracted. Practitioners are, in order words, to sublimate their sexual drives into something more productive. Their accounts do not contribute to a genuine antinatalist theory in Buddhism. Although Mishra does not discuss any “Asian antinatalism” in much detail, his account of Buddhism and Brahmanism is more instructive here. While Mishra views Buddhism and Brahmanism as containing some essential quality of what we now call antinatalism, this gist is not cultivated sufficiently. He argues that this can only occur when the external conditions are right, which he believes to be the case with modern, secular democracies. On the other hand, “[i]n the less-developed world and among the poor, with little education and the struggle to survive, we can scarcely speak of natalist behavior in ideological terms” (Coates 2016, 166). Mishra is not unnecessarily harsh here, but simply argues that the conditions for the spread of the radical phenomenon of antinatalism are not yet met everywhere. It is, in other words, simply a matter of time before the “truth” of antinatalism will spread beyond the West. For Mishra, the internet comes in handy here (Coates 2016, 85) It is, then, a matter of revelation, as it were, and education. Until then, antinatalism will spread fastest in the Western world which is roughly commensurate with the recent findings of Brown and Keefer (2019) who, for the first time, discuss antinatalism from the perspective of evolutionary psychology.

3. For Brian Leiter, Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the death of God fundamentally altered the enlightened sense of equality among people that was, hitherto, safeguarded by God (Leiter 2019, 390–93). When the transcendental system of values crowned by God fell away, so did the equality that derived from it. The other side of the coin is Nietzsche’s faith in higher human beings as the proud, but in Nietzsche’s eyes absolutely necessary, champions of inequality. The death of God, consequently, would lead to the death of the human as we know nowadays. This second—but not secondary—death would simultaneously be the birth of a higher form of human, unshackled and undistracted. Leiter adds, however, that Nietzsche “...presumably is not making a prediction about what the vast “herd” of humanity will come to believe, only about his rightful readers, that elite he imagined were predisposed for his insights[.]” (398).

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