

# A Risk-Based Argument for Anti-Natalism

from *The Virtues & Vices of Having Children*

by Chad Vance (forthcoming)

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**Abstract** Anti-natalists commonly argue against the permissibility of procreation either on the grounds that non-existence is *always* better than existence, or because it risks the creation of a life that is *not worth living*. Here, I argue that we have strong moral reasons to refrain from procreating even when the resulting child's life *will* be overall worth living. I do so on the grounds that all instances of procreation in the actual world inflict upon the resulting child an unjustifiably high risk of severe pro tanto harms—serious enough that their life, though perhaps worth living, is nevertheless *not worth initiating*. I conclude that procreation is immoral, contingent upon our moral failure to eradicate the conditions that render human lives not worth initiating in the first place.

## 1 A Risk-Based Argument

Here, I argue that procreation is *prima facie* immoral because it imposes significant risks of severe pro tanto harms onto the resulting child without their consent—harms serious enough that the child's life, though perhaps worth living, would nevertheless be *not worth initiating*. Doing so not only violates that child's rights, but also fails to fulfill our duties of parental care. I present this risk-based argument for anti-natalism here in §1, before responding to potential objections in §2. I further support my thesis by appealing to a principle of moral caution in §3, before offering some concluding remarks in §4.

To begin, consider the following case:

**Life Extension Biohacker** In a world where everyone naturally drops dead at age 40, Barry, a self-proclaimed “biohacker”, has accidentally discovered a biohack in his garage using the gene-editing technology, CRISPR. The cure is an engineered, highly contagious airborne virus which, if released, will rapidly spread through the human population, altering the genes of all those infected, and extending their lifespans by 80 years, on average (to 120). Barry does not have time to ask humanity for permission. The cure is rapidly deteriorating, and he is not sure how to replicate it. So he drives to the nearest airport and releases the virus, extending human life expectancy by 80 years.

Are Barry's actions morally permissible? I suspect that some readers will already be uncomfortable with his behavior, given that it affects the genes of all human beings without their consent, thus violating their rights to bodily autonomy. (Consider, for example, how many people were opposed to vaccine mandates during the pandemic, and remain so, despite the fact that these would have saved seven million lives<sup>1</sup>. Yet, vaccines merely train our immune systems, rather than altering our genes, which is far more invasive. Furthermore, vaccine mandates would have been imposed by

*governments*, which many believe to have the legitimate authority to issue such mandates, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. How much *more* opposed would people have been if some *vigilante* had made a unilateral decision not merely to vaccinate them, but to affect their very DNA without their consent?)

Yet, now imagine that the story above has the following additional features:

**Life Extension Biohacker, continued** Before releasing the hack, Barry also knows that it has the following effect: 25% of people in the world will have an adverse reaction to the edit, such that they will experience one of several horrific effects. For example, some will contract a severe, debilitating disease (such as multiple sclerosis), or develop debilitating chronic pain; others will develop the sorts of dispositions whereby they become murderers or rapists, while others still will become suicidal. Furthermore, 100% of recipients who reach their full (new) life expectancy will now experience the process of aging during their last few decades. Barry releases the biohack.

Are Barry's actions morally permissible, given these additional details? Many non-consequentialist readers will agree that they are not. For, even though Barry gives everyone (on average) 80 additional years of life that they would not otherwise have had, he does so knowing that roughly 2 billion of them will go on to suffer one of several truly horrific effects. *Even if* the vast majority of those 2 billion individuals are ultimately *all-things-considered benefitted*—for example, a life with MS is frequently still worth living, despite the misery that it brings—Barry's actions are still immoral because he imposes a significant risk of severe *pro tanto* harms onto them without their consent.

Yet, I argue, Barry's actions are *morally analogous to procreation*. For, like Barry, while procreators give their offspring, on average, 80 years of life that are typically worth living, they *also* impose upon that child a 25% chance (at *least*) of living a life that is truly harrowing, or tragically short, or both. This figure may seem surprising. But consider: In the U.S., each child born has roughly a(n)...

- 1.5% chance of developing one of many (typically) *very seriously debilitating diseases* (e.g., multiple sclerosis).<sup>2</sup>
- 8.5% chance of developing “high-impact” **debilitating chronic pain** (i.e., pain so severe that it interferes with daily life, typically rendering one incapable of working)<sup>3</sup>
- 1.6% chance of committing **suicide** (4%, if we include accidental drug overdoses)<sup>4</sup>
- 12% chance of being **raped**<sup>5</sup>
- 0.7% chance of being **murdered**<sup>6</sup>

- 29% chance of being a victim of severe physical **domestic violence** (yes, you read that correctly!)<sup>7</sup>
- 6.75% chance of being a victim of severe and violent **child abuse**<sup>8</sup>
- 3% chance of **being a rapist**<sup>9</sup>
- 0.5% chance of **being a murderer**<sup>10</sup>
- 3% chance of physically or sexually **abusing a child**<sup>12</sup>
- 14% chance of physically **abusing their partner**<sup>11</sup>
- 0.65% chance of dying before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday<sup>12</sup>

These add up to 81.2%, collectively. But, due to the likelihood that there is some overlap between categories here (with some individuals experiencing *multiple* items on this list) and the possibility of over-reporting (though typically it is thought that several of these numbers are actually *under-reported*, but let us grant it anyway), by a *very* conservative estimate, we can safely conclude that at least 25% of children born in the U.S. will suffer something *truly horrific*. It is also worth noting that every child who does *not* die tragically young will instead experience the horrors of aging—diminishing mental and sensory faculties, increasing immobility, relentless aches and pains, etc. (Additionally, each child has a near 100% chance of contributing to climate change, resource depletion, animal death, etc. I have argued elsewhere that procreation in developed nations is immoral on these environmental grounds *alone*—a position known as ‘Green’ Anti-Natalism—but let us set this concern aside here.)<sup>13</sup>

Due to these features of human life, I propose that procreation, like Barry’s release of the biohack, violates the resulting child’s rights; namely, their right not to have a significant risk of severe pro tanto harms imposed upon them without consent. As Seana Shiffrin writes,

procreation violates the consent rights of the child who results. ... In every case it involves a person imposing a risk upon another where the imposition is not necessitated by the need to avert greater harm. (1999, 137, 139)<sup>14</sup>

There is one potentially morally relevant difference between Barry’s action in Life Extension and the act of procreation. Namely, since Barry’s victims *already exist*, Barry is merely *extending* lives, whereas procreators *create* lives. In that case, perhaps one might view Barry’s actions as *preventing a harm* (namely, the harm of death at 40), while bringing someone into existence merely bestows a pure benefit. Yet, even if that is correct, I believe that this difference only strengthens my case. For, as Shiffrin has persuasively argued, it seems generally much *worse*, morally, to impose pro tanto harms (or risks of such harms) on others in order to secure greater *pure benefits* for them than it does to impose those same harms in order to *prevent greater harms*. For example,

compare the moral status of yanking a drowning person out of a river, breaking their arm in the process of saving their life (which seems permissible) with that of dropping gold bars on impoverished children from a helicopter, breaking their arms in the process of giving them riches (which seems impermissible). If there is a genuine moral distinction here (as I believe there is), then it follows that it is actually *worse* to inflict a 25% chance of a morally significant horror upon someone in order to bestow the benefit of a life worth living (as procreators do) than it is to inflict that same risk upon someone in order to prevent the harm of death (as Barry the biohacker does).

Furthermore, I believe that there is an *additional* reason why procreation is immoral—one which is absent in the Biohacker case. This reason is grounded in a distinction from David Benatar, between a life that is *not worth living* and one that is *not worth initiating*. We can all agree that it would be immoral and exceptionally callous to intentionally bring Miserable Meg into existence (from Roberts, 2011), a child whose life is filled with so much suffering that it is not even worth living. But, now imagine Legless Linda, who will be born without legs. Linda will likely have a life worth living. (Limblessness comes with its own set of *difficulties*, to be sure, but it is not incompatible with an overall good life.) Nevertheless, it seems immoral to intentionally bring a child into existence with this condition. (For example, imagine a couple going through the process of IVF who intentionally selects for embryos that will be born legless.) While Linda's life may be worth *living*, I contend that it is not worth *initiating*.<sup>15</sup> Even if the reader is not convinced that creating Linda is *immoral*, surely they must agree that, at the very least, intentionally selecting for Linda's existence would betray a particular kind of *callousness* on the part of the parent. (*What kind of a parent would wish this condition upon their child!?*)

I propose that each prospective parent has a moral *duty* to bring their child into existence with a very high chance of having a life that is above some minimally acceptable threshold of well-being or goodness. Here, I take a cue from Laura Purdy, who argues that it is immoral for individuals with Huntington's Disease to procreate, on the grounds that there is a 50% chance of passing on this horrific disease to their child, concluding that "we ought to try to provide every child with something like a minimally satisfying life." (1996, 45) It is this parental duty, I contend, that is what renders it immoral to intentionally create a life that will be—or even has a significantly high probability of being—not worth initiating. (And it is this *second* wrong-making feature which is absent in the Barry case.)

Finally, note that not all of the items included on the list above are horrors that the child will *endure*. Several of them are horrors that the child will *cause*; and there's something *especially* insidious about bringing a child into the world knowing that they will victimize *someone else*. For example, consider the following case (adapted from my 2024, 111):

**The Predictor** In a future society, those who wish to procreate must first create multiple embryos in a lab. These are then scanned by a super-advanced artificial intelligence capable of predicting the future of each embryo. To date, the A.I.'s predictions have been over 99% accurate. Karen, a prospective parent, awaits her results. The A.I. predicts that all of her embryos will be upstanding citizens, except for embryos #4 and #9. Embryo #4 will, if incubated, go on to rape one person. Embryo #9 will, if incubated, go on to murder one person. Karen then deliberately selects embryos #4 and #9 to be implanted for gestation, discarding the rest. Sure enough, years later her son Forrest rapes one person, and her daughter Nina murders one person.

Surely it is immoral for Karen to bring Forrest and Nina into existence in this case when their crimes are 99% likely. But, how low does this risk need to be before it becomes permissible to roll the dice on the lives of your child's potential future victims? There is a 15-20% *chance* that any given child born in the U.S. will commit murder, rape, severe physical abuse of an intimate partner, or severe physical or sexual abuse of a child! Such offspring, I believe, are not worth initiating. Here, the wrongness of bringing such an individual into existence is grounded not in the duty to provide a minimally decent life for one's child, but rather in our duty *not to be complicit in the victimization of innocent people*.<sup>16</sup> In the case above, Karen is responsible for creating the conditions that result in innocent people becoming victims without their consent. Likewise, every person who procreates in the United States is engaging in a behavior that has, on average, a 15-20% chance of generating such outcomes.

I conclude that procreation is all-things-considered immoral, for the following three reasons:

- (i) It violates our duty of *non-maleficence*, not to impose severe pro tanto harm upon others (or even a significant *risk* of severe pro tanto harms upon others) without their consent.
- (ii) It violates our duty of *parental care*, to ensure to the best of our ability that our children will have (or very likely will have) a minimally decent life; i.e., as I have put it here, a *life worth initiating*.
- (iii) It violates our duty *not to be complicit in the victimization of others*, by generating the conditions under which others will become (or are even subject to a significant *risk* of becoming) the victims of severe pro tanto harms.

## 2 Objections

(1) **Hypothetical Consent:** Most victims of debilitating diseases, chronic pain, abuse, etc. still have lives that are overall worth living. So, procreation is justified because we can assume that every child gives their hypothetical consent to being all-things-considered benefitted.<sup>17</sup>

Reply: I disagree. For starters, there are a significant number clear explicit *dissenters* who choose to opt out of living (and a far greater number who seriously contemplate, make detailed plans for, or unsuccessfully attempt to do so). But, that aside, it is important to note, following Shiffrin (1999), that an assumption of an agent's hypothetical consent to a pro tanto harm is most easily justified when the pro tanto harm (a) is required in order to *prevent a greater harm*, (b) is minor, and (c) temporary or reversible; and when (d) the subject's values or attitudes toward risk are taken into consideration. For example, in the case of yanking a drowning person out of a river and breaking their arm in the process, from the previous section, (a) you are saving the child from the harm of death, (b) a broken arm is a relatively minor harm, and (c) is also temporary; and it is at least *possible* that (d) the subject's attitudes toward life are known. By contrast, when bringing a child into existence, (a) you are *not* saving them from a greater harm. Rather, you are bestowing the pure *benefit* of a life worth living. Furthermore, many of the harms appealed to here are (b) severe and (c) permanent. (Even the harms of being physically or sexually abused often leave permanent psychological trauma. See, e.g., van der Kolk, 2014) Finally, (d) it is not even *in theory* possible to take the child's values into consideration, since they do not yet even *exist* at the time of the decision to procreate.<sup>18</sup> Thus, I contend that the assumption of hypothetical consent to pro tanto harms (or the risk of such harms) is justified in the former sort of case, but not in the latter.

It is also worth noting, as Elizabeth Harman (2004, 99) has persuasively demonstrated, that even if one *prefers* one's situation, and is all-things-considered *benefitted* by some past wrong, this does not entail that the past wrong is rendered retroactively permissible, or that it was not a rights violation, or that the subject retroactively consents to it. For example, she describes a victim of rape who is impregnated, and gives birth to a child whom she loves very much. She might *prefer* the scenario that resulted in this child, whom she loves deeply—but this *absolutely* does not entail that she therefore retroactively consents to the rape, or that her assailant behaved permissibly. Similarly, I maintain, imposing a 12% chance of being raped upon one's child by bringing them into existence (in addition to all of the other potential horrors listed above) is not rendered morally permissible, even *if* the resulting child has a life worth living and overall prefers to have been brought into existence rather than not.

(2) **Justified Paternalism:** The Biohacker's actions are an instance of *unjustified* paternalism (impermissibly harming someone or infringing upon their liberty “for their own good”), because he is a vigilante. But, parent-to-child paternalism is justified.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, as David DeGrazia argues, harmful paternalistic behaviors can be permissible even when parents impose those harms upon their children in order to secure *pure benefits*. For example, as he notes, “This is often the case when parents push a child to be an outstanding scholar, musician, or athlete.” (2012, 156)

Reply: It is true that it seems permissible for a parent to impose minor pro tanto “harms” upon their children in order to secure pure benefits—e.g., making them eat their vegetables (for health), or do their homework (for education). But, surely it is *not* permissible to impose upon them a *significant risk of severe, potentially debilitating harms* “for their own good”.

Rebuttal: Yet, DeGrazia goes on to point out, parents do not *cause* these harms by bringing their children into existence. Rather, they merely *expose* them to the risk of such harms—which is far more easily justified. For example,

Parents who allow their children to join the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, participate in team sports, walk alone to friends’ houses or the mall, drive a car when they are old enough, ride in a car at any time, and so on expose their children to [the risk of] harm—typically without meaningful consent, yet often faultlessly. (2012, 153-154)

Reply: Even so, my claim here is that the *risk of certain kinds* of significant pro tanto harms—namely, the sort that would render a life *not worth initiating*—is so high that even merely *exposing* our children to such risks is not justified by the fact that they are also likely to enjoy benefits which outweigh those harms. For example, while it might be permissible to drop your child off at Girl Scouts even when you know that a small number of scouts come home with a broken arm—surely it is *not* permissible to do so knowing that 1 in 8 scouts will be raped, and 1 in 12 will develop debilitating chronic pain, and so on, no matter *how* amazing and beneficial it is to be a Girl Scout!

(3) **The Right to Reproduce:** Even if there is some prima facie wrongness associated with procreation, it is still all things considered permissible, because we have a basic right to procreate (or a right to bodily autonomy, or the pursuit of happiness, etc.).

Reply: But, it is generally recognized that it is not permissible to exercise one’s rights—or rather, that our rights simply do not apply—in cases where exercising them causes significant harm to (or even imposes a significant risk of harm upon) others. For example, even if my rights to liberty and property render it permissible to drive my car home, I do *not* have a right to drive home drunk. As Jessica Flanigan notes, in the context of her argument that it is immoral to refuse vaccination due to the risk of harm that it imposes upon others, there is “no unique right to harm and impose risks on others”, and furthermore, “people have rights to not be subjected to serious risks without their consent”. (2014, 21, 12)

(4) **One Cannot Violate the Rights of the Non-Existent:** Procreation *cannot be a rights violation*, since the child does not exist at the time of the action, and therefore lacks rights.

Reply: It is possible to behave in ways that *will* later violate the rights of someone, *once they exist*. As Seana Shiffrin notes:

hiding a nondefusable bomb attached to a nontamperable time clock of seven years in a kindergarten would be clearly wrong. In part, it would be wrong because it violates the rights to life of the children who will die, even though they do not now exist and do not yet possess rights to life. One's action sets into motion a chain of events that *will* lead to the violation of the rights that *will* come to be held. (1999, 137, emphasis mine)

Furthermore, it is also worth noting, as Molly Gardner argues (2016), that if the eternalist view of time is correct, then future people *do exist*, and stand in the appropriate sorts of relationships to us, which in turn grounds our present moral duties toward them.

(5) **Demandingness:** A moral prohibition against procreation is far *too demanding*, since having children is, for many, an important life goal, the fulfillment of which is central to their well-being.

Reply: Demandingness considerations are far more likely to override duties of *beneficence* than duties of *non-maleficence*. For example, many find it plausible that we are not obligated to give up all of our savings to help people in dire poverty, or give up our spare kidney to help someone in need of a transplant, or remain attached to a violinist for nine months in order to save his life. However, when our actions are seriously *harming* others, or even imposing a significant *risk* of serious harm onto others, an appeal to demandingness generally does not suffice. For example, if, in order to make it on time to your first day of work, you needed to push a boulder blocking the road down into a crowded area where it had a 25% chance of either killing or seriously maiming someone, it would not be permissible to do so—even if it was your dream job, and you knew that you would be fired if you did not show up on time.<sup>20</sup>

(6) **When Risk is the Norm:** If a child is born without wings, this is not a harm, nor does it count as a *prima facie* moral reason against procreating. This is because lacking wings is the *norm* for our species. Likewise, if *all* humans died at age forty, or had no legs, then creating a child with these conditions would not be a harm, nor would such a life be “not worth initiating”. Yet, if the empirical claims made in this paper are correct, then it *is* normal for *all* acts of procreation to impose at least a 25% risk of “severe pro tanto harms” upon the resulting child. Thus, the universality of such risks give us no more reason to refrain from procreating than does the fact that our children will be born without wings. Even Laura Purdy seems willing to admit that the imposition of risks upon our children is morally permitted when they are the norm. For instance, she writes,

It might be thought that even this moderate claim [that parents should try to ensure something like normal health for their children] is unsatisfactory as in some places debilitating conditions are the norm, but one could circumvent this objection by saying that parents ought to try to provide for their children health normal for that culture, even though it may be inadequate if measured by some outside standard. (1996, 46)

Reply: I agree that my child's inevitable lack of wings does not constitute a moral reason to refrain from procreating. This is because the lack of wings does not constitute a harm in the actual world. (Being wingless does not make one worse off than they otherwise would have been, because there are no nearby possible worlds where a child is born with wings; nor is winglessness inherently painful, or traumatic, etc.) For this reason, perhaps the example of Legless Linda was not an optimal one. For, if *all* human beings were born without legs, then leglessness would similarly not be a harm. (It renders a life not worth initiating in our society *precisely because* most human beings have legs, and societies are structured in such a way that most activities contributing to human well-being require legs, etc.) Yet, the sorts of pro tanto harms that I have included on my list are not harms of this sort. For example, debilitating chronic pain would render a life not worth initiating *regardless* of whether or not this were the norm for our species—as would the inheritance of debilitating diseases, or being the victim of rape or severe abuse, and so on. Such conditions or experiences are all *inherently* painful, or traumatic, etc., *independent* of whether or not they are “normal”.

In fact, though I have not focused on it here, I would even suggest that *aging* is a pro tanto harm of this sort. The process of aging is universal for those of us who are fortunate (?) enough to escape an untimely death, and perhaps for this reason we often fail to think of it as a harm—and yet, undoubtedly the relentless progression of daily aches and pains, accompanied by the slow and steady loss of our mental and sensory faculties, our mobility, our health, and so on are a true horror! Its universality does not alter or undermine this fact.

(7) **Ableism:** Consider two individuals with dwarfism. If they procreate, there is a 50% chance that their child will also have dwarfism, a 25% chance that they will not, and a 25% chance that they will be born with a severe, debilitating, typically fatal version of double-dwarfism called ‘homozygous achondroplasia’. The first child of beloved actor Warwick Davis—of *Willow*, *Return of the Jedi* (as the Ewok, Wicket), and *Harry Potter* (as Professor Flitwick) fame—was sadly born with this condition, for example, and died at nine days old. If a 25% chance of a horrific medical condition is sufficient to render procreation immoral, then it follows that dwarves should not breed with one another. This seems unacceptably ableist.

Reply: On my proposal, being disabled is neither necessary nor sufficient for rendering procreation immoral. It is not (by itself) sufficient, since having a *non-inheritable* disability does not *by itself* impose any significant risk of severe pro tanto harms onto the resulting child; and it is not necessary, since an inheritable genetic condition is only one of *many* ways in which we impose risk of severe harms onto our children. Indeed, my argument here entails that it is immoral for dwarves to breed. But keep in mind that I have actually argued that it is immoral for *anyone* to breed, given that *every* act of procreation is presently at least 25% likely to result in a child who will suffer some horror that renders their life not worth initiating.

Even so, it *is* true that my argument entails that a couple with dwarfism would have even *stronger* moral reasons to refrain from procreating, compared to most others, since the risk of severe pro tanto harms would be even higher than average in this case.<sup>21</sup> Yet, similarly, it *also* entails that someone with Huntington's disease (who has a 50% chance of passing on this disease to their child) has much stronger reasons to refrain from procreating than most others; as does someone living in a place such as war-torn Gaza, where children are far more likely to be victims of starvation or violence; and so on. This is not inherently discriminatory. It is merely a result of the claim that parents have stronger reasons to refrain from procreating, the more likely it is that their child's life will fall below some minimally acceptable threshold of health or well-being.

### 3 Moral Caution

Even if the reader remains unconvinced, there may yet be another route to my anti-natalist conclusion—one that appeals to a principle of *moral caution*. For, the following claim is overwhelmingly plausible:

**Moral Caution Principle** If it is not clear whether or not performing action A is permissible, but it *is* clear that *refraining* from A is permissible, then one ought to refrain from doing A.<sup>22</sup>

For example, imagine that you are working at the junkyard crushing old cars when you suddenly believe (say, with 25% certainty) that you *might* have just seen a child climb into the next car. In this case, it is not clear whether crushing the next car is morally permissible. It *might* be permissible to crush the car (there's a 75% chance that no harm will come of it); but it also *might not* be (since there's a 25% chance that doing so will result in a child's death). However, *refraining* from crushing the car is *clearly* morally permissible. So, by the Moral Caution Principle, you should do that.

But then, in light of the concerns I have outlined in the sections above, surely it is at least not *entirely* clear that procreation is permissible. Surely even the skeptical reader should admit that it is at least *plausible* that the risk of severe pro tanto harms is great

enough that it *might* violate our parental duties to our children, or our children's rights, etc., to such a degree as to render procreation immoral. On the other hand, it is relatively uncontroversial that *refraining* from procreation is morally permissible. Thus, if my argument here fails to *conclusively* establish that procreation is immoral, I contend that, even if I have merely established that there is a reasonable chance that it *might be* immoral, the Moral Caution Principle renders procreation all-things-considered immoral anyway, given the asymmetry in our justification about the moral status of our two options.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have argued that procreation is immoral, in virtue of the fact that it is accompanied by an unacceptably high risk of bringing into existence a *life not worth initiating*—i.e., one that, even if it is ultimately *worth living*, is fraught with pro tanto harms severe enough that no parent ought ever to impose such harms (or even significant *risks* of such harms) upon their child without their consent. Even the unconvinced reader must surely admit that this fact should at least give us *pause*, engaging in serious moral reflection before proceeding with the decision to procreate. Each prospective parent must ask themselves, *Am I willing to subject my would-be child to these risks?*

What is more, the argument presented here simultaneously supplies us with *strong moral reasons to make the world a better place to exist*. Focusing our efforts on curing diseases, solving the mental health crisis, eradicating poverty and hunger, finding ways to alleviate chronic pain, stamping out racism and all other unjust forms of discrimination, solving climate change, preventing violent crime—murder, rape, domestic abuse, and so on—these projects would all serve to reduce the significant risks of harm that accompanies each act of procreation, in turn reducing the prima facie wrongness associated with such an act.<sup>23</sup> In my view, if that risk could be sufficiently diminished, then procreation could eventually become all things considered permissible.<sup>24</sup> Indeed the pursuit of such a world would be much better, all things considered, than the pursuit of human extinction. (For this reason, the anti-natalist conclusion argued for in this paper is only a *contingent* one—contingent upon our moral failure to pursue a better world for our children.) Therefore, the pursuit of such a world ought to be our highest priority. That world would be the greatest gift that we could give to future generations—not only because of the alleviation of suffering and improvement of human well-being, but also because (in my view) by achieving it, we will have eradicated the conditions which render each procreative act immoral.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> To date, there have been a little over 7 million deaths due to COVID-19, according to the World Health Organization. Source: <https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/deaths>

<sup>2</sup> I have included the following diseases in this calculation: multiple sclerosis, lupus, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, systemic sclerosis, Charcot-Marie-Tooth, myositis, Parkinson's, ALS, and Huntington's disease. Numbers: In the U.S., per 100,000 population, Parkinson's affects 572 per 100,000 ; MS 309.2 ; cerebral palsy 290 ; lupus 199 ; CMT 40 ; SSc 25.9 ; muscular dystrophy 20 ; myositis 14-21.4 ; ALS 10.1 ; Huntington's 4.8. These add up to exactly 1,500 per 100,000, or 1.5% on the nose. In terms of population, 5.1 million presently existing Americans either already has one of these, or will develop it in their lifetime.

Sources: Parkinson's: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41531-018-0058-0> ;

MS: <https://www.neurology.org/doi/full/10.1212/WNL.0000000000007035>

Lupus: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-025-13071-7>

Cerebral Palsy: <https://www.cerebralpalsyguide.com/cerebral-palsy/statistics/>

CMT: <https://www.hnf-cure.org/cmt/what-is-cmt/>

Systemic sclerosis (SSc): <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10391172/>

Muscular dystrophy: <https://www.cdc.gov/muscular-dystrophy/research/summary.html>

Myositis: <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/medicine/articles/10.3389/fmed.2022.842586/full>

ALS: <https://www.cdc.gov/als/dashboard/index.html>

Huntington's: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10086981/>

<sup>3</sup> Sources: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db518.htm>,  
<https://uspainfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Living-Well-Chronic-Pain-2024-PRINT02.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> E.g., of the 3.1 million total deaths in 2023 in the U.S., roughly 49,316 (or 1.6%) were due to suicide (and this relation has hovered around 1.6%, even trending slowly upward, for decades). There were 105,007 deaths due to drug overdose. 93% of these were ruled unintentional, i.e., not suicides, accounting for 3.2% of all deaths that year (though most recent years hover around 2.5%). In addition, it is estimated that, in 2023, 12.8 million, 3.7 million, and 1.5 million Americans seriously contemplated, planned for, or (unsuccessfully) attempted suicide, respectively.

Sources: Suicide: <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/data.html>

Total Deaths: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/wr/mm7331a1.htm>

Total Overdoses: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db522.htm>

93% of Overdose Deaths are Unintentional: <https://usafacts.org/answers/how-many-drug-overdose-deaths-happen-every-year-in-the-us/country/united-states/>

<sup>5</sup> Roughly 1 in 5 women, and 1 in 26 men are raped in the U.S., according to the CDC:

<https://www.cdc.gov/nisvs/documentation/nisvsReportonSexualViolence.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> E.g., of the 3.1 million total deaths in 2023 in the U.S., roughly 22,380 (or 0.72%) were due to homicide (and this relation has hovered around 0.7% for decades). Source: <https://usafacts.org/articles/which-cities-have-the-highest-murder-rates/>. This number increases if we include instances of being killed by others which are *not* classified as homicides. For example, if we add *being killed by a drunk driver* (e.g., 12,429 people in 2023), the probability increases to roughly 1%.

<sup>7</sup> This represents 32.5% of women and 24.6% of men who report either “being hit with a fist or something hard, kicked, hurt by having hair pulled, slammed against something, beaten, burned on purpose, attempted to be hurt by choking or suffocating, [or] having a knife or gun used on them” by an intimate partner. Source:

[https://www.cdc.gov/nisvs/documentation/NISVSReportonIPV\\_2022.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nisvs/documentation/NISVSReportonIPV_2022.pdf). The percentage of victimization grows significantly if we include other forms of domestic abuse (such as stalking, “non-severe” physical violence that includes “being slapped, pushed, or shoved”, etc.). All told, nearly 46% of all Americans will be abused by an intimate partner in *some* way, during their lifetime. Note also that, by this report’s own admission, “respondents may have chosen not to disclose victimization due to safety concerns despite efforts to ensure their comfort with doing so. Thus, the estimates presented in this report might underestimate the true prevalence of intimate partner violence in the U.S. population.”

<sup>8</sup> 4.5% of children are subject to physical violence and 2.25% to sexual violence. Source: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470337/>. The percentage of victimization grows

significantly if we include other forms of child abuse (such as neglect). All told, roughly 25% of all children experience *some* form of child abuse.

<sup>9</sup> How did I arrive at this number? It's very rough, but clearly the number must be smaller than 12%, since many rapists are repeat offenders. One study estimates that roughly two-thirds of rapists are serial rapists, and that the average number of rapes among serial rapists is 5.8. Given these numbers, America's 40.8 million rape victims will be victimized by 9.7 million rapists, or 2.86% of the population. Source: [https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/publications\\_nsvrc\\_key-findings\\_rethinking-serial-perpetration\\_0.pdf](https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/publications_nsvrc_key-findings_rethinking-serial-perpetration_0.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> How did I arrive at this number? It's very rough, but clearly the number must be smaller than 0.7%. First, I noted that 93% of homicides involve one victim: <https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/hvus23.pdf>; and about 1% of convicted murderers will murder again upon release: <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/a-new-lease-on-life/#iii-review>. Based on these numbers, I estimate that, for every 100 murders there are roughly 96 murderers. This would mean that 1 in every 143 Americans commits murder, but I have very conservatively lowered that estimate to 1 in 200 to be safe.

<sup>11</sup> How did I arrive at these numbers? I could not find data on perpetrators of these crimes, but surely the number of perpetrators is smaller than the number of victims (given repeat offenders). Here, I have assumed that the number of perpetrators is *half* the number of victims, which seems a reasonable and pretty conservative estimate, given that the recidivism rate among these crimes is fairly low.

<sup>12</sup> Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/child-mortality?focus=~USA>

<sup>13</sup> See Vance (2024). Not to mention, there is a high chance that a child brought into the world today face the hardships of climate change, war, division, scarcity of resources, erosion of democracy, etc. (For this reason alone, many young people are making the decision not to have children.) In addition to this list are a whole host of other horrific conditions or situations or events which one's child may experience, such as severe poverty, food insecurity, PTSD, bullying and other forms of psychological abuse, depression, debilitating anxiety, loneliness, being the victim of racism and other forms of discrimination, losing one's home or life in a natural disaster, developing one of several (typically) late-onset illness (such as rheumatoid arthritis or Alzheimer's), or dying in a traffic collision (1.3% of all Americans), and so on. We might also note that, for many Christians, Muslims, etc., it is believed that there is a high probability that any given child will go to hell and experience infinite suffering. Himma (2016) argues that this alone renders procreation immoral for Christians. Though, many theists believe that hell is a *choice*—which seems importantly morally different from the horrors on my initial list, which are suffered *without consent*.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting the various ways in which my own proposal differs significantly from that of Shiffrin's. For starters, Shiffrin is arguing that *all* pro tanto harms (some of which are inevitable in *any* life) confer some wrongness upon the act of procreation; whereas I am only arguing that certain non-inevitable, but significantly probable *severe* harms render procreation immoral (namely, harms that render life “not worth initiating”, as I will explain below. Shiffrin writes,

By being caused to exist as persons, children are forced to assume moral agency, to face various demanding and sometimes wrenching moral questions, and to discharge taxing moral duties. They must endure the fairly substantial amount of pain, suffering, difficulty, significant disappointment, distress, and significant loss that occur within the typical life. They must face and undergo the fear and harm of death. ... All of these burdens are imposed without the future child's consent. This, it seems, is in tension with the foundational liberal, anti-paternalist principle that forbids the imposition of significant burdens and risks upon a person without the person's consent. (1999, 136-137)

Second, Shiffrin explicitly states that she is *not* arguing that procreation is all-things-considered impermissible, but rather that it has “a *pro tanto* wrongful element” and “involves serious moral hazards” (ibid., 139, 136). Her primary goal is, rather, to argue in favor of a child's grounds for *legal recourse* against their parents, in cases where they have in fact experienced serious pro tanto harms.

<sup>15</sup> See Benatar (2006, 23). The example of living without a limb is his. Incidentally, Benatar *rejects* the claim that existence is ever an all-things-considered benefit, saying instead that it is *always* a harm, and furthermore that “high-quality lives are exceedingly uncommon” (ibid. 92). By contrast, I accept that being brought into existence *is* an overall benefit for many, if not *most*, human beings, and that high-quality lives are quite common.

<sup>16</sup> See Benatar (2015, ch. 4) for a “misanthropic” anti-natalist argument grounded in humanity’s brutality. A similar argument can be found in Hereth and Ferrucci (2021).

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Weinberg, who states, “most informed, competent agents seem to regard life as a reasonable risk” (2016, 145).

<sup>18</sup> See also Singh (2018) for another Shiffrin-inspired refutation of the hypothetical consent objection.

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Weinberg (2016, 136), who argues that, for this reason, procreation does not violate the consent rights of the child. DeGrazia argues similarly, claiming that parents are morally permitted to impose non-trivial harms on their children in order to bestow pure benefits (2012, 156-7). This objection is also mentioned in Singh (2018, 1140).

<sup>20</sup> Though, I would argue that even our duty of *beneficence* is not obviously overridden, even in cases where fulfilling it would require a significant sacrifice of our own well-being. For example, imagine instead that, on your way to work, you see a drowning child who is 25% likely to die if you do not stop to help. (In my view, you should sacrifice your job to save the child.)

<sup>21</sup> Not to mention, even *regular* dwarfism is often extremely painful and debilitating in older age, and is frequently accompanied by reduced life expectancy.

<sup>22</sup> This is my paraphrase of a principle proposed in Matheson (2021), and the case that follows is adapted from Matheson as well.

<sup>23</sup> This point is recognized in Lee (2025, 78), who points out that some anti-natalist arguments (e.g., Shiffrin’s) would be weakened if society became more utopian.

<sup>24</sup> Surely it is permissible to impose a *negligible* risk of severe harms upon others in order to secure significant benefits. (For example, contrast the permissibility of *drunk* driving with that of *sober, attentive* driving.)

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