

Anti-Natalism: The Opposite of Epicureanism

Post by “Don” of August 20, 2025 at 7:41 AM

I came across this article today:

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[The Case for Not Being Born](#)

The anti-natalist philosopher David Benatar argues that it would be better if no one had children ever again.

www.newyorker.com

I knew the term anti-natalism but never heard of Benatar or his work. But it struck me as diametrically opposed to Epicurean philosophy.

For example:

Quote

Like a boxer who has practiced his counters, Benatar has anticipated a range of objections. Many people suggest that the best experiences in life—love, beauty, discovery, and so on—make up for the bad ones. To this, Benatar replies that pain is worse than pleasure is good. Pain lasts longer: “There’s such a thing as chronic pain, but there’s no such thing as chronic pleasure,” he said. It’s also more powerful: would you trade five minutes of the worst pain imaginable for five minutes of the greatest pleasure? Moreover, there’s an abstract sense in which missing out on good experiences isn’t as bad as having bad ones. “For an existing person, the presence of bad things is bad and the presence of good things is good,” Benatar explained. “But compare that with a scenario in which that person never existed—then, the absence of the bad would be good, but the absence of the good wouldn’t be bad, because there’d be nobody to be deprived of those good things.” This asymmetry “completely stacks the deck against existence,” he continued, because it suggests that “all the unpleasantness and all the misery and all the suffering could be over, without any real cost.”

Post by “Cassius” of August 20, 2025 at 8:16 AM

Good catch Don and I completely agree that it is about as much contrary to Epicurus as one can get.

Epicurus touches on this in the letter to Menoecus, and I would think it would be clear how un-Epicurean this point of view is, but I am afraid that some people see this as acceptable to Epicurus just like they see "Absence of Pain" as meaning that Epicurus wanted nothing in life other than to escape pain, as Plutarch argued.

This subject came up in 2018 in a thread that remains accessible in the Epicurean Philosophy [Facebook group](#), and it's worth glancing at some of those posts. One in particular I made note of to illustrate the problem mentions Michel Onfray, who some hold in high regard:



Okko Hartikainen

Michel Onfray is a Neo-Epicurean antinatalist. It's plausible that some Epicureans were antinatalists/pessimists/rejectionists in the ancient Greece, just like some Cyrenaics (Hegesiacs) were and some were not.

"Not having children comes not from dislike or depise, but from love too great to bring them into this world, too limited, too vain, too cruel."

– Michel Onfray, *Journal h doniste: Tome 2, Les Vertus de la foudre*, Grasset, Paris 1998.

"Lucretius not only denied the existence of the gods, he denied the existence of happiness. There was none in this Life, and in his negation of an hereafter there could be none in another. As for ambition, what is it but a desire for an existence in the minds of other people—a desire which when fulfilled is a mockery, and unfulfilled a tomb? And besides, to what does success lead? To honour, glory and wealth? But these things are simulachres, not happiness. Any effort, any aspiration, any struggle, is vain.

"Nequidquam, quoniam medio de fonte leporum Surgit amari aliquid, quod in ipsis floribus angat."

– Edgar Saltus, *The Anatomy of Negation*.

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One of my comments in response has some other references:

This list from wikipedia of groups who support antinatalism is a rogue's gallery in my view:

The teaching of the Buddha (c. 400 BCE) is interpreted by Hari Singh Gour (1870-1949) as follows:

Buddha states his propositions in the pedantic style of his age. He throws them into a form of sorites; but, as such, it is logically faulty and all he wishes to convey is this: Oblivious of the suffering to which life is subject, man begets children, and is thus the cause of old age and death. If he would only realize what suffering he would add to by his act, he would desist from the procreation of children; and so stop the operation of old age and death.[4]

The Marcionites believed that the visible world is an evil creation of a crude, cruel, jealous, angry demiurge, Yahweh. According to this teaching, people should oppose him, abandon his world, not create people, and trust in the good God of mercy, foreign and distant.[5][6][7]

The Encratites observed that birth leads to death. In order to conquer death, people should desist from procreation: "not produce fresh fodder for death".[8][9][10]

The Manichaeans,[11][12][13] the Bogomils[14][15][16] and the Cathars[17][18][19] believed that procreation sentences the soul to imprisonment in evil matter. They saw procreation as an

instrument of an evil god, demiurge, or of Satan that imprisons the divine element in matter and thus causes the divine element to suffer.

Further, this:

I am surprised that wikipedia does not list THIS group, which is the place I've heard a variation of that view before:

For two-and-a-half years, the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel debated. These said, "It is better for man not to have been created than to have been created"; and these said, "It is better for man to have been created than not to have been created."

Talmud, Eruvin 13b

.....

And yet, the sages of Shammai are of the opinion that man would be better off not to have been created—an opinion which the Talmud cites as a legitimate Torah viewpoint. Indeed, it is regarding the debates between the schools of Shammai and Hillel that the Talmud declares: "These and these are both the words of the living G-d"!

<http://www.chabad.org/.../2578/jewish/To-Be-or-to-Be-Not.htm>

Post by “Bryan” of August 20, 2025 at 10:01 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

which is the place I've heard a variation of that view before:

And is ultimately the primary source and confirming bias for Joshua Rothman's New Yorker article and why David Benatar is presented to the public. Once again, just like with physics, much of "modern morality" is just their religious ideas, but packaged to look modern and secular. *(Something new was needed once the Christianity scam failed in certain sectors!)*

Post by “Rolf” of August 20, 2025 at 10:38 AM

I was a big fan of Benatar and antinatalism as a teenager. How things can change...

That said, I have less grievances with antinatalism than with, say, Christianity. At the very least, antinatalists want to minimise pain. And while they “throw the baby out with the bathwater”, the method of not creating kids in the first place *is* rationally sound - not being born is nothing to worry about, just as being dead is nothing to worry about - unlike the methods supernatural religions promote for the cessation of suffering. Most antinatalists I’ve spoken to have been depressed and cynical, yet generally rational, people.

Besides, it’s not like Epicureanism is an inherently *pro-natalist* philosophy. Epicurus never told us to “be fruitful and multiply”. As far as I’m aware, it’s fairly neutral on the question of whether or not we should procreate.

Post by “Cassius” of August 20, 2025 at 11:17 AM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

I was a big fan of Benatar and antinatalism as a teenager. How things can change...

For the better!!! 😊

Post by “DaveT” of August 20, 2025 at 11:34 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Quote

Benatar explained. “But compare that with a scenario in which that person never existed—then, the absence of the bad would be good, but the absence of the good wouldn’t be bad, because there’d be nobody to be deprived of those good things.” This asymmetry “completely stacks the deck against existence,” he continued, because it suggests that “all the unpleasantness and all the misery and all the suffering could be over, without any real cost.”

I don't know anything about this subject yet, but this quote reminds me of the nonsensical quip: I'd like to have a ham and egg sandwich if I had some ham, if I had some eggs.

Post by “Don” of August 20, 2025 at 11:20 PM

[Quote from Rolf](#)

antinatalists want to minimise pain

I interpreted it that they want to minimize existence. A non-existent thing/entity/person cannot be said to "not experience pain." The "being" that is not born doesn't exist. Less beings in the world doesn't alleviate the pain experienced by the already existing beings.

[Quote from Rolf](#)

“throw the baby out with the bathwater”



I found your choice of metaphor directly on point. Well played!

[Quote from Rolf](#)

Besides, it's not like Epicureanism is an inherently pro-natalist philosophy. Epicurus never told us to “be fruitful and multiply”. As far as I'm aware, it's fairly neutral on the question of whether or not we should procreate.

Generally true. The philosophy doesn't take a pro or anti stance other than to value existence over non-existence and to evaluate whether to have children in light of acknowledgement of the pleasure and pain involved. It's a very subjective decision.

Not directly relevant to the natalist question, but at least Epicurus was genuinely concerned with the continued well-being of Metrodorus' children, enough to specifically address their care in his will.

Post by “Cassius” of August 21, 2025 at 3:31 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

Not directly relevant to the natalist question, but at least Epicurus was genuinely concerned with the continued well-being of Metrodorus' children, enough to specifically

address their care in his will.

Yes and I would take that further and combine it with the observations that have been made by Dr Boeri and Aioz (in [Theory and Practice in Epicurean Political Philosophy](#)) and by others in other contexts, that the Epicureans were far from being totally unconcerned about the welfare of society as they are caricatured by Plutarch and others.

I think it's likely that Rolfe has not been around long enough for our podcast or discussions about that book, but the book argues that Epicurus certainly understood that the happiness of himself and his friends is directly related to the welfare of society, and no society can perpetuate itself for very long without attention to who is going to replace it.

The idea that we are concerned for ourselves alone only until we are ready to exit the stage makes no sense given the emphasis on friendship and rational understanding of cause and effect, nor would it have made as much sense for the Epicureans to be concerned about future generations as Diogenes of Oinoanda explicitly stated himself to be and is implicit in the writing of Lucretius and others.

If the Epicureans had made a practice of criticizing the having and rearing of children as more trouble than it is worth, we would have had much more documentation of that in the arguments of their enemies than we do. If I recall Cicero hardly mentions this specific allegation at all, and much of the rest of the argument is an attack alleging that humans have no bonds of affection for each other, which is a misreading of Epicurus' position on how society arises through nature rather than through divine guidance.

We don't have to have had children ourselves to be very glad for and supportive of those who do.

Post by “Kalosyni” of August 23, 2025 at 11:26 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

The philosophy doesn't take a pro or anti stance other than to value existence over non-existence and to evaluate whether to have children in light of acknowledgement of the pleasure and pain involved. It's a very subjective decision.

"Conditional natalism" - it wouldn't be good to bring a child into the world during war and famine. Also, women still do most of the childrearing tasks, so the lives of women with children are subject to massive time constraints - with little spare time to give to philosophy (unless there is enough finances to hire a nanny).

Post by “Adrastus” of October 9, 2025 at 5:12 AM

Anti-Natalism is largely irrelevant to me as I have children. As a Dad who tries and has tried to share the tasks of raising children and with a partner who thinks outside of the cultural box on the solutions to problems of contemporary motherhood, I honestly fail to see many downsides to children as having children has not hindered any area of my life. It has only greatly enhanced it by making the task of philosophy even more urgent and palpable, as well as, allowing me to experience a whole variety of pleasures of the mind and pleasant emotions that I would have otherwise never known.

I suppose there are all sorts of maladies a child may be physically or mentally afflicted with, or the child may not live long or not be set upon by great violence due to environmental or social factors like conflict and disease to not reach an age of understanding for there to have been any form of consolation. One might make a resoundingly anti-natalist argument given the chances of this, though you never quite know what Nature informs the body of unless one were in that situation. But if our pleasant disposition is not overly reliant on notions of anyone and everyone reaching some sort of perfected state, the achievement of all of one's potential and the heights of human attainment, or necessarily having to persist for any particularly long period of time in order for any one life to be worth living; or to come at it from a different direction - to otherwise conquer the fear of the death of others, then you can seek to offer a child the most joyful of times now and not delay in the instruction in right philosophy, while still reasonably preparing a future for the child like one would their own life given their own uncertain fate. Principal Doctrine 19 helps alleviate that sort of fear and provides consolatory salvation, and we should expect nothing less in a sober pursuit of philosophy than to be sobered now and again by correct reasoning.