

'We Are Creatures That Should Not Exist': The Theory of Anti-Natalism

July 15, 2015 2:00 pm Published by [David Benatar](#)



Picture: “Digital Painting” by Aleksandra Lech on [Behance](#). Follow The Critique on [Facebook](#) & Twitter [@dekritik](#) for special features.

It used to be a rare occurrence for my students to ask me whether I had seen a particular television show. That changed when *The True Detective* aired and students began inquiring whether I had seen that series. What prompted these questions, I came to learn, were the anti-natalist musings of Detective Rustin Cohle as well as the acknowledgement, in an interview, by writer Nic Pizzolatto, that my anti-natalist book, *Better Never to Have Been* [1], was among the works

that had inspired Rust Cohle's worldview [2].

It certainly came as a surprise to me, as it seems to have been to others, that "such a big hit features so prominently a dark philosophy which suggests ...[as anti-natalism does] ... that we should stop reproducing" [3]. A wide audience was introduced to this grim view of the world.

There is a danger, however, that anti-natalism will be too closely associated with the character of Rust Cohle by those whose only exposure to this view is via *The True Detective*. The danger is that anti-natalism might be confused with or regarded as conjoined to other dark features of the Rust Cohle character. These include nihilism, violence and alcoholism.

Anti-natalism is the view that we ought to desist from procreating – that it is wrong to have children. There are various routes to this conclusion. Some of these are what we might call "philanthropic" routes. They emanate from concern for the humans who will be brought into existence if we do procreate. According to these arguments life is filled with suffering and we ought not to create more of it. Many pro-natalists balk at this suggestion and claim, at the very least, that the good in life outweighs the bad. They should pause to remember the following.

First, there is ample evidence from psychological research that (most) people are prone to an optimism bias and are subject to other psychological traits that lead them to underestimate the amount of bad in life [4]. We thus have excellent reason for distrusting most people's cheery assessments of how well their lives are going.

Second, when we look closely we notice just how much suffering there is. Consider, for example, the millions living in poverty or subjected to violence or the threat thereof. Psychological distress and disturbance is widespread. Rates of depression are high. Everybody suffers frustrations and bereavements. Life is often punctuated by periods of ill-health. Some of these pass without enduring effects but others have long-term sequelae. In poorer parts of the world,

infectious diseases account for most of the burden of disease. However, those in the developed world are not exempt from appalling diseases. They suffer from strokes, from various degenerative diseases and from cancer.

Third, even if one thought that the best of human lives were good (enough), to procreate is to inflict, on the being you create, unacceptable risks of grotesque suffering, even if that occurs at the end of life. For example, 40% of men and 37% of women in Britain develop cancer at some point. Those are just terrible odds. To inflict them on another person by bringing him into existence is reckless. Rustin Cohle expresses this idea when he says that he thinks “about the hubris it must take to yank a soul out of nonexistence into this ... Force a life into this thresher ...” [5] (His talk of souls should obviously be taken metaphorically.)

Another route to anti-natalism is via what I call a “misanthropic” argument. According to this argument humans are a deeply flawed and a destructive species that is responsible for the suffering and deaths of billions of other humans and non-human animals. [6] If that level of destruction were caused by another species we would rapidly recommend that new members of that species not be brought into existence.

Although Rustin Cohle does not explicitly employ misanthropy in support of his anti-natalism, he is certainly misanthropic. For example, he observes astutely that “people incapable of guilt usually do have a good time.” [7] His inferences from misanthropy are not ones that an anti-natalist would necessarily endorse. For instance, in justifying his own (“righteous”) violence, he says that the “world needs bad men. We keep the other bad men from the door.” [8] Anti-natalists are not committed to any particular views about when violence is and is not justified. Anti-natalism is not a complete moral theory, but only a view about the morality of procreation. However, it is unlikely that vigilante violence, in which Rustin Cohle and his partner Martin Hart engage, would pass muster if relevant moral considerations were applied.

Nor does anti-natalism imply that we should resort to alcoholism. Consumed to

excess, alcohol tends to make life not better but rather worse – both for those who imbibe it and for those who come in contact with the alcohol abusers.

There is a common tendency to regard anti-natalists as nihilists. Rust Cohle claims to be a nihilist. However, despite that claim, as Nic Pizzolatto himself has noted, Rust is no nihilist [9]. Nihilists (about value) think that nothing matters, but Rust and anti-natalists in general, think that that there is much that matters. It matters, for example, whether people suffer. Anti-natalism is grounded in deep concern about value rather than in the absence of any value.

It is not only humans but also animals, or at least sentient animals that are harmed by being brought into existence. The basic curse of consciousness applies to all sentient beings. However, many anti-natalists focus on humans. The reasons vary. Among them is that (normal, healthy, adult) humans face an additional curse of self-consciousness. For related reasons, most humans are also able, at least in principle, to reflect on whether they should create offspring.

However, it should also be said that many humans give shockingly little if any thought to their procreative actions. This may be because humans are not as different from non-human animals as they would like to think. Like other animals, we are the products of evolution, with all the biological drives that such products can be expected to have. Rust recognizes this obstacle when he says:

“I think the honorable thing for our species to do is deny our programming, stop reproducing. Walk hand in hand into extinction one last midnight. Brothers and sisters opting out of a raw deal.” [10]

It is important to note that anti-natalism, while favouring human extinction, is a view about a particular means to extinction – namely non-procreation. Anti-natalists are not committed to either suicide or “speciecide”, as some of their critics insensitively suggest. Nothing is lost by never coming into existence. By contrast, ceasing to exist does have costs. Suicide in particular is really difficult, which is why Rust responds to Marty’s question “So what’s the point of getting

out of bed in the morning” with the disclosure “I lack the constitution to commit suicide” [11]. Murder and specicide carry additional moral problems, including but not limited to violating the rights of those who may prefer not to die.

As an anti-natalist, Rust Cohle was a late bloomer. He became an anti-natalist too late to spare his daughter from coming into existence. Indeed, it took her death for him to realise just how hubristic it is to inflict the risks of existence on one’s offspring. He is thus mistaken when he says that “as for my daughter, she spared me the sin of being a father.” [12] The sin of being a father is a sin of creating a child, not the sin of rearing one.

Spoiler alert: Disappointingly, there is some, although by means definitive reason, to think that Rust veers away from his anti-natalism by the end of the first season. There is certainly evidence of increased optimism. He and Marty are gazing at the night sky and Rust speaks about “light versus dark”. Marty, who does not share Rust’s grim views, notes that “the dark has a lot more territory”. Rust first agrees, but then retracts. In what is the final line of the season he says: “Well, once there was only dark. If you ask me, the light’s winning”.

Footnotes & References

[1] David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

[2] Michael Calia, “Writer Nic Pizzolatto on Thomas Ligotti and the Weird Secrets of ‘True Detective’”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 February 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2014/02/02/writer-nic-pizzolatto-on-thomas-ligotti-and-the-weird-secrets-of-true-detective/tab/print/> (Accessed, 26 February 2015).

[3] Michael Calia, “The most shocking thing about HBO’s ‘True Detective’”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 January 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2014/01/30/the-most-shocking-thing-about->

[hbos-true-detective/tab/print/](#) (Accessed, 23 March 2015)

[4] I survey some of this evidence in *Better Never to Have Been*, pp. 64-69.

[5] *The True Detective*, Episode 2.

[6] This argument is presented in Chapter 4 of David Benatar and David Wasserman, *Debating Procreation: Is it Wrong to Reproduce?*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

[7] *The True Detective*, Episode 3.

[8] *The True Detective*, Episode 3.

[9] Michael Calia, "Writer Nic Pizzolatto on Thomas Ligotti and the Weird Secrets of "True Detective"", *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 February 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2014/02/02/writer-nic-pizzolatto-on-thomas-ligotti-and-the-weird-secrets-of-true-detective/tab/print/> (Accessed, 26 February 2015).

[10] *The True Detective*, Episode 1.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *The True Detective*, Episode 2.

David Benatar

David Benatar is Professor and Head of Philosophy at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. He is the author of *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford, 2006) and *The Second Sexism: Discrimination Against Men and Boys* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

More Posts

Categorised in: [Articles](#)

