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Engineering Nothingness: The Limits of Human Dignity between Anti-Natalism and Contemporary Eugenics

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Abstract:
This study explores anti-natalist philosophy and eugenics as contemporary manifestations of the reengineering of human beings and the deconstruction of human nature within the fundamental tension between human dignity, biological constraints, and sociocultural particularities. In this context, the refusal to procreate or the decision to undergo eugenic enhancement ceases to be a purely personal choice. Instead, it becomes an ethical and political instrument that reshapes the individual according to external criteria. The study further undertakes a philosophical deconstruction of the ideological dimensions underpinning these currents. It interrogates the universalist claims of bioethics, highlighting the risks posed to individual freedom and anthropological diversity. From this perspective, anti-natalism and eugenics emerge as arenas of conflict among ethics, politics, and science, in which the limits of control over human life are tested, and the question arises of whether the human being may still be defended as an autonomous agent in the face of attempts at fragmentation and reconfiguration.
Keywords: Anti-natalism; Eugenics; Human Nature; Bioethics.

1. Introduction

Anti-natalist philosophy (Antinatalisme) constitutes one of the subtle forms of contemporary eugenics, insofar as it is grounded in presuppositions and prior conceptions regarding procreation as an immoral act. Its proponents call for abstention from having children, justifying this position because bringing a new being into a world replete with tragedies, suffering, wars, and famines is an irrational act whose harms outweigh its benefits. Anti-

natalists propose adoption in place of procreation, arguing that the genuine means of eliminating suffering are not to exist in the first place. However, despite its apparent humanitarian ethical stance, anti-natalism today intersects with the project of contemporary eugenics, which seeks to reshape the human being at both the biological and social levels through prior conceptions of what is deemed 'fitter' or 'better'. In this context, a fundamental problem emerges: How can philosophy, as critical reflection, balance the right to existence, human dignity, and individual autonomy, on the one hand, with attempts to reshape the human being according to preconceived notions of perfection and moral values, on the other hand?

2. Abstention as the Principle of Anti-Natalism and the Logic of the Negation of Existence

Anti-natalist philosophy is founded upon a radical pessimistic outlook toward life, drawing inspiration from several philosophers, including Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Emil Cioran (1911–1995), David Benatar (1966–), Théophile de Giraud (1968–), Christine Overall (1949–), and others. The idea of anti-natalism is not a novel thesis in human thought; rather, it traces its origins to ancient times across numerous civilisations. For example, in his philosophy, the Buddha called for the avoidance of all forms of suffering through the renunciation of their causes, which led him to abandon his married life and depart from his palace in search of epistemic paths capable of answering his ontological questions concerning suffering: Why do we suffer? What is the nature of suffering? Can it be brought to an end? What is the path to liberation from it? These questions constituted the initial seeds that paved the way for the formation of the intellectual structure of anti-natalism.

In Greek civilisation, the idea is also present in the figure of Achilles, who preferred to remain unmarried in the hope of immortalising his name, following in this respect the example of the Greek goddess Athena. Similarly, in Arab culture during the Abbasid era, another example is Abu al-ʿAlaʾ al-Maʿarri (973–1057), who lived a celibate life and refused marriage. Upon his death, the following phrase was inscribed upon his grave: 'This is what my father has inflicted upon me, and I have inflicted it upon no one', a clear indication of his existential stance towards existence itself.

From a cultural and social perspective, the idea of anti-natalism, albeit in an implicit manner, appears in several practices, such as the widespread use of contraception, the request to marry an infertile woman if a wife has died and left children to avoid inheritance disputes, and the growing reluctance to marry in recent periods, in addition to other manifestations reflecting the social and cultural stance toward the issue of procreation. In this context, the South African philosopher David Benatar (1966–) wrote in his book *Better Never to Have Been*, in which he presented the most prominent arguments for anti-natalism, maintaining that life is not worth all this trouble and that the act of bringing children into existence constitutes an unjustifiable wrongdoing. He states that ‘Coming into existence is always a

serious harm, and procreation is always wrong' (Benatar, 2013). For him, life is of a tragic nature, and the optimistic view towards it is merely a deception invented by human beings to conceal the bleak reality in which they live. He argued that anti-natalism realises two principal benefits: first, granting happiness to children by not bringing them into existence in the first place, thereby avoiding future misery that would affect both parents and children alike; and second, conferring a degree of reassurance upon the present generation by alleviating tension and anxiety regarding the future, particularly in a world characterised by a disparity in resources and an increase in human competition. Hence, Benatar considers the philosophical question 'Why do we have children?' to be one of the unexamined questions that rarely occur to the mind. When such a question is posed to parents, they experience confusion and astonishment, offering stereotypical justifications such as 'to populate the earth', 'to ensure the continuation of the lineage', or 'to carry the family name', among other responses that advocate anti-natalism, which is regarded as unconvincing and lacking a solid rational foundation.

Anti-natalists maintain that these justifications are untenable and that it is unjust to bring children into a world in which they will find themselves confronted with the rapid depletion of natural resources, given the range of risks associated with famines, environmental pollution, disease, and overpopulation. In this regard, they refer to demographic projections indicating that the world's population may reach approximately 11 billion by the year 2100, as for the question 'Why do we have children? ', its absence from collective consciousness according to advocates of anti-natalism is attributed to the dominance of the traditional narrative concerning the value of the family and the role of children, in addition to the influence of religious beliefs that encourage procreation and reproduction, as well as social and cultural customs that regard childlessness as an indication of marital failure or as a challenge to a woman's function as a mother, particularly within conservative social contexts.

The philosopher Christine Overall (1949–), in her book *Why Have Children?* (Overall, 2012, p. 15), offered a critical analysis of the beliefs of parents who reject the idea of refraining from procreation because, had children not been born, they would be deprived of the pleasures of life, such as play, friendship, sex, love, and other existential experiences. Overall, it responds to this claim by arguing that nonexistent beings possess no moral value and cannot experience loss or deprivation, since existence is a precondition for any value or experience. She further maintains that 'procreating merely for the sake of having children in an endless process appears to be a Sisyphean undertaking lacking a clear foundation and value' (Overall, 2012, p. 205). On this basis, the debate between bioethics and anti-natalist philosophy becomes apparent. Whereas anti-natalists contend that parents have no right to determine the fate of their children by bringing them into life without consulting them or granting them the opportunity to consent to existence, bioethics, by contrast, holds that abstaining from procreation on the basis of a comprehensive principled stance constitutes a

violation of the principle of individual autonomy, since deciding that children should not exist is likewise a decision taken by parents on their behalf. Thus, both parties seek to represent the interests of the hypothetical child; however, their disagreement lies in their interpretation of the nature of that interest: is it realised through existence or through nonexistence?

Advocates of anti-natalism justify their position by maintaining that abstention from procreation represents, first and foremost, a bioethical solution, as it spares future generations from entering into a series of forthcoming biomedical crises whose future gravity remains unknown. In this context, they affirm that 'the risks of overpopulation and planetary deterioration require us to exercise particular caution regarding the bringing of more children into the world' (Overall, 2012, p. 204). The arguments of anti-natalists may appear, to some extent, logical to those who adopt a pessimistic view of life, especially if one considers the perspective of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer on procreation, according to whom sexual impulses constitute its true motive. At the same time, love is merely a beautiful illusion that helps us accept the suffering inherent in existence. Even from a cultural and social standpoint, it may be argued that certain elements within Arab society implicitly support some anti-natalist theses. However, the idea is not openly declared owing to religious and social constraints. For example, expressions of resentment by some spouses in the event of an unplanned pregnancy, or instances in which parents reject the birth of a girl, may be regarded as forms of undeclared anti-natalism, insofar as they entail the rejection of the existence of a particular child. Similarly, abstention from marriage for the sake of devotion to scholarship or worship, as was the case with Islamic scholars such as Imam al-Nawawi, Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah, and al-Tabari, among others, represents a tendency that addresses the issue of procreation indirectly, even if not grounded in an explicit philosophical rationale such as that advanced by contemporary anti-natalists.

3. Anti-Natalist Philosophy as a New Face of Eugenics

Nevertheless, the real problem does not lie in antinatalism as a personal decision made by spouses between themselves; this remains an individual matter that, at a minimum, does not conflict with the principles of personal freedom. The genuine danger emerges when anti-natalist philosophy becomes a conceptual façade for negative eugenics, albeit in a softer form and under a more humanitarian appearance. It conceals itself behind a discourse that claims to protect humanity and safeguard its future. Moreover, at its core, it contains latent ideologies related to human selection and attempts to restructure the family or even eliminate it through means that appear legitimate and humanitarian. These means consist of a set of phenomena reinterpreted within this discourse, such as the encouragement of homosexuality as an alternative to the traditional procreative family, currents of transhumanism, pandemic warfare, and other mechanisms that, according to this view, contribute to the achievement of what is referred to as the “golden billion”. In this context, the Voluntary Human Extinction

Movement (VHEMT) (2024) is a clear example of this orientation, linking anti-natalism to a broader project aimed at reducing the number of human beings under environmental, health, and ethical pretexts.

The question of preserving human life has long been a central concern of philosophy. The concept of life has not been reduced to its purely biological dimension; rather, it has extended to encompass the various dimensions of human existence, embodied in the pursuit of good life as a form of harmony between the human being and the world. Life is not merely organic continuity but an existential project within which values, ethics, and meanings intersect and through which the human being's relationship with the self and with the surrounding universe is formed.

However, with the emergence of contemporary bioethical practices such as euthanasia, eugenics, and other practices that are too numerous to enumerate here, a fundamental tension becomes apparent between ethical claims and practical application. The human subject has been transformed from a free and active being possessing its own will into a mere object subjected to control and reshaping in accordance with external standards that diverge from human nature. This has occurred through the adoption of visions and orientations that present themselves as universal norms while clearly disregarding all forms of human particularity and the cultural, social, and environmental diversity that characterise human societies. Here, a central question arises: How can these alleged universal standards be reconciled with the depth of cultural diversity that characterises human nature from an anthropological perspective? If the human being is the product of history, individual experience, and sociocultural particularities, what are the consequences of these coercive practices that seek to reshape humanity according to predetermined measures? Can such practices affect the essence and uniqueness of the human being, that uniqueness which confers humanity in the first place? From another, more problematic angle, an equally important question arises: Since when have human genes become an expression of human identity? Can human existence be reduced to a purely biological datum?

Through these problems, philosophy, confronted by the challenges of contemporary bioethics, is compelled to reconsider the complex structure linking science, ethics, and politics to preserve the humanity of the human being as an onto-ethical end that is not reducible to the question of essence but transcends it toward the defense of the very core of human existence. With the rise of globalising and universalist tendencies inclined towards the unification of standards and the effacement of differences, the danger lies in the instrumentalisation of bioethics as a tool for normalising the human being in accordance with globalised consumerist or technological measures, operating in the name of progress and the global human while weakening individual and cultural identities, striking at the very foundation of the family and emptying the human being of historical and symbolic particularity.

In this context, the task of philosophy is not confined to undertaking a critical review of dominant discourses; it extends to restoring the human being as an active subject capable of resisting new forms of moral engineering practised under the aegis of globalisation, which are not devoid of ideological content seeking to reshape the human being according to an economic or capitalist logic that reduces human value to that of a resource subject to regulation and utilisation. Thus, from a critical philosophical perspective, bioethics appears as a field within which multiple visions concerning the meaning of life, dignity, the body, and identity contend. This struggle reveals that the defence of the human being cannot be achieved without recognition of anthropological plurality and of the cultural and lived roots that cannot be erased or transcended under the pretext of neutral universal standards. At the same time, in their depths, they embody a logic centred upon a single model of the human being.

4. Eugenics and the Idea of Human Selection

After failing to exercise complete control over nature, the human being turned to controlling humanity itself, seeking to subject it to the logic of organisation and selection. In this context, it is not surprising that Francis Galton (1822–1911), the founder of eugenics, declared in his well-known statement, 'What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly' (Musa, p. 180), in a clear indication of the possibility of human intervention to correct what is perceived as defects in nature through mechanisms of human selection. Galton explicitly expressed the necessity of 'improving the human race by breeding from the strongest or those most fit genetically, such as geniuses, writers, and scientists, and sterilising the weak who are feared to transmit undesirable hereditary traits to their offspring. He even called for the killing of children born with such undesirable traits because they spread within society' (Musa, p. 181). On the basis of this vision, numerous countries implemented compulsory sterilisation programmes affecting tens of thousands of individuals classified as undesirable, whereby the human being was transformed into a material subject to biological sorting according to criteria resembling market laws: the fittest remains, and the weaker are excluded. Thus, the relationship between ethics and science was inverted, and the human being became a mere biological commodity governed by the logic of production and enhancement.

Eugenics developed along two principal trajectories, which formed the theoretical and practical framework for advocates of racial improvement. The first trajectory is positive eugenics, which aims to encourage the reproduction of individuals deemed to possess desirable traits, such as high intellectual ability, a strong physical constitution, good health, and good fertility. Proponents of this approach sought to create what they considered favourable births on the basis of an ideal conception of the human being and the capacity to attain a degree of biological perfection. The second trajectory is negative eugenics, which seeks to prevent the reproduction of those believed to carry undesirable hereditary traits,

such as certain physical disabilities, mental disorders, and genetic diseases (Sara, 2022). This prevention is achieved through coercive or quasicoercive mechanisms, most notably sterilisation and segregation, or restrictions on marriage and procreation, under the pretext of protecting society from the transmission of such traits to subsequent generations.

In principle, the positive aspects of eugenics may appear acceptable to some, as they accord with the innate human inclination to improve life and strive for beauty, health, and perfection. It may even be argued that this orientation resonates with certain religious and cultural traditions. For example, within the Islamic heritage, there is support for the idea of choosing an appropriate spouse, as the Prophet ﷺ advised a suitor to look at the woman he intended to marry, since this would be more conducive to harmony between them, reflecting a concern for the quality of family life and human concord. Nevertheless, this apparent acceptance of the positive aspect does not negate the fact that eugenics, in both its positive and negative forms, carry within its essence the danger of reducing the human being to a biological object subject to classification and selection, thereby threatening the principles of human dignity and cultural and existential diversity.

The true locus of the problem, however, emerges in negative eugenics. This form raises profound concerns regarding the capacity of human beings to transform into a sovereign power controlling the destinies of others, possessing the authority to grant life or impose death in a manner that reproduces dangerous patterns of biological domination. Modern history has witnessed explicit applications of this orientation, as 'the United States of America and other Western states enacted eugenic laws permitting the state forcibly to sterilise those deemed feeble-minded, while encouraging individuals with desirable traits to produce as many children as possible' (Francis, 2006, p. 112). This pattern of control recalls the population engineering proposed by Plato in the *Republic*, when he divided society into three classes, rulers, warriors, and producers, on the basis of improving the stock of the ruling and guardian classes to ensure the purity of traits appropriate to each function within the ideal state. This orientation also refers to Malthusianism, which posited that population growth accelerates beyond the capacity of food resources to keep pace, thereby foreshadowing crises of famine, epidemics, and struggles for survival, leading some later thinkers to invoke this theory to justify policies of population control and the restriction of reproduction.

In addition to the issue of the nationalisation of eugenics, that is, its transformation into a state project whereby it shifts from a philosophical idea into a political measure through which states justify unethical practices, such as wars and genocides, including those committed during the Nazi wars and, more recently, the genocide of the Palestinian people. However, in view of the tragedies resulting from the implementation of eugenic policies, these practices were halted following the genocidal wars and forced sterilisation programmes. ‘Whereas old eugenics required the continual selection of the fit for breeding and the exclusion of the unfit, the new eugenics will, in principle, allow for the

transformation of all the unfit to the highest genetic levels' (Francis, 2006, p. 115), as a means of improving the public image of eugenics.

Despite all the developments and justifications advanced in its favour, eugenics continues to provoke numerous ethical and social crises, most notably the issue of abortion, in which eugenics has played a prominent role, to the extent that the lives of fetuses are treated as lacking intrinsic value so long as there exists the possibility of modifying or enhancing any aspect of their biological constitution. From this perspective, eugenics may be regarded as an embodiment of human selection closely resembling Darwin's principle of natural selection, with the fundamental difference that conscious human intervention accelerates and directs this selection in accordance with specific social and cultural standards.

5. Anti-Natalism and Eugenics: The Deconstruction of Human Nature

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1929–) speaks of human nature as follows: 'It is not a property that we possess, such as innate intelligence or having blue eyes; rather, it refers to that which is inviolable, which can have meaning only within relationships among persons who recognise one another within a framework of reciprocal and equal interaction' (Habermas, 2006, p. 44). By this, Habermas means that human nature represents a fundamental value that is inviolable and must remain beyond the sphere of public dispute and political debate. He further maintains that the pursuit of human enhancement or biological perfection at the expense of spiritual and social integrity is nothing but an illusion endlessly pursued by humankind. Therefore, Habermas warns of the dangers of manipulating the human genome, which may lead to a widening gap between what is natural and what is manufactured (Habermas, 2006, p. 55). Moreover, such practices do not merely corrupt human nature biologically; they also inflict social harm by establishing relationships grounded in inequality and discrimination rather than in justice and equality.

Although the state in Western societies intervenes in supporting disadvantaged groups by providing scholarships and free education and healthcare to mitigate social disparities and reduce inequality among individuals, eugenics seeks to transcend this natural disparity among human beings. It is founded upon the belief that the human being can ascend to a condition of intelligence, strength, and beauty through reliance upon techno-medical means to modify and enhance biological traits.

In contrast, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) affirms that inequality among human beings is natural, including differences between the nondisabled and people with disabilities, between the beautiful and the unattractive, and between individuals with other traits. Rousseau adds, 'There is a very specific quality that distinguishes them and cannot be contested, namely, the faculty of self-perfection (la faculté de se perfectionner), a faculty which, if assisted by favourable circumstances, subsequently develops all the other faculties' (Rousseau, 2009, p. 84). In other words, the human being is distinguished from other creatures by the capacity for continual improvement, whether at the

individual or collective level, provided that favourable conditions are available for the exercise of this faculty. On this basis, Rousseau accords significant importance to natural inequality among human beings in terms of capacities and inherited traits. However, certain advocates of genetic determinism (déterminisme génétique) maintain that inequality among individuals is fundamentally attributable to the genetic dimension. This debate is clearly reflected in contemporary issues such as homosexuality, where discussion centres upon the extent to which genes, as opposed to moral and social factors, shape human identity and behaviour.

Homosexuality may be cited as a contemporary applied example within the broader field of eugenics, particularly regarding the genetic dimension. In this context, Francis Fukuyama addresses the ongoing conflict between the political left and right in the United States concerning homosexuality, asking whether it is attributable to genetic inheritance or whether it is merely a moral inclination and behavioural deviation. Notably, the debate surrounding this issue has not remained confined to the moral dimension; it has extended to the political sphere, which has exhibited fluctuations in its decisions regarding the judgment of homosexuality and the regulation of its legal status. As Fukuyama states, 'The left strongly opposes biological explanations and seeks to downplay any evidence that heredity significantly influences any of these behaviours. With respect to homosexuality, however, the left has adopted the opposite position, maintaining that sexual orientation is not a matter of personal choice or social adaptation but rather something with which the individual is born (Fukuyama, 2006, p. 54). Thus, it appears that, in the context of homosexuality, the political left adopts a dual standard whereby homosexuality is justified through a biomedical framework to facilitate its social acceptance, particularly within Western societies that revere science and regard it as the primary authority for explaining any natural or social phenomenon.

For this reason, advocates of homosexuality adopt what contemporary biology offers, insofar as it serves their political project, which extends beyond mere sexual desire toward the formulation of a new social conception of human nature and the future structure of the family, drawing upon the universal principles provided by bioethics, such as individual autonomy and freedom. In addition, contemporary biotechnology now claims the capacity to resolve most human problems, whether in relation to reproduction through embryo banks or to sex transition. Francis Fukuyama points to a difficulty confronting right-wing currents that regard homosexuality as a behavioural and moral deviation, posing the following question: if certain traits, such as intelligence or talent, are accepted, why should a genetically inherited sexual orientation not likewise be accepted? Moreover, some genetic traits may be modified behaviourally, as in the case of left-handedness. Fukuyama proposes a middle solution through genetic modification by introducing testosterone into the mother's womb in cases where precise medical examination reveals that the foetus is male yet carries female genes to prevent the birth of a genetically homosexual child (Fukuyama, 2006, pp. 57–58). However,

this issue transcends mere genetic or behavioural modification; it represents the new face of contemporary eugenics, which seeks to reshape human nature through cognitive mechanisms presented as care and preservation of human dignity, while reality reflects biologically and socially mediated control, ethically disguised, concealing motives of domination and the reengineering of the human being.

6. Conclusion

Anti-natalist philosophy and contemporary eugenics appear as two facets of a project that transcends reflection upon the human being as a living entity, rendering it instead the object of axiological, biological, and social reengineering. Whereas anti-natalism calls for abstention from procreation as a means of alleviating suffering, eugenics seeks to control human traits according to preconceived notions of robustness and perfection, thereby placing the human being before a paradox centred upon how to preserve human dignity and uniqueness. Moreover, tendencies proliferate such that the person is reduced to a mere object of modification and enhancement. The ethical dilemmas posed by these philosophies concern not only the human right to existence or to genetic constitution but also the ability of philosophy and bioethics to protect humans from technological and political exploitation, which may undermine fundamental values. From this perspective, the defence of human beings and human dignity constitutes a fundamental philosophical and ethical challenge, requiring a rethinking of the relationships among individual freedom, moral values, and universal standards, as well as the recognition of cultural diversity and human particularity. The impasse presented by anti-natalism and eugenics thus serves as a test of philosophy's efficacy in confronting the problems of the modern age, in which it must restore the human being to the centre of concern as a free and active subject capable of resisting contemporary forms of moral and social engineering.

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