

CHAPTER 1

The Misanthropic Argument for Anti-natalism

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The "most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth"

— King of Brobdingnag, in Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, Part II, Chapter 6.

Some arguments for the conclusion that it is (always) wrong to bring somebody into existence are what I call "philanthropic" arguments. They are rooted in a concern for the welfare of those who would be brought into existence. According to these arguments, coming into existence is such a serious harm or carries such a severe risk of serious harm to those people brought into existence that we should desist from creating them.

However, philanthropy is not the only route to anti-natalism. There are also anti-natalist arguments that we can characterize as "misanthropic." These arguments focus on the terrible evil that humans wreak, and on various negative characteristics of our species. This chapter will be devoted to advancing what I take to be the strongest of these arguments—a moral argument.¹

Misanthropic anti-natal arguments are likely to be met with an even more hostile reaction than are philanthropic anti-natal arguments. It is not hard to see why this is the case. First, we tend to dislike those who hate us. The misanthrope is, purportedly, one who hates humans and thus it is unsurprising that the misanthrope is disliked. Second, people do not

like to hear bad things about themselves and the misanthrope has lots of bad things to say.

A few comments may be offered to mitigate this instinctive response. First, the arguments that will be advanced here are misanthropic only in the sense that they point to unpleasant facts about humans. Accepting these arguments does not commit one to hating humans. Indeed, I shall argue that the misanthropic arguments are not incompatible with the philanthropic ones. Thus the characterization of the arguments as misanthropic should not be taken too literally or over-interpreted.

Second, the unpleasant claims that the misanthropic arguments make about humanity may well be true. To refuse to believe them merely because they are unpleasant would provide the misanthrope with further grounds for complaint. Failing to acknowledge one's flaws is itself another flaw.

The strongest misanthropic argument for anti-natalism is, I said, a moral one. It can be presented in various ways, but here is one:

1. We have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing into existence new members of species that cause (and will likely continue to cause) vast amounts of pain, suffering and death.
2. Humans cause vast amounts of pain, suffering and death.
3. Therefore, we have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing new humans into existence.²

I shall delay discussion of the first premise until later, and shall begin now by demonstrating the truth of the second premise. I do so in two stages. First, I highlight the dark side of human nature. Then I show just how harmful humans are. The two are connected because the dark side of human nature partially explains why humans are so harmful. More specifically, it explains how, in certain situations, the dark side manifests, with destructive results. I shall provide more detail than some might think necessary. I do so because some people are inclined to underestimate the extent of human destructiveness and I need to forestall that sort of glib response.

HUMAN NATURE—THE DARK SIDE

Our species is prone to a flattering view of itself. Humans have regarded themselves as the pinnacle of creation, formed by and in the image of an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God, and inhabiting a planet at the center of the universe—a planet around which all others

revolve.³ Science has done much to debunk some of these ideas. We now know that our planet is not at the centre of the universe: the earth revolves around the sun rather than vice versa. And we know—or at least some of us do—that we are Johnnie-come-lately products of a long, blind evolutionary process.

However, the inclination towards self-adulation is remarkably resilient, and it simply manifests differently in the scientific paradigm than it does in the religious one. Thus, in our taxonomy of species, we designate ourselves as *Homo sapiens*—the thinking human. There is, of course, some truth in this designation. As a species we do think more than other animals, and we have greater technical capacity than they do. The human elite has had some remarkable achievements. However, we would do well to note that these achievements are thought to be remarkable only because (1) they are not within the reach of most humans; (2) the cleverest humans typically produce them only by pushing the limits of their capacity; and (3) there are no more cognitively capable species on the planet to put our achievements into a humbling perspective.⁴ There is thus something unfair about judging our entire species by the achievements of its elite. Even the cognitive capacities of the elite are massively deficient in countless ways.

We fancy ourselves as rational beings, but there is ample evidence that we regularly fall far short of thinking and acting rationally.⁵ For example, we have instincts to make intuitive judgments that, on reflection, we can see to be mistaken. But we are also often too lazy to do the necessary reflection. Our decisions can be influenced by the “framing effect”—that is, our decisions are likely to differ depending on whether the same information is presented one way or another. In states of sexual arousal we make decisions that we know to be irrational when we are not aroused. We are willing to pay more to *retain* something than we are to *obtain* something of the same value even when there is no reason to be attached to the object we already own—the so-called “endowment effect.” Humans also have a tendency to be overly optimistic and we have considerable capacity for self-deception. And these are but a few of hundreds of possible examples that could be provided.

For all the thinking that we do we are actually an amazingly stupid species. There is much evidence of this stupidity. It is to be found in those who start smoking cigarettes (despite all that is known about their dangers and their addictive content) and in the excessive consumption of alcohol—especially in those who drive while under its influence. It is to be found in the achievements of the advertising industry, which bear ample testament to the credulity of humanity. It is also to be found in the successes of

political sloganeering, demagoguery, and spin, to which billions of people fall prey. The seriousness with which so many people take matters of utter inconsequence—such as sport and the vicissitudes of particular sport teams—and the popular adulation of shallow, dysfunctional sports, music, and film stars are also items of evidence.⁶ Further signs are to be found in the fads and fashions and delusional obsessions that run rampant.⁷

Our cognitive and other deficiencies are troubling in their own right, but some of these deficiencies, predictably, also incline us to various moral failings. These failings explain, or partially explain, some of the terrible things humans do and thus form the basis for the strongest versions of the misanthropic argument against creating new people.

Consider, for example, the human tendency towards conformity. In one influential study⁸ demonstrating this phenomenon, groups of subjects were shown a line—the “standard”—and then asked which of three other lines was the same length as the standard. The nonequivalent lines were of sufficiently different lengths that the correct answer was clear. In each group of subjects all but one were confederates of the experimenter and they were instructed, in some conditions of the experiment, to give the wrong answer. A significant number of the individuals who were the actual experimental subjects yielded to the majority’s answer. Subsequent analysis has confirmed these findings but also shown that the extent of conformity is influenced by cultural variables.⁹

The studies have also shown that the extent of conformity is influenced by the degree to which the stimulus was ambiguous. The less clear the correct answer is, the more likely people are to conform to the majority view. We should thus expect that when we shift from simple factual matters such as the length of lines to more complicated matters, including evaluative ones, people will be even more likely to conform. That is to say, when everybody is admiring the legendary “emperor’s new clothes,” it is less likely that the lone individual will announce that the emperor is not wearing any clothes. We know how dangerous conformity can be in certain circumstances. One context in which it has manifested is that of witch hunts. Judging by the actual incidence of witches (where “witch” is understood the way witch hunters understand it), a witch hunt should be about as successful as a unicorn hunt. Yet tens of thousands of purported witches were “found” and killed between 1450 and 1700.¹⁰ There have been sporadic witch hunts since then, including in our own times.¹¹

Humans also have a propensity to obey authority and will often do so even when they are asked to do terrible things.¹² Most people have difficulty believing that they would be among those who would obey orders to commit atrocities. While it is true that there are some people with the

strength to resist authority where it is appropriate to do so, it is not the case that everybody who thinks that they fall into that category is as exceptional as they think they are. Indeed, in the famous psychological experiments that demonstrated the tendency to obey authority, some of the subjects who had thought well of themselves were shocked to find they had followed orders. One of them began to call himself "Eichmann,"¹³ a reference to Adolf Eichmann, whose defense at his trial in Jerusalem was that he was obeying orders.¹⁴

An even more graphic experimental example of how ordinary people can quickly descend into barbarism is that of the Stanford Prison Experiment.¹⁵ In this experiment, twenty-four healthy student volunteers were randomly assigned to the roles of either guards or prisoners in a faux prison located in the basement of the Stanford psychology building. Both groups adapted very rapidly to their respective roles, with the authoritarian "guards" humiliating and psychologically torturing the "prisoners." The treatment of the "prisoners" got so bad that the experiment had to be terminated prematurely, after a mere six days.

I have pointed to evidence that humans are neither as clever nor as good as they often think they are. None of this is to deny that there are also positive features to human nature. For example, we can (even if we do not always) employ reason to a greater degree than other animals. And we can feel empathy and act on it (as some animals also do). I have focused on the negative, not to deny the existence of the positive, but instead to highlight what is ignored in the general self-conception of our species.¹⁶ Moreover, the dark side is arguably the more primitive. To avoid its manifestation, considerable effort has to be expended in educating and training people and in constructing and maintaining circumstances and institutions that inhibit the dangerous lapses to which people are prone.

HOMO PERNICIOSUS

Humans may exceed other animals in their sapient capacities, but we also surpass other species in our destructiveness. Many animals cause harm, but we are the most lethal species ever to have inhabited our planet. It is revealing that we do not refer to *this* superlative property in identifying ourselves. There is ample evidence that we are *Homo perniciosus*—the dangerous, destructive human.¹⁷

In what follows, I shall first demonstrate how much harm humans do. I shall consider three categories of such harm: harm to other humans; harm to animals; and harm to both humans and animals via harm to the

environment. While it is obviously impossible to provide a full catalogue of human destructiveness, I do plan to survey a wide range of types and provide some examples.

Inhumanity to Humans

Humans have harmed other humans for as long as there have been humans. The earliest destruction was on a relatively small scale, not least because there were so few humans at the beginning of the species' history. The harms inflicted were, most likely, assault and murder committed by individuals or small groups, with the victims being either individuals or other small groups. In other words, the totality of the destruction would have been very similar to that seen in some species of non-human primates today.

Although humans continue to inflict such harms, when we think today of the destruction that humans wreak, we are more likely to think first of much larger-scale destruction. Humans have killed many millions of other humans in war and in other mass atrocities, such as slavery, purges, and genocides.

The number has been increasing, partly because of the burgeoning number of humans that there are to kill, and partly because humans' destructive capacity has increased so significantly. That said, it is alarming just how lethal primitively armed humans can be.

Many hundreds of millions have been murdered in mass killings. In the twentieth century, the genocides include those against the Herero in German South-West Africa; the Armenians in Turkey; the Jews, Roma, and Sinti in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe; the Tutsis in Rwanda; and Bosnian Muslims in the former Yugoslavia. Other twentieth-century mass killings were those perpetrated by Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin, and Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge. But these mass killings were by no means the first. Genghis Khan, for example, was responsible for killing 11.1% of all human inhabitants of earth during his reign in the thirteenth century.¹⁸

The gargantuan numbers should not obscure the gruesome details of the how these deaths are inflicted and the sorts of suffering the victims endure on their way to death. Humans kill other humans by hacking, knife-throwing, bludgeoning, decapitating, shooting, starving, freezing, suffocating, drowning, crushing, gassing, poisoning, and bombing them. Sometimes the victims are killed one at a time and sometimes they are killed en masse in a single action. Although the killing is sometimes at a distance where the suffering can be obscured from the killer, at other

times it is up close—the killer, covered in the blood and splattered brains of his victims, continues on his destructive path through further victims.

Mass killings are obviously not the only form of destruction wrought by humans. There are smaller scale killings and there are various barbarities other than killing. Humans rape, assault, flog, maim, brand, kidnap, enslave, torture, and torment other humans. Brutal punishments are inflicted on people, sometimes for real crimes but sometimes merely because of their religious or political views, their race or ethnicity, or their sexual orientation or practices. There are so-called “honor killings” and mutilations for perceived or suspected violations of rigid codes. And humans have performed human sacrifices to their deities.

It is hard to fathom the depth and variety of the barbarism. Consider, for example, the case of René de Permentier, a Belgian officer in the Congo in the 1890s:

He had all the bushes and trees cut down around his house . . . so that from his porch he could use passersby for target practice. If he found a leaf in a courtyard that women prisoners had swept, he ordered a dozen of them beheaded. If he found a path in the forest not well-maintained, he ordered a child killed in the nearest village.¹⁹

Or consider what was done to Ahmad Qabazard, a nineteen-year-old Kuwaiti detained by the Iraqis. His parents were advised that he would soon be released. When they heard a car approaching, they went to the door:

When Ahmad was taken out of the car, they saw that his ears, nose and genitalia had been cut off. He was coming out of the car with his eyes in his hands. Then the Iraqis shot him, once in the stomach and once in the head, and told his mother to be sure not to move the body for three days.²⁰

Militiamen in Congo cut the flesh from living victims and force them to eat it, a practice known, macabrely, as “autocannibalism.”²¹ Other practices include cutting a fetus out of a woman’s uterus and then making her friends eat it, and inserting the end of an AK-47 rifle into a woman’s vagina and then pulling the trigger.²² Nearly every year, fighters from the Lord’s Resistance Army “club to death hundreds of people as they raid villages and kidnap children.”²³

Kidnapping of children in such contexts is the first stage in making them child soldiers. Sometimes they are forced to kill members of their own family²⁴ or others, typically in gruesome ways. In one case a boy was told to pound to death the baby of a woman he knew.²⁵ If the inductees

refuse orders they are beaten savagely or even killed. Indoctrination is another component of their “training.” It is estimated that there are currently about three hundred thousand child soldiers in conflicts in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and elsewhere.²⁶

In other situations those who are kidnapped are sold into slavery. They are torn away from their families and sometimes shipped great distances, often in fetid, crowded conditions, in which many die. They are subjected to savage beatings, rape, and other indignities. Nor does the slave’s commercial value mean that slaves were not killed. In one horrendous case, 133 live slaves were thrown overboard on the orders of the captain, who had insured them for £30 each.²⁷

Some people think that slavery is no longer practiced. However, it persists even in some jurisdictions where it is illegal.²⁸ In some places, young girls are still sold into sexual slavery. One young Cambodian girl, Long Pross, who was kidnapped and forced into prostitution has related how she was beaten and subjected to electric shocks. Two crude abortions were performed on her. When the second left her in great pain she pleaded to be able to rest. In response her “owner” gouged out her right eye.²⁹

Now, it may well be suggested that terrible though all these actions are, it is a minority of humans who actually behave in these ways. In response to this comforting thought, a few other, less-comforting ones need to be considered. First, some of the serious harms humans inflict on other humans are not as aberrational as one might think. For example, there was a time when slaveowning was widespread. Slave merchants might have been a small minority, but slave owners were far more common. Rape remains widespread today. It is probably a minority of people who are rapists, but it is not a negligible minority.

Second, even where people are not themselves perpetrators they are often facilitative of the atrocities committed by others. For example, they might support the infliction of torture and cruel punishments, or policies that discriminate against people on the basis of their race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation, and vote for governments that implement such practices and policies. Sometimes large numbers of people endorse a worldview in which “honor killings” thrive, or in which terrorists are hailed as heroes. Sometimes the facilitation of evil results not from an endorsement of the evil but from stupidity, gullibility, dogma, or some other failing. Consider, for example, so-called “useful idiots,” those well-meaning people who support a cause without realizing how evil it really is. Well-intentioned people in the West who sympathized with the Soviets are common examples. Many of them would have been horrified by the brutality of and the repression within the Soviet Union, but their naïveté

blinded them to the realities of the Soviet regime. Perhaps the most tragic situations are those in which well-meaning people inadvertently cause even more suffering. For example, there is some evidence that Western media attention to amputations in Sierra Leone actually encouraged further amputations by those seeking media attention.³⁰

Third, we should remember how easily ordinary people can slip into contemptible behavior. One such scenario can be found in crowds of people clambering in shops for sale items or products in limited supply. In late 1998, the Furby (a stuffed toy) was the season's hottest toy in the United States, and customers were jostling to buy the limited stock. One woman in the crowd "was pushed into a door, where her arm was badly bruised."³¹ In another shop a thirteen-year old girl reported that when she picked up a Furby, a woman took her "hand and chomped on it" in order to force her to let go of it.³² The problem of shopper crowd violence is a recurring one.³³ One year a Wal-Mart employee in Valley Stream, New York, was trampled to death by shoppers who stormed into the store looking for bargains.³⁴

Nor is this the worst kind of crowd behavior. Lynch mobs, whose collective intentions are to kill, are notorious examples. The members of such mobs have often been "respectable" members of society. In 1672, the De Witt brothers were lynched in The Hague. The mob's intention had been to hang them, "but they were so viciously attacked that they died before reaching the scaffold. The bodies were then hung up by the feet, stripped bare, and literally torn to pieces."³⁵ The philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, "was stunned by these acts of barbarity, perpetrated not by some roving band of thieves, but by a crowd of citizens that included respectable middle-class burghers."³⁶

Although this particular example and some of the other evidence I have provided of atrocities is historical, it certainly cannot be claimed that the worst human destructiveness is restricted to the past. I have provided plenty of evidence of ongoing harm that humans do.³⁷ Second, the historical evidence is often pertinent to the present and future. What people have done in the past provides good evidence of the kinds of things people can do under certain circumstances. Sometimes relevantly similar circumstances re-emerge. One of the reasons why the Holocaust is so shocking is that it was conceived and implemented by what had been thought to be so civilized a society. It is unduly optimistic to think that civilization cannot backslide into barbarism. We saw earlier, when I described the dark side of human nature, some of the features of the human character that make this possible. It is thus altogether too convenient to assume that there are only a few evil people who do things of which the rest of humanity is incapable. Sometimes it is only moral luck that prevents somebody from becoming a genocidaire, for example.

Fourth, human destruction comes in degrees and not all of it involves the worst atrocities. There are many more minor and sometimes quotidian harms that humans inflict on others. They lie, steal, cheat, speak hurtfully, break confidences and promises, violate privacy, and act ungratefully, inconsiderately, duplicitously, impatiently, and unfaithfully. As a result people's property is lost or damaged, their feelings hurt, their confidence shattered, their trust destroyed, and their psyches scarred. These are not murder, mutilation, torture and rape but they are nonetheless deep, often life-altering hurts. In the more extreme cases the victims take their own lives as a result of the hurt, but it does not have to reach that level for it to be worthy of our moral revulsion.

Although humans do have a sense of justice, and human societies often respond to injustice in order to punish it, rectify it, and prevent future instances of it, injustice all too frequently prevails. For example, most of the perpetrators of human history's worst atrocities lived out their natural lives without penalty. Forty-nine percent continued ruling until their deaths by natural causes and a further 11% had peaceful retirements. For an additional 8% the only penalty was exile³⁸. Consider, too, the number of unreported rapes, unsolved murders, and other crimes for which nobody is ever convicted. Whistle-blowers and others who refuse to countenance bad behavior by powerful people often pay a high price.³⁹ Evil-doers often act with impunity.⁴⁰

Nor should we lose sight of the myriad lesser injustices of human life. One such perpetrator was anatomist Henry Gray, who systematically downplayed the role of his collaborator and illustrator, Henry Carter, in the production of what, tellingly, became known as *Gray's Anatomy*.⁴¹ Another was Selman Waksman who successfully connived to rob his student, Albert Schatz, of credit for the latter's discovery of streptomycin. As a result, Dr. Waksman and not Dr. Schatz won the Nobel Prize for the discovery.⁴² Despite many attempts to rectify the injustice, Dr. Schatz went to his grave without achieving the recognition he was due.

"Bad guys" regularly "finish first." They lack the scruples that provide an inner restraint, and the external restraints are either absent or inadequate.

Brutality to "Brutes"

Humans inflict untold suffering and death on many billions of animals every year, and the overwhelming majority of humans are heavily complicit.

Over 63 billion sheep, pigs, cattle, horses, goats, camels, buffalo, rabbits, chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys, and other such animals are slaughtered every year for human consumption.⁴³ In addition, approximately 103.6 billion aquatic animals are killed for human consumption and non-food uses.⁴⁴

Nor is the sum of these figures—over 166 billion animals—the total number of animals killed annually in the industries that provide humans with animal flesh. Excluded are hundreds of millions of male chicks that are culled by the poultry industry because they will be unable to produce eggs. There do not seem to be any estimates of the annual number of such kills *globally*. However, there are figures for some specific countries and regions, including the United States (260 million⁴⁵) and the European Union (330 million⁴⁶).

Nor do the official slaughter figures include the dogs and cats that are eaten in Asia. Reliable figures are even harder to obtain here, but one calculation puts the annual number at between thirteen and sixteen million dogs and about four million cats.⁴⁷ Similarly excluded are “bycatch”—animals such as turtles, dolphins, sharks and sea birds that are caught up in nets even when they are not the intended catch. There are no reliable figures for the numbers of animals killed in this category, but a subset of “bycatch,” those discarded overboard, amounts to about a further 5 billion marine animals.⁴⁸

The deaths of the overwhelming majority of these animals are painful and stressful. Humans kill the millions of male chicks in a variety of ways. In the United States most are killed by being sucked at high speed to a “kill” plate, which is sometimes electrified.⁴⁹ Elsewhere they are killed by suffocating or crushing, or, in the United Kingdom, by gas or instantaneous maceration.⁵⁰ Broiler chickens and spent layer hens are suspended upside down on conveyor belts and have their throats slit. Pigs and other animals are beaten and shocked to coax them to move along in the slaughterhouses, where their throats are cut or stabbed, sometimes after stunning but sometimes not.

Marine animals do not fare any better. They typically suffocate to death once out of the water, but there is suffering even on the way to the surface. Fish that are rapidly hauled by trawlers from great depths suffer barometric trauma. Gas bubbles form inside the body, causing extreme pain. Their swim bladders also become hugely inflated. “Sometimes the pressure is so great their stomach and intestines are pushed out of their mouth and anus. Eyes also become distorted and bulge out.”⁵¹ Fish caught on a smaller scale, with line and bait, suffer the trauma of the hook as they fight for

their lives. Some humans would like to believe that fish do not feel pain, but this comforting fiction, once held about mammalian animals, withers in the light of the evidence.⁵² The deaths of dolphins, which are highly intelligent mammals, may be even worse. When they are not bycatch but instead the intended prey of fisherman, they are driven into bays where they are butchered. Whales, also mammals, are hunted at sea where they are harpooned.

Animal suffering at the hands of humans is not restricted to the time that humans kill animals. Chickens, for example, are typically reared in the extremely confined spaces of the battery cages. They cannot spread their wings or move about. They cannot engage in any of the activities, such as dust bathing, which they would instinctually perform. They stand, with discomfort, on a sloped wire floor. Because such conditions disturb the birds and cause them to peck at one another, chicks destined for this life of suffering are de-beaked with a hot blade. When the egg yield from a battery of hens declines, the hens are shoved into crates and transported to slaughter.

Veal calves and farrowing sows are confined to such small spaces that they can barely move for the duration of their lives. Cows are fed bovine growth hormone to increase milk production, but this often causes mastitis—painful inflammation of the cows’ udders. Humans mutilate various animals, including pigs and cattle, by docking their tails, castrating, dehorning, and branding them, all without anesthetic. Animals are often transported immense distances by truck and ship in cramped and foul conditions to be slaughtered at their destinations.

Producing food for humans is by no means the only context in which animals are maltreated. It is hard to know how many millions of animals are affected by scientific experiments⁵³ each year, but a conservative calculation suggests that it is at least 115 million.⁵⁴ Moreover, despite a commitment to the “three Rs” of animal use in science—replacement, reduction, and refinement—at least some countries are actually *increasing* the number of animals used each year.⁵⁵

Many horrific experiments have been performed. It is hard to summarize the full range of torturous treatments to which animals have been subjected, but some examples illustrate the sorts of cruelties humans have inflicted on animals. There was a time when animals would be dissected while fully conscious.⁵⁶ As recently as the 1960s, conscious dogs were subjected to microwave blasts, resulting in the swelling of their tongues, the crisping of their skin and, if the temperatures were high enough, in death.⁵⁷ In that decade and the following one, monkeys were exposed, by

the U.S. military, to massive doses of radiation, resulting in the monkeys' "going into convulsions, stumbling, falling, vomiting, twisting in an apparent endless and futile search for a comfortable position."⁵⁸

Psychological trauma has also been inflicted. In one (in)famous set of experiments, infant monkeys were separated from their mothers, causing severe distress to both mother and infant. The infants were then deprived of any live contact. Their mothers were replaced with mannequins that blasted the infants with air, or rattled them until their teeth chattered, or catapulted them across their cages, or stabbed them with spikes.⁵⁹ Females "reared" in these ways were then forcibly impregnated. Given their own upbringing they were unable, unsurprisingly, to care for the resultant offspring, and instead assaulted, maimed, and even killed their infants.⁶⁰

By current standards, many such experiments would not receive the approval of animal research ethics committees. However, the current standards still allow humans to inflict significant harm, including death, on animals. For example, toxicity tests (for both medicines and cosmetics) are performed where the intended or expected outcome is death, typically preceded by the suffering that accompanies the path to death by poisoning. Other animals are genetically engineered to experience motor neuron degeneration,⁶¹ or, like the "oncomouse,"⁶² to develop cancer. Humans also perform surgery on animals to produce experimental models of painful conditions, such as sciatica,⁶³ and they cause stroke-like symptoms in a variety of animals, including rats, rabbits, cats, dogs, and monkeys.⁶⁴ They subject animals to substances such as ethanol⁶⁵ and methamphetamine⁶⁶ and to the effects these substances have on them. Those performing such experiments receive acclaim from the majority of their fellow humans.

Even more damning of our species than cases where cruelty is inflicted as a result of indifference are cases where the cruelty is brought about for human entertainment. Consider the baiting of bulls, bears, badgers, and other animals. The baited animal is tethered to a pole and then attacked by dogs for the pleasure of human spectators. Cock-fighting, dog fighting, and bullfighting continue even today.

Other "sports" also inflict suffering and death on animals even where this is not the goal. Horses are whipped on the racetrack to entice them to run faster. They are injected with performance-enhancing drugs, often illegally. They regularly break bones while racing and are then "euthanized."⁶⁷ Some horses that are too old or weak to run are sent for slaughter. Other animals that suffer for human entertainment are those confined to zoos or made to perform in circuses.

Even those animals with whom humans have the closest emotional bonds—domestic companion animals such as dogs and cats—are not immune to ill treatment on a colossal scale. Some humans confine these animals in small spaces, beat them, and fail to exercise or feed them adequately. The permutations of cruelty are endless. For example, Henry Morton Stanley, the famous nineteenth-century explorer, cut off his dog's tail, cooked it and fed it to the dog.⁶⁸ Terrible cruelty persists in our own times. In August 2006, a woman in England attempted to drown a puppy in boiling water. The puppy survived that attempt and was then left to die, which took "possibly as long as a week."⁶⁹ In other recent cases a man killed a dog by baking it in an oven,⁷⁰ and another decapitated a cat with a machete.⁷¹ There are thousands of other such cases.

Millions of dogs and cats are abandoned each year. In the shelters to which they are sent, the overwhelming majority are killed because homes cannot be found for them.⁷² It is astounding that in the context of so many unwanted domestic animals, humans actively breed more such animals, which only exacerbates the problem. Sometimes these breeding activities are informal and small-scale. A much greater problem, however, are the so-called "puppy mills" (or "kitty mills"), which produce large numbers of animals, who are often kept in poor conditions and given inadequate attention. The aim is to maximize profits for the breeders, and scant if any attention is given to animal welfare.

The human penchant for "purebreds" also leads to animal suffering. Many such animals suffer from congenital problems that impair their ability to breathe, or that render their spines vulnerable to injury, or their hips to dysplasia,⁷³ for example. Other bizarre human aesthetic preferences lead dogs to have their tails docked or their ears cropped, often without anaesthesia. Animals are also declawed and "debarbed" for the convenience of the humans whose homes they share.

These types of human-inflicted harm on animals do not include the miscellaneous other ways in which our species spreads misery. For example, in Asia, bears are "milked" for their bile, a substance still used in traditional "medicine," even though no medicinal value has ever been demonstrated. To facilitate the harvesting of their bile, the bears are confined for the duration of their lives to "crush cages" in which they cannot stand up or move around. In these conditions their muscles atrophy and they go mad. The catheters cause pain and the wounds can become infected, often leading to death.

Even more widespread than the abuse of bears is the fur industry. Mink, foxes, rabbits, dogs, cats, and others are its victims. Many of these animals are reared on fur farms, in conditions that cause significant

suffering. They are then killed so that humans can wear their furs. Some humans seem to think that fashion is a good reason to make an animal suffer and die.

Toxic to the Environment

Some of the harm that humans cause to other humans and to animals is mediated by the destructive effect that humans have on the environment. For much of human history, the damage was local. Groups of humans fouled their immediate environment. In recent centuries the human impact has increased exponentially and the threat is now to the global environment. The increased threat is a product of two interacting factors—the exponential growth of the human population combined with significant increases in negative effects per capita. The latter is the result of industrialization and increased consumption.

The consequences include unprecedented levels of pollution. Filth is spewed in massive quantities into the air, rivers, lakes, and oceans, with obvious effects on those humans and animals who breathe the air, live in or near the water, or who get their water from those sources. The carbon dioxide emissions are having a “greenhouse effect,” leading to global warming. As a result, the icecaps are melting, water levels are rising, and climate patterns are changing. The melting icecaps are depriving some animals of their natural habitat. The rising sea levels endanger coastal communities and threaten to engulf small, low-lying island states, such as Nauru, Tuvalu, and the Maldives. Such an outcome would be an obvious harm to its citizens and other inhabitants. The depletion of the ozone layer is exposing earth’s inhabitants to greater levels of ultraviolet light. Humans are encroaching on the wild, leading to animal (and plant) extinctions. The destruction of the rain forests exacerbates the global warming problem by removing the trees that would help counter the increasing levels of carbon dioxide.

There are some people, of course, who deny that humans are having at least some of these large-scale negative effects on the environment. However, this is not the place—and I am not the person—to argue against the climate change denialists. Those who do deny that humans are having a deleterious effect on the environment may simply exclude the relevant harms. Humans are so destructive even without these harms that the second premise can easily survive their exclusion. By contrast, those who do recognize that humans are damaging the environment can simply add this to the previous list.⁷⁴

THE NORMATIVE PREMISE

We have seen that humans cause colossal amounts of suffering and death. Having demonstrated the truth of the second premise, I turn now to consider the first premise of the moral misanthropic argument for anti-natalism:

We have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing into existence new members of species that cause (and will likely continue to cause) vast amounts of pain, suffering and death.

The first thing to note about this premise is what it does not claim. It does not claim that we should *cull* members of dangerous species. Nor does it claim that we have a duty to *prevent others* from bringing new members of dangerous species into existence. The claim is a much more modest one. It says that one should oneself desist from bringing such beings into existence.

For this premise to be true it does not have to be the case that every single member of the species will cause pain, suffering and death. To see why this is so, consider another presumptive duty—the duty not to drive through red traffic lights. We have such a duty because driving through red traffic lights is dangerous, even though not every instance of such conduct results in harm.

The normative premise is neutral between whether the species in question is one’s own or another. Here it is important to note how widely the premise would be accepted if the species were *not* human. Imagine, for example, that some people bred a species of non-human animal that was as destructive (to humans and other animals) as humans actually are. There would be widespread condemnation of those who bred these animals. Or imagine that some scientists replicated, and released, a virus that caused as much suffering and death as humans cause. Again, there would be little hesitation in condemning such behavior.⁷⁵

The question, then, is whether it makes any difference whether the highly destructive species is our own. In offering an affirmative answer to this question, some people might suggest that there is something paradoxical about claiming that we have a duty to desist from bringing into existence members of a species that is harmful to itself. There is, on this view, something odd about citing the harm caused to humans by humans as a reason to desist from creating humans. In other words, the misanthropic argument seems to be in conflict with the philanthropic ones. If humans are worth protecting from harm then they are not so bad that we

should not replicate the species. And if they are as bad as the second premise of the moral misanthropic argument suggests, then we should not count the harm done to them as relevant in the first premise.

This line of argument fails. First, the harm that humans do to humans is only part of the harm humans do. We are also extremely harmful to other species. Thus, even if we could not cite the harm that humans do to other humans for the purposes of the moral misanthropic argument, the argument could still be carried on the strength of the harm that humans do to animals. This does assume, of course, that animal interests count morally. However, there are very powerful arguments for this conclusion and I shall not rehearse them here.⁷⁶

Second, it is a mistake to muddle our attitudes towards victims and our attitudes to perpetrators—even when the victims are also perpetrators. The recommendation that we should keep these attitudes separate is not uncommon. In civilized societies it is agreed that there are limits on what we may do to even the worst perpetrators, let alone lesser perpetrators. Those who torture and rape their victims before murdering them are not subjected to similar treatment by the state (at least in civilized societies). This is because the perpetrator remains morally considerable despite his perpetration and, on this view, there are limits on what we may do to morally considerable beings. The separation of attitudes is not restricted to the context of punishment. A woman may be guilty of physically assaulting her child, but that does not mean that we should be unconcerned about the physical assault her husband inflicts on her, or that we should be not be concerned about the violence he suffers at the hands of others. We should be concerned about the harm inflicted even on those who inflict harm on others. This point is even more important when greater harms are inflicted on lesser perpetrators. Thus, the philanthropic and misanthropic arguments are not incompatible. We can believe both that it would be better if humans never suffered the harms of existence and that it would be better if there were no humans to inflict harms.

Now, it may be suggested that what is odd about the moral misanthropic argument is the particular way it recommends preventing harm. It seeks to prevent harm to humans by preventing humans. This objection would have more force than it does if there were reasonable prospects of reducing human destructiveness to negligible levels fairly promptly and then ensuring that they do not rise again. If that were the case then it could be argued that instead of preventing humans we should rather reduce their destructiveness. In fact, however, we cannot expect that human destructiveness will *ever* be reduced to such levels. Human nature is too frail and the circumstances that bring out the worst in humans are

too pervasive and are likely to remain so. Even where institutions can be built to curb the worst human excesses, these institutions are always vulnerable to moral entropy. It is naïve utopianism to think that a species as destructive as ours will cease, or all but cease, to be destructive.

Am I being overly pessimistic here? After all, it has been argued that rates of violence have been steadily diminishing and are now much lower than they were in prehistoric times.⁷⁷ This trajectory does not supplant the pessimism implicit in the misanthropic argument. Insofar as violence has decreased it is only the *rate* of violence that has declined. People are now less likely to suffer violence than they were before.⁷⁸ However, the total *amount* of suffering and death that is inflicted has increased, primarily because there are now many more people to inflict harm and to suffer harm at the hands of others. Desisting from creating new humans would mean that there would be fewer humans to be harmed and thus less total harm. While rates of violence are important, the total amount of violence is at least as important a consideration in deciding whether to create new people. There would be less violence if there were fewer people.

Even if we restrict our attention to the rate of violence, the rate could still increase. Given human nature, we cannot assume that the trend towards reduced rates is inexorable. However, even if we set that concern aside, the current rates are far from negligible despite the reduction. Even if it were not naïve to think that in the very long term, human destructiveness could be reduced to negligible levels, it would still be indecent to create beings that in the interim would cause massive pain, suffering and death.

A PRESUMPTIVE DUTY

If my argument so far is correct, then we have a presumptive duty to desist from bringing new humans into existence. Can the presumption be defeated?

Those who think it can might suggest that while the destructiveness of humans does create a presumption, the presumption can be defeated because of the good that humans do. One version of this view maintains that the good is sufficiently widespread that the presumption can *regularly* (even though not always) be defeated, and I shall consider this version first.

The more regularly a presumption can be defeated, the less clear it is that the presumption really is a presumption. However, the presumption against creating new members of a species that is as destructive as ours

must surely be a strong one. Thus, those who would suggest that it is regularly defeated must bear the burden of proof and demonstrate that humanity does enough good to outweigh all the harm it does. I am not optimistic that this burden can be met.

Certainly in the case of the treatment of animals, the scales are heavily weighted against us. Although it is true that some humans do some good for animals, much of this is merely rescuing animals from the maltreatment of other humans. At the level of the human species such benefits cannot be used to offset the harms. If there were no humans to inflict the harms, these benefits would not be necessary. Of course, humans do bestow some other benefits, such as veterinary care for their companion animals. However, the number of animals affected and the amount of good done is massively outweighed by the harm the human species does to non-human animals.

Humans do bestow more benefit on other humans than they do on animals. Nevertheless, it seems clear to me that the good humans do is not sufficient to outweigh the presumption against creating new people. There may well be no definitive argument to prove this to those who think otherwise. However, there are a number of considerations that can be offered in support of my assessment. At the very least, these considerations show that those who think that the presumption is defeated cannot demonstrate that it is.

First, the benefits humans provide to other humans have to offset not only the harms done to humans but also those done to animals, and these harms are colossal. When the levels of destruction are this great, the amount of benefit one is going to have to demonstrate in order to defeat the presumption is immense. If pro-natalists think that the good humans do does indeed outweigh the terrible destruction I have described, then we need to hear some explicit details. Approximately how much good outweighs the dismemberment of a living being? How much outweighs mass rape? How much outweighs the Rwandan genocide or Joseph Stalin's purges? It is when one actually keeps the atrocities in mind rather than speaking about them abstractly as "the evil humans do" that the claim that these atrocities are outweighed is shown to be indecent.

Second, we need to understand what it means for the good to outweigh the bad. This may not be as straightforward as it sounds. For example, imagine you knew that if you conceived a child it would later, as an adult, murder somebody. How many lives would that potential person have to save during the course of his life (that would not otherwise be saved) in order to override the presumption against bringing him into existence? I doubt that that number is 2 or even anything close to that.

What this case suggests is that the notion of "good outweighing bad" is more complicated than may first appear. Now, perhaps it will be suggested that this particular case is a poor analogy for the matter at hand. Whether or not that is true, the very same point can be made about the case at hand. Thus, a species that kills n -billion humans and animals over some specified period would not redeem itself by saving n -billion + 1 lives over that same period.

Perhaps there are some utilitarians who would, in each of the cases just mentioned, assert that saving an additional life would indeed be sufficient to offset the lives taken. However, utilitarians are not committed to such a view and any form of utilitarianism that did adopt it would be a simplistic one. A more nuanced view would recognize that taking lives typically (even if not always) has worse secondary effects than failing to save lives. A murderer, for example, arouses more fear than a person who fails to save some lives that he could otherwise have saved.

Non-utilitarians would have further reason for accepting the more complicated conception of what it takes for good to outweigh bad. For them, considerations such as the violating of rights could be a moral cost that is not offset by saving a few more lives than are lost by the violation of rights. On at least some non-utilitarian views, there could be a threshold of harm beyond which no amount of benefit can compensate. If there is any such threshold then human destructiveness arguably exceeds it.

Third, some benefits will be moot in determining whether the presumption is defeated. To understand which these are, consider two intersecting distinctions:

- 1(a) benefits to those humans who already exist; and
- (b) benefits to those future people who will be brought into existence only if the presumption against creating them is defeated.
- 2(a) benefiting by preventing harm; and
- (b) benefiting by bestowing some (intrinsic) good.

At least those benefits at the intersection of 1(b) and 2(a) are moot.⁷⁹ This is because the benefits that fall in this intersection can be achieved in two ways: (1) by overriding the presumption and creating the people who will prevent the harm; and (2) by deferring to the presumption and not creating the people who will suffer the harm. Because of this, these benefits are not net benefits of creating new humans. That is to say, they are not an advantage over the situation that would result from following the presumption against creating new humans. Thus, they should not be factored into a decision whether or not the presumption is defeated.

to at least 1690 animals over the course of a lifetime.⁸⁴ This is an understimate, but it is nonetheless a lot of destruction for a single individual.

Each new person also has an impact on the environment and thereby on those sentient beings affected by environmental damage. In developed countries, the impact of each person is massive. In the United States, for example, the average person produces 28.6 tons of CO₂ emissions per year.⁸⁵ In developing countries the per capita emissions are typically lower, but they are not zero. In Bangladesh and India, the annual average emissions of CO₂ per person are, respectively, 1.1 and 1.8 tons.⁸⁶ Thus each new child contributes to environmental damage. Perhaps a pro-natalist will want to argue that we cannot expect the production of new people to have no impact on the environment and that some such impact is acceptable. However, whatever force this argument has is weakened as the number of people increases. The more people there are, the less justifiable it is to add further increments of environmental damage. Developing countries often have higher birthrates than developed ones. Individuals within such countries are going to have a difficult time justifying their repeated procreation.

Humanity is a moral disaster. There would have been much less destruction had we never evolved. The fewer humans there are in the future, the less destruction there will still be.

CONCLUSION

Anti-natalist arguments vary in the scope of their conclusions. At its most extreme an anti-natalist conclusion opposes all procreation, but milder versions oppose only select cases of procreation.

The philanthropic arguments generate an extensive conclusion. They suggest that coming into existence is always a harm. Because that harm is actually severe, it is, at least on some views, always wrong to have children. (Other views might allow some procreation as part of a plan to phase humans out of existence.⁸⁷)

The conclusion of the moral misanthropic argument is that it is presumptively wrong to have children. It is possible that this presumption could sometimes be defeated. I have argued that people will think it is defeated much more often than it actually is and that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to know when the presumption is indeed defeated. However, it remains possible that there are some circumstances in which a new human would produce sufficient good to offset the harm that that particular human would cause.

Fourth, at least under current conditions the creation of each new human or each new cohort of humans does not produce benefits at the same rate that it produces harms. Given the current size of the human population and the current levels of human consumption, each new human or cohort of humans adds incrementally to the amount of animal suffering and death and, via the environmental impact, to the amount of harm to humans (and animals). The additional harm caused by each additional human may be imperceptible but it is nonetheless an addition that, when aggregated with other imperceptible additions, becomes perceptible. However, it is not the case that the addition of every new human or cohort of humans adds benefits. Much of the good that humans do could be done by fewer rather than by more humans. Thus, even if it is not always the case that creating additional humans is a net harm, it certainly is a net harm when the human population is sufficiently large (and destructive).

For these reasons I reject the suggestion that the presumption against creating new people can *regularly* be defeated. In response, those who think that the presumption can be defeated could fall back on a less ambitious version of this view—namely, that the presumption can *occasionally* be defeated. Thus, particular potential procreators might agree that humanity is in general a very dangerous species. However, they might suggest that the odds are that their own potential offspring are much more likely to do enough good and little enough bad to defeat the presumption.⁸⁰

Depending on what we take to be “enough good and little enough bad,” this may well be true of *some* (small number of) potential people. However, we can fully expect that most potential procreators will be very poor judges of whether their potential offspring are likely to fall into this category. The optimism bias, coupled with a tendency to rationalize that the action one wants to perform will serve the greater good, will lead the vast majority of potential procreators (or at least the vast majority of those who think before procreating) to the conclusion that the presumptive duty of the misanthropic argument is defeated in their case. The overwhelming majority of them will be wrong. Those who doubt this should consider the average person’s destructive effect on, at least, animals and the environment.

We saw earlier that well in excess of 166 billion animals are killed every year for human consumption or in industries providing for this consumption. The overwhelming majority of humans on the planet are contributing to this killing and the prior suffering. With the exception of India, where a significant proportion of the population is vegetarian,⁸¹ only a very small proportion of people in other countries are either vegetarian or vegan.⁸² This suggests that, on average, each flesh eater is responsible for the deaths (and suffering) of at least twenty-seven animals per year⁸³—which amounts