

I am Rivka Weinberg, philosopher and author of ‘The Risk of a Lifetime: How, When, and Why Procreation May be Permissible’.
AMA about procreative ethics, bioethics and the metaphysics of life and death.

RivkaWeinberg¹ and r/Science AMAs¹

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April 17, 2023

Abstract

I’m Rivka Weinberg, Professor of Philosophy at Scripps College, which is one of the Claremont Colleges, in way too sunny California. I grew up in Brooklyn (before it was cool), worked my way through Brooklyn College as a paralegal, and got my PhD. from the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor. Most of my philosophical work has focused on the ethics and metaphysics of creating people. It still surprises me that so many people just go ahead and create an entire new human without really thinking through what they are doing to that person. It surprises me even more that so many people seem to think that life is inherently good and that living is a privilege and a treat. I find that outlook very hard to understand, though I haven’t given up trying. My book, *The Risk of a Lifetime: How, When, and Why Procreation May Be Permissible*, is a culmination of my many years of thinking about what we are doing when we create a person. As the title reveals, I think we are imposing life’s risks on that person, and I consider when and why that set of risks may be permissible to impose. Although it might seem foreign to think about having a baby as imposing life’s risks on someone, I don’t think it’s as counterintuitive a conception of procreation as it might initially seem. It’s not odd to think that a teenager shouldn’t have a baby because that baby will have lots of disadvantages, i.e., face the high degree of significant life risks that are associated with being born to teen parents. It’s not unusual to think that people who carry genes for terrible diseases, such as Tay Sachs, should try to make sure that they don’t partner with another carrier and bear a child who will have to suffer so terribly. Many people think that they shouldn’t have children who would be at a high risk for a life of abject poverty. And those are all ways of thinking about whether the life risks we impose on those we create are permissible for us to impose. So that is my framework for thinking about procreative ethics. Within that framework, I think about what kind of act procreation is, whether it is always wrong, whether metaphysical puzzles such as Parfit’s famous non-identity problem make it almost always permissible (short answer: so not!), and what makes someone parentally responsible. In my book, I arrive at principles of procreative permissibility based on a broadly contractualist framework of permissible risk imposition. I am currently finishing up some papers on whether parental responsibility has a set endpoint, or indeed any endpoint; and on some aspects of risk imposition that are unique to, and uniquely problematic for, procreative acts. I am also thinking a lot about pointlessness, about how life is not the kind of thing that can have a point or purpose, and whether we can rationally find that disappointing or even tragic. I probably should have thought that through before I had children who now have to live pointless lives, like everyone else. Ah well. Fun fact: I have two children, and ten siblings. Links of Interest: My book: *The Risk of a Lifetime: How, When, and Why Procreation May Be Permissible* An article of mine reviewing David Benatar’s antinatalist book (*Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*): “Is Having Children Always Wrong?” NewBooksNetwork podcast interview on my book “The Moral Complexity of Sperm Donation” Short piece in Quartz: “Is it unethical to have children in the era of climate change?” Another short piece in Quartz: “When is it immoral to have children?” EDIT: That’s it for my time! Thanks everyone for your questions and I will try to look again later.

[REDDIT](#)

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RIVKAWEINBERG [R/SCIENCE](#)

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Although it might seem foreign to think about having a baby as imposing life's risks on someone, I don't think it's as counterintuitive a conception of procreation as it might initially seem. It's not odd to think that a teenager shouldn't have a baby because that baby will have lots of disadvantages, i.e., face the high degree of significant life risks that are associated with being born to teen parents. It's not unusual to think that people who carry genes for terrible diseases, such as Tay Sachs, should try to make sure that they don't partner with another carrier and bear a child who will have to suffer so terribly. Many people think that they shouldn't have children who would be at a high risk for a life of abject poverty. And those are all ways of thinking about whether the life risks we impose on those we create are permissible for us to impose.

So that is my framework for thinking about procreative ethics. Within that framework, I think about what kind of act procreation is, whether it is always wrong, whether metaphysical puzzles such as Parfit's famous non-identity problem make it almost always permissible (short answer: so not!), and what makes someone parentally responsible. In my book, I arrive at principles of procreative permissibility based on a broadly contractualist framework of permissible risk imposition.

I am currently finishing up some papers on whether parental responsibility has a set endpoint, or indeed any endpoint; and on some aspects of risk imposition that are unique to, and uniquely problematic for, procreative acts. I am also thinking a lot about pointlessness, about how life is not the kind of thing that can have a point or purpose, and whether we can rationally find that disappointing or even tragic. I probably should have thought that through before I had children who now have to live pointless lives, like everyone else. Ah well.

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Links of Interest:

My book: [The Risk of a Lifetime: How, When, and Why Procreation May Be Permissible](#)

An article of mine reviewing David Benatar's antinatalist book (*Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*): ["Is Having Children Always Wrong?"](#)

[NewBooksNetwork podcast interview on my book](#)

["The Moral Complexity of Sperm Donation"](#)

Short piece in Quartz: ["Is it unethical to have children in the era of climate change?"](#)

Another short piece in Quartz: ["When is it immoral to have children?"](#)

EDIT:

That's it for my time! Thanks everyone for your questions and I will try to look again later.

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In the [announcement thread /u/ADefiniteDescription](#) asked:

Hi Professor Weinberg - thanks for joining us! I haven't had time to read your book, but I listened to the [NewBooksNetwork interview](#) which helped a lot to understand your view.

I want to start out by saying I agree with your sentiment that I find anti-natalism fairly intuitive (although more in the Shiffrin sense than the Benatar/you "life sucks" sense) but don't think the arguments bear out the theory. That's part of why I find your work so interesting.

#1

My first question has to do with teaching procreative ethics. Most of my students don't share our intuition and find anti-natalism positively dumbfounding. What are the best ways that you've found to introduce the subject to students in a general intro course (i.e. not one on procreative ethics)? Is there a specific reading you use? I've been assigning [Harman's *Nous* review of Benatar's book](#), but I'd love to use something a little more self-contained. Would something from your book work?

#2

My second question has to do with one of the arguments in your book. Going off the NBN interview, it sounds like you utilise a variant of Rawls' "Veil of Ignorance" to argue for your contractualist approach to procreative ethics. I'm worried that this version of the Veil is on even shakier conceptual grounds than Rawls'. Think about some of the responses to Rawls which claim that you can't conceptualise yourself behind the Veil because you can't strip away some of your necessary properties and still conceive of your "self" without them - e.g. race or gender. These types of responses basically rely on the idea that no matter what, you always bring something with you behind the Veil. I worry that this is especially true of your argument, because it's basically conceptually impossible to conceive of yourself as non-existent in a way that is required. You might think that this isn't a problem because we can just assume we're existent and reflect on an existent person considering the risks of procreation behind the Veil, but the problem is that the majority of people seem to be very biased. Consider for example Tom Nagel, who you and Talisse bring up in the interview. Nagel thinks that life is good even when it's bad (something I suspect the vast majority of folks agree with). Benatar thinks that it sucks even when it's good (more or less).

Note that whichever way the bias goes, it doesn't matter. What matters is that *something* is coming with us behind the Veil, not the actual content, and thus we can't trust the results of the thought experiment (because it threatens to reduce us to relativism).

So my question is two-fold I guess. Of course I'd like to know how you would respond to the above question, but I'm also curious how important you think the Veil is to your account. Can it be safely discarded, or is it essential?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

To your first question, when I teach antinatalism, I assign the first two chapters of Benatar's book. So I go right to the arguments. One way I motivate the antinatalist intuition is by asking students whether they would have chosen before their conception - would that have been possible - to exist. Some say no. For those who say yes, I ask them why. They usually talk about how their lives are good. I then ask them about the future and the risks that lie ahead for them. That can lead not only to their thinking about nonexistence as a risk-free alternative but it also points the discussion in the direction of what

could happen to people in life instead of just what has happened so far to the people privileged enough to reach my classroom (though some of them may have gone through some terrible times too). Of course, I also think that a great reading to assign on antinatalism is the chapter in my book where I discuss Benatar's and Shiffrin's arguments. (Chapter 4: Is Procreation Almost Always Wrong?). To your second question, first let me say that I do think, and I make this argument explicitly in my book as well, that the principles of procreative permissibility which I argue for in my book can be argued for directly, without a Rawlsian framework. But I also think that the arguments about how we can't really put ourselves in other people's shoes and consider perspectives different from our own has been overstated. Sure, we can't know exactly what it's like to be someone else. But we do have some moral imagination and empathy (if we didn't morality in general would be pretty difficult). We also have the testimony of people who are different from us and we can learn about what it's like to be them by taking their testimony seriously.

My most important point in answering your question is to clear up how I set up the procreative veil of ignorance. First of all, I don't ask us to assume, hypothetically, that we may or may not exist. I ask us to assume that we will definitely exist. I do that because existence itself is not what is being distributed in this thought experiment. What is being distributed are procreative benefits and burdens. If a hypothetically possible person turns out never to exist then that hypothetical person is a merely possible person (a hypothetically possible person that will never actually exist), has no real interest, and is therefore of no moral relevance. What I ask us to do in the procreative thought experiment is to assume that we will exist and that we will both procreate and have been procreated under the principles of procreative permissibility we select. So the conflict of interests is intrapersonal, between one person at different stages of life (at birth and then when possibly having an interest in procreating, post-puberty). The conflict is not interpersonal nor is it about who gets to exist. The conflict is intrapersonal and involves the distribution of procreative benefits and burdens. Procreative benefits and burdens include the circumstances into which one is born and the moral rules that govern whether, when, and how one might permissibly procreate. Sorry for the lengthy response! Thank you for a great question

Hi Professor Weinberg,

I'm a 29 year old man and my partner is about to turn 28, so the window for having kids will close soon-ish. I have a lot of heritable diseases and invisible disabilities that aren't bad enough to make my life not worth living, but if I could choose between the body I have and a body without those problems, I'd choose the latter. I also suspect the quality of life around the world will decline dramatically over the next few decades, due to political unrest and rising sea levels. Should we have kids, or should we settle for dogs?

[RaisinsAndPersons](#)

As I argue in my book, I think the >life worth living< standard is too low – that's the standard set by the non-identity problem which I argue is a metaphysical mistake and, in any case, not a moral compass or standard for us to follow (that's why it's called a *problem*). I think you should assess the likelihood of your children being able to achieve and enjoy a high level of procreative goods. I do think climate change poses a significant risk to future people but that risk is not the same for all people. For example, it's higher for those living in low lying islands and lower for those living in inland Canada (I think).

If I may ask another question about your book...

I'm interested in your argument against Shiffrin (again, as relayed in the NBN interview; I haven't had a chance to look at the text). When Shiffrin claims that bringing someone into existence is problematic

because they can't consent to it, you note that children can't consent even if they do exist and that we give those rights to stewards who paternalistically decide for them. But I'm wondering why this isn't just a restatement of the problem. That is, the problem is that children can't consent - even in principle. You're bringing someone into existence who can't possibly (in a strong, conceptual sense of possibility) agree to that action, and thus forcing them into a situation where they lack all real normative control over their lives for at least a dozen years. The wrong isn't merely being brought into existence without one's consent, but being brought into a special type of existence where one lacks any normative powers against one's consent.

[A Definite Description](#)

Thank you for this question. I agree that some might say that we merely put the problem another way when we say that children are not the kinds of entities that can consent. But Shiffrin specifically frames the procreative problem as a consent rights violation and we cannot violate the consent rights of children because they don't have these rights. It is therefore appropriate and permissible for us to make choices on their behalf. So the fact that children can't consent is not a barrier to permissible procreation if it is morally okay for us to make decisions on behalf of children.

In the [announcement thread /u/-Fantoche-](#) asked:

I am also thinking a lot about pointlessness, about how life is not the kind of thing that can have a point or purpose, and whether we can rationally find that disappointing or even tragic. I probably should have thought that through before I had children who now have to live pointless lives, like everyone else.

Hi Professor Weinberg. I want to share some thoughts that I have in response to this paragraph of yours that I just quoted. If you are short on time and can't read my post, my questions are at the very bottom of the post, last paragraph. Thanks for your time.

So, I have to preface my post by saying that I've been an antinatalist for about a decade now and I've been part of multiple groups and communities for antinatalists and the childfree. I never thought I'd make this post until very recently, but I've seen quite a lot in these past 10 years and I've come to think that this line of thinking is problematic, especially when it isn't qualified. I know this was possibly tongue-in-cheek, but I still want to comment on it. For starters, if this proposition is true, then it invalidates itself. If life is pointless then everything we do with our pointless lives is pointless, including saying that it is pointless. This is not a novel thought but it is a valid criticism of this line of thinking.

I don't think it does anyone any good to think along these lines. Benatar sees danger there too, and he qualifies in his latest book the distinction between terrestrial meaning and cosmic meaning and makes a pretty big deal about it. As a systems thinker with a strong interest in Process Philosophy, I now think this distinction is also problematic, but I'm happy to know that he at least gives people an "out" so that they can frame the problem differently and aren't overcome with despair and self-defeating nihilistic thoughts like many people in the antinatalism communities that I frequented are.

From what I've observed in myself and others over the years, making absolute statements about life like this one leads to a conjoining of other dogmatic beliefs, usually reductionistic/scientistic in nature. While I don't believe that there is much harm in thinking that life is (cosmically) pointless, there is harm in those accompanying beliefs, because they are self-serving, demonstrably false and they also encourage intellectual laziness.

The next step, logically, for a lot of people who hold them, is to think that life is not only pointless, but *malignantly useless*, to use Thomas Ligotti's term. Once you've reached that point, you are not interested in questions about life anymore, you feel like you know everything non-trivial there is to know about it, and you are only interested in distracting yourself from it or escaping it. This is not a good place to be in. I've known a few individuals who have taken their lives soon after reaching that

place.

I think there are other valid ways to view life which are less damaging to people's psyches. Maurice Merleau-Ponty said that, once we are in the world, we are *condemned to meaning*. We are in the world and of the world, inextricably, existing as meaning-constructing organisms. This bird's-eye view that we seem to be able to take about life still has a subject at its beginning, always. We do not have the capacity of functioning with pure rationality, as Damasio has shown: even the most rational mathematician is passionate when he is doing mathematics. Does that not make life inherently purposeful, even though there isn't one singular purpose? Or rather, is it not true that life is inherently purposeful *because* that is the case? I remember Cioran saying that the fact that life doesn't have a purpose is a reason to live, moreover, the only one. The death of grand narratives hasn't stripped life of its meaning, yet we have not adapted our language to this fact, why do you think that is?

I think the problem starts because we're operating under a Cartesian worldview of separation/isolation/disjunction which sees a (now pointless) world/objects "out there" while we are a separate subject. That's an assumption that's sadly not questioned enough. I don't buy that distinction anymore; or at least I think it has to be contextualized and integrated within a more global perspective in order to be philosophically/scientifically valid. I wish people took an interest in epistemological constructivism, phenomenology, systems thinking and cybernetics more often to discuss this.

I'm concerned with the way we talk about life -- if we're interested in life and in harm reduction, we should regularly be examining our presuppositions about it and our use of potentially problematic language. I personally think that procreative ethics is a separate topic from existentialism/metaphysics and the latter shouldn't inform the former. I hope people will come to separate these two subjects in the future. The lack of a grand purpose to life is a non-issue for me when it comes to procreation ethics, yet I've seen it sold and often (mis)used (via greedy reductionism) as a *road to antinatalism...*

All that said, I guess my questions are:

(1) Do you think that the belief that life is pointless should inform antinatalism, and do you hold this existential nihilism separate from your antinatalist-leaning views?

(2) If you're of the belief that life is inherently pointless and that this somehow diminishes it, do you think there are good reasons to avoid presenting life as (rather self-evidently) pointless to others? In other words, do you see potential dangers with this line of thinking when talking about life with others?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

As I mentioned, I am thinking a lot about pointlessness but I have much thinking and reading left to do before I have definitive things to say about it. That said, I'll take a crack at your questions. To the first, what I have been thinking about pointlessness is not directly connected to procreative ethics, at least not at this point. My thinking is about whether it is rational to mind or be disappointed that something, namely, life as a whole, is not the kind of thing that can have a point or purpose. Even if it is rational to be bothered by this, it does not follow that it is irrational not to be bothered by this (though that is something I am thinking about as well). Finally, even if life is ultimately pointless, it does not follow that it has no value at all – purpose is only one sort of value – and it also does not follow that procreation is always wrong. That is a very long way of saying no, my worries about pointlessness are not connected to my general worries about procreating, at least not yet (my somewhat joking comment about not having thought about this before I had children who have to lead pointless lives, aside). To your second question, I think that it is usually not dangerous to be honest with people about what you take to be true and of philosophical importance. Exceptions may apply under exceptional conditions. In almost all of my classes, I teach at least one of these "dangerous" topics, e.g., antinatalism, existentialism, suicide, etc. I teach a whole course on death and another whole course on the meaning of life and I have not found that my students are unable to handle these topics. It helps to present arguments from different points of view, which I of course do, because that is part of what I think my

job is as a philosophy professor. But that practice also has the added benefit of taking the depressing edge off some of these ideas. I find that students are generally very interested in having these sorts of discussions and are often relieved to finally be able to talk about things they have been thinking about on their own for some time.

Hello Professor Weinberg, and thank you for your time and for joining us.

When studying problems like the nonidentity problem, or more general, yet grave problems, such as suicide, procreation and abortion, many people make comparative judgements between the person-that-doesn't-exist and the person-who-would-exist.

Some people, such as me and some of my fellow researchers, think that those comparative statements simply do not make any sense (in the formal usage of the term).

For example, were a suicidal person to draw a comparison between "the suffering they're enduring" and "the relief they'd get from death", the comparison strikes me as impossible -- as the second state (relieved in death) doesn't exist in any way whatsoever, having no subject to experience it. There is nobody to be relieved.

Another example rises when discussing abortion. Many people would make claims such as "this potential person has a right to come into existence". But as we see, this sentence predicates something of a subject, whereas no subject is present (yet). There is no person to talk about, and the rights we are attributing are in fact attributed to something else.

The simple sentence "coming to existence" is figurative. It suggests that something slips from non-existence to existence, as if non-existence and existence were two similar ontological planes one could travel across freely; but that is not the case, and we talk in such a way solely to facilitate understanding.

I could summarize my point in this way : one cannot predicate of non-existence. It is impossible to formulate a judgement about something that doesn't exist. And here, I mean *doesn't exist* in the most radical way possible. Therefore, how is it possible to draw comparisons between states, and therefore statuate on whether it is acceptable to go from existence to non-existence, or vice-versa ?

When discussing Benatar's antinatalist claims, this issue rises up immediately. "Better not to have been"-type claims can only work, from an epistemic standpoint, if there is a comparison to be made between "not having been" and "having been". But how is that comparison possible ? The situation of the subject who has never been cannot be analyzed : there is no subject. Nothing can be said of this subject, for he doesn't exist. Therefore, we cannot compare the situation of this subject to that of another subject.

How can bioethical discussions and arguments that revolve around procreation (which is the "bringing" into existence of a subject) or death, (such as palliative ethics), work around this problem ? How to escape the epistemic prison of existence ?

I apologize for any poor wording choices or grammatical mistakes, as english isn't my native language.

[Mezziaz](#)

Thank you for raising this complex but important set of issues. Regarding your questions, I think it might be helpful to consider the difference between possible people, merely possible people, and future people. A possible person is simply a hypothetically possible person who may or may not ever exist. I don't have much to say about this category without further dividing it into those who will exist in the future, i.e. future people, and those who could hypothetically exist but never will, i.e. merely possible people. Merely possible people will never exist and so they have no interests (because

interests are contingent on existence, otherwise we have no real subject for interests) and are of no moral relevance. Future people will exist in the future so they are morally relevant and the fact that they don't exist yet doesn't matter very much. For example, Feinberg presents a case of a man who plants a bomb in a kindergarten classroom, set to go off in ten years, which it does, killing all the kids in the room. None of those kids existed when the bomb was planted but in planting that bomb, the planter harmed future people and is responsible for murdering them.

Now, let me turn to some of your examples. Kant argues against suicide sort of along the lines you describe when he says you cannot improve your condition by destroying yourself. However, a person can argue that nonexistence is nothing, existence is something and sometimes something (in this case, their miserable life) is worse than nothing (their nonexistence). I don't find this to be nonsensical.

As for abortion, when people speak of the fetus having a right to life, I think sometimes they are considering the fetus to be a real person, with the same rights as a person. Arguments based on potentiality are harder to sustain, in my view, but they need not always lack a subject. One can argue that a fetus is not a person but is a subject - it is something after all, and that subject has a right to develop into something else, namely, a person. (I don't make this argument myself).

We can have discussions about procreative ethics because when we create people, we impose life's risks of them. The fact that they don't exist before we do this doesn't make it impossible to assess the morality of imposing these risks, just as the bomb planter in Feinberg's case murders children who don't yet exist when he plants the bomb.

Lastly, I want to say that I think I understand where you are coming from regarding your worries about existence as a predict, and I think you might enjoy reading my paper, >Existence: Who Needs It? The Non-Identity Problem and Merely Possible People<, as well as the section in my book that discusses the metaphysics of possible people, future people, and puzzles of the merely possible.

In the [announcement thread /u/sensible_knave](#) asked:

Hi, Professor, thanks for taking the time to join us today.

What do you take to be the strongest reply (if there be any that may qualify as such) to 'The Bystander Challenge' as described in your paper "[It Ain't My World](#)"? For others, that challenge is

If I have committed no wrong associated with someone else's problem, what obligates me to help them? How does someone else's problem become my obligation?

The latter part of the paper can be interpreted as suggesting that 'self-interest' may be your answer. However, I understand that section of your argument to primarily demonstrate that self-interest fails to adequately motivate a rather radical ethical response to the plight of others that at least some forms of consequentialism seem to demand of us. (That is, I'm hesitant to possibly over-interpret your discussion of self-interest beyond its role I imagine it playing in the argument in order to assume it represents what you take to be the best response to The Bystander Challenge.)

Thanks again!

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Thanks for this question. You're right to note that in that paper, I am mostly arguing against radical responsibility for others. I don't make a positive case for why we are obligated to help others in that paper, though I gesture toward self-interest as a start. I do that because I think that contractualist ethics can explain why we should generally be somewhat helpful to (some) others: because that's the kind of social contract we would sign on to, given the chance. Social cooperation is enjoyable and advantageous. I also think that Kantian ethics can explain why we should generally be somewhat

helpful to (some) others, and that explanation is that it's a way of expressing our respect for persons as intrinsically valuable. (Neither contractualism nor Kantianism will generally force us to help all others to the point of marginal utility, or anywhere close).

In the [announcement thread /u/Formally_Nightman](#) asked:

What causes negative birth rates in countries and how does the governmental body response to this affect our procreative ethics on the micro level?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

This is partly an empirical question so that part is not really in my area of expertise. From what I have read, it seems that negative birth rates can be caused by a wide variety of political, economic, and cultural conditions. Governmental responses vary from nothing to incentivizing child bearing and/or immigration. Negative birth rates can pose problems because there can be insufficient younger people available to support a larger aging population. On an individual level, the same principles of procreative permissibility apply in terms of parent to child ethics, which is what my focus has been. When procreation affects third-parties, such as other people in an overpopulated or underpopulated world, what one might owe to others can have an impact on one's procreative obligations. Unlike what I've often heard others say, however, I don't think it is at all easy or clearly warranted to claim that all procreation is wrong because the world is overpopulated. There are ways of reducing world population without having individuals who want children go childless, and my view is that we should put our efforts toward those ways, such as making effective contraception easily available to women. That has proven a very effective means of reducing overpopulation.

I have a number of objections to something you mentioned at the end, and was wondering if you could elaborate further.

When you say "life is pointless," I'm not sure what you mean. Do you mean that, in-itself, the cycle of life that maintains the existence of the human species is, *qua* continuation of the species, pointless?

Because you seem to draw the conclusion that the pointlessness of this life cycle *as a whole* implies that the *parts of this whole* should be deemed equally pointless by virtue of the fact that they are part of a pointless whole. Moreover, you imply that based on the fact that the *birth* of the individual is part of a pointless whole, their *life* (continued existence) should also be considered pointless.

You wrote:

children who now have to live pointless lives, like everyone else.

On these grounds, it's just as easy to say that going to buy food at the grocery store is also a pointless activity. After all, buying food is an economic exchange, and this economic exchange is a part of the global market of capitalism, and capitalism is (a) pointless, (b) poses risks to the participants, and (c) leads to disastrous consequences. Yet this shouldn't lead us to conclude that *eating* is a pointless activity, simply because my participating in a pointless activity allows me to acquire food (That doesn't make capitalism or reproduction any less problematic).

Likewise, we should not conclude that *living* is a pointless activity, just because a pointless activity (sexual reproduction, continuation of the species) brings it about.

Thus, when you say:

life is not the kind of thing that can have a point or purpose, and whether we can rationally find that disappointing or even tragic.

You seem to be conflating two senses of life (a) life as the process of continuing the species, manifested in procreation and (b) life as the *living* of the (already created) individual. It might be the case that life in sense (a) does not have a point or purpose, but this doesn't imply that life in sense (b) lacks a point, end, or purpose.

Moreover, I don't think that anyone who believes in teleology would think that the purpose of (b) can be inferred from (a). Instead, any teleological claim about the "point" or "purpose" of life would have to be inferred retroactively from (b) back into (a).

Finally, if you think that life *generally* (not simply the creation of life) is not the kind of thing that can have a point or purpose, how are you making normative claims about the risks of living? What's *the point* of preventing a person from encountering risks while living?

[iunoionnis](#)

I'm not sure I fully understand your question. One of the things I have been thinking about is the relationship between purpose or point within a life and something like purpose or point of a life as a whole. I am not sure yet how that relationship works. As I said earlier in this thread, I haven't made any connections so far between my thinking about pointlessness and procreative ethics.

I would like to clarify that I don't say that we should or must prevent a person from encountering risks while living. That is likely impossible and also likely undesirable. What I do say is that we must take seriously the nature and probability of harm of the risks we impose when we procreate.

The focus in this area of contemporary analytic philosophy is on the question of whether it's permissible to have children. I'm no historian of philosophy but that seems pretty different than the primary question in this area in the history of Western thought: namely the question of whether birth control is morally permissible. I'm also led to believe that some Abrahamic sects believe that procreation isn't merely permissible but (weakly) obligatory.

So I'm curious what you think then of the ethics of birth control. In particular I'm wondering what you think of *permanent* birth control, like tubal ligations and vasectomies. Are there things we should be wary about when it comes to these procedures?

If you have any literature suggestions I'd love those as well - this is an issue I'm fairly interested in but haven't seen much about.

[ADefiniteDescription](#)

In my view, not having children is the more morally conservative choice because it usually involves less moral risk.

I could see birth control being a moral issue if the world was suffering from a population crash and then maybe some argument could be made that we should help other currently living people by having children. But we would have to make sure we aren't having children primarily or exclusively for that purpose because, if we were, we would, in my view, not be treating the future person with sufficient respect for them as an end in themselves.

I have no moral problem with permanent birth control procedures, per se. I'd only caution against them because one might change one's mind later in life and we have reliable long-term birth control alternatives, such as intrauterine devices.

What do you think of the following argument for Antinatalism:

1. **I have a child.** I subject a person to guaranteed suffering that comes with life without its consent.
2. **I don't have a child.** I am preventing a potential person from possible happiness. A potential person does not have as much moral consideration in ethics as an actual person. Therefore reproducing is immoral.

Moral considerations depend on outcomes of actions.

I'm not sure if this is in line with Benatar's arguments, but I think it's stronger.

Also I'll be sure to read your article.

[cant-feel_my-face](#)

To your first argument, I would say that although it's true that procreation subjects the future person to suffering (without consent), it may not always be wrong to do this because you, the person already alive, may have a strong interest in procreating and it may not be bad for a person to be born, even if that person will suffer. After all, that person may also experience great joy, meaning, fulfillment, and enjoyment. So if your only moral principle is something like, >first, do no harm<, then antinatalism may well follow. But you'd have to argue for that as a primary or sole moral principle and I haven't seen an argument to that effect.

To your second argument, I agree that not having children is the more morally safe choice. I think we are obligated to make sure that the risks we subject our future children to are permissible risks to impose. In contrast, we have no obligation to a possible person to create that person because only real people have real interests so only a person that will exist at some point is of moral relevance.

My antinatalist convictions come from a deep concern for human rights. I agree with Benatar's asymmetry, but I don't think it's the best AN argument. This is how I look at it:

1. In most modern, civilized societies, negative rights are taken very seriously. Those who violate basic negative rights - through murder, rape, etc. - are punished severely, both legally and socially. The vast majority of people agree that it's unethical to violate the negative rights of others.
2. When a person has a child, they are exposing the child to millions of different harms, and they know that the child will experience many of those harms over a lifetime. If you know that an action (procreation) will result in harm to another person, and you go through with the action anyway without that person's consent, you're committing a negative rights violation.
3. Some people will respond that the positives of life outweigh the negatives. However, this is irrelevant. If you hit a random man on the street with a baseball bat without the man's consent and then give him a thousand dollars, you've still violated the man's negative rights. Perhaps the man would have consented if you told him about the thousand dollars beforehand, but that doesn't matter; harming someone without their consent is a negative rights violation.
4. Conclusion: procreation is a negative rights violation, and it should be prohibited in civilized societies just like other negative rights violations.

Thoughts?

[cp12345678](#)

I think you are combining arguments about life's harms or suffering with arguments about consent. Because children don't have the right or the capacity for meaningful consent, we may argue that we have the right to make decisions on their behalf. If their life is likely to be a very worthwhile risk to take and accept, we may permissibly take/accept this risk for them. So that is what I think the flaw is in

consent type antinatalist arguments. Note also that consent or autonomy is not our only value. Welfare is also a value and some think it is a more important value than autonomy. This is just something to consider when such a formidable and costly (to people who want to have children and to societies who depend on continued population for sustained prosperity) rests entirely on autonomy/consent rights. (Which, in any case, as argued, don't apply to procreation).

Because life includes benefits and burdens, it is unclear why only the burdens count. The only way you can run that sort of argument is by adding in a consent problem, as Shiffrin does and as you do with your baseball bat, and as I have addressed.

Hi Dr.Weinberg, thank you for doing this!

Your topic is extremely interesting. What are the most interesting (or instructive) readings you came across that are related to your interest (esp. about metaphysics of person, ontology and identity of personhood)?

Also, what was the most insightful or interesting text you've read to build up your knowledge in metaphysics? As an undergrad I'm extremely interested in this field and I've been reading a lot about Aristotle and whatever I can find about the field of ontology, and I'm wondering what else you would suggest to read to build up a solid background in this field.

Thank you very much!

[PM MOI TA PHILO](#)

On the metaphysics of persons as it relates to the ethics of the beginning and end of life, I would recommend reading Parfit's >Reasons and Persons< and Jeff McMahan's >The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life<. Amy Kind has a recent introductory book on the metaphysics of persons that I would recommend as well. I also recommend the Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Death and Mark Johnston's >Surviving Death<. Those are texts that would be helpful to anyone trying to learn about the metaphysics of personhood, life, and death.

Do you think that the unethical aspect of procreation can transfer or increase over several generations? For instance, if you can safely assume your children will have poor lives but will also in all likelihood reproduce and create other poor lives (and so on) would that affect the morality of the decision? I've actually heard the reverse version of this argument where we have a duty to create the trillions of lives that might happen if the human race develops further.

Do you think anti-natalism can ever become a mainstream point of view since it is contrary to some aspects of human nature?

Has anyone had an extremely adverse or violent reaction to hearing about your work?

[FattenedKvass](#)

Oops! I forgot to address your last question. As far as I know, no one has had a violent reaction to my work nor has anyone suffered adverse effects.

Do you think that the unethical aspect of procreation can transfer or increase over several generations? For instance, if you can safely assume your children will have poor lives but will also in all likelihood reproduce and create other poor lives (and so on) would that affect the morality of the decision? I've actually heard the reverse version of this argument where we have a duty to create the trillions of lives

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[FattenedKvass](#)

Thank you for your questions. To your first question, I do think that we are primarily responsible for the procreative act that we do, not for the procreative acts other people may choose to do even if those people descend from us. However, if you can foresee that your child will likely have a good life but then ignore procreative ethics and create a child with a terrible life, I suppose you ought to take that into some sort of account but I don't think it translates into a clear obligation for you not to procreate. This is because I think we are responsible for what we do, not for bad things others may choose to do. (In other words, I believe ethics is agent-centered or agent-relative, not agent-neutral). However, if what we do will result in someone suffering terribly regardless of anyone's choice (e.g., maybe you can reliably foresee that your child will be forced by nature itself - how, I have no idea - to have a miserable child) then that result may count as a something you yourself are doing. But, I'd have to think more about that. Great question!

I certainly don't think we have an obligation to procreate so that more people can enjoy life because I think interests are contingent on existence. So I don't think the hypothetical interests of merely possible people - i.e., people that could exist if we choose to create them but in fact never will exist - count at all. Merely possible people are of no moral relevance.

Finally, do I think that antinatalism can ever become mainstream? Probably not. As you imply, people probably have a biological instinct to reproduce. Also, many people love life, even when they are suffering. Many people think of life as intrinsically worthwhile.

Will we see artificial wombs, and what technologies are ethically feasible to that end?

[takunveritas](#)

That is an empirical question and I am not a scientist so I am not particularly well placed to answer. I have read about the possibility and it does not seem biologically impossible, given that we already can keep life going for a few days after conception, as we do with IVF, and we also keep life developing toward the end of the gestational period in the artificial womb of sorts that incubators are. Artificial wombs might be of value to those who are incapable of gestating a child. But switching over to artificial wombs entirely might involve the loss of the biological experience of gestating a baby in one's own womb which can be a fascinating and fulfilling experience.

Your Hazmat Theory appears to miss a fundamental distinction between actual hazmat and normally innocuous material. I run a few scenarios to respond to your theory: 1) Jack some uranium laying around, Jane steps on it and a crystal of a minute size gets embedded in her foot and she dies of complications later; 2) Jack forgets some paper somewhere, Jane crumples it up, eats it, and chokes to death; 3) Jack throws out a used condom, Jane finds it and inseminates herself, Jane is physically fine but her child endures great harm (or whatever harm is incurred by her or her child you think is fitting to your point). I could express this more formally and have elsewhere, the point is that 3 is more similar to 2 than 1. Where Jane has to do relatively little to be harmed by the uranium, she has to go to extraordinary lengths to harm herself or other people with paper or other people's gametes. I'm putting this quickly before class, so apologies for anything that's unclear. Where's my analogy failing for you?

[GuzzlingHobo](#)

For those unfamiliar with what this question is referring to, I have argued that people are responsible for the hazardous materials in their possession and control and that one's gametes constitutes such materials because they can join with other gametes and grow into very need and vulnerable persons with full moral status. This is part of my theory of parental responsibility and I call it the Hazmat Theory.

You have raised the distinction between hazardous materials and normally innocuous materials. I am not sure what that comes to here. I don't think of gametes as innocuous as pieces of paper because you have to work fairly creatively and off-label, so to speak, to sustain significant harm from a normal piece of paper. Gametes, in contrast, are naturally drawn to each other (as are their owners, quite frequently) and when gamete owners allow their gametes to frolick about, we can very well end up with a whole needy vulnerable tiny person.

Recall that I argue that it's not the bare fact of our ownership of our gametes that makes us parentally responsible for when they turn into a person. It is the risks we choose to take with them that makes us responsible for the results. So, again, it's not just that we have this dangerous stuff, it's that we choose how to handle our dangerous possessions and for that we are responsible. Maybe a helpful analogy would be to a gun locked in a separate compartment from its ammunition also locked very securely somewhere else, etc., versus keeping your loaded gun in toddler-reach. So the gun is a dangerous possession and you are responsible for the risks you take with it.

How does about any ethical stance on the preconditions of permissible procreation square with the liberal idea that it's ultimately for the individual couples to decide? (Or maybe it doesn't?)

How does your particular view translate into policy recommendations -- or at least into principles for good social organization or institutions?

[goiken](#)

Most of my work has been directed at individuals, making decisions for themselves. Hopefully, they will make moral decisions and duly consider moral arguments. To me, that is in keeping with the liberal respect for autonomy.

Policy is different because public policy may involve laws, and laws are enforced by the state. I make very few policy recommendations because, as I explain in the conclusion to my book, law and public policy have to consider many factors, including the potential abuses of power, enforcement, and sanction.

I do, however, make some policy recommendations. For example, I think gamete donation is wrong and we should stop allowing it. We should certainly stop anonymous gamete donations, as many countries have, because it deprives people of knowledge of their biological origins merely for parental convenience, which I don't think is a good enough reason. If adoptees have a right to know their biological origins, as many think they do, similar reasoning may apply to children born of gamete donation.

I also think that experimental reproductive technologies should be regulated and evaluated by neutral informed parties. Not by the fertility specialists and clinics that stand to profit from them.

Liberalism doesn't prevent enacting these policies because liberalism doesn't just let anyone do anything they want regardless of the effect on or wrongs to others.

How can you claim that we are

imposing life's risks on that person

when there was no person that we could impose anything on, and when the worst possible consequence of the risk of existence is to be free of it?

Existence is a condition of possibility for the ethical judgment, how can it be included as its object, on what grounds?

[nihilnegativum](#)

We impose life's risks on a person when we create them. The person and the risks are created simultaneously. One need not precede the other.

As for saying that the worst consequence of the risk of existence is to be free of it, how does one free oneself? Suicide has risks and harms of its own and not everyone thinks that suicide results in nonexistence so I don't think we can easily rely on the possibility of suicide to undo our procreative errors.

Putting aside any ethical questions regarding abortion itself, how do you feel the availability of abortion influences parental responsibility? Some people have made the argument that as long as abortion is safe, free and readily available then presumed parental responsibility should rest with the individual who carried the fetus and thus had the power to terminate the pregnancy.

[studentofsmith](#)

This is an excellent question that I haven't thought about enough. The responsibility for one's gametes is limited to one's control of them such that if one's gametes are stolen or one is unforeseeably deceived into relinquishing them then one is likely not parentally responsible for any resulting child. However, once an embryo has implanted and is growing, the risk of one's gamete joining with another gamete and growing into a person has either ripened into a fact already (if you think a fetus is a person) or is in the process of ripening (if you think a fetus is not a person until whatever stage). I don't think the mere availability of an abortion is enough to undo this result because not everyone feels that abortion is morally permissible and my view is that abortion is morally grey enough for one person's discomfort with it to be enough to allow that person to decline this way of releasing someone from parental responsibility.

Another way to think about this is that the availability of abortion may sometimes, under some conditions, affect the responsibility that the father has to the mother of his child but it doesn't affect the responsibility that the father has to the child itself.

Two questions:

First, if thinking about the choice to have children in this manner, isn't one then limited by the amount of information one has access to about their health and current socio-economic situation, and their ability to understand how that information is presented to them? Thinking from an immigrants perspective if this was an American idea conveyed to them when they came into this country. (I'm in America which is way I'm framing it this way).

Second question (more silly): If you have seen the Walking Dead, two characters Glenn and Maggie decide to have a child while there are herds of undead; the threat of violent takeovers from other camps; hardly any food, medicine, or doctors; and no clear sign of government structure. What are your thoughts on procreating during a zombie apocalypse, and is this covered in your book?

[nomindbody](#)

If I understand you correctly, your first question is about needing information to make a morally informed procreative decision. I agree that this is true and sometimes unfortunately lacking. As for the movie, I haven't seen it but I do discuss the permissibility of procreating under various conditions and generally it would not be permissible, in my view, to procreate under dire conditions for the future child.

In the [announcement thread /u/Letit_be_Known](#) asked:

Procreative ethics is a hot topic right now with celebrities getting in trouble. Within the human condition and power hierarchy society is trying to suppress sexual advances via intellectualism as well as inflating age of consent and ultimately marriage by 1.5-3x despite all these things being historically unnatural.

Has there been any study on the major negative impacts that these policies have and could have, given social pressure to conform moves vastly faster than biology?... Yet biology is still the ultimate arbiter as of now and probably needs to be accounted for even as it's antithetical to evolving policy. I see these two aspects as ethically diverging at an accelerated pace.

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

I am not sure I understand your question, and if I read you correctly you're asking about sex ethics, not about procreative ethics, but let me try to answer and then you can correct me if I've misunderstood. Basically, I think that we are biologically capable of only having sex when we have the consent of both parties. I've gone my entire life and have only had sex that way, so far as I am aware. Many men I know, probably the vast majority them, have done the same. When teens have sex with each other, I think they often can consent to that and the law agrees. But when adults have sex with teenagers, there is a power difference and there the age of consent is a moral and legal barrier to sex. I don't think biology makes it impossible to follow these rules. Marriage is a legal bond that often comes along with adult responsibilities. Marriages and families fare better on all measures of human well-being when marriage is reserved for adults so that seems a warranted policy. The fact that historically we allowed children to marry is, in my opinion, a regrettable fact of history.

Hi Professor Weinberg. I first wanted to thank you for doing this AMA. I loved your book *Risk of a Lifetime*, as it's a fantastic book on the subject of procreation ethics. Your papers have also been a great resource for me.

With our current advancements in science and medicine, our knowledge of whether or not a child will (or could) inherit a disease has changed how we view the permissibility of procreation. In *Risk of a Lifetime*, you talk about diseases that children could inherit, and how this knowledge informs us in whether or not a procreative act is permissible. This raises two questions for me:

1. If we're taking into account the statistical probability of a child inheriting a disease, should we also take into account the probability of that disease being cured within that child's lifetime?
2. If someone who has a disease thinks "I do not think it would be irrational for me to accept this as a condition from birth because my life has been good", and there's a high chance that their children would have that disease, do you still think that your Procreative Balance principle would still hold up in this situation? Would their affirmation of their disease make their procreative choice permissible?

[Ihr_Todeswunsch](#)

I'm glad to hear you liked the book! Thank you! In answer to your first question, to the extent that we know or can reasonably estimate the chances of an inherited disease being cured during a child's lifetime, yes, I think we should take that into account when assessing the nature of the risks we are imposing by creating that child.

To your second question, I don't accept subjective assessments of well-being as determinants of the nature of the risk we are imposing on a child we create. So, for example, the fact that you might think that your life with a particular condition has still been good overall is not relevant. What is relevant is the objective likelihood of a child born with this condition being able to achieve and enjoy a life of human flourishing along the measures of procreative good outlined in the book, which include being well-nourished, in good mental and physical health, well educated, socially connected, having self-respect, and being free of oppression.

Hello Dr. Weinberg, I have had an argument with a friend recently I was fairly confused by the following question:

"If a person thinks that his life is good, does that mean, that his life is good?"

I feel like I have heard a lot of arguments saying, that the answer here is "no", but who is to judge the quality of a persons' life other than that person.

Can you maybe suggest some reading on this?

Thank you.

[The Pointless Point](#)

There are both objective and subjective assessments of a person's quality of life and I think they are both valid to some extent. It seems a little silly to tell someone who finds their life a misery that it's in fact fantastic and it also seems a little silly to decide that a person's life is good because they say it is, even as they are in the midst of what is objectively a terrible life.

I would recommend reading my discussion of this in the fourth chapter of my book. I also recommend reading what Benatar has to say about this in his book (>Better Never to Have Been<).

Hello. Thank you for the opportunity to ask a question. How would you respond to the following?

Any meta-ethics rests on a foundation of fitness, i.e. being to the benefit of survival and reproduction. All higher order modes are either offshoots of this (how to keep people from killing each other) or artifacts of the ongoing debugging of consciousness (itself a product of selection) as a mode in which the ethical discussions play out (the nature of pain, suffering, happiness, etc.). Things seeming to have a point, the quest for meaning, utilitarian heuristics, faith, virtues, etc all derive from some desire to secure the continuation of some essence into the future.

Your formulation, as you admit, is not intuitive. I'd venture to say it is anti-intuitive to the vast majority of the population. Anyone who buys what you are saying is less likely to survive and reproduce. So how can a philosophy which is itself maladaptive be in keeping with any ethical system?

[Axxon-N](#)

I don't think I agree with your premise, though maybe I'm misunderstanding it. Although any ethical system that was maladaptive would not survive, that itself would not make it morally wrong, would it?

But, setting that aside, I don't argue that procreation is always wrong so I don't think that if we adopted the principles of procreative permissibility for which I argue that we would be less likely to survive as a species. We might even be more likely to survive because we might reduce some of the problematic effects of overpopulation. That said, if procreation was always wrong, then I think the fact that it would result in human extinction would not be a decisive reason to abandon morality. (If antinatalism was morally correct - I do not argue for that position).

Hello, I have a question? Your main argument seems to be that before someone is conceived, they cannot consent. How do you define consent for someone who has not yet been conceived?

(Note that I am not asking for an operational definition (how to *determine* if they consent) but the theoretical definition.)

[TheKing01](#)

My main argument for what?

I have to admit - I have a hard time taking this seriously. It just seems kind of silly. I wonder if there is something I'm missing that you could help me with?

I think people procreate mostly because they have a "pre-wired" biological drive to continue the species. Any ethical concern seems, at best, kind of irrelevant.

I don't mean to single you out, I have a similar frustration with a lot of moral philosophy. It seems like very smart people spending a lot of time constructing theories about how morality should work without too much observation about what is actually going on. When I hear moral arguments "in the wild" they are almost always aimed at justifying a preconceived moral intuition or manipulating someone else behavior. Anti-natalism looks to me to be a bit of both. Moral argument is useful for justifying a particular position or course of action at the expense of some other thing but they don't seem to arrive at a truth the way you would if you were doing math. I'm not sure how to judge the truth value of moral claims.

I suspect our emotional aversion to letting harm come to children (even children who aren't our own) made it easier for a tribal society to survive. Combine this pre-wired moral intuition with a somewhat gloomy disposition on life or maybe some adolescent resentment about how life is hard sometimes and a very clever fore-brain used to justify things afterward and anti-natalism is born.

It is hard for me to see this as more than intellectually justified adolescent whimpering with a smattering of self righteousness. Help me to see the error of my ways. I would be happy to change my mind.

[DivergentMind](#)

I understand wondering about the possibility that people procreate due to their biological or Darwinian drive to do so and that any further discussion about it is irrelevant chit-chat. My view on this possibility is that it is possible but it seems unlikely to me because I don't think that people create nearly as many children as they could reasonably expect to survive to adulthood, which is what we might expect them to do if they were operating on a purely Darwinian basis. Conversely, people who can't procreate biologically often go to great lengths to adopt a child to raise, which seems to indicate that our procreative interests are not limited to biological reproduction. Attempts at contraception go back as far as recorded history and today contraception is widely used so it seems that people are thinking through their procreative decisions in ways not entirely based on biological or Darwinian drives to reproduce. I don't discount biology or evolution. I just argue that it is not the entire procreative story.

To your broader point regarding moral philosophy, I don't see why the fact that people evolved to cooperate socially excludes the possibility of genuine moral thought and practice. Ignoring all other factors of human thought, expression, and action aside from biology and evolution seems just as narrow-minded as ignoring basic natural facts. For more on this debate, I recommend that you read both de Waal's "Primates and the Philosophers: How Morality Evolved," as well as Korsgaard's powerful reply, included in the book, "Morality and the Distinctiveness of Human Action."

If we look at our own life and understand that each day we decide to stay alive is similar to creating ourselves anew, then why not just kill ourselves to prevent such an intrusion that is similar to creating a new life into the world?

[txipper](#)

I am not sure I understand your question but if you are asking about the moral difference between keeping yourself alive and creating another person, one difference is that keeping yourself alive is your choice for yourself but creating another imposes risks on another person. Morally, we usually give people much more leeway to impose risks on themselves than on others.

Another difference is that continuing to exist is not the same kind of decision as starting to exist. See my discussion of suicide earlier in this thread.