



The Tennessee Center For
**BIOETHICS
& CULTURE**

Life Without Us?

By Jane Patton, Guest Columnist



It is not new that some people say that they do not want to bring children into the world. And, as far as the do's and don't's of being environmentally responsible, the carbon footprint of a single human being tops the list of avoidable behaviors. One presidential candidate even advocates abortion as a way to combat climate change. So, it may be okay to have one or two children. Any more than that and parents might be called selfish.

But, a growing movement is taking the idea of limiting births to the next level—preventing all births. Who are these “antinatalists”, and why do they think this way? Besides the fact that people are destroying the earth and everything in it, they say, life is just plain miserable. We are either hurt, tired, hungry or have to use the bathroom, and it never stops.

One thought leader who provides “pessimistic inspiration” for antinatalists is David Benatar, professor of philosophy at the University of Cape Town Bioethics Centre, and author of the 2006 book “Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence”. To antinatalists like Benatar the pain of life is always greater and more constant than its pleasures. People ruin everything and each other. It is just not worth it to procreate.

Some antinatalists say that since children do not ask to be born, we are violating their human rights by exposing them to this woe-filled life against their wills. (That a pregnancy could be a violation of the human rights of the fetus is an interesting point to be made in the abortion debate.) But, even if antinatalists think you should not begin a life, opinions vary as to whether, when, or how to end a life. Benatar does not advocate euthanasia because death is yet another bad thing about life and we should be in no hurry to bring it about. Others, if they think to ultimacy in their pessimistic view, might have an easier time justifying suicide or euthanasia.

When bioethics professionals like Benatar say that even the best sort of life is really not worth living, it is apparent that the bioethics tent is large enough that in a field which is partly about affirming the dignity of persons, the dignity of persons includes their right to not exist. Where will the protection be for “the least of these” across the spectrum of life—even those who have yet to be conceived—without rather a new emphasis on what distinguishes us from plants and animals and on our inherent dignity as human beings?

Ironically for the antinatalist, it is a characteristic of our human exceptionalism that we think we can decide whether or not we should exist. Along with that ability to reason is our common sense of futility. Who has not wondered what the point of it all is? Though one may argue that the futility of life is meant to lead us to real answers rather than to despair, it may be helpful in any discussion involving bioethics to acknowledge our mutual personal brokenness in a broken world.

Also part and parcel of our humanity is our common longing for meaning. Even the most ardent pessimist has a will to survive that is stronger than the conviction that life is not worth living. Human beings have “eternity in our hearts” —the sense that there is something more, a hope, however limited, that draws us forward to look for meaning and even beauty. Even antinatalists likely find some meaning in their cause of meaninglessness.

Antinatalists may not be in our social circles, but a devaluing of human life is obvious all around. A collective recovery of our inherent worth as individuals is needed in order to shine a guiding light on the increasing complexity of end-of-life situations. Where there is opportunity and when so much is at stake, it is easy to lead with what separates us. Pushing back in a culture of death may include keeping in mind common characteristics of our human dignity and to champion them wherever we find them, even when we find them among people who deny that dignity most vehemently.

**The Tennessee Center for Bioethics & Culture responds to the
Public Call for Evidence for the International Commission on the Clinical Use
of Human Germline Genome Editing***

Given that

According to the canons of research on children, experiments are only ethically justified when there are clear benefits to that individual child and proportional burdens to that child. Risks and burdens beyond truly “minimal” to individual children are not justified to benefit other children. To do so is to treat one child as a means to another child’s ends (i.e., to instrumentalize that child).

Whereas

- Human germline genome editing is experimentation on embryonic humans who cannot give consent, informed or otherwise
- Human germline genome editing converts embryonic humans from progeny into experimental subjects, not only through gestation, but for all their reproductive lives
- Human germline genome editing converts not only one generation, but also all succeeding generations into experimental subjects
- Human germline genome editing allows some humans to fashion other humans after their own desires
- Errors occur in any production, and this reality extends to laboratories in which human embryos are manipulated

The Tennessee Center for Bioethics & Culture concludes

Human germline genome editing constitutes human experimentation without consent, and as such is capable of producing grave harm – for generations to come.

Moreover, human germline genome editing is unjust, producing inequalities

- A few humans will have unprecedented influence over future generations.
- Resulting generations will be monitored in ways not deemed necessary for previous generations, or necessary for their contemporaries not born through the same mechanism(s)

If scientists engage in human germline genome editing, mistakes will be made, and human beings will bear those errors. Humanity possesses no means of compensating for such harm, and the destruction or killing of human beings so harmed – at whatever stage of life they may be – would be a wholly inappropriate response.

*U.S. National Academy of Medicine (NAM), the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS), and the Royal Society of the U.K.

Recent Article Published

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The Tennessee Center for Bioethics & Culture

The Tennessee Center for Bioethics & Culture is a 501(c)3 educational non-profit which exists to promote human dignity in the face of challenges to what it means to be human, and to inform and equip people to face the vital bioethics issues of the 21st Century.

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With gratitude for you, our supporters and readers,
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