

WHAT IS ANTINATALISM?  
AND OTHER ESSAYS

Second Edition

*Masahiro Morioka*

**Tokyo Philosophy Project**

# What Is Antinatalism? And Other Essays

Philosophy of Life in Contemporary Society

Second Edition

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What Is Antinatalism? And Other Essays: Philosophy of Life in  
Contemporary Society, Second Edition

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## PREFACE

This book is a collection of essays on the philosophy of life's meaning in contemporary society. Topics range from antinatalism, the meaning of life, and the trolley problem to painless civilization. I am now writing a comprehensive philosophy book on these topics, but it will take several years to complete. I have therefore decided to make an easily accessible book to provide readers with an outline of the philosophical approaches to the meaning of life that I have in mind.

Chapter One discusses the definition, history, and category of antinatalism. Antinatalism is the thought that all human beings or all sentient beings should not be born. Although I am not an antinatalist, I believe that antinatalism poses an important question about procreation and the meaning of our lives. This is why I present an overview of past and present antinatalistic thought and perform an analytical examination of its arguments.

In Chapter Two, I take up Philosopher Thaddeus Metz's argument on meaning in life, especially his fundamentality theory, and claim that "the heart of meaning in life," which is a concept I propose in this chapter, cannot be compared with anything whatsoever.

Chapter Three deals with the concept of "birth affirmation," which means my being able to say "yes" to

having been born. I believe that birth affirmation is one of the most promising ideas that can contribute to contemporary philosophical discussions on meaning in life, and I call this approach “an affirmation-based approach to meaning in life.” The concept of birth affirmation has two dimensions: the psychological dimension and the philosophical dimension. I would like to show in this chapter that it is difficult to clarify what it actually means to say “yes” to my having been born.

Chapter Four discusses the relationship between the dropping of atomic bombs and the trolley problem. I argue that the dropping of atomic bombs was a typical example of events that contain the logic of the trolley problem in both their decision-making processes and justifications. I further argue that the trolley problem has its own unique problems, which I call “the problem of the trolley problem.” This problem has been overlooked in academic discussions of the trolley problem. I also discuss the religious aspect of this problem.

In Chapter Five, I talk about the “philosophy of life” as an academic discipline. We have the philosophy of language, the philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of history, but why don’t we have the philosophy of life in the field of philosophy? Of course, we have *Lebensphilosophie*, but it covers neither philosophical discourse in the ancient world nor current analytical approaches to the concepts of life and death. A new research field is required to advance contemporary philosophy.

In Chapter Six, I sketch an outline of my “painless civilization” theory, a criticism of contemporary civilization that deprives us of the joy of life in exchange for eliminating pain and suffering. I also discuss the concept of the

“fundamental sense of security,” which is indispensable for us to be able to live a life without regret.

The essays in this volume were written in English between 2005 and 2021. I hope you enjoy the philosophical discussions in the following chapters. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my colleagues, friends, and family.

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## **PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION**

The first edition of this book has been widely downloaded from the Internet and Amazon webstores. I have added two chapters, Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight, and corrected grammatical errors and inappropriate usages found in the first edition. I would like to thank Robert Chapeskie for his professional editing. I hope readers will enjoy the updated edition of the book.

January 15, 2024  
Masahiro Morioka

## Bibliographic information about each chapter

### Chapter One

Masahiro Morioka, "What Is Antinatalism?: Definition, History, and Categories." *The Review of Life Studies* Vol.12 (May 2021):1-39.

### Chapter Two

Masahiro Morioka, "Is Meaning in Life Comparable?: From the Viewpoint of 'The Heart of Meaning in Life'." *Journal of Philosophy of Life* Vol.5, No.3 (October 2015):50-65.

### Chapter Three

Masahiro Morioka, "What Is Birth Affirmation?: The Meaning of Saying 'Yes' to Having Been Born." *Journal of Philosophy of Life* Vol.11, No.1 (June 2021):43-59.

### Chapter Four

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### Chapter Six

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### Chapter Seven

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# CHAPTER ONE

## What Is Antinatalism?

### Definition, History, and Categories

#### 1. Introduction

The concept of antinatalism is now becoming popular on the Internet. Many online newspaper articles deal with this topic, and numerous academic papers on antinatalism have been published over the past ten years in the fields of philosophy and ethics.<sup>1</sup> The word “antinatalism” was first used with its current meaning in 2006, when two books that justify the universal negation of procreation were published: one by David Benatar and the other by Théophile de Giraud. However, we can find various prototypes of antinatalistic

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Jonathan Griffin “Anti-natalists: The People Who Want You to Stop Having Babies.” *BBC*, August 13, 2019

<https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-49298720>; Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow “I wish I’d Never Been Born: The Rise of the Anti-natalists.” *The Guardian*, November 14, 2019

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/14/anti-natalists-childfree-population-climate-change>; Cory Stieg, “Antinatalism: The Popular Reddit Movement to Stop Procreation.” *Refinery29*, August 15, 2019

<https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/08/239978/what-is-antinatalism-childfree-movement-reddit>; Joshua Rothman “The Case for

Not Being Born.” *The New Yorker*, November 27, 2017

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-case-for-not-being-born>.

thought in ancient Greece, ancient India, and modern Europe. The name Schopenhauer may come to mind.

In this section, I briefly summarize the history of antinatalistic thought and propose a set of categories for antinatalism and related ideas. In October 2020, I published a Japanese book entitled *Is It Better Never to Have Been Born?*,<sup>2</sup> in which I delved into the philosophies of the Upanishads, ancient Buddhism, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Cioran, and Benatar from the perspective of contemporary antinatalism. Before proceeding with my discussion of this topic, I would like to say that I am not an antinatalist, but I am not a pronatalist either. As a philosopher, I have been searching for the possibility of “birth affirmation,” but birth affirmation does not necessarily mean the negation of antinatalism. I will discuss this again in Section 3.

From a linguistic point of view, the root word “natal” in “antinatalism” comes from the Latin word *nātālis*, the original meaning of which is “of or relating to birth.”<sup>3</sup> According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, “natal” is an adjective that means “relating to the place where or the time when someone was born.” This shows that the literal meaning of “antinatalism” is the negation of being born.

Taking this into consideration, I would like to define antinatalism as follows:

### *The Definition of Antinatalism*

Antinatalism is the view that all human beings or all sentient beings should not be born.

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<sup>2</sup> Morioka (2020). This is the book I introduced when I was interviewed by the Exploring Antinatalism Podcast in February 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *Cassell’s Latin Dictionary*.

This definition has two implications: one is that looking toward the past, we can say that all human beings or all sentient beings should not have been born, and the other is that looking toward the future, we can say that we should not give birth to children. (Sometimes the latter implication includes the negation of the procreation of some or all sentient animals). I want to call the former idea “birth negation” and the latter idea “procreation negation.”

Here, let us take a brief look at the definitions of antinatalism appearing in recent academic papers. Christopher Belshaw (2012) defines antinatalism as “the view that it’s better never to have been born and hence that procreation is wrong.”<sup>4</sup> Belshaw’s definition is similar to mine, which refers to both birth negation and procreation negation. J. Robbert Zandbergen’s (2020) definition is as follows: “Antinatalism is the conviction that human existence is not intrinsically more valuable than nonexistence. This incongruence at the heart of human reality may further inspire the conviction that human reproduction must be brought to an absolute halt.”<sup>5</sup> Zandbergen also describes the two aspects of antinatalism in a slightly different way. Blake Hereth and Anthony Ferrucci (2021) define it as follows: “Anti-natalism is the view that it is morally impermissible to bring a child into existence. Anti-natalism is a moral position concerning prospective procreation. As such, it is a moral thesis against procreation for the purposes of bringing new humans into existence.”<sup>6</sup> They interpret antinatalism with a

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<sup>4</sup> Belshaw (2012), p. 117.

<sup>5</sup> Zandbergen (2020), online version.

<sup>6</sup> Hereth and Ferrucci (2021), p. 14.

special emphasis on procreation negation. In the same vein, Faith L. Brown and Lucas A. Keefer (2020) define it more simply: “Anti-natalism is the ethical view that it is morally wrong for people to reproduce.”<sup>7</sup> None of these four definitions mention the reproduction of sentient beings, which is a major theme of antinatalism among today’s grassroots antinatalists.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the Facebook group “Antinatalism,” which is one of the oldest networking sites for grassroots antinatalists, defines antinatalism as follows: “Anti-natalism (or antinatalism) is a philosophical position that assigns a negative value to birth.” Their definition seems to incorporate birth negation, procreation negation, and sentient beings’ coming into existence.<sup>9</sup> The entry for “antinatalism” in the April 2021 edition of English Wikipedia states, “Antinatalism, or anti-natalism, is the ethical view that negatively values coming into existence and procreation, and judges procreation as morally wrong.”<sup>10</sup>

As is evident from the above, there is no single, universal definition of antinatalism so far. By turning our eyes to the history of ideas and tracing the formation process of antinatalistic thoughts, we can shed new light on the concept of antinatalism.

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<sup>7</sup> Brown and Keefer (2020), p. 284.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, the authors of the papers mention the lives of sentient animals, but the point here is the fact that they did not include the words “sentient beings” in their definitions.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/antinatalism/> (Accessed April 26, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antinatalism> (Accessed April 26, 2021).

## 2. A Brief History of Antinatalistic Thought

The idea of birth negation existed in ancient Greece. It has since influenced European literature and philosophy up to the present day. The idea of procreation negation appeared in the 20th century. In addition to the above two negations, there was a third type — “reincarnation negation” — found in ancient India. Theravāda Buddhist practitioners are pursuing this kind of negation even today.

Kateřina Lochmanova and Karim Akerma call antinatalistic thought that existed before the 20th century an “antinatalistic spirit” or “proto-antinatalism.”<sup>11</sup> I want to enlarge the concept of proto-antinatalism to include ancient India’s reincarnation negation. And I want to call the idea of the universal negation of procreation that emerged in the 20th century “anti-procreationism.”

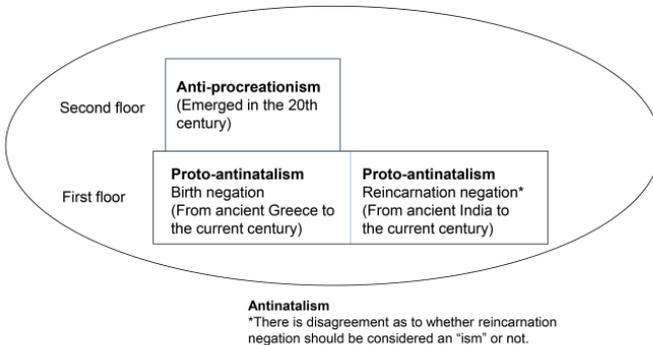


Figure 1

<sup>11</sup> Lochmanova (2020), p. 38; Akerma (2020), pp. 126, 130.

As you can see in Figure 1, antinatalism is composed of three categories of antinatalistic thought: 1) proto-antinatalism as birth negation on the first floor, 2) proto-antinatalism as reincarnation negation on the first floor, and 3) anti-procreationism on the second floor. The reason the second floor is on top of the proto-antinatalism as birth negation is that while birth negation is frequently mentioned in the discourse on anti-procreationism (e.g., Benatar’s book), reincarnation negation is hardly discussed there.<sup>12</sup>

Let us examine these three categories one by one.

### 1) *Proto-antinatalism as birth negation*

This is an antinatalism that emerged in ancient Greece. Theognis, Sophocles, and many others wrote poems and plays about the idea that “the best thing is not to be born, and the next best thing is to return quickly to where we came from.”

For example, Sophocles writes in his *Oedipus at Colonus* as follows.

Never to be born is the best story.  
But when one has come to the light of day  
second-best is to leave and go back  
quick as you can back where you came from.<sup>13</sup>

This is a combination of the negation of human birth and the affirmation of human death. Please note that what Sophocles

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<sup>12</sup> In this sense, Coates (2014) is a rare exception.

<sup>13</sup> Sophocles (2005), lines 1347-1350, p. 84.

argues above is a *universal* negation of coming into existence, not just personal regret at having been born. A similar passage can be found in Theognis's *Elegeia* 425-428. These authors compare humans being born with humans not being born and conclude that not being born is better than being born. The idea of birth negation was prevalent around the Mediterranean region at that time. We can see an example of this influence in the Book of Ecclesiastes (Cohemoth) in the Old Testament.

And I thought the dead, who have already died,  
more fortunate than the living, who are still alive;  
but better than both is the one who has not yet been,  
and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the  
sun.<sup>14</sup>

Similar ideas are also found in the Gnostic scriptures. These ideas sometimes accompany a somewhat personal lamenting that "it would have been better never to have been born." We can find an example of such an expression in Goethe's *Faust*, Book One. The rejuvenated Faust visits his girlfriend Gretchen, and he discovers that she has gone insane. Faust cries in despair.

I wish I had never been born! (*O, wär' ich nie  
geboren!*)<sup>15</sup>

This is the most moving part of Book One of *Faust*.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 4:2-3. Coogan et al. (2010), p. 940. It is said that the author of *Ecclesiastes* must have read Theognis.

<sup>15</sup> Goethe (1797), line 4596.

The Greek type of birth negation further influenced Schopenhauer, Cioran, Benatar, and other antinatalists in the present day. For instance, Schopenhauer writes that the most important truth is the recognition that “it would have been better if we had never existed (*Wir besser nicht dawären*).”<sup>16</sup> Cioran writes, “Not coming into existence is, no doubt, the best possible formula (*Ne pas naître est sans contredit la meilleure formule qui soit*).”<sup>17</sup> Schopenhauer and Cioran make universal statements concerning birth negation.

At the same time, a personalized expression of birth negation is widely seen in contemporary society. We sometimes encounter the lament of birth negation in current literature, comics, and popular music. (Remember UK rock band Queen’s lyrics in *Bohemian Rhapsody*: “Mama, ooh, I don’t want to die, I sometimes wish I’d never been born at all”). It is still vividly alive today.

I think that a *universal negation* of birth (“Never to be born is the best story”) and a *personalized lamenting* of birth (“I wish I had never been born!”) should be theoretically separated from each other, although they are actually closely connected. While the former is an authentic proto-antinatalism, the latter is not considered an authentic proto-antinatalism because it talks only about the speaker’s personal inner lamentations. The latter should rather be considered fertile soil that helps the former to flourish.

The combination of a universal negation of birth and a personalized lamenting of birth sometimes creates attitudes of looking at life and the world from a negative and pessimistic

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<sup>16</sup> Schopenhauer (1844), Bd. 2, Kapitel 48.

<sup>17</sup> Cioran (1973), p. 243.

perspective. Benatar's "pragmatic pessimism" is one such approach. He recommends we "embrace the pessimistic view, but navigate its currents in one's life." He says, "It is possible to be an unequivocal pessimist but not dwell on these thoughts all the time."<sup>18</sup> We may call such an attitude a proto-antinatalistic way of living.

Lochmanová offers a slightly different interpretation of the Greek type of birth negation. She writes that "the ancient antinatalistic reflections should be marked as rather passive, since neither of those lamentations result in a proposal for a concrete solution."<sup>19</sup> She is correct in saying that the ancient Greeks did not reach a pragmatic proposal for preventing procreation. She calls this type of birth negation antinatalism "in the broader sense" and distinguishes it from "narrow-sense antinatalism," whose central theme is "the idea of extinction of mankind."<sup>20</sup>

## 2) *Proto-antinatalism as reincarnation negation*

This is an antinatalism found mainly in ancient India. It is a negation of the re-birth of a person after death. The ancient Indians believed that after death, the human self (*atman*, *attan*) or the five *skandhas* reincarnate into other sentient beings (including humans) and that this reincarnation continues endlessly. This means that life with suffering continues forever. To avoid this, ancient Buddhists attempted to attain *nirvana* through various practices. When a state of *nirvana* is reached in this human world, a person's

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<sup>18</sup> Benatar (2017), pp. 210-211.

<sup>19</sup> Lochmanová (2020), p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> Lochmanová (2020), p. 112.

*samsara* ceases, and he or she will not be born again into any world.

The *Sutta Nipāta* describes a Buddhist practitioner's reaching a state of *nirvana* as follows:

Rebirth had been ended: a noble life had been led: what was to be done had been done and there was nothing else to be done in this earthly existence: Sundarika-Bhāradvāja had become one of the arahants.<sup>21</sup>

This is a unique type of antinatalism because the practitioner practices it in the hope that he or she will not be born into any world in the future. Not only in ancient times but also today, this is the unchanging goal of Theravāda Buddhist practitioners. According to ancient Buddhism, all births are births into the world of suffering; hence, coming into existence must be evaluated negatively. If we focus on this aspect, we can say that ancient Buddhism is antinatalist. However, we can also interpret ancient Buddhism as saying that being born into this human world is affirmed because there is a possibility of reaching *nirvana* here. Therefore, if we pay attention to this aspect, we cannot immediately say that it is antinatalist.

As for childbearing, although the practitioners themselves do not procreate, they do not think that all humans should not procreate. Because practitioners who do not attain *nirvana* in this world will need to be born again in this world through reincarnation in the future, it is necessary that non-practitioners in our society continue to procreate.

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<sup>21</sup> *Sutta Nipāta* (1985), 3:4:32, pp. 54-55.

Considering all of the above, we can say it is true that ancient Buddhism contains the idea of reincarnation negation; however, we need further research to make clear whether it can be called an authentic proto-antinatalism. The Upanishads share the idea of reincarnation negation with Buddhism, but in a slightly different form. They maintain that our world is a world of suffering and that those who know the sacred truth of reincarnation proceed on the “path to the gods” after death, escape from reincarnation cycles, and reach the world of eternity. A majority of contemporary antinatalists in Europe and the English-speaking world do not seem to have taken these forms of proto-antinatalism into their perspectives. One thing we have to consider is whether we can call Indian reincarnation negation antinatal-“ism.” This question arises because they did not necessarily argue that *all* human beings should transcend reincarnation or stop procreation. The target of their enlightenment was basically restricted to each individual practitioner, not the human race as a whole.

One of the important gifts the ancient Indians gave to antinatalism is the idea of veganism/vegetarianism. Ancient Indian religions generally believed that sentient beings and human beings are deeply connected with each other through an infinite process of reincarnation. Adherents of Jainism, for example, strictly refrained from eating animals and insects in order not to directly harm their lives. Their veganism is considered to have remotely influenced today’s vegan antinatalists.

It was Schopenhauer who boldly combined the above two types of proto-antinatalism, the Greek type of birth negation and the Indian type of reincarnation negation. He argues, on

the one hand, that the most important truth is the recognition that it would have been better if we had never existed (the Greek type of birth negation); on the other hand, he asserts that what is most important for us is to dismantle our will to life/live and reach a state of will-less-ness and the cessation of reincarnation (The Indian type of reincarnation negation). Schopenhauer is a unique philosopher who integrated two traditions of proto-antinatalism and laid the groundwork for the 20th century's anti-procreationism.<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that Schopenhauer has a positive attitude toward universal procreation negation when he talks about Augustine's *On the Good of Marriage*.<sup>23</sup>

### 3) *Anti-procreationism*

This is an antinatalism that argues that we should not give birth to children and that the human race should become extinct by giving up procreation. This type of antinatalism appeared in the 20th century. It emerged because effective contraceptive methods were developed, the influence of religion was relatively weakened, and global environmental problems became more serious.

Karim Akerma considers Kurnig as the first modern anti-procreationist figure who was under the influence of Schopenhauer but succeeded in freeing himself from

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<sup>22</sup> I conducted a comprehensive examination of Schopenhauer's antinatalism in Chapter 3 of Morioka (2020). Eduard von Hartmann took up Schopenhauer's concept of will-less-ness and argued that when the human race succeeds in removing its will to life, all the will existing in the universe will disappear, and as a result, the universe itself will disappear. von Hartmann (1876), S. 405.

<sup>23</sup> Schopenhauer (1844), Bd. 2. Kapitel 48.

Schopenhauer's metaphysics. Kurnig published a book called *Neo-Nihilism* in 1903. According to Akerma, this was the first time in history that an entire book had been devoted to anti-procreationism.<sup>24</sup> In his 1941 book *On the Tragic*, Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe argued that human beings should decrease their population to "below replacement rates" and become extinct.<sup>25</sup> In the 1970s, population explosion and global environmental destruction became a huge international problem, and the idea emerged that the human race is a cancer on the Earth. Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard writes in his 1971 novel *Gehen* that "the Earth on which there are no human beings, attained by gradual extinction, would be, needless to say, the most beautiful."<sup>26</sup> In 1991, Les U. Knight began The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT) and called for the extinction of the human race. On their website they state, "Phasing out the human species by voluntarily ceasing to breed will allow Earth's biosphere to return to good health".<sup>27</sup>

In 2006, David Benatar published the book *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, in which he argues that not being born is better than being born, based on the idea of philosophical asymmetry between pleasure and pain. According to Benatar, human beings' coming into existence is always a harm; therefore, we should not give birth to children. Benatar calls this way of thinking an "anti-natalist position" or an "anti-natalist view."<sup>28</sup> He says that his

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<sup>24</sup> Akerma (2020), p. 126.

<sup>25</sup> Tangenes (2004).

<sup>26</sup> Bernhard (1971), p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.vhemt.org/> (Accessed April 18, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Benatar (2006), p. 8.

argument arises “not from a dislike of children, but instead from a concern to avoid the suffering of potential children and the adults they would become.” He argued that the number of people should become zero, and “extinction within a few generations is to be preferred.”<sup>29</sup>

The word “antinatalism” had long been used to refer to population suppression policies, such as China’s One Child Policy, in the field of social science. (Conversely, population growth policies were called “pronatalism”).<sup>30</sup> At this point, the word did not yet have the connotations of today’s anti-procreationism, where individuals should take the initiative to refrain from procreation and exterminate the human race. It was Benatar who introduced this word into philosophy and added an anti-procreationist meaning to it. This was an epoch-making event. The Wikipedia entry on “antinatalism” was created in 2007, a year after the publication of Benatar’s book. In that entry, antinatalism was defined as “the philosophical position that asserts a negative value judgement towards birth.”<sup>31</sup>

Another proponent of antinatalism is Belgian writer Théophile de Giraud. He also published a book in 2006, entitled *L’Art de guillotiner les procréateurs: Manifeste antinataliste* (The Art of Guillotining Procreators: An Anti-Natalist Manifesto), and expressed his view against procreation. This book, written in French, devotes its entire length to the discussion of the negation of procreation and is considered one of the most important books about anti-procreationism, comparable to Benatar’s. In its introduction,

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<sup>29</sup> Benatar (2006), p. 198.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Heitlinger (1991) and Cheng (1991).

<sup>31</sup> Wikipedia (English): the entry on “antinatalism.”

de Giraud writes, “Philosophy has debated all the questions that came before the human mind, but there is only one exception: *the ethical validity of procreation.*”<sup>32</sup> He then argues that birth is one of the three major human sufferings, exposes the psychological mindset of birth advocates, asks whether children can really love their parents, asserts that children have the right to denounce their parents and that ethics and birth are incompatible, considers global overpopulation and the conditions for parents to have children, and discusses the relationship between feminism and antinatalism. His pessimistic view of being born seems to have been heavily influenced by Schopenhauer. While Benatar approaches the subject with the logic of analytical philosophy, de Giraud does so with the method of continental philosophy and literature.

De Giraud argues that the first articles of all charters aiming at protecting the interests of the child should be as follows:

1. The first right of the child is not to be born.
2. The second right of the child consists in being able to summon before the courts, if he considers it necessary, those who seriously harmed him by violating his first right.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, he holds that children should be able to sue their parents for giving birth to them. De Giraud also talks about the relationship between antinatalism and feminism in

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<sup>32</sup> de Giraud (2006), p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> de Giraud (2006), p. 82.

Chapter 10, entitled “Remedy through Feminism.” This is a perspective that is lacking in Benatar.

It is not clear when antinatalist activism emerged in the English-speaking world. The Facebook group “Antinatalism” was created in 2007, which was perhaps the earliest Internet site for the discussion of this topic.<sup>34</sup> EFILism is an early example of such activism. It was proposed by YouTuber Inmendham around 2010 and states that the DNA mechanism by which life reproduces itself and the emergence of sentient beings have caused ongoing suffering in this universe. Inmendham argues that the termination of the reproduction of human beings and sentient beings is the solution.<sup>35</sup> The first four letters of EFILism are a reverse reading of LIFE. The publication of Benatar’s *Better Never to Have Been* in 2006 had a major theoretical impact on antinatalist activism. (However, it should be noted that many current antinatalists do not necessarily agree with Benatar’s ideas.) One of the places where antinatalism has been discussed in the English-speaking world is Reddit.com, which is a huge collection of posting forums, and an antinatalism thread (r/antinatalism) was created there in 2010. Cory Stieg writes that “Benatar’s concept has taken on a new life, so to speak, among Redditors, YouTube communities, and vegan advocacy groups. Online, antinatalists have created a safe space to talk about their experiences, share memes about natalism, and geek out about philosophy.”<sup>36</sup> According to

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/antinatalism/> The name of the site when it was created was “Anti-natalism,” and it was then renamed “Antinatalism.”

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.efilism.com/> (Accessed April 5, 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Stieg (2019).

efilism.com, several of the above trends came together in a big wave in 2011, which gave birth to the antinatalism community.<sup>37</sup> A booklet entitled *The Antinatalist Manifesto* was published in 2016 by an author calling themselves “Antiprocreation.” It argues that we were created forcibly without being asked whether it was okay to give birth to us and that procreation is a violation of human dignity, human rights, and freedom.<sup>38</sup> Jiwoon Hwang, the person writing under the pseudonym “Antiprocreation,” started publishing a magazine entitled *The Antinatalism Magazine* in 2017. He also published the blog post “Why it is always better to cease to exist (pro-mortalism, promortalism)” and advocated pro-mortalism in 2018.<sup>39</sup>

On September 18, 2017, the international academic conference “Antinatalism: To Be or Not to Be?” was held at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Ostrava, Czech Republic. Kateřina Lochmanová and others, who would later edit the book *History of Antinatalism*, gave presentations. It may have been the first international conference on the subject of antinatalism. On May 30, 2018, the international conference “Antinatalism Under Fire” was held in Prague with participants including David Benatar, Iddo Landau, Saul Smilansky, and Jiwoon Hwang.

In 2020, an activist group called “Antinatalism International” was founded and began its vigorous activities on the Internet. According to them, the most succinct

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<sup>37</sup> <http://www.efilism.com/>

<sup>38</sup> Antiprocreation (2016). He also published Antiprocreation (2017).

<sup>39</sup> Hwang (2018). I met him at the First International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life, held at Hokkaido University in 2018. He attempted suicide and then passed away the same year at the young age of 23. See Burmazovic (2018).

expression of antinatalism is “Antinatalism is a critique of procreation.” They say that “[a]ntinatalism, in general, argues that creating life is unethical because of the existence of suffering and that the best outcome is extinction.” They exemplify the four schools of anti-procreative thought: antinatalism, EFILism, the VHEMT, and childfree (a lifestyle of voluntary childlessness).<sup>40</sup> They have published *An Antinatalist Handbook* on their website, rebutting every question that is raised against antinatalism and every justification for procreation made by pronatalists. Antinatalist activism in the English-speaking world seems to have focused its campaign goals on the extinction of the human race through the termination of all human procreation and, if possible, the extinction of all sentient beings. However, antinatalist activists’ activities are diverse, and it is impossible to define them from a single perspective.

The academic study of the history of antinatalism has only just begun. Ken Coates’s *Anti-Natalism: Rejectionist Philosophy from Buddhism to Benatar*, published in 2014, is perhaps the earliest example of such scholarship. Coates located the origin of antinatalism in Hinduism and ancient Buddhism and gave an overview of the antinatalism of Schopenhauer, Eduard von Hartmann, Peter Wessel Zapffe, Benatar, Beckett, and Sartre. In 2017, Karim Akerma published in German the encyclopedic *Antinatalismus: Ein Handbuch* (Antinatalism: A Handbook). This 736-page book includes entries and quotations concerning antinatalism from

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<sup>40</sup> <https://antinatalisminternational.com/what-is-antinatalism/#1601628649736-f2e278a6-0b08>

a variety of texts. In 2020, I published the Japanese book *Is It Better Never to Have Been Born?* In this book, I examined the history of antinatalism from a different perspective than Coates, starting with ancient Greece and ancient India before moving on to Schopenhauer and 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, and criticized Benatar's harmful birth theory. I also proposed a basic framework for the concept of "birth affirmation," which will be the foundation of my upcoming book *A Philosophy of Birth Affirmation*. Also in 2020, Kateřina Lochmanová edited the book *History of Antinatalism: How Philosophy Has Challenged the Question of Procreation*, which examined in detail the history of Western antinatalism from ancient Greece through medieval Europe to the present day. This book provides a rich source of previously unavailable information about antinatalistic thought.

The academic study of antinatalistic topics has also just begun in recent years. Concerning the problem of non-existence of consent, Seana Valentine Shiffrin (1999) and Asheel Singh (2018) are important papers. Concerning the justification of procreation, Christine Overall (2012) and Rivka Weinberg (2016) are important books. Weinberg's "principle of procreative permissibility" is particularly intriguing. She proposes two principles for procreation: the principle of motivation restriction and the principle of procreative balance. The former makes mandatory the parents' motivation for raising a child, and the latter sets the range of reasonably acceptable risks for permissible procreation.<sup>41</sup> Although Weinberg's idea is not necessarily one that can solve the problem of antinatalism, I believe it has the

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<sup>41</sup> Weinberg (2016), pp. 176-180.

potential to inspire new ideas in the field of philosophy of procreation.<sup>42</sup>

Julio Cabrera, who has long advocated the concept of “negative ethics,” argues in his 2020 paper “Antinatalism and Negative Ethics” that antinatalism should be strengthened by his idea of negative ethics. Generally speaking, antinatalism argues that our life is not worth starting, but it does not necessarily argue that it is not worth continuing. Cabrera disagrees with this approach. If we think that life can be considered worth continuing, then “this can weaken the thesis that life is never worth-starting and give some force to natalism.”<sup>43</sup> According to Cabrera, “human life should be regarded as ethically not worth-continuing *in general* even when sensibly tolerable.”<sup>44</sup> However, he does not recommend immediate suicide motivated just by fear or weakness, because life-ending must be “morally guided.”<sup>45</sup>

J. Robbert Zandbergen writes in his 2020 paper “Between Iron Skies and Copper Earth: Antinatalism and the Death of God” that antinatalism is “the most radically modern phenomenon that emerged after the death of God, and represents the most radical face of secular humanism.”<sup>46</sup> He argues that after the declaration of the death of God by Nietzsche, humans had to reconstruct the foundation of their value system, and antinatalism provided us with the most radical answer, the extinction of the human race. However,

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<sup>42</sup> In Morioka (2020), I added the third principle, “the principle of responsibility,” to Weinberg’s two principles to resolve the problem of non-existence of consent by a newborn child (p. 302).

<sup>43</sup> Cabrera (2020), p. 187.

<sup>44</sup> Cabrera (2020), p. 167.

<sup>45</sup> Cabrera (2020), p. 185.

<sup>46</sup> Zandbergen (2020), p. 2 (online version).

Zandbergen does not think that the negation of procreation is the essential core of antinatalism. He writes that “it is a common misconception that antinatalism is unduly focused on reproduction and, more importantly, the cessation thereof. It is important to understand that the policy recommendation concerning reproduction only flows from a deeper concern with the state of human existence overall. As will be shown here, the conviction that human existence holds no intrinsic value over nonexistence is the core of antinatalism.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, he suggests that the idea that not being born is better than being born, which can be found in proto-antinatalism as birth negation, might be the essential core of antinatalism, and anti-procreationism is a result that has emerged “inspired” by birth negation.

Faith L. Brown and Lucas A. Keefer’s paper “Anti-Natalism from an Evolutionary Psychological Perspective” (2020) discusses antinatalism in terms of evolutionary psychology. They think that there must be psychological reasons or factors that encourage people to accept or resist antinatalistic ideas. In addition to an optimism bias, which Benatar had already mentioned in his book, they point out four factors: a fast life history, sex differences, altruism, and attachment security. They conclude, respectively, that 1) higher-class individuals prefer antinatalism; 2) females are more attracted to antinatalism than males; 3) females in general and people who have experienced huge suffering choose antinatalism because they think seriously about the quality of life of future children; and 4) people who have a distrust of others and avoid intimate attachment are more

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<sup>47</sup> Zandbergen (2020), p. 7 (online version).

likely to be pessimistic and more likely to be drawn to antinatalism. Although these are still just hypotheses, they strongly suggest that antinatalism research in psychology will be very meaningful. I hope that there will be some positive feedback from psychology to philosophy in the future.

### 3. Categorization of Antinatalist Concepts

Here I would like to leave the history of ideas and move on to a discussion of the concept of antinatalism itself. There is a wide variety of concepts associated with antinatalism. The following is a rough draft of my categorization. This is a categorization of antinatalism and its related concepts, not a categorization of antinatalists. A person can have more than one of the following views at the same time.

A: All births are bad. (Being born is bad. Giving birth is bad.)

\* All births are always bad.

[A-1: Benatar's type] This argument claims that coming into existence is always a harm because of the asymmetrical nature of pleasure and pain in which the presence of pain is bad but the absence of pleasure is not bad.

[A-2: Pain avoidance theory] If we had not been born, we would never have felt pain. If we do not procreate, children who could feel pain will never come into being.

\* All births are bad as a whole.

[A-3: Russian roulette type] If we continue giving birth, at least one baby will be unhappy after growing up. Even if there are many children who will be happy, at least one child in the next generation will become unhappy,

so we must consider childbirth to be bad as a whole in the sense that it will always produce that one child somewhere.

\*[A-4: Non-existence of consent] Consent from a newborn child is absent.

\*[A-5: Diversity tolerant type] All births are bad. All people should not procreate. But it must be acceptable for others to hold pronatalist views, and it must be acceptable for others to hold wrong views.

B: [B-1: “Birth negation” type] Being born is bad. I wish all of us had not been born. But I do not necessarily evaluate the goodness or badness of giving birth.

C: Being born is not necessarily bad.

\*[C-1: “Procreation negation” type] Being born is not necessarily bad, but giving birth is always bad.

\*[C-2: “Reincarnation negation” type] Rebirth in other worlds (or in this world) by reincarnation should be stopped. Rebirth in the next world has positive meaning only if a practitioner wishes to reach a state of *nirvana* after a series of succeeding reincarnations.

\*[C-3: Childfree] I do not give birth. I do not argue that all people should never procreate.

D: [D-1: Negation of the “promotion of procreationism”] Forcing someone to give birth is always bad. Procreation ideologies promoted by a nation, society, relatives, men, and others should be abolished.

E: Sentient being-oriented antinatalism. (This may include aliens and AI/robots that can experience pain).

\*[E-1: Domestic animal type] All domestic animals should be abolished (before voluntary human extinction occurs).

\*[E-2: Sentient being type] All sentient beings should

become extinct.

\*[E-3: Biotechnological approach type] All pain in sentient creatures should be artificially removed.

F: [F-1: Biological life-centered type] All living beings should become extinct.

G: [G-1: Non-existence type] No beings should exist. Complete nothingness is preferable. The strongest negation.

Using the above categorization, I propose the following groupings.

\*Antinatalism in the narrow sense: A-1, A-2, A-3, A-4

\*Antinatalism in the broad sense: A-5, B-1, C-1, C-2, E-1, E-2

\*Anti-procreationism: A-1, A-2, A-3, A-4, A-5, C-1, E-1, E-2

\* C-3, D-1, E-3, F-1, and G-1 are not antinatalism.

The above categorization is not intended to cover all patterns of antinatalism. Each category includes cases where there is a specific advocate (e.g., A-1) and cases where there is not necessarily a specific advocate (e.g., A-5). Since there could be various categorizations other than my own, I encourage others to use this as a reference when making their own set of categories.

I am not an antinatalist myself, although I hold the idea of “birth negation” deep in my heart. I myself am closest to the “birth negation” type (B-1). However, while the birth negation type of antinatalism makes a universal claim that “it would have been better if *we* had never been born,” I only have a personal view that “it would have been better if *I* had never

been born.” In this single respect, I am not an antinatalist. However, at the same time, I am not a pronatalist either, because I do not necessarily think that the human race should continue to procreate. I will discuss this point later in the Appendix.

By the way, to overcome my inner birth negation, I have advocated in my books and papers the concept of “birth affirmation,” which means being truly glad that I have been born. This “birth affirmation” is also very personal, and I do not believe that all people should affirm their own birth. I believe that the possibility of birth affirmation is open to all people, but it is up to each individual to decide whether to pursue this possibility, and I also believe that birth affirmation does not necessarily lead to a life of high value.

Furthermore, birth affirmation is not necessarily in conflict with anti-procreationism. It is possible that an anti-procreationist devotes all her life to the promotion of anti-procreationism, and, as a result, her attempt becomes successful, and she reaches a state of “birth affirmation” and feels happy to have been able to achieve her ultimate goal. The relationship between birth affirmation and antinatalism includes many profound issues like this, so further research is needed. I encourage those who are interested in the concept of birth affirmation to read my paper “What is Birth Affirmation?: The Meaning of Saying ‘Yes’ to Having Been Born” (Chapter Three of this book) and the English translation of Chapter 4 of my 2013 book *Manga Introduction to Philosophy*.

#### 4. The Validity of Antinatalism in the Narrow Sense

In this section, we will examine the validity of “antinatalism in the narrow sense.” Antinatalism in the narrow sense — that is to say, [A-1: Benatar’s type], [A-2: Pain avoidance theory], [A-3: Russian roulette type], and [A-4: Non-existence of consent] — asserts that all human births are universally bad and therefore all procreation should not take place. These four theories can be constructed as independent, consistent perspectives on human procreation. However, they are *not strong enough to be able to assert* that only their position is correct and that other ideas of affirming procreation are *universally wrong*. I would like to discuss this point very briefly in the following section. Please keep in mind that I do not intend to say that antinatalism cannot be established as a meaningful philosophical theory on birth and procreation. It can. What I want to emphasize is that it is wrong for such a theory to claim that only its position is universally correct and that other theories affirming procreation are all wrong and should be abolished.

##### A-1: *Benatar’s type*

This argument claims that coming into existence is always a harm because of the asymmetrical nature of pleasure and pain in which the presence of pain is bad but the absence of pleasure is not bad. If there is a prick of a needle in a person’s life, the life of the person as a whole necessarily becomes a bad one. Therefore, it can be universally asserted that being born is always worse than not being born, and therefore all births should not be carried out. This idea, already found in Schopenhauer, was theorized in Benatar’s

*Better Never to Have Been*, which took up the debates that had been conducted by Jan Narveson and Hermann Vetter in the 20th century.<sup>48</sup> Philosophers have debated whether Benatar's argument is correct, and Benatar has attempted to refute their objections. In my observation, some of the objections made by David Boonin (2012) and Erik Magnusson (2019), especially Boonin's argument regarding the Relational Symmetry Principle and Magnusson's discussion of counterfactual conditionals, succeed in pinpointing Benatar's weaknesses.<sup>49</sup> I criticized Benatar's argument in Chapter 7 of Morioka (2020) from the perspective of *Sein* and *Werden*, and in Morioka (2021) I argued that there can be a rival theory that is stronger than Benatar's asymmetry theory.<sup>50</sup> I believe that some of these criticisms are critical to Benatar's argument.<sup>51</sup> I do not have the space to present these discussions here in detail, but putting all of them together, I believe that the Benatar-type defense of antinatalism is not as strong as Benatar himself claims it to be.

#### A-2: *Pain avoidance theory*

If people are born, they will necessarily experience suffering. If people are not born, they will never experience suffering. Therefore, to fundamentally prevent suffering, we should stop all procreation.

There are two problems with this.

The first problem is that although this theory is based on

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<sup>48</sup> Narveson (1967); Vetter (1969), (1971).

<sup>49</sup> Boonin (2012), pp. 15-25; Magnusson (2019), p. 4. I do not necessarily agree with all of the arguments in their papers.

<sup>50</sup> Morioka (2020), (2021).

<sup>51</sup> I plan to have these works translated into English and made available to international readers.

the premise that it is better to have no existence and no suffering than to have existence and suffering, there is no logical ground for this premise to be universally true. In other words, when someone argues that “a life that has reached a state of joy by overcoming past painful experiences is not inferior to the (hypothetical) state that there is no pain because a life does not exist,” the pain avoidance theory cannot provide a basis for rejecting this argument as false. This is because the pain avoidance theory focuses only on the existence or non-existence of pain and does not take into account any positive sides that pleasure and joy can bring to life. The only way for proponents of the pain avoidance theory to refute the above argument would be to reply that the mere presence of pain in life makes that life unworthy of beginning, or that the mere presence of pain, no matter what great pleasure or joy there might be, ruins the entire positive value of that pleasure or joy. However, the former is unable to disprove the above argument because it still does not explain why the absence of pain is considered universally “better” than the presence of both pain and pleasure. In other words, the pain avoidance theory argues that since we necessarily experience pain once we are born, it would be better if we were not born at all, but behind this argument is the hidden assumption that we do not need to take into account anything other than pain when we consider the goodness or badness of being born. However, this assumption is not proven to be correct at all. The latter is an argument for asymmetrical comparison of pain and pleasure, and therefore has the same difficulty as Benatar’s type.

The second problem arises if the pain avoidance theory takes into account the amount of pain and argues that small

pains can be cancelled out by pleasure or joy, but large pains can never be cancelled out no matter how much pleasure or joy there might be. First, if small pains can be canceled out by pleasure or joy, then the pain avoidance theory cannot conclude that birth is universally bad, because it is possible to live a whole life without experiencing large pains that cannot be canceled out by pleasure or joy. The pain avoidance theory cannot dismiss this possibility. And the line between small and large pain will be different for each person, which means that it is not possible to objectively determine what a universally bad life is. If we were to change the argument to be that there will always be at least one person in the human race who will experience great pain that cannot be canceled out by pleasure or joy, it would become the Russian roulette type discussed in the next section.

### *A-3: Russian roulette type*

This view argues that if human beings continue to give birth, there will be at least one person whose life will be an unhappy one; therefore, all births should not be carried out in order to prevent that one unhappy life from emerging.

There are two problems with this.

The first problem is that the Russian roulette theory cannot refute the position that “even if there is a person whose life is likely to be unhappy because of suffering, all births are permitted to take place if there is an effective function in society in which people actively support this person and bring them out of their unhappiness.” If a Russian roulette theory advocate wishes to dismiss this, they have no choice but to argue on the basis of possibility — i.e., that the practical possibility of establishing such an ideal society is so extremely

low that it is pointless to set up such a position. However, such a counterargument allows for a counter counterargument of the same kind, namely, “Antinatalists say that if all births could be prohibited, there would be no suffering at all, but the practical possibility of such an ideal is extremely low, so it is pointless to set up such a position.” Thus, the strength of the counterargument and that of the counter counterargument would be on par with each other. Therefore, the Russian roulette theory cannot refute the above position. A corollary of this argument is that birth advocates have a strong obligation to help people whose lives are likely to be unhappy to escape from the path to unhappiness. The fulfillment of this obligation should be a prerequisite for procreation. Thus, the Russian roulette theory does not function as an almighty defense of antinatalism, but rather as an imposition of a strict moral norm on birth advocates. It is the birth advocates who must place the Russian roulette theory as the foundation of their argument.

The second problem is the following. The Russian roulette theory is an argument that focuses only on the interests of the newborn and ignores the interests of the people who already exist in the world and are expected to bear children. However, it does not provide any logical grounds for the assertion that the interests of existing people can be ignored when questioning the pros and cons of procreation. Of course, this point holds true for many types of anti-procreationism as well, but it is especially important for the Russian roulette type. The Russian roulette theory asserts that we must abandon the wishes of existing people to experience the joy and happiness of bearing and raising children, to have their children experience the joy and happiness of living, and

to make every effort possible to achieve this, because there is a risk that at least one child will be unhappy. However, the Russian roulette theory fails to show logical grounds to support the assertion that “all hopes of childbearing among existing people” and “all possibilities of total happiness to be experienced by many children who will be born in the future” must be abandoned in order to prevent the birth of at least one child who will be unhappy.

Antinatalists sometimes argue that procreation is an act of parental egoism, but in our society we tolerate a variety of egotistical acts that may lower the well-being of others (e.g., my living in a certain nice rental property lowers the well-being of an unknown person who could have lived a decent life only by living there, or my passing an entrance exam lowers the well-being of someone else who did not pass it), and antinatalists have to explain why procreation does not fall into such an acceptable range. If they try to answer this by saying that procreation, unlike these social activities, is the creation of a sentient being out of nothing, then their objection again comes back to the problem of the pain avoidance theory. Also, it is sometimes said that “antinatalism is a kind belief that puts the interests of children first,” but the mere fact that it is such a belief does not prove that procreation is universally wrong.

The following discussion may also be helpful. First of all, generally speaking, there are cases in which the regulation of society by the Russian roulette theory is not feasible. These are the cases in which (1) the benefits that would be lost by the regulation are so great that they would shake the whole society, and (2) there are no other alternatives to maintain these benefits. Example 1: The regulation of “sexual harassment in

the workplace.” In this case, (1) is not significant, and (2) exists (e.g., the use of cosplay brothels), so the regulation can be established. Example 2: The regulation of “private cars that may cause serious traffic accidents.” In this case, in the city center, (1) is not significant, and (2) exists, so the regulation can be established. In the countryside, (1) is significant, and (2) does not exist, so the regulation cannot be established (but some measures are needed to reduce the suffering caused by traffic accidents). Regarding the regulation of procreation, if the interests of existing people are also taken into account, (1) is significant, and (2) does not exist, so the regulation cannot be established. However, whether this argument can be sufficiently applied to the case of creating existence from nothing remains unclear and thus requires further investigation.

In response to the above, those who say that not giving birth to any human being is the right answer because if we do not give birth to any human being, these problems themselves will not arise, are faced with the original question — “It is true that if we do not give birth to any human being, these problems will not arise, but why can we universally conclude from this that all of us should not give birth to any human beings?” — and they are sent back to square one.

At the same time, we need to think about the case in which every child born will certainly become unhappy. For example, let’s consider a case in which the earth’s environment drastically changes and unknown radiation falls on the Earth, and all children born will surely experience unbearable suffering for the rest of their lives (adults are not affected by radiation because they are already fully grown). This is a Russian roulette game where every chamber is filled

with live ammunition. In this case, we should refrain from having children. It is only in this and similar cases that the plausibility of anti-procreationism is confirmed. In the current situation, we can say that humans are not placed in such an environment because there are many people who end their lives with satisfaction. We can conclude from this that those who try to defend birth must continue to make great efforts to prevent our natural and social environment from becoming this awful. (However, I do not believe that people should continue to procreate, because I am not a pronatalist.)

#### *A-4: Non-existence of consent*

This is the argument that it is wrong to give birth to a child without the child's consent to be born. It faces the following problems. First of all, it is impossible to obtain consent because there is no subject of consent before birth. When a subject of consent exists, it can be wrong to force that subject to do something without consent, but that logic cannot be applied when there is no such subject. Thus, we are led to the conclusion that we cannot say that it is wrong to give birth to a child because there is no consent, nor can we say that it is not wrong to give birth to a child because there is no consent. If one argues that any child who is born will necessarily suffer the *pains* of life without consent, this brings us back to the issue of the pain avoidance theory. This shows that the non-existence of consent theory alone cannot lead to any conclusions about the goodness or badness of procreating.

In response to this, it is sometimes argued that one should not give birth to a child in the first place, because after the child is born and grows up, the child may look back on her birth and raise the question to her parents, "Why did you give

birth to me even though I did not consent to it?” However, this is not a correct question to begin with, because it is based on the misconception that there is a subject of consent before birth. If it is not a misconception, then this argument again faces the problem of the previous paragraph.

If this argument is intended to point the finger at the parents and say, “If you hadn’t given birth to me, I wouldn’t have to suffer, but because you gave birth to me, I am now suffering like this,” then we must say it is very one-sided. This resentment can be extended to further questions not related to procreation, such as, “Why didn’t you kill yourself when you were young? If you had, I wouldn’t have been born” and “Why did you choose to get married? If you hadn’t gotten married, I wouldn’t have been born.” It can be extended to a grudge against grandparents: “Why did you give birth to my parents?” It can even go so far as to say to the nation of Japan, “Why did you lose the war? If you had not lost the war, I would not have been born.” It is extremely unbalanced in that although there is an infinite number of possible targets for resentment, it is focused only on the sexual intercourse of the parents at a certain point of time in their lives. While I can understand the sentiment of naming the parents who are closest to them, we have to say that their logic is weak and arbitrary. In addition, we can say that the mere personal grudge “if you had not given birth, I would not have suffered like this in the first place” does not reach the idea of antinatalism that “all births should not be carried out.” As I mentioned in Section 2, academic discussion of this topic is still going on, and further discussion is thus needed to settle the entire dispute on non-existence of consent.

From all of the above, we can conclude that the four forms of antinatalism in the narrow sense are not strong enough to declare that only their own position is correct and the idea of affirming procreation is universally wrong. What I have discussed in this section is no more than a brief sketch of the whole picture. Many topics and counterarguments remain undiscussed.

Reading my discussion in this section, readers may wonder why the author of this book is so desperate to take a puzzle-solving approach to such absolute questions. It is easy to answer by saying that this is the very job a contemporary philosopher is supposed to do. But as a philosopher who has a flesh and blood body, I would like to say that the reason I am doing this kind of messy job is that antinatalism is my own existential question. Since my childhood, I have been continuously repeating the question in mind, “Why have I been born even though I am destined to die someday?” and I have cried many times to myself, “If death is the unavoidable endpoint, I wish I had never been born!” For me, the question of birth negation has been an existential problem. And sometimes I have wondered why the extinction of the human race was not allowed because for me the happy death of a human being and the happy extinction of the human race were considered to be the best solution to my existential problem. At some point in my life, this idea changed into the idea of birth affirmation. And to make clear the concept of birth affirmation, I have been doing this kind of analytic and historical research. Basically, I am doing this for myself, not for anyone else.

Nicholas Smyth stresses in his 2020 paper “What Is the Question to Which Anti-Natalism Is the Answer?” that the

discussion of procreative ethics should be more existential. This is exactly what I want to say. He criticizes contemporary procreative ethicists because they “have mainly followed Benatar in continuing to write in highly impersonal terms about sufferings, harms and duties, usually in impartial and quantitative terms.”<sup>52</sup> Smyth insists that we should be “existentially grounding”<sup>53</sup> when thinking seriously about antinatalism and the issues of meaning in life, and we should ask such true life questions to ourselves as people who are living here and now. We must make these decisions ourselves, because no one can make them for us. He writes that in the situation where a person is on her deathbed and looking back on her life asking whether it was meaningful, “there is an absolute, categorical distinction between a person standing beside the bed and the person *in* the bed.”<sup>54</sup> This is what I called a “solipsistic layer” or the “heart of meaning in life” in my 2019 paper “A Solipsistic and Affirmation-Based Approach to Meaning in Life.”<sup>55</sup> In this paper, I talked about the ontological status of a suffering person appearing in Viktor Frankl’s book, and I wrote that “whatever suffering this individual may experience her life occurs only once in this universe and can never be repeated in any other way in the future, and the manner in which this individual exists in this universe is unique and can never be compared with anything whatsoever.”<sup>56</sup> A person who is existing in this manner should be the true target of philosophy of life’s meaning, and this is

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<sup>52</sup> Smyth (2020), pp. 77-78.

<sup>53</sup> Smyth (2020), p. 82.

<sup>54</sup> Smyth (2020), pp. 82, 85.

<sup>55</sup> Morioka (e2019).

<sup>56</sup> Morioka (e2019), p. 84.

one of the basic underpinnings of my philosophical research on antinatalism and birth affirmation.<sup>57</sup>

## Appendix

### How Antinatalism and Its Research Began in Japan

Contemporary discussion of antinatalism began when Shuichi Kato published his Japanese book *An Examination of Life that Begins from the “Individual”* in 2007, one year after Benatar’s book. At the time Kato was not aware of Benatar’s argument, so his book did not refer to it.

In his book, Kato took up the proposition “it is better not to have been born” and made a philosophical analysis of it. If we take antinatalism broadly, Kato’s book is considered the first example in Japan that comprehensively examined the topics of birth negation in antinatalism. After introducing antinatalistic thoughts in Theognis, Koheleth, and George Akiyama’s manga *Ashura*, Kato writes as follows:

It is meaningless to murmur gloomily, “I wish I had never been born,” or to sing cheerfully, “I am glad I have been born.” ... Since a person who has already been born can no longer do “that he was not born” — a strange way of putting it, but that is the only way to put it —, it is impossible to make a value judgment as to which is better or worse by comparing the situation in which one has been born (i.e., reality) and the situation

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<sup>57</sup> I have also called this a “life study approach” to the problem of life and death. See the Epilogue of Morioka (e2005, 2017). If this resonates with you, I recommend my 2017 paper “The Trolley Problem and the Dropping of Atomic Bombs” (Morioka, e2017, Chapter Four of this book).

in which one has not been born.<sup>58</sup>

In 2009, I published a paper on the extinction of the human race through abstinence from procreation. This was the second section of the paper “Is There an Obligation to Produce Future Generations?” (The paper as a whole was co-authored with Shinogu Yoshimoto, and the second section was written by me). At that time, I too did not know of the existence of Benatar’s book or Knight’s VHEMT. Independently of Benatar and Knight, I conducted a thought experiment in this paper on the possibility of a “gentle self-erasing” of the human race by the voluntary cessation of procreation by women, and I argued in favor of their choice. I would say that the discussion of anti-procreationism in Japan actually dates back to at least the year 2009. As far as this 2009 paper is concerned, I could be regarded as an anti-procreationism sympathizer in the sense that I would allow the extinction of the human race by gradually stopping childbirth.<sup>59</sup> (As far as I know, the first scholar who discussed the planned extinction of the human race was Kazuyuki Kobayashi. He argued in his 1999 paper “Is Our Future Valuable?: A Strategy for Extinction” that planned extinction would be a rational alternative for us, although his argument was not made from an antinatalistic point of

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<sup>58</sup> Kato (2007), pp. 19-20.

<sup>59</sup> I also made a sympathetic statement about human extinction in a 2019 dialogue for the magazine *Contemporary Thought* [現代思想] (Morioka and Toya, 2019, p. 19). Those who criticize me for being a pronatalist are presumably unaware of my having made such statements. For example, in the comment section of the February 2021 YouTube interview with me by The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast, someone named “maker rain” posted, “Masahiro Morioka is an infamous Pro-natalist here in Japan.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=123mtxZXcko> (Accessed February 21, 2021).

view.<sup>60</sup>)

The above shows that two aspects of antinatalism — birth negation and procreation negation — were discussed in the years 2007–2009, independently of foreign discourse such as that of Knight, Benatar, or de Giraud. We can say that in Japan an academic discussion of antinatalism began at least in the period 2007–2009. At that time, neither Kato nor I knew the word “antinatalism,” so we did not use it in our publications. It is worth noting that both Kato and I had conducted research on Japanese bioethics — ethics of abortion for Kato and ethics of disability and feminism for me — and through our research we encountered the problem of wrongful life lawsuits, in which a child born with disabilities accuses the physician of not having provided information to her parents, thinking that if the information had been provided then she would have never been born. This way of thinking is similar to that of birth negation. Controversy surrounding wrongful birth might have influenced the Japanese academic discussion of antinatalism in its first stage.

In 2010, Benatar’s asymmetry argument was introduced in Japan by Kato in his paper “Notes for ‘Freedom to Produce / Freedom to Be Born.’” In this paper, Kato cites Benatar’s asymmetry theory and writes that, “As Benatar says, we may have to accept the conclusion that procreation is always bad, and therefore the best thing is for all human beings to disappear from the earth. But frankly speaking, I am not able to fully understand his non-personal influence theory.”<sup>61</sup> This was probably the first time Benatar’s name appeared in

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<sup>60</sup> Kobayashi (1999).

<sup>61</sup> Kato (2010), p. 106.

printed media in Japan. However, Kato did not yet use the term “antinatalism.”

The Japanese word “反出生主義 (pronounced as *han shusshoh shugi* or *han shussei shugi*),” which is the equivalent of the English word “antinatalism,” is considered to have first appeared on October 22, 2011, in the first edition of the Japanese Wikipedia entry “David Benatar.” This entry is believed to have been created based on the same entry in the English Wikipedia. Since 2011, there have been many Internet websites or blogs that have dealt with antinatalism, but because their pages are constantly updated, it is difficult to pinpoint when the term “antinatalism” was first used on those sites.

Google Trends shows that the spike in searches for the word started roughly around 2013.



In March 2013, my paper “Is Coming into Being Desirable?: On David Benatar’s *Better Never to Have Been*,” which is a critical review of Benatar’s book, was published in Japanese. There I wrote as follows.

This is a book that meticulously examines the proposition, “It is better never to have been born,”

using the methods of analytic philosophy. Benatar draws the conclusion that it would have been better if all human beings had never been born, and goes on to argue that the human race should become extinct as soon as possible. Benatar's position belongs to the category of "antinatalism" in analytic philosophy, and his reflections have recently attracted a great deal of attention in the philosophy of the English-speaking world. (The most famous advocate of antinatalism is Arthur Schopenhauer.)<sup>62</sup>

We can confirm from this quotation that in the Japanese academic world, the term "antinatalism" was introduced in 2013 as having two meanings: 1) "it would have been better if all human beings had never been born" and 2) "we must stop procreation and the human race must die out." The above-mentioned paper was the first comprehensive introduction to Benatar's argument, but looking back on it from the present point of view, we can find many instances in which this argument was not correctly understood. Also, the explanation of "antinatalism" there is not a good one. In any case, it is important to note that the word "antinatalism" was introduced in Japan, along with Benatar's philosophy, as a term for meaning both "birth negation" and "procreation negation," which were discussed in the previous sections.

The first case in which the philosophy of Benatar was discussed at an academic conference in Japan was when I made a presentation entitled "Is There an Obligation to Produce Future Generations?" at a symposium of the 24th

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<sup>62</sup> Morioka (2013), p. 2.

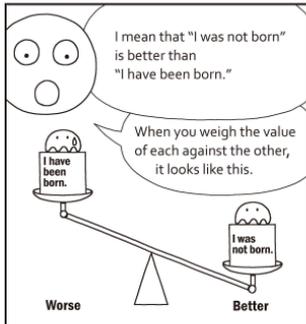
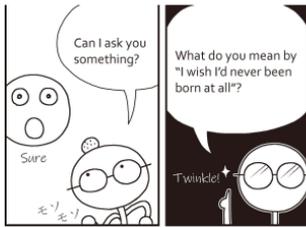
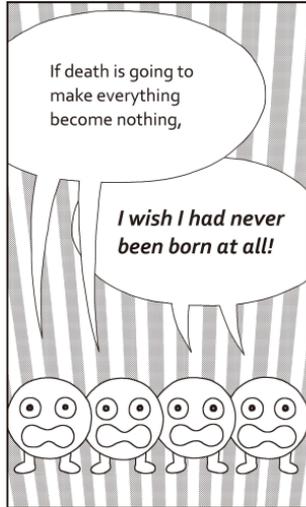
annual meeting of the Japanese Association for Bioethics held at Ritsumeikan University on October 27, 2012. The second case was Fumitake Yoshizawa's presentation "Asymmetry Concerning the Value of Being Born: A Counter Proposal to D. Benatar's Argument" at the 5th annual meeting of the Japan Association for the Contemporary and Applied Philosophy at Nanzan University on April 21, 2013. However, in both cases, the word "antinatalism" was not used in the presentations. In March 2014, Shinogu Yoshimoto published a Japanese paper entitled "Is Human Extinction Morally Appropriate?: David Benatar's Theory of Harmful Birth and Hans Jonas's Ethical Thought" in the philosophy journal *Gendai Seimei Tetsugaku Kenkyu*. This is a comparative study of the philosophies of Benatar and Jonas and is considered a pioneering work in this field. Yoshimoto uses the word "antinatalism" when talking about Benatar's philosophy. This is perhaps the second case in which the word appeared in the printed media.<sup>63</sup>

In 2013, I published the book *Manga Introduction to Philosophy: An Exploration of Time, Existence, the Self, and the Meaning of Life* with cartoonist Nyancofu Terada. In Chapter 4, I discussed birth negation in antinatalism from a philosophical point of view. The following images are examples of such discussions in the English translation of the book:<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Yoshimoto (2014). A recent paper by Nao Murata (2021) is a comprehensive discussion of antinatalism from the perspective of philosophy of religion.

<sup>64</sup> Morioka and Terada (e2013, 2021), pp. 185-186.



In 2017, Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been* was translated by Kazuo Kojima and Takayoshi Tamura. With this publication, Benatar's arguments became available to a wider audience in Japan. The Real Argument Blog, a blog aimed at enlightening the public about antinatalism, was created on the Internet by an anonymous author or authors in 2017. They explicitly defined antinatalism as "the negation of procreation" and gave it the Japanese name "アンチナタリズム" (pronounced *anchi natarizumu*). This blog had a huge impact on subsequent antinatalists on the Japanese Internet and Twitter. Antinatalist activism in Japan is considered to have become visible with the launch of this blog. It vigorously introduced articles and information on antinatalism that had been accumulated mainly in the English-speaking world, and expanded the scope of Japanese antinatalism to include not only humans but also other sentient organisms. We can see the influence of EFILilism and veganism here. In the article "Introduction to Antinatalism: An Easy-to-understand Explanation of Antinatalism — What Antinatalism Is and What It Is Not," it defines antinatalism as follows:

Antinatalism is the opposite position of natalism, which promotes having children. Antinatalists believe that people should not have children. The words "should not" usually mean that it is morally wrong, and therefore it must not be done.<sup>65</sup>

The blog defines antinatalism as the position that "we should

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<sup>65</sup> <http://therealarg.blogspot.com/2017/12/introduction-to-antinatalism.html> (Accessed April 10, 2021).

not have children.” And as for “our having been born,” it says the following:

Antinatalists are not lamenting the fact that they have been born. Some of them might do so, but this has nothing directly to do with the thought of antinatalism. As we explained at the beginning, antinatalism is “should not create,” not the personal lament that “I wish I had never been born!”<sup>66</sup>

It is a little difficult to understand this statement, but it is clear that the author or authors refuse to equate antinatalism with the personal lament that “I wish I had never been born.” However, it is not clear whether they believe that the proposition of the harmful birth theory that “it is better not to be born” or “it would have been better not to have been born” is completely unrelated to antinatalism.

In any case, this declaration had a powerful impact. It was the influence of this blog that led to the emergence of antinatalists who called themselves “アンチナタリスト” (a transliteration of the English “antinatalist”). In its wake the understanding that antinatalism is the idea that people should not have children became a standard interpretation among Japanese grassroot antinatalists. This is evident from the fact that when someone presents the phrase “I wish I had never been born” as an expression of antinatalism on Twitter, this is immediately disputed by antinatalists, who say that this is not antinatalism.

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<sup>66</sup> <http://therealarg.blogspot.com/2017/12/introduction-to-antinatalism.html>

In November 2019, the magazine *Contemporary Thought* [現代思想] published a special issue entitled “Considering Antinatalism: The Idea That It Would Have Been Better Never to Have Been Born,” which became the first book to feature the term “antinatalism” in its title. The focus of this special issue was philosophical examinations of the harmful birth theory using Benatar’s book as a starting point, and not much space was dedicated to the idea of anti-procreationism. This special issue became a hot topic, and public awareness of the term “antinatalism” increased with its publication. The subtitle of this special issue, “The Idea That It Would Have Been Better Never to Have Been Born,” was taken from the title of Benatar’s book. The publication of this issue may have helped broaden the understanding that antinatalism means birth negation, rather than procreation negation.

In 2020, my aforementioned book *Is It Better Never to Have Been Born?* was published. In this book, I pointed out that there are two aspects of antinatalism: birth negation and procreation negation. Throughout the text, much emphasis was placed on the history of ideas of birth negation. An interview with me appeared in the online edition of the *Mainichi Newspaper* on January 2, 2021, which was the first time the term “antinatalism” appeared in a national newspaper headline (other than in a book review).

In January 2021, the Association of Anti-Procreationism in Japan was founded by Yuichi Furuno and Asagi Hozumi as a networking site for antinatalist activism in Japan. They state that they oppose “the creation of all beings that can feel pain.” They argue that all humans should not have children and should seek to become vegan. They also reject the production

of sentient organisms by human hands, so it can be said that they have a broader perspective than a type of antinatalism that targets only humans.

The above is an outline of how the term “antinatalism” was introduced in Japan up to April 2021. As we have seen so far, the meaning of the term “antinatalism” has fluctuated many times between “birth negation” and “procreation negation.”

It is also worth noting that the idea of birth negation has figured prominently in the intellectual history of Japan. After Mahāyāna Buddhism was introduced in Japan in the 6th century, the reincarnation negation type of antinatalism became popular, and ordinary people believed the teaching that this world was in its worst period. Many of them aspired to leave this hellish world and go to the pure land that is believed to exist in the western direction. This sentiment created an antinatalist layer in the traditional Japanese mindset. One hundred and fifty years ago, Japan opened its borders and vigorously started importing Western ideas. The philosophy of Schopenhauer became popular among intellectuals and university students. Famous novelists such as Ryūnosuke Akutagawa and Osamu Dazai published novels that dealt with antinatalistic ideas. Akutagawa wrote the Novel *Kappa* in 1927, in which the father of an imaginary creature called a “kappa” puts his mouth on the genitals of its pregnant mother and says to their fetus, “Tell me whether you want to come out into this world!” and the fetus replies, “I do not want to be born because I do not want to inherit your mental illness and I believe that the existence of kappa is

bad.”<sup>67</sup> In 1947 Dazai wrote the novel *The Setting Sun*, in which its protagonist says, “Human life is so miserable. In reality, everyone thinks it would have been better if we had never been born.” She goes on to say, “Every day, from morning till night, I am waiting for something that is not here. I am too miserable. I want to rejoice in life, in human beings, in the world, and I want to be glad that I have been born.”<sup>68</sup> Birth negation and birth affirmation have been among the most important themes in modern Japanese literature.

In the realm of contemporary subculture, the theme of antinatalism frequently appears in the works of manga and anime. In his 1970 manga *Ashura*,<sup>69</sup> George Akiyama describes the misery and resurrection of a boy who cries alone, “I wish I had never been born. Gah!” (This has become one of



© George Akiyama 1970. *Ashura*. Gentosha.

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<sup>67</sup> Akutagawa (1927, 1992), pp. 75-76.

<sup>68</sup> Dazai (1947, 2000), pp. 105-106.

<sup>69</sup> Akiyama (1970, 2006). *Ashura* is a Japanese translation of the Indian *Asura*.

the most famous cries in the history of Japanese manga).

In the anime *Pocket Monsters: Mewtwo Strikes Back!*, released in 1998, Mewtwo, an artificially created Pokémon, says to humans, “Who asked you to give birth to me? Who asked you to make me? I have a strong grudge against everyone who has brought me into being,” and begins to fight back against humans.<sup>70</sup> This anime film became a big hit in Japan and other countries. In 2019, Mieko Kawakami published a novel entitled *Summer Stories*, which deals with the subject of antinatalism and reproductive ethics. In her novel, she lists Benatar’s book and one of my papers on antinatalism in the references.<sup>71</sup> Hajime Isayama’s manga series *Attack on Titan*, which was completed in April 2021, dealt heavily with antinatalistic ideas in the last part of the story and made a strong impression on readers. One of the characters says, “If we hadn’t been born in the first place, we wouldn’t have had to suffer,”<sup>72</sup> and there were readers who interpreted this as an expression of antinatalism. I believe that this cultural background has facilitated the development of contemporary antinatalism in Japan.

Finally, I would like to make two additional remarks.

Firstly, I am sometimes criticized by Japanese antinatalists who claim that I am a pronatalist and have no interest in the ethics of procreation, but this is completely wrong. With regard to the first point (pronatalist), I have already pointed out that I published a paper that presented human extinction in a positive light. With regard to the second point (the ethics of procreation), I would note that I have

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<sup>70</sup> Shudo (1998).

<sup>71</sup> Kawakami (2019).

<sup>72</sup> Isayama (2021).

conducted philosophical investigations of the concept of procreation independently of the discussion of antinatalism. For example, in my book *Confessions of a Frigid Man: A Philosopher's Journey into the Hidden Layers of Men's Sexuality* (2005, 2017), I discussed childbirth as a key concept of male sexuality, and in my article "Philosophical Investigations on the Concept of Procreation" (2014), I examined the concept of "procreation" analytically, both of which were my original contributions to this topic.

Secondly, there are several ongoing disputes in the antinatalist community on the Japanese Internet. 1) Antinatalists and anti-antinatalists sometimes condemn each other using offensive language. Some antinatalists accuse people who have procreated of committing violence against their children, and some anti-antinatalists make derogatory remarks about antinatalists. The most common attack on antinatalists is, "Why don't you kill yourself?" 2) There is a conflict between vegan antinatalists and non-vegan antinatalists. The former argues that the suffering of all sentient beings, including humans, should be reduced, while the latter argues that antinatalism should be applied only to humans. 3) There is a conflict between antinatalists who deny intercourse and antinatalists who affirm intercourse. The former argues that no matter how much contraception is practiced, the possibility of pregnancy due to intercourse never becomes zero; therefore, intercourse should not be permitted. The latter argues that it is okay to have intercourse if you use contraceptives because you can have an abortion if they fail. 4) There are complex conflicts between antinatalists and feminists. Feminists criticize male antinatalists for not taking into account women's embodied experiences. Also, as

for a woman's right to give birth, which is one of a woman's fundamental reproductive rights, feminists affirm it while antinatalists negate it. I witnessed an exchange on Twitter in which an antinatalist feminist condemned men with offensive language and a non-antinatalist feminist then criticized the first feminist's harsh words. 5) There is a conflict between antinatalists who support euthanasia and antinatalists who believe that euthanasia and antinatalism should not be linked together. There are also various opinions on whether eugenics or eugenic thought should be linked to antinatalism.

\* I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Asagi Hozumi for answering my questions, Mr. H for comments on the categorization of the concepts of antinatalism, and Amanda 'Oldphan' Sukenick and Mickael Holbek for their helpful information about antinatalist movements in the English-speaking world.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### Is Meaning in Life Comparable?

From the Viewpoint of ‘The Heart of Meaning in Life’

#### 1. Introduction

In Federico Fellini’s 1954 film *La Strada*, the Fool encourages Gelsomina, a young female member of a circus troupe who has little talent, little skill, and little social value.

*THE FOOL:* You may not believe it, but everything that exists in the world has some purpose. Here . . . take . . . that pebble there, for instance.

*GELSOMINA:* Which pebble?

*THE FOOL:* Oh . . . this one, any one of them . . . Well . . . even this serves some purpose . . . even this little pebble.

*GELSOMINA:* And what purpose does it serve?

*THE FOOL:* It . . . but how do I know? If I knew, do you know who I’d be?

*GELSOMINA:* Who?

*THE FOOL:* God Almighty who knows everything. When you’re born, when you’ll die. Who else could know that? No . . . I don’t know what purpose this pebble serves,

but it must serve some purpose. Because if it is useless, then everything is useless . . . even stars. . . . At least that's what I think. And even you . . . even you serve some purpose . . . with that artichoke head of yours.<sup>1</sup>

In this sequence, the Fool stresses his idea that everything in the universe serves some purpose no matter how useless or worthless it may look, although no one can know exactly what this purpose is. Only God knows this. The Fool says, "If it [this pebble] is useless, then everything is useless."

I do not believe in God, but the Fool's words eloquently explain my personal sentiment on meaning in life, which is in sharp contrast to Thaddeus Metz's objectivist approach in his book, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*. In this chapter, I criticize his objectivist approach to meaning in life and instead propose my own argument using the concept of "the heart of meaning in life."

## 2. Metz's Interpretation of Meaning in Life and Its Problems

Metz classifies theories of meaning in life into two categories, namely, supernaturalism and naturalism. The former is the view that meaning in life should be interpreted in relationship to a spiritual realm, and the latter is the view that meaning in life can be acquired in a purely physical world.<sup>2</sup> The latter, naturalism, is further divided into two categories, namely, subjectivism and objectivism.

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<sup>1</sup> Bondanella and Gieri, p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> Metz, p. 19, p. 79.

Subjectivism is the view that meaning in life can be acquired by obtaining the objects of one's "propositional attitudes," and objectivism is the view that one's life is meaningful "in itself" at least in part regardless of one's propositional attitudes.<sup>3</sup>

Metz defends objectivism. He calls his idea "the fundamentality theory." The basic idea of his fundamentality theory is described as follows.

A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.<sup>4</sup>

Metz argues that fundamental conditions of human existence can be interpreted in terms of the good, the true, and the beautiful. For example, Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa tried hard to improve suffering people's fundamental living conditions; scientific discoveries by Einstein and Darwin contributed much to the progress of fundamental knowledge of humans and the universe; and Picasso and Dostoyevsky's works lead our eyes to the most fundamental layer of the world of the beautiful.<sup>5</sup> Their lives are all meaningful because they oriented their rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence on the level of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

The final version of his fundamentality theory is as follows.

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<sup>3</sup> Metz, pp. 164-165.

<sup>4</sup> Metz, p. 222.

<sup>5</sup> Metz, pp. 227-233.

A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she, without violating certain moral constraints against degrading sacrifice, employs her reason and in ways that either positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence, or negatively orient it towards what threatens them, such as that the worse parts of her life cause better parts towards its end by a process that makes for a compelling and ideally original life-story; in addition, the meaning in a human person's life is reduced, the more it is negatively oriented towards fundamental conditions of human existence or exhibits narrative disvalue.<sup>6</sup>

This statement is composed of two parts: the part dealing with fundamental conditions of human existence and the part dealing with one's life-story. Metz claims, with regard to the former, that a life in which one orients rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence is more meaningful than a life in which one does not orient it towards them and, with regard to the latter, the life which exhibits narrative value is more meaningful than the life which exhibits narrative disvalue.

Let us examine an impressive example that Metz uses in his book. He stresses that great meaning is conferred, intuitively, on the lives of Mandela and Mother Teresa.

In contrast, their lives would not have been notably important had they striven to ensure that everyone's

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<sup>6</sup> Metz, p. 235.

toenails were regularly trimmed or that no one suffered from bad breath, even if these conditions were universally desired (or needed!). Why are the former plausible candidates for substantial significance, while the latter are not?<sup>7</sup>

Here he concludes that the actual lives of Mandela and Mother Teresa are more meaningful than the hypothetical lives which are made up solely of trimming toenails or preventing bad breath.

Concerning the life-story, Metz suggests that a life in which “its bad parts cause its later, good parts” by virtue of “personal growth or some other pattern that makes for a compelling life-story that is original,” is more meaningful than lives which are solely “repetitive,” “end on a low note,” or “intend to replicate another’s whole-life.”<sup>8</sup>

One of the most basic presumptions of Metz’s objectivism is that we can compare the meaning in the life of one person with that of another by observing their lives from the outside, and can reach the conclusion that one life is more meaningful than the other. I have grave doubts about this way of thinking.

Let us go back to the dialogue in the film *La Strada*. The central message there was that every life has meaning no matter what social value it may have. After having seen the film, many viewers would think that the life of Gelsomina, which was no more than a litany of trivial events ending in tragedy, was, indeed, full of dignity and divinity, comparable

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<sup>7</sup> Metz, p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> Metz, p. 235.

to those of sacred religious figures. Gelsomina did nothing to orient her rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence, and the tone of her life became dimmer and dimmer toward its tragic end point. According to Metz's fundamentality theory her life should therefore be considered to have very little meaning compared with that of Mandela or Mother Teresa, but many of us would probably have just the opposite impression. To viewers, Gelsomina *is* Mandela or Mother Teresa. The life of a person of no importance can have equal meaning to the life of a distinguished person. Something strange is happening here. We might call it "the dialectic of meaning in life." This, however, is no more than my personal impression of the central message of the film. In the following paragraphs I am going to translate it into more theoretical language.

In Metz's fundamentality theory, "meaning in life" can be interpreted as the significance of socially and narratively valuable life. By the words "socially valuable life"<sup>9</sup> I mean a life in which one positively orients rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence. According to his final prescription, the more social and narrative value a person's life has, the more her life becomes meaningful.

Let us consider the life of Gelsomina. Is it possible that this life has great meaning despite the fact that it actually had no social or narrative value? If it is, then Metz's interpretation of meaning in life in his final prescription must be considered incorrect.

If we examine the world of literature and religious texts we can easily find many stories in which the life of a person

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<sup>9</sup> This is not Metz's phrase but mine.

without any social or narrative value is depicted as having tremendous meaning at the deepest spiritual level. This shows that people have never limited meaning in life to a person's social or narrative value, and in some cases they have found great meaning in other characteristics such as sincerity, faithfulness, or industriousness. I would even claim the life of a person can have grave and unsurpassable meaning even if it is made up of a repeated routine of toenail trimming or the prevention of bad breath.

Let us consider the lives of Mandela and Mother Teresa. Interestingly, it is possible to imagine a situation in which they ask themselves, "While my life has been socially and narratively valuable to the fullest degree, is it truly meaningful?" and answer in the negative. For example, it is possible for them to "think" that their lives are completely meaningless because they told a lie, only once in their life, to their beloved friend, although their lives have been full of social and narrative value. This shows that meaning in life is not logically equal to social and narrative value (because if they are logically equal it should be incorrect to "think" in that way). The important point is that even Mandela or Mother Teresa are presumably able to doubt the meaning of their own lives, and those who advocate Metz's theory of meaning in life would have to "correct" this by saying, "Your doubt is wrong. Your life must be meaningful according to our theory!"

Even a person whose life fully satisfies Metz's fundamentality theory is able to legitimately doubt the meaningfulness of their own life. Here lies the most essential characteristic of the concept of meaning in life.

In this section, I have demonstrated that Metz's fundamentality theory fails to grasp the meaningfulness of

Gelsomina's life. In the following sections, I will move on from Gelsomina's case and inquire into a much deeper dimension of meaning in life.

### 3. The Heart of Meaning in Life

First, I would like to explain my understanding of the concept of "meaning in life." When we talk about meaning in life, we do not necessarily or solely talk about a person's social and narrative value. In many cases, our question of meaning in life takes a form similar to the following.

Alas, does my life such as it is have any meaning at all?

I believe that what is asked or lamented in the above question constitutes the core content of meaning in life. I want to call it "the heart of meaning in life." This question emerges from the deep layer of my mind when I notice that the solid psychological ground which was supporting the affirmative basis of my life has suddenly collapsed or disappeared into nothing. The most important point here is that the words "my life" in this question point to the life of oneself, that is to say, the life of the person who is now writing this text, or the life of a person who is now reading this text. "My life" means the life of I who am now writing this text, and "my life" also means the life of the reader of this text, that is to say, the life of "you," my dear reader! *You* are supposed to pose this question, "Alas, does my life such as it is have any meaning at all?" This is not a general question which can be equally applied to anyone. This is a question that can only be applied to my life when it is uttered by me, or to your life when it is uttered by you. This

can be extended to his/her life when the question is uttered by him/her.

A question about “the heart of meaning in life” is completely different from a general question about meaning in life, such as, “What is meaning in life in general?” A question about “the heart of meaning in life” is to be answered, in principle, only by the person who uttered it. There is no general answer to a question about “the heart of meaning in life” that is equally applicable to everyone. Furthermore, it is very important to understand the following distinction. Generally speaking, we can say that a question about “the heart of meaning in life” can be answered by the person who uttered it, so in the case of the reader of this text, it is only for your own actual life that you can legitimately talk about “the heart of meaning in life.” Only regarding the life one has actually lived and is going to live can one talk about “the heart of meaning in life,” and, in the case of the reader, you can only speak of it in regard to your own life. Let us keep this in mind and delve deeper into this topic.

Metz often says that the life of Mandela or Mother Teresa has significant meaning because they positively oriented their rationality toward fundamental conditions of human existence. We have to pay special attention here to the fact that Metz is not talking about “the heart of meaning in life” because Metz himself is neither Mandela nor Mother Teresa, that is to say, he is living the life neither of Mandela nor of Mother Teresa. Metz is talking about the meaning in life of persons other than himself. Metz can talk about “the heart of meaning in life” only when he refers to his own actual life. This is the logical conclusion that is derived from the concept of “the heart of meaning in life.” And we should note that

throughout his book, Metz never talks about “the heart of meaning in life.” From my viewpoint, Metz fails to discuss the most important aspect of meaning in life in his academic discussion of this topic. His philosophical analysis has not yet reached the layer that I most want to make clear.

Metz might classify my position under a certain type of subjectivism, but I would disagree because subjectivists, in Metz’s sense, do not talk about “the heart of meaning in life” either. According to Metz, subjectivism is the view that meaning in life can be acquired by the acquisition of the objects of one’s “propositional attitudes.” It is clear that in this kind of subjectivism “we” can talk about “his” or “her” meaning in life by referring to their acquisition of the objects of their propositional attitudes. However, this is not what “the heart of meaning in life” really points to because “the heart of meaning in life” of his or her life can only be legitimately talked about by him or herself, not by us. Hence, my position is not even subjectivism in Metz’s sense.

For instance, Metz describes a dominant form of subjectivism as follows.

(S<sub>1</sub>) A human person’s life is more meaningful, the more that she obtains the objects of her actual pro-attitudes such as desires and goals.<sup>10</sup>

In this sentence Metz talks about someone else’s meaning in life. This shows that what Metz is talking about is, by definition, never “the heart of meaning in life.”<sup>11</sup> Metz

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<sup>10</sup> Metz, p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> The same holds true of S<sub>2</sub> and S<sub>3</sub>. Metz, pp. 176-179.

discusses subjectivism throughout Chapter Nine, but my position is not dealt with anywhere in that chapter.

Moreover, it is crystal clear that my position is not supernaturalism because I do not have any religious belief. Metz's classification of meaning in life fails to catch "the heart of meaning in life" in my sense.

Of course, it is possible for Mandela or Mother Teresa to utter, "Alas, does my life such as it is have any meaning at all?" In this case, their question is without doubt one about "the heart of meaning in life." However, when we ask "Does the life of Mandela or Mother Teresa have any meaning at all?," we completely fail to pose the question of "the heart of meaning in life" for Mandela or Mother Teresa.

It is true that as a result of the accomplishments of Mandela and Mother Teresa many people's fundamental living conditions were dramatically improved. In this sense we sometimes say their lives had great meaning and this makes sense in our ordinary language. But it is important to understand that here "the heart of meaning in life" of Mandela or Mother Teresa is never being talked about. This is made possible only when they themselves talk about meaning in their own actual life.

In the same vein, I can talk about "the heart of meaning in life" only when I talk about the meaning in my own actual life. However, at the same time, my judgment regarding meaning in life will be acquired under the strong influence of the human relationships that surround me. For example, whether I was able to make my friends and/or my family happy will play a crucial role in evaluating meaning in my life. Hence, while it is only I who can legitimately talk about "the heart of meaning in life" in the case of myself, it is human

relationships and broader contexts surrounding me that strongly assist in determining the evaluation of meaning in my life.

Let us turn our eyes to “my counterfactual life.” Is it possible for me to talk about “the heart of meaning in life” in my counterfactual life? For example, it makes sense to say, “if I were a billionaire, my life would be tremendously meaningful,” but in this case I am failing to talk about “the heart of meaning in life.” The reason for this is as follows.

As was discussed earlier, “the heart of meaning in life” refers to what is asked or lamented in the question, “Alas, does my life such as it is have any meaning at all?” Here we have to pay special attention to the phrase “my life such as it is.” This phrase clearly means “my *actual* life as it *is*,” not “my *counterfactual* life as it *might be*.” Hence, when I talk about “the heart of meaning in life” I must be talking about my actual life as it is, not my counterfactual life as it might be. When I am talking about meaning in my counterfactual life in which I am a billionaire, I am not answering the question, “Alas, does my life such as it is have any meaning at all?” because in my actual life I am not a billionaire; I am no more than an upper-middle-class college professor. It is only when I talk about my actual life in which I am an upper-middle-class worker that I can talk about “the heart of meaning in life” in my own life. Of course, it makes sense for me to say, “if I were a billionaire, my life would be tremendously meaningful,” but in using this sentence I can only be referring to something other than “the heart of meaning in life” that we have been discussing so far.

What about meaning in my life in the past? Is it possible for me to talk about “the heart of meaning in life” as of my life

one year ago? Before thinking about this question, let us examine what the phrase “my life such as it is” means in a strict sense. In this phrase, “such as it is” means my actual life, and my actual life is the life I am experiencing here and now which is made possible by the accumulation of what I have experienced up until the present. I can talk about “the heart of meaning in life” solely in respect of my life of this kind. Hence, it is now clear that in the case of my life in the past I cannot talk about “the heart of meaning in life” because “my life such as it is” is not a phrase that denotes a certain time-point in life in the past. Of course, it makes sense to say, “if I were the person that I was one year ago, my life would be more meaningful than this,” but this is not a sentence that represents “the heart of meaning in life” one year earlier in my life. According to this line of thought, we can also conclude that I cannot talk about “the heart of meaning in life” for my life in the future.

It might be helpful here to refer to Theo van Willigenburg’s concept of “an internalist view on the value of life.” According to van Willigenburg, the goodness of life is “in some sense always related to what is, or could be, experienced as valuable by the person who is leading that life,” and the important thing is “not whether others value these goods, but whether I value them from *my* perspective.”<sup>12</sup> At first sight, his argument looks similar to mine; however, he believes that the goodness of a person’s life cannot be determined only by that person’s self-judgment. Hence, while he uses the term “internalist,” he actually supports the idea that the value of one’s life is determined both by one’s own internal judgment

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<sup>12</sup> van Willigenburg, p. 27. Italic by van Willigenburg.

and by external facts and/or contexts. He concludes that his “internalist position rejects the experience requirement posed by experiential subjectivism.”<sup>13</sup> His discussion is complicated and contorted because he does not clearly distinguish between the concepts of value, goodness, and meaning. It seems to me that although the value and goodness of one’s life cannot be determined only by one’s inner judgment, with regard to “the heart of meaning in life,” it ought to be determined in a purely internalist fashion, that is, only by the judgment of the person who is leading that life.

What I am arguing is not that objective approaches are totally senseless, but that although objective approaches can accurately explain some ordinary usages of the words “meaning in life,” they can never grasp the layer of “the heart of meaning in life” we have discussed so far.

Metz criticizes “first-person” approaches to meaning in life because most of us “are concerned about whether, say, the lives of our spouses and children are meaningful, and not merely because the meaning of our own life might depend on the meaningfulness of theirs.”<sup>14</sup> Of course I understand what he wants to say, and I agree with him that in our ordinary lives we usually think like that. Nevertheless, we have to keep in mind that the “meaningfulness” to which Metz refers is something completely different from “the heart of meaning in life” in our sense. I can never talk about the meaningfulness of my spouse’s life or my children’s lives at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.”

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<sup>13</sup> van Willigenburg, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Metz, p. 3, note 3.

#### 4. “The Heart of Meaning in Life” Cannot Be Compared

An important conclusion can be derived from the above discussion, namely, it is totally impossible to compare “the heart of meaning in life” among people. Meaning in life is incomparable at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.”

First, it is impossible to compare my “meaning in life” with another person’s “meaning in life” at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” The reason is simple. It is impossible to talk about “the heart of meaning in life” in the life of others, and it is therefore logically impossible to compare it with mine. Metz writes in his book, “For all I know, my life is, so far, more pleasurable than Emily Dickinson’s was, but less meaningful than Albert Einstein’s.”<sup>15</sup> I understand that here he is talking about his version of the objective interpretation of meaning in life. If he were talking about “the heart of meaning in life” in my sense, what he is saying would be total nonsense.

Second, it is impossible to compare one person’s “meaning in life” with another person’s “meaning in life” at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” I cannot talk about “the heart of meaning in life” in the life of others, so it is logically impossible to compare them. It is logically impossible for me to compare Metz’s “meaning in life” with Einstein’s “meaning in life” at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” It is also logically impossible for me to compare Mandela or Mother Teresa’s “meaning in life” with that of an ordinary, mediocre person at that level.

Third, it is impossible to compare “meaning in life” in my

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<sup>15</sup> Metz, p. 63.

actual life with “meaning in life” in my counterfactual life at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” The reason for this was explained earlier. This may be one of the important points that distinguishes my theory from other subjectivist approaches.

The above discussion shows that “the heart of meaning in life” in my life cannot be compared with anything at all. This means that it is impossible to say that meaning in my life is greater or lesser than meaning in some other life when we are talking about “the heart of meaning in life.” It transcends all comparisons.

This means that it is completely wrong for me to answer the question, “Alas, does my life such as it is have any meaning at all?” in a form such as “my life has a greater meaning than such and such” or “my life has a lesser meaning than such and such.” The only possible answers are “my life has meaning” or “my life does not have meaning.” The answer must be one of two values, a binary yes-or-no, black-or-white, and there is no ambiguous gray zone between these two answers. This may sound counter-intuitive, but if all comparisons are to be prohibited at the level of “the heart of meaning in life,” the only conclusion to be arrived at here is that there is meaning in my life or there is not. Meaning exists, or it does not exist. There is no third answer between them. What is at issue here is not a question of comparison or degree, but one of existence. We are now in the realm of ontology.

Of course, sometimes I am unable to provide this kind of yes-or-no answer to the question of “the heart of meaning in life,” but this is not a big problem. What I am arguing here is that if I can actually answer the question, my answer will have to be in the “yes-or-no” format. An interesting conclusion

derived from this is that if I feel that my life has even just a bit of meaning, this means that my life has complete, fullest possible meaning at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” If I think my life has even a smidgen of meaning, fullest meaning has already been endowed to me. It is only when I think that my life does not have any meaning at all that I am allowed to say that my life does not have meaning. It seems to me that there is an interesting asymmetry between the existence and non-existence of meaning in life at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.”

You may think that I am comparing “existence of meaning” and “non-existence of meaning” while arguing that meaning in life cannot be compared, and because this is an apparent contradiction, my reasoning is totally wrong. I do not necessarily think this is the case. This is closely connected with the discussion of anti-natalism. For example, I can say that I exist now, and this makes sense, but when I say this I do not necessarily compare my existence with my non-existence. It is very hard, or almost impossible, to imagine what it really means for me not to exist now. Of course I can “think” about a possible world in which I do not exist while other things do exist, however, it is impossible to “imagine” what this possible world looks like in a strict sense because in this possible world the subject, this *I* who can perceive this possible world from the inside, does not exist at all. In order to compare two possible worlds I must be able to imagine what they look like; therefore, it is impossible to compare the world in which I exist with the possible world in which I do not exist.<sup>16</sup> We have

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<sup>16</sup> This is one of the main reasons why David Benatar’s argument can be considered to be wrong. See my forthcoming paper.

to completely distinguish imagining from thinking.

If this reasoning is correct, then the same thing can hold true in the case of meaning in life. When I talk about the existence of meaning in life, I do not compare it with the non-existence of meaning in life. No comparison is needed in talking about meaning in life at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” I acknowledge, however, that this discussion requires a more sophisticated and detailed analysis to be undertaken elsewhere.

It seems to me that to answer “yes” to the question of “the heart of meaning in life” is to give affirmation to the whole process of my life up until the present. This suggests that “the heart of meaning in life” can be talked about for one’s whole life up until the present, not for one’s partial life in the past.<sup>17</sup> This should further lead to “birth affirmation,” that is, saying yes to the fact that I have been born into this world. In contrast, to answer “no” to the question is to negate the whole process of my life, and this will lead to “birth negation,” that is, saying no to the fact that I have been born, or, in other words, to say it would have been “better never to have been.” Here the philosophy of meaning in life ties into the philosophy of birth affirmation, which I have been examining in recent years.<sup>18</sup>

In the previous section I argued that the life of Gelsomina can have great meaning despite the fact that it was actually one without any social or narrative value, and that, in some cases, the life of a person can have grave and utmost meaning even if it is made up of a repeated routine of toenail trimming or bad breath preventing. Metz criticizes this way of thinking.

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<sup>17</sup> I am going to discuss this topic by referring to Chapter Three of Metz’s book in a forthcoming paper.

<sup>18</sup> For example, see Morioka (2011).

Remember Metz's words: "[T]heir lives would not have been notably important had they striven to ensure that everyone's toenails were regularly trimmed or that no one suffered from bad breath, even if these conditions were universally desired (or needed!)." Here let us think deeply about this case from the viewpoint of "the heart of meaning in life."

First, imagine I have a life made up of a repeated routine of toenail trimming or bad breath preventing. You may think that such a life does not have any meaning at all. Nevertheless, this is not my actual life. This is my counterfactual life. Hence, I can never make a judgment on this kind of counterfactual life of mine at the level of "the heart of meaning in life."

Second, imagine the life of a third person that is made up of a repeated routine of toenail trimming or bad breath preventing. As we discussed earlier, it is impossible to talk about other people's meaning in life at the level of "the heart of meaning in life." The situation is the same as in the first case. Metz's words above appear to be totally senseless from our viewpoint.

Third, imagine a case in which a person whose life is made up of a repeated routine of toenail trimming or bad breath preventing says that "my life has a significant meaning at the level of 'the heart of meaning in life.'" What should we think of this person's words? I believe that all we should do is accept the words as they are and never say that they are right or wrong. We should refrain from saying that such a life has lesser meaning than that of Mandela or Mother Teresa, or that such a life does not have much meaning at all. The same thing can be said about a person who is merely alive and whose life is nothing more than that.

There remains a question regarding which we must

undertake a deliberate consideration. This is the question of whether the life of those who deeply injure others should also be considered, in some cases, to have meaning at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” Let us consider the life of Adolf Hitler as an extreme example. First, it is possible to imagine a case in which my life is just the same as Hitler’s, but this is the case of my counterfactual life and my actual life is completely different from it, hence, I cannot talk about meaning in this hypothetical case at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.”

Second, then what about my actual life? I have to say that in my actual life I have injured and afflicted many people, and even now I might be letting someone suffer from what I am doing to him or her. In such a life of mine, can I say that my life has meaning at the level of “the heart of meaning in life” in spite of the above fact? It is extremely difficult to draw a definite conclusion in this case, but I believe that I am able to answer yes to this question. This is made possible only when I sincerely reflect on the injury and suffering I have caused others, think deeply about how I am going to rework my relationships with them, and think deeply about how I am going to construct relationships with others whom I encounter in the future.

Third, what if someone like Hitler says that his life is full of meaning at the level of “the heart of meaning in life”? He might say that what he has done to people has significant meaning because he has successfully flourished in a way of life which no one other than him can ever accomplish in human history, and hence, even if what he has done to people has been nothing but a series of grave injuries and suffering, his life should be considered to have significant meaning at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” Many people would feel

disgusted and nauseated hearing his words, and, emotionally speaking, I too feel like giving him a punch in the face. Interestingly, however, if he is talking about his own “heart of meaning in life,” there is nothing wrong with the use of the words “meaning in life” in his argument. Therefore, no matter how hard it is for us to accept his words, all we can do is accept them as they are, and we must refrain from affirming or negating his argument on meaning in life. If we criticize him and say, “your life has no meaning at all,” these words should be considered totally incorrect as long as they are said about “the heart of meaning in life.” We have to keep in mind that here lies the true uniqueness of the concept of “the heart of meaning in life.”

Following this acknowledgement, we must then criticize him and argue that his whole life is *ethically* wrong and is never *ethically* justified. We have to say to him that a life of afflicting a great number of people should be ethically negated and should never again happen in this world. Although “the heart of meaning in life” and “goodness or evilness of life” are interconnected, the level of “meaning” and the level of “goodness/badness” should be clearly separated from each other in their ontological status. With regard to others’ lives, we cannot make a judgment on the former, but we can do so on the latter.

To take another example, if there is a recreational drug user/addict whose life has never been improved, and he has never tried to improve the fundamental conditions in our society but is fully satisfied with his life from the bottom of his heart, can we say that his life has meaning? From a common sense view, we would say that such a life does not have much meaning, but strictly speaking, if he himself believes that his

life is full of meaning at the level of “the heart of meaning in life,” we cannot affirm or negate his words and all we can do is accept his opinion about his meaning in life as it is stated. Of course I would never recommend such a life to others and would argue that a life free from such addictions would be by far the better life. Nevertheless, at the level of “the heart of meaning in life” I would argue that we should refrain from judging the meaning in life of others from the outside and just accept their words as they are.

Let us go back to Gelsomina’s case. I pointed out that while most of us would find meaning in Gelsomina’s life, Metz’s fundamentality theory cannot find much meaning in her life because she did not try to orient her rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.

What does the theory of “the heart of meaning in life” say about Gelsomina’s life? The answer is already clear. At the level of “the heart of meaning in life,” we cannot talk about the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of Gelsomina’s life, nor can we compare it with that of another person’s life. What Gelsomina did was just to live her “miserable” life honestly and sincerely. The meaning of Gelsomina’s life transcends all of us at the level of its heart.

In this chapter I have demonstrated that there exists “the heart of meaning in life,” a layer that cannot be compared with anything, among the layers of the question of meaning in life. I believe that this layer constitutes the very central content of meaning in life because it is not when it is posed in an objective form but when it is posed and directed toward your own actual, irreplaceable life that the question of meaning in life takes its purest and most painful form.

\* I wrote that “[i]n Metz’s fundamentality theory, ‘meaning in life’ can be interpreted as the significance of socially and narratively valuable life. By the words ‘socially valuable life’ I mean a life in which one positively orients rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence,” but now I think this interpretation was misleading. I should not have used the word “socially” in this context. However, this does not affect my discussion of the heart of meaning in life. (November, 2021)

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## CHAPTER THREE

### What Is Birth Affirmation?

The Meaning of Saying “Yes” to Having Been  
Born

#### 1. Introduction

In this chapter, I conduct a philosophical analysis of the concept of “birth affirmation.” Birth affirmation means the state of mind in which I can say from the bottom of my heart that I am truly glad that I have been born. In short, it means to be able to say “Yes” to my having been born. I believe that birth affirmation is one of the most promising ideas that can contribute to contemporary philosophical discussions on meaning in life. In my 2019 paper, I called this approach “an affirmation-based approach to meaning in life.”<sup>1</sup>

The concept of birth affirmation was first proposed in my Japanese paper “What is Life Studies?” published in 2007, and since then this concept has been deepened in my Japanese papers and books. In the following sections, I present the basic framework of my birth affirmation-based approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Morioka (2019).

It was Friedrich Nietzsche who first introduced an affirmation-based approach to the philosophy of life in Western philosophy. Nietzsche writes in the *Drunken Song of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “Did you ever say yes to one joy? O my friend, then you said yes to all woe too. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored, —.”<sup>2</sup> This “saying yes” (*Ja-sagen* in German) to one’s life is considered a primordial concept that helped grow our idea of birth affirmation. (However, as we will see in the final part of this chapter, Nietzsche’s *Ja-sagen* has a significant problem we should never overlook.) We can also find a similar concept in the philosophy of Viktor Frankl. In some German editions the title of his masterpiece *Man’s Search for Meaning* includes the prefix “...trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen,” which can be translated as “...To Say ‘Yes’ to Life Nevertheless.” We can see Nietzsche’s *Ja-sagen* in Frankl’s title. According to Frankl, we are being questioned by life, daily and hourly, about the meaning of our own life. We have a responsibility to answer that question, and “saying yes to life” can be the most simple and fundamental response.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche and Frankl are two pioneers of affirmation-based approaches to meaning in life. In current academic discussions on philosophical approaches to meaning in life, we rarely encounter this type of thinking, but I believe it is time to reevaluate the importance of affirmation-based approaches in this field.

Another philosophical approach we must pay special attention to is “antinatalism,” which argues that it is better never to have been born, and hence that we should not give

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche (2005), p. 278.

<sup>3</sup> I borrowed this sentence from Morioka (2019), p. 90.

birth to children. Antinatalistic thought can be found in ancient Greek literature, ancient Buddhism, and modern thinkers such as Schopenhauer and Cioran. Today's most enthusiastic advocator of antinatalism is David Benatar. He argues that the proposition "coming into existence is always a harm" is correct, and his argument is therefore stronger than rival theories.<sup>4</sup> I believe that his argument in Chapter Two of his book *Better Never to Have Been* is incorrect, but I will defer my discussion of it to a future text.

As I have noted, antinatalism consists of two negations. The first is "birth negation," which argues that it is better never to have been born. The second is "procreation negation," which argues that we should not give birth to children. The logical consequence of the second thesis is the extinction of the human race. Birth affirmation is roughly the opposite concept of the first thesis of antinatalism, "birth negation." Please note that birth affirmation does not necessarily lead to the affirmation of procreation. Birth affirmation is saying "Yes" to my own having come into existence, but procreation affirmation is saying "Yes" to the coming into existence of my own or someone else's baby. These are two completely different things. In this chapter, I use the term "antinatalism," paying special attention to its first aspect, "birth negation," and leave the discussion of its second aspect, "procreation negation," to another paper.<sup>5</sup>

Honestly speaking, the idea of "birth negation" is deeply rooted in my mind. However, I want to create a philosophy of

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<sup>4</sup> Benatar (2006). See also Coates (2014), Lochmanová ed. (2020), and Morioka (2021, Chapter One of this book) for the history of antinatalistic thought.

<sup>5</sup> See Morioka (2021), Chapter One of this book.

birth affirmation and overcome my own birth negation, because I have already been born, and hence it is impossible for me to go back to the world where I had not been born. Therefore, my attempt to create a philosophy of birth affirmation is aimed, first of all, at the resolution of my own personal existential problem. In this sense, birth affirmation should be, basically, the affirmation of “my” having been born.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, I strongly believe that my philosophical struggle over this subject will be helpful to other people who have suffered from similar inner philosophical problems to mine.

## 2. The Psychological Dimension of Birth Affirmation

It is hard to clarify what exactly the affirmation of my having been born means. The sentence “I am truly glad that I have been born” seems straightforward at first sight, but upon closer scrutiny we soon realize that its exact meaning is unclear. The same can be said about the phrase “saying yes to my having been born.” What does it mean to “say yes” to my birth in the situation in which I have already been born into this world? You might think that birth affirmation is the claim that having been born is better than not having been born, but this is wrong. In my view, birth affirmation is not a claim that is justified by a comparison between two situations. I want to take a close look at this point.

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<sup>6</sup> In this chapter, I use the word “my”; however, strictly speaking, “my” does not mean the author (Morioka). I should use the words “the solipsistic being” and say “the affirmation of the solipsistic being’s having been born.” Regarding the concept of the solipsistic being, see Morioka (2019).

Birth affirmation has two dimensions: the psychological dimension and the philosophical dimension. The psychological dimension of birth affirmation is the dimension in which psychologically affirmative reactions to my having been born arise. The philosophical dimension of birth affirmation is the dimension in which a psychological affirmation or negation of my having been born is examined in terms of philosophy and metaphysics.

I will discuss the psychological dimension first and leave the discussion of the philosophical dimension to the next section. The psychological dimension of birth affirmation can be divided into two interpretations:

1) *The possible world interpretation*

Even if I could imagine a possible world in which my ideals were realized or my grave sufferings were resolved, I would never think, from the bottom of my heart, that it would have been better to have been born into that possible world.

2) *The anti-antinatalistic interpretation*

I would never think, from the bottom of my heart, that it would have been better not to have been born.

Let us examine the possible world interpretation first. This interpretation argues that birth affirmation means I would never wish, from the bottom of my heart, to have been born into a possible world where my problems have been resolved, even if I could vividly imagine such a possible world. For example, imagine a situation in which I have a severe physical disability, but being supported by sincere caregivers, supporters, and friends, I feel I am truly happy. In such a case,

even if I could imagine a possible world where my physical disability was completely cured, it would be possible that I would not wish, from the bottom of my heart, to have been born into that possible world. This should be called birth affirmation, because in this case I can believe that the fact that I have been born into this actual world does not need to be negated at all, and as a result, my birth into this actual world is strongly affirmed. Of course, this is no more than a rough sketch of the possible world interpretation of birth affirmation. There are a lot of things to be discussed even in this single case.

I would like to add one thing here. The possible world interpretation resembles Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati*. Nietzsche talks about the concept of *amor fati* in *Ecce Homo* as follows: "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity."<sup>7</sup> This means that people who live in the state of *amor fati* never wish for this world to be replaced by any other possible world. The possible world interpretation is an articulated version of Nietzsche's *amor fati*. The possible world interpretation claims that even if I could imagine *better* possible worlds than the actual one in which I live, I would never wish, from the bottom of my heart, to have been born into those *better* worlds. In the psychological dimension, we sometimes imagine *better* possible worlds and compare them with this actual world. Even in such a case, a person living in the state of birth affirmation never thinks that this world should have been one

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<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche (1967, 2000), p. 714. The original German is "Meine Formel für die Grösse am Menschen ist *amor fati*: dass man Nichts anders haben will, vorwärts nicht, rückwärts nicht, in alle Ewigkeit nicht."

of these *better* worlds.<sup>8</sup> (In the philosophical dimension, the situation becomes totally different. I will discuss this later.)

Let us consider, next, the anti-antinatalistic interpretation. Antinatalists, such as Schopenhauer and David Benatar, argue that if we compare one's having been born and one's not having been born, one's not having been born is better than one's having been born. They argue that this proposition is universally applicable to any person's birth. It is true that there are many people who have this kind of worldview and lament their own coming into this world. Reflecting on my own experience, sometimes I, too, am inclined to think that my not having been born would have been better, especially when thinking about what I have done to my loved ones and friends. This shows that this kind of antinatalism (birth negation) is rooted even inside me.

However, since it is impossible to go back to my birth and erase it from this world, what I should do is, I believe, not cling to an unrealizable alternative and lament it, but try to find a way of dismantling the thought of "better never to have been" that has been inscribed on a deep layer of my mind. This dismantling of inner birth negation should open up the possibility of saying "Yes" to my having been born. This is the anti-antinatalistic interpretation of birth affirmation.

When I reach either of these two psychological states, or a combination of them, I can say I am in a state of birth affirmation in the psychological dimension. It should be noted that in order to reach a state of birth affirmation, I do not need to affirm every event that has occurred in my life. I can affirm

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<sup>8</sup> Please note that there is no inconsistency in a situation in which this person, who is in a state of birth affirmation, tries to improve her current life conditions in the future.

my life *as a whole*, even if there have been events in my life that cannot be affirmed.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The Philosophical Dimension of Birth Affirmation

Let us move on to the philosophical dimension of birth affirmation.

The philosophical dimension of birth affirmation can also be divided into two interpretations:

1) *The possible world interpretation*

The comparison of betterness or worseness between a possible world and the actual world is impossible.

2) *The anti-antinatalistic interpretation*

The comparison of betterness or worseness between my having been born and my not having been born is impossible.

In the psychological dimension, I can imagine other possible worlds and compare them with this actual world, and I can wish I had been born into another world, or I can wish I had never been born into any possible world. In the psychological dimension, this way of thinking makes sense, but in the philosophical dimension, it causes serious problems.

Let us take a close look at the possible world interpretation. At first sight, it seems possible to compare this actual world and another possible world and to judge which

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<sup>9</sup> Since there is not enough space to discuss this topic here, I would advise those who are interested in it to see Morioka (2019).

world is better than the other. However, I believe that the comparison of betterness or worseness between the actual world and a possible world cannot be made correctly.

Imagine the pilots of the Enola Gay, who were about to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. In this moment, they could imagine two possible worlds. One was a world in which about 100,000 residents were to be killed instantly. The other was a world in which the pilots did not press the button and a mass killing was avoided. We can correctly compare the betterness or worseness between these two possible worlds, because these two possible worlds are on the same level in their modality. We can say the latter possible world is better than the former, or vice versa.

Next, imagine a civilian of Hiroshima who was actually watching the burning town and piles of charred bodies in every corner of the city just after the dropping of the atomic bomb. In this case, it is impossible to correctly compare the betterness or worseness between the two worlds: the actual world that was unfolding before this person's eyes and the possible world in which such devastation never occurred, the peaceful world of Hiroshima at 8:15 a.m., August 6, 1945.

The former world is the actual world that the person actually experiences. The latter world is a possible world that the person can only imagine amid the actual devastation surrounding her. These two worlds are situated on completely different levels in their modality. Hence, it is impossible to correctly compare the betterness or worseness between them. Such comparisons are impossible because while the actual world that I live in is a world of constant and dynamic change, in other words, a world of becoming (*Werden*), possible worlds are worlds that I have just imagined or posited, which

are not under the influence of becoming and dynamic change. The world of actual becoming cannot be compared with any other imagined world in its betterness or worseness. This kind of understanding of modality strongly contradicts the modal realism of David Lewis, which insists that every possible world has its own actuality as an indexical. I will not go deeper into the discussion of modal theories here, but we must be aware of the fact that the discussion of birth affirmation needs more clarification from the perspective of possible world semantics.<sup>10</sup>

Let us move on to the anti-antinatalistic interpretation.

This interpretation argues that the comparison of betterness or worseness between my having been born and my not having been born is impossible. There are two reasons for this. One is the same reason I examined in the possible world interpretation, which argues that it is impossible to compare the betterness or worseness of the actual world and a possible world. If the world in which I have never been born can be considered an example of a possible world, the same logic we have just examined above should also apply in this case.

The second reason is unique to the anti-antinatalistic interpretation, which argues that a comparison between them is impossible because the state of my not having been born cannot be correctly posited. Please note that my point is not that the state of my non-existence cannot be correctly posited. By using counter-factual conditionals, I can talk about the world in which I do not exist, and I can also talk about the betterness or worseness of that counter-factual world. My point is that “my non-existence” and “my not having been

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<sup>10</sup> I have done some of the discussions in Morioka (2020).

born” refer to completely different states of affairs. The former refers to a situation in which I do not exist in the universe. This is a proposition concerning my *existence*. The latter refers to a situation in which I have not come into being in the universe. This is a proposition concerning my *becoming*. These two situations are completely different. It is very important to keep this in mind when discussing this topic.

In the case of my non-existence, I can talk about what the world would be like if I did not exist at all. However, in the case of my not having been born, I cannot correctly posit the world in which I have not been born. The reason is that if I try to imagine the world in which I have not been born, I have to imagine a world in which the “I” that is now trying to imagine that world has not been created, but this is logically impossible. In the case of my non-existence, I can stand in a safe zone located outside of the question “Is my non-existence better than my existence?” and think about the question as a bystander.

However, in the case of my not having been born, I cannot remain standing in such a bystander’s position. Positing the situation of “my not having been born” forces me to actually go back to my birth and annihilate my coming into this world. That is because the negation of the static “my existence” does not affect the “I” that is thinking about this negation; however, the negation of the dynamic “my becoming” reaches the “I” that is thinking about this negation, because this actual “I” is a direct outcome of that becoming.

In other words, my existence can be counter-factualized, but my becoming cannot be counter-factualized. Positing the situation of “my not having been born” forces me to actually go back to my birth and annihilate my coming into this world,

but this is impossible. Hence, I cannot successfully posit the situation of “my not having been born,” and it is therefore impossible to compare the betterness or worseness of my having been born and my not having been born. As I mentioned before, this is a corollary of the traditional philosophical problem of “being” and “becoming,” which has been discussed from Plato to Nietzsche and Heidegger. I would like to call this problem — namely, the problem that my non-existence can be posited but my not having been born cannot be posited — “the problem of my non-existence and my non-becoming.”

We can also illustrate the difference between the impossibility of comparison in the possible world interpretation and the impossibility of comparison in the anti-antinatalistic interpretation as follows. In the possible world interpretation, the subject “I” exists in both worlds: actually in the actual world and hypothetically in a possible world. On the other hand, in the anti-antinatalistic interpretation, while the subject “I” exists in the actual world, the hypothetical world where I have not been born cannot be posited, so we never know whether the subject “I” exists there. Hence, we can say that the natures of the two interpretations are completely different in their impossible-ness of comparison.

This argument also needs further elaboration and clarification, but I believe that I have succeeded in presenting the basic framework of the concept of “birth affirmation.” Putting together the discussions of the psychological dimension of birth affirmation and the philosophical dimension of birth affirmation, we can conclude the following:

### The psychological dimension of birth affirmation

1) *The possible world interpretation*: Even if I could imagine a possible world in which my ideals were realized or my grave sufferings were resolved, I would never think, from the bottom of my heart, that it would have been better to have been born into that possible world.

2) *The anti-antinatalistic interpretation*: I would never think, from the bottom of my heart, that it would have been better not to have been born.

### The philosophical dimension of birth affirmation

The comparison of betterness or worseness between the actual world and a possible world and between my having been born and my not having been born is impossible.

Before the discussion undertaken in this chapter, it was difficult to give a clear answer to the question “What does it mean to say ‘yes’ to my having been born?” Now, I believe, we can present a plausible response.

Let us turn our attention to the relationship between the above two dimensions. In the philosophical dimension, it is impossible to compare betterness or worseness between “the actual world and a possible world” and between “my having been born and my not having been born.” However, sometimes I am inclined to compare them in the psychological dimension and negate the worth of my having been born to a life I am actually living. When falling into this way of thinking, what I should do first is go to the philosophical dimension and make sure that such a comparison does not make sense

philosophically, and then come back again to the psychological dimension.

What I should do next is pursue the possibility of thinking, “Even if I am inclined to think that it was better to have been born into another possible world, or better never to have been born, I should never cling to such an unrealizable alternative and lament it but try to find a way of dismantling that idea.” If this kind of positive and mutually supportive combination occurs between two dimensions, it will certainly serve as a solid foundation for our pursuit of birth affirmation.

Considering all of the above, we can say the following. In the psychological dimension, the first step of birth affirmation is to *become free from* the idea that I wish I had been born to a certain possible world, or that I wish I had never been born. In the philosophical dimension, the first step of birth affirmation is to *know* that the comparison of betterness or worseness of the actual world and a possible world or of my having been born and my not having been born is impossible.

What we have further to consider is whether this first step is sufficient to fully establish the concept of birth affirmation, or whether something more affirmative should be added for it to be the true basis of birth affirmation. This is a question we will have to tackle in a future discussion.

Camil Golub discusses an important issue concerning our affirmative attitudes to our actual lives in his 2019 paper “Personal Value, Biographical Identity, and Retrospective Attitudes.” He writes, “Sometimes, however, we judge that certain lives would have been better for us, all things considered, and yet do not regret having missed out on those lives. Indeed, we affirm our actual lives when comparing them

to those better alternatives.”<sup>11</sup> This is similar to what we have called the “possible world interpretation in the psychological dimension of birth affirmation.” Golub calls it the “conservative bias” and argues that such an affirmation is rationally explicable.

Golub proposes two concepts: “personal value” and “biographical identity.” Personal value is “our attachments to certain relationships, projects, and other valuable things in our past.”<sup>12</sup> Golub argues that such attachments can lead us to a state of affirmation of our actual lives. Biographical identity means an identity that includes certain valuable things in our past that have become “part of who we are” as essential ingredients of our current self.<sup>13</sup> He argues that affirming our biographical identity can also lead us to reasonably affirm our actual lives even if they are not better than imagined, preferable hypothetical lives.

Golub’s argument successfully demonstrates how the affirmation of one’s actual life can become a reasonable judgement even if it is not considered a better choice. His argument may also be applied to our possible world interpretation in the psychological dimension of birth affirmation. However, there are two things that concern me. The first is that he does not clearly define the concepts of “affirmation” and “regret” in his argument. The second is that he does not fully discuss the importance of the philosophical dimension of birth affirmation, which I have extensively addressed in this section.<sup>14</sup> I think a lot of things remain

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<sup>11</sup> Golub (2019), p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> Golub (2019), p. 79.

<sup>13</sup> Golub (2019), p. 82.

<sup>14</sup> He says that Velleman’s view is “far too radical,” but I do not necessarily

undiscussed surrounding this topic despite Golub's valuable contribution.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. Comparison with Other Related Concepts

There are several concepts similar to birth affirmation. Here I want to take up three concepts — namely, “self-affirmation,” “the affirmation of existence,” and “the affirmation of life” — and further clarify what exactly birth affirmation means in contrast with them.

Self-affirmation means to say “Yes” to oneself. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines self-affirmation as “the act of affirming one’s own worthiness and value as an individual for beneficial effect.”<sup>16</sup> In social psychology, self-affirmation is considered a source of resilience when one’s integrity is threatened. Claude M. Steele demonstrated in an experiment that when people’s integrity was threatened, they “eliminated the effect of specific self-threats by affirming central, valued aspects of the self.”<sup>17</sup> This is one of the important aspects of the theory of self-affirmation in social psychology.

The difference between self-affirmation and birth affirmation is clear. While self-affirmation is to say “Yes” to oneself, birth affirmation is to say “Yes” to one’s having been born. The former means the affirmation of one’s worthiness, value, or integrity in cases where there are threats from the outside. The latter means the affirmation of the state of affairs

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think so. Golub (2019), p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> I would like to thank Ikuro Suzuki for his discussion of Golub’s paper in a meeting of Hokkaido University’s research group on meaning in life held in February 2021.

<sup>16</sup> “Self-affirmation” in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.

<sup>17</sup> Steele (1988), p. 289.

of my having been born into this world. This means that birth affirmation is not necessarily the affirmation of the worthiness or value of one's self. We can also say that birth affirmation is not necessarily equal to the concept of self-esteem.

The affirmation of existence is a term that has been used in Japanese disability ethics. Since the 1970s, Japanese disability activists have criticized our mainstream society for maintaining the eugenic idea that disabled people should never exist in society. Disability activists argued that no matter how physically disabled, weak, unproductive, and burdensome to their family, disabled people's existence should be protected, highly respected, and affirmed. They call this idea the affirmation of existence. Based on this idea, they have criticized the killing of disabled children, selective abortion, and new eugenics. I am not sure how this term has been used in the English-speaking world, but I believe that readers can easily grasp the central meaning of this term that has been used in the Japanese disabled people's movement.<sup>18</sup>

The concept of the affirmation of existence is very close to birth affirmation. Their goals are almost the same. The difference is while the former mainly functions as a concept for resisting social pressure from the majority of people in our society, the latter does not usually function as such. Birth affirmation can function as an important life question for both the minority and the majority.

The affirmation of life generally means the affirmation of our being alive itself, or the affirmation of our way of being as life, which consists of such aspects as birth, growth, giving

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<sup>18</sup> See Morioka (2001), Chapter 6; and Morioka (2015a).

birth, aging, and death. This is the affirmation of the fact that we are not in the realm of death and that we are not just inorganic matter. Here I would like to focus on Nietzsche's concept of affirmation. He writes in *The Will to Power* as follows:

If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things; and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event—and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed.<sup>19</sup>

This is considered one of the most extreme affirmations of life, which extends towards all existence in the universe. Nietzsche says that if we affirm one single moment of our life, it necessarily means that we are affirming our entire life. This is because in order for us to be able to have one single moment of affirmation, all the events in our life that have prepared that moment were needed for it to happen; therefore, all of these moments are justified and affirmed as valuable supportive factors that have prepared that single moment. This is a basic idea underlying Nietzsche's concept of *eternal recurrence*.

The Nietzschean affirmation of life looks similar to our birth affirmation, but there are fundamental differences between the two. Firstly, Nietzsche does not specifically talk about the affirmation of my having been born. What he talks

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<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche (1967), pp. 532-533, no.1032.

about is a dynamic relationship between the affirmation of a single life event and the affirmation of one's entire life. The affirmation of one's coming into being is not situated in the center of his philosophy of life. Secondly, in his philosophy of *eternal recurrence*, all of the past events that have prepared a current affirmative moment should be wished or desired to happen again in the future time and time again eternally, but this way of thinking is absurd and morally wrong. We should not wish that misery and devastation, such as the dropping of atomic bombs and the terrorist attack on the Twin Tower Buildings, will happen again in the future, even if those events have remotely prepared the moment of bliss and happiness I am experiencing here and now. Birth affirmation cannot support this kind of thinking.

## 5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to clarify the concept of birth affirmation from the viewpoint of philosophy and metaphysics. I am now developing a philosophical framework called "the philosophy of birth affirmation" based on the concept of birth affirmation and other related ideas. I believe that this philosophy can become one of the most promising approaches to difficult problems concerning meaning in life.

A former version of this chapter was presented online as a keynote speech at the Third International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life, held at the University of Birmingham on July 23, 2020. During and after the conference, I received valuable comments and suggestions from participants. I would like to offer brief replies to some of them here.

The first question was why I added the phrase “from the bottom of my heart” to the definition of birth affirmation. The point is what role the phrase “from the bottom of my heart” plays in the sentence “to think from the bottom of my heart that I am truly glad that I have been born.” My answer is that by adding that phrase, the sentence can become a truly existential one. I want to place special emphasis on this point because for me the question of birth affirmation is not just puzzle-solving. I am talking about my own existential value judgment about my own having been born. This is not a question of the birth affirmation of an imaginary person. The topic here is my own birth affirmation. And what is also questioned here is *your* affirmation, dear reader, the affirmation of *your* own having been born. In my 2019 paper, I called this dimension a “solipsistic layer” in the pursuit of meaning in life. The phrase “from the bottom of my heart” signifies this layer.

The second question was whether I can give affirmation to someone else’s birth. For example, is it possible for parents to give birth affirmation to their baby by saying “I am truly glad that you have been born”? Contrary to many readers’ expectation, my reply is that this is not birth affirmation, because birth affirmation must be, by definition, the affirmation of my own birth, not the affirmation of someone else’s birth. Of course, it is conceivable that a parent may say to their baby, “I am truly glad that you have been born,” and I would find this to be a moving scene; however, this is not the birth affirmation we have discussed. It might instead be called “procreation affirmation.” It is important to understand that the situation in which you say to yourself that “I am truly glad that I have been born” and the situation in which I say to you

that “I am truly glad that you have been born” are different.

The third question concerned the optimistic nature of birth affirmation; that is to say, the concept of birth affirmation seems to shed light solely on the positive side of one’s life. To answer this question, I would like to talk about birth affirmation in my own case. In my own personal case, I have never reached a state of birth affirmation. Not only that, I sometimes sink deeply into the thought that I wish I had never been born into this world. I have been in the midst of birth negation since I entered adulthood, and I have not escaped completely from this mental state. This is why I have conducted philosophical investigations into birth affirmation for such a long time. The attempt to create a philosophy of birth affirmation has both positive and negative sides. The concept of birth affirmation is not necessarily colored by an optimistic view of life.

The fourth question was as follows: “Is a life of birth affirmation better than that of birth negation?” I have a solid answer to this question. A life of birth affirmation is not better or worse than that of birth negation because these two lives cannot be compared in terms of their betterness or worseness, which I argued in Section Three of this chapter. I may live and die a life of birth affirmation, or I may live and die a life of birth negation. If I live and die a life of birth affirmation, it is the one and only actual life of mine, and it cannot be compared with any other possible lives of birth negation in their betterness or worseness. The same is true of a life of birth negation.

The fifth question was about the timing of my achieving a state of birth affirmation. I am sometimes asked whether I am imagining the moment just before my death as the timing

I say to myself that I am truly glad that I have been born. I used to think this way the past,<sup>20</sup> but I do not think so now. I think I can reach a state of birth affirmation at any point in my life. It might be the last day of my life, some day in the future, or just here and now. What happens after I reach such a state? A state of birth affirmation might continue for a long period of time, but it might soon disappear. Birth affirmation is not like eternal life or *nirvana*. It is not certain whether I can keep it forever after I reach such a state. The problem of timing of birth affirmation has a close relationship with the controversy concerning the part-life and the whole-life in the philosophy of life's meaning.<sup>21</sup>

The sixth question was whether the philosophy of birth affirmation argues that every one of us should reach a state of birth affirmation. This is a misunderstanding I frequently encounter when I talk about birth affirmation. I do not think that all of us should *reach* a state of birth affirmation, or even that all of us should *aim* to reach this state. Birth affirmation is a concept that is needed for people who wish to be liberated from the thought of birth negation lurking inside them. There must be many people who do not need this concept in the pursuit of their life goals.

The last question was whether birth affirmation is a subjective concept or an objective concept. In the field of the philosophy of life's meaning, there has been a huge controversy over whether meaning in life is subjective or objective. Regarding this problem, I have proposed the concept of the "heart of meaning in life" and claimed that

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<sup>20</sup> For example, in my 2007 paper.

<sup>21</sup> See Metz (2013), pp. 37-58.

there is a solipsistic layer in meaning in life that cannot be compared with anything whatsoever.<sup>22</sup> I would like to answer in the same way to the question of birth affirmation. Birth affirmation is neither subjective nor objective, but solipsistic. I will clarify this point in my future papers on birth affirmation.

I have illustrated a brief outline of the concept of birth affirmation. Although what I have discussed in this chapter is just an incomplete summary of the whole picture and I have yet to clarify its details, I believe that the concept of birth affirmation will be able to break new ground in the field of the philosophy of life's meaning.

\* I would like to express my gratitude to those who asked me valuable questions after my presentation at the Third International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life held online at the University of Birmingham on July 23, 2020.

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<sup>22</sup> See Morioka (2015b, Chapter Two of this book) and Morioka (2019).

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## CHAPTER FOUR

# The Trolley Problem and the Dropping of Atomic Bombs

### 1. Introduction

Brian Short provides a concise explanation of a standard version of the trolley problem in a recent issue of the *LSA Magazine*.

You're standing next to a train track when you spot a locomotive approaching. Farther down the track are five people in the path of the train but too far away for you to shout a warning to them. A lever next to you would allow you to divert the train – saving the lives of five people – onto a track with only one person standing on it. If you knew that one person would die if you flipped the lever, would you still do it?"<sup>1</sup>

You have only two choices: do nothing and let the trolley run five people over, or divert the trolley and let it run one person over.

The trolley problem was first introduced by Philippa Foot

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<sup>1</sup> Short (2015), p. 63.

in her paper, “The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect,” published in 1967, and it has been further developed by Judith Jarvis Thomson and other philosophers up until the present day.

However, it is worth noting that the original logic inherent in the trolley problem had already appeared twenty years before Philippa Foot’s paper. That is to say, we can find almost the same logic in the 1947 article, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” by Henry Lewis Stimson, who served as US Secretary of War during World War II.

## 2. The Dropping of Atomic Bombs

In his article, Stimson recalls his and his colleagues’ decision-making process concerning the use of atomic bombs at the end of World War II. Stimson was very pessimistic about the surrender of the Japanese government. He writes:

We estimated that if we should be forced to carry this plan to its conclusion, the major fighting would not end until the latter part of 1946, at the earliest. I was informed that such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties, to American forces alone. Additional large losses might be expected among our allies, and, of course, if our campaign were successful and if we could judge by previous experience, enemy casualties would be much larger than our own.<sup>2</sup>

He decided to use an atomic bomb and end the war. He

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<sup>2</sup> Stimson (1947), p. 102.

thought that an atomic bomb would give an effective shock to his enemy. He writes:

Such an effective shock would save many times the number of lives, both Americans and Japanese, that it would cost.<sup>3</sup>

This is the main logic of his decision to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. He believed that without the atomic bomb the number of American and Japanese casualties would have been much larger.

Had the war continued until the projected invasion on November 1, additional fire raids of B-20's would have been more destructive of life and property than the very limited number of atomic raids which we could have executed in the same period.<sup>4</sup>

Stimson thought that if America did nothing special and continued its conventional battles, a huge number of American and Japanese soldiers' lives would be lost; however, if America used an atomic bomb, the loss of lives would be much smaller. This is exactly the same logic as is found in the trolley problem.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stimson (1947), p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> Stimson (1947), p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> I have always wondered why there are so few English language articles that discuss the dropping of atomic bombs as a typical example of the trolley problem. Phil Badger talks about atomic bombs in "How to Get Off Our Trolleys," but he only discusses the outward similarities between them (Badger [2011]). In *The Trolley Problem or Would You Throw the Fat Guy Off the Bridge?*, Thomas Cathcart mentions atomic bombs on page 110, but

This was the case not only for the Japanese, but for the US soldiers on the frontlines who were then waiting for landing operations on the main islands of Japan. If the experiment of the atomic bomb had been unsuccessful, the soldiers on the frontlines would have had to land and continue desperate fighting against an enemy fully prepared to die. Paul Fussell was one of those soldiers. He writes in his provocative and moving article entitled, “Thank God for the Atom Bomb,” as follows:

When the atom bombs were dropped and news began to circulate that “Operation Olympic” would not, after all, be necessary, when we learned to our astonishment

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he gives only eight lines to this topic (Cathcart [2013], p. 110). In the book *Would You Kill the Fat Man?: The Trolley Problem and What Your Answer Tells Us about Right and Wrong*, David Edmonds mentions Elizabeth Anscombe’s anger when hearing that Oxford University was to give an honorary degree to Harry S. Truman, who decided to drop atomic bombs on two cities (Edmonds [2014], pp. 22-25. See also Anscombe [1957]); however, Edmonds does not give any detailed discussions about the relationship between the trolley problem and atomic bombs.

In connection to this, it is worth noting that in her 1976 paper, “Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem,” Judith Jarvis Thomson proposes two imaginary cases in which Russians launch an atom bomb towards New York. In the first case, the president of the United States, whose name is Harry (the same as Truman), deflects that atom bomb toward Worcester. In the second case, the president, whose name is Irving, drops an American atom bomb on Worcester and pulverizes the Russian one by its blast. Thomson suggests that these two cases share a similar logic that is found in the trolley problem (Thomson [1976], p. 208). Here Thomson hints that these two imaginary cases have some connection with Hiroshima or Nagasaki by naming one of the presidents “Harry,” however, she never directly mentions these two Japanese cities so as not to be entangled in a provocative ethical debate on the dropping of atomic bombs in World War II. James M. Fisher and Mark Ravizza discuss Thomson’s 1976 paper and stress the horribleness of the launching of an atomic bomb, but do not mention Hiroshima or Nagasaki (Fisher and Ravizza [1992], pp. 68-69).

that we would not be obliged in a few months to rush up the beaches near Tokyo assault-firing while being machine-gunned, mortared, and shelled, for all the practiced phlegm of our tough facades we broke down and cried with relief and joy. We were going to live. We were going to grow to adulthood after all.<sup>6</sup>

Fussell was inside the trolley problem; he was among the five workers on the train track. He saw a trolley bearing down on him and then suddenly it was diverted and he was saved by a hair's breadth. For Fussell, the trolley problem was an actual situation he faced.

So, what happened to the one person on the other train track? Fussell refers to the destiny of his enemies on Japanese soil in a straightforward manner. He quotes from the survivors' testimonies such as “[w]hile taking my severely wounded wife out to the river bank ..., I was horrified indeed at the sight of a stark naked man standing in the rain with his eyeball in his palm.”<sup>7</sup> Fussell writes about the drawings made by atomic bomb survivors:

These childlike drawings and paintings are of skin hanging down, breasts torn off, people bleeding and burning, dying mothers nursing dead babies. A bloody woman holds a bloody child in the ruins of a house, and the artist remembers her calling, “Please help this child! Someone, please help this child. Please help! Someone, please.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Fussell (1981), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Fussell (1981), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Fussell (1981), p. 19. See also Wingfield-Hayes (2015). In the article

When I read articles or hear presentations on the trolley problem, such stories come into my mind all at once and overwhelm me.

Every year I give a talk about the trolley problem in my college class and ask the students what they would do if they were in that situation and only two choices were available to them. The majority of them reply to me that they would save five people by diverting the trolley to the other track. Then I talk about the dropping of atomic bombs on Japanese cities in the summer of 1945, and point out that the decision to divert the trolley, which the majority of the students chose, shares the same logic as the US government's decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that killed more than 200,000 Japanese people, including civilians. They are shocked to hear my argument and for the first time start to seriously rethink the meaning of the trolley problem. Most Japanese do not think atomic bombs were necessary to end the war, or that the dropping of atomic bombs was morally justified to save the lives of American and Japanese people that would have been lost without them. Since the students also share that sentiment, the fact that they behaved like the US government when faced with the trolley problem places a heavy moral dilemma on their shoulders. Young students here learn the story of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at least once in

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entitled, "A Tricycle, a Toddler and an Atomic Bomb," on the CNN website, you can see a burned tricycle for toddlers found in Hiroshima city.

<<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/05/world/hiroshima-survivors-artifacts/>> (Visited August 15, 2016). You can also see the photo of a woman carrying a burnt-to-black baby in her arms on the NHK website.

<<http://www.nhk.or.jp/special/detail/2015/0806/>> (Visited August 15, 2016).

their elementary or junior high school days. At the time of the bombings on August 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, people in the Japanese islands offer silent prayers for the victims of the atomic bombs. For the Japanese, the dropping of atomic bombs is a symbol of peace and prayer. During these two days, many Japanese people yearn for peace, non-killing, and non-violence.

### 3. The Problem of the Trolley Problem

Before going on to our analysis of the ethical dimension of the trolley problem, let us first examine whether the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima is really an appropriate example for discussing the trolley problem. Looking back on history, we could say that there was a third alternative for the allied forces, that is, withdrawing the army from the front line and seeing how the Japanese government would react, while continuing tough diplomatic negotiations with them. This choice was possible because the Japanese army had been on the verge of collapse since the battle of Okinawa, and Japan would have had no other way but to surrender even if the allied forces had not done anything to the Japanese mainland. If this is true, it means that the trolley's brake was not actually broken. If the allied forces had stopped fighting, the Japanese army might have fought back at them using their remaining aircraft and warships. This means that the Japanese army was not actually bound to the track.

Of course, there are historians who doubt a third possibility of this kind. For example, Francis Winters, following Barton Bernstein and other scholars' discussions, argues that if the allied forces had continued conventional bombings and a blockade of Japanese ports, and had sent the

message that the role of the emperor would be unchanged in post-war Japanese society, the dropping of atomic bombs would not have been necessary; however, in that case, we would have witnessed the army of the Soviet Union entering the mainland of Japan instead, which would not have been good news for Truman.<sup>9</sup> The actual situation was far more complicated than the standard trolley problem.

Considering all these factors, it can be concluded that the historical event of the dropping of atomic bombs itself should not be regarded as an event that *literally embodied* the trolley problem. However, at the same time, we can say that the *decision* to drop the bombs was made according to the way of thinking inherent in the *logic* of the trolley problem, and hence, in this sense, the historical event of the dropping of atomic bombs contained the *logic* of the trolley problem in its *decision-making* process. We should clearly distinguish between these two concepts. Hiroshima can be considered an appropriate example of the trolley problem in the latter context.

The way of thinking inherent in the logic of the trolley problem was crystalized in Stimson's type of *justification* of atomic bombs. The possibility is either landing or atomic bombs. The advancement of the allied forces toward the Japanese mainland was taken for granted. The brake of the allied forces was completely broken. The lever was in the hands of Stimson and Truman, who were sitting in a safety zone far from the Far East.

The trolley problem in which a bystander pulls the lever was invented by Thomson in her article, "Trolley Problem,"

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<sup>9</sup> Winters (2009), pp. 182-192.

published in 1985. Interestingly, in the original trolley case proposed by Foot in 1967, the person who pulls the lever is not a “bystander,” but the “driver” of the trolley. Thomson sees a sharp difference between these two cases. She says, “[T]he trolley driver is, after all, captain of the trolley. He is charged by the trolley company with responsibility for the safety of his passengers and anyone else who might be harmed by the trolley he drives. The bystander at the switch, on the other hand, is a private person who just happens to be there.”<sup>10</sup> According to Thomson, the driver is responsible for the people who might be harmed, but a bystander does not have such responsibility.<sup>11</sup> In the atomic bomb case, Stimson and Truman were considered to be the persons who should take responsibility for the people who might be harmed by the then ongoing war. Hence, Stimson’s type of *justification* of the dropping of atomic bombs should be regarded as a “driver” version of the trolley problem.

My conclusion is therefore that the dropping of atomic bombs was a typical example of events that contained the *logic* of the trolley problem both in their *decision-making* processes and *justifications*.

Reading articles and books on the trolley problem from the perspective of the dropping of atomic bombs, I have gradually realized that discussions of the trolley problem share a series of fundamental problems, which I refer to collectively as “the problem of the trolley problem.” This problem has five aspects. Let us examine them one by one.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Thomson (1985), p. 1397.

<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Thomson argues that it is permissible for a bystander to take responsibility (p. 1398).

<sup>12</sup> When hearing the trolley problem, what comes to our minds first is that in

### *The First Aspect: “Rarity”*

The first aspect is that the trolley problem is often considered to be a rarely occurring problem although in reality there have been many events in human history that contained the logic of trolley problem in their decision-making processes.

In the paper, “Revisiting External Validity: Concerns about Trolley Problems and Other Sacrificial Dilemmas in Moral Psychology,” Christopher W. Bauman et al. write as follows:

In sum, philosophers developed trolley problems as *rhetorical devices* that could help them articulate the implications of moral principles in concrete, albeit highly unusual, situations. Although others have criticized the use of trolley problems in philosophy (e.g., Hare, 1981; Pincoffs, 1986; Singer, 1999), our purpose is to point out the potential limitations of using such unrealistic scenarios in empirical science.<sup>13</sup>

They seem to think that the trolley problem is a rhetorical device that invents a highly unusual situation, but their presentation is fairly misleading. We have to distinguish between the following four notions: the logic of the trolley

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this thought experiment the information about the victims’ names, genders, ages, and their relationships to us are all missing. This characteristic of “anonymity” is certainly an important feature of the trolley problem; however, this is shared with many other thought experiments in philosophy, and is not peculiar to the trolley problem. Thus, I do not include it in the list of aspects of the problem of the trolley problem.

<sup>13</sup> Bauman et al. (2014), p. 539.

problem, an event that literally embodies that logic, an event that contains that logic in its decision-making process, and the discourse that depicts that logic. It is of course possible that five people are actually bound to one track and one person to another track and the brakes of a running trolley are broken, but this is surely an extremely rare scenario as Bauman et al. correctly point out. However, as we can easily imagine, there have been many historical events that contained that logic in their decision-making processes, especially in times of war, and there must be other smaller-scale events or incidents that contain a logic similar to that of the trolley problem in our society, such as the case of a car with broken brakes speeding toward a group of pedestrians, in which if the driver turns left or right a very small number of pedestrians will be run over (the recent question of whether a self-driving car's artificial intelligence should be equipped with the ability to make moral decisions in such a situation may be an even better example of this). Ordering Kamikaze suicide attacks or the work of extinguishment inside a damaged nuclear power plant might be another example. Thus, it is a paralogism to think that because events that *literally embody* the trolley problem rarely occur, events that contain the *logic* of the trolley problem in their decision-making processes are also rare.

Barbara H. Fried expresses the same point as follows: “[T]he trolley literature has inadvertently led both authors and consumers of that literature to regard tragic choices *themselves* as rarely occurring and freakish in nature. But they are neither of these things. They are ubiquitous and for the most part quotidian ....”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Fried (2012), p. 7. Italics by Fried.

Although the logic of the trolley problem can be found in many historical events and in our current society, we are often inclined to think that because the trolley problem is based on a highly unrealistic scenario, we rarely encounter it in the real world, with the exception of armchair philosophers' thought experiments. This is the first aspect of the problem of the trolley problem.

*The Second Aspect: "Inevitability"*

In the standard trolley problem, it is strongly postulated that the brakes of a running trolley are broken and we do not have any means to stop the trolley before it runs over people on the track. The choices left to us are only two: to pull the lever and kill one person, or to do nothing and let five people die. However, when it is applied to actual events, this way of thinking sometimes leads to a problematic result.

For instance, Stimson's interpretation, which is a typical example of the trolley problem, took it for granted that the advancement of the then ongoing war was inevitable and there were no other choices but to either land on the main islands or drop an atomic bomb. However, in reality, as I discussed earlier, there might have been a third alternative—that the US withdraw their forces from the frontline and wait for the surrender of the Japanese government, no matter how small that possibility would have been. Hence, we must say that Stimson's interpretation worked as a device to turn our eyes away from this third possibility and to make us believe that there were actually only two choices, landing or dropping the atomic bombs.

Once we look at actual social events from the perspective of the trolley problem, we are naturally inclined to think that

it is utterly impossible for us to stop the running trolley no matter what measures we take, and the idea that we might still be able to stop the trolley in some way gradually disappears from our consciousness. This is the second aspect of the problem.

Allen Wood explains the same point in a different manner. The trolley problem cuts out various important factors from a given situation and tries to narrow its scope; however, in the real world, those discarded factors can play a decisive role when making a difficult decision. Wood argues that “[i]n the process, an important range of considerations that are, should be, and in real life would be absolutely decisive in our moral thinking about these cases in the real world is systematically abstracted out. The philosophical consequences of doing this seem to me utterly disastrous, and to render trolley problems far worse than useless for moral philosophy.”<sup>15</sup>

### *The Third Aspect: “Safety Zone”*

In the trolley problem it is usually supposed that we are standing next to the track or driving inside the trolley, completely protected from what is to occur on the tracks. We are inside a safety zone. Those who are going to be killed are the people on the tracks, not us. While being protected inside a safety zone, we are discussing who should be saved, or killed—people on the right track, or people on the left track.

In the case of atomic bombs, the top commanders (Stimson, Truman, and others) were discussing whether or not to drop them inside a safety zone, located far from the

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<sup>15</sup> Wood (2011), p. 70. He concludes that the principle of human dignity “may give us reasons [for] refusing to look at the world in the way trolley problems tend to induce us to look at it” (p. 80).

battlefield, where their lives were completely protected from direct, lethal effects caused by the landing or the dropping of atomic bombs. The third aspect of the problem is that the lives of people who discuss the trolley problem are protected inside a safety zone and that they can discuss it without being bothered by the possibility that their lives might be threatened by an actual trolley. Of course, this is a characteristic found not only in the trolley problem. Many other ethical dilemmas also share this problem. But I want to stress this aspect here because we tend to forget the fact that we are situated in a privileged position when thinking about this kind of armchair thought experiment.

At the same time, we have to pay special attention to the trolley problems in which the life of the person who decides whether or not to pull the lever is to be taken away as the result of her own decision making. Let us take an example from Thomson's 2008 paper.

In this paper, Thomson proposes two new variations of the trolley problem, namely, the "Bystander's Three Options" case and the "Driver's Three Options" case. In the Bystander's Three Options case, when the bystander does nothing five people die, when he throws the switch to the right one person dies, and when he throws the switch to the left the trolley kills him as he is standing on the left track. Similarly, in the Driver's Three Options case, when the driver does nothing five people die, when he turns it to the right one person dies, and when he turns it to the left the trolley crashes into a stone wall and he dies.<sup>16</sup>

In both cases, the person who decides whether or not to

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<sup>16</sup> Thomson (2008), pp. 364, 369.

turn the trolley is under threat of being killed by his own decision making, and hence in this sense, the person in question is not considered to be located in a safety zone. He is not in a privileged position anymore. His life can be taken away. Thus, the third aspect of the problem does not seem to exist here.

However, I want to add an important point. In the above two cases, while the person who decides the direction of the trolley is not located in a safety zone, the person who proposes these cases, namely Judith Jarvis Thomson herself, is still located in a safety zone, and the same holds true for those who discuss Thomson's variations, including the reader, you, and the author of this chapter, me. Almost all of us who are now thinking about Thomson's cases in which the person deciding the direction of the trolley is not located in a safety zone are actually located in a safety zone. In most cases, professors or students who are discussing the life of the bystander or the driver who is not in a safety zone are in fact within a safety zone and protected from any threat the trolley might pose to them. Furthermore, most of us usually forget the fact that we are in a safety zone and protected from dangers even when we are seriously thinking about a person who is under threat outside a safety zone.

Let us take another example from moral psychology. In 2008 and 2009, Bryce Huebner and Marc D. Hauser conducted questionnaire research on "altruistic self-sacrifice," using Thomson's trilemma case, through the Moral Sense Test website. They presented two scenarios to participants. In the first scenario, a bystander, whose name is Jesse, is at the switch point. A voluntary participant was asked what Jesse should do in the situation. In the second scenario, a voluntary

participant “was asked what she or he should do rather than being asked what Jesse should do.”<sup>17</sup> The participant has to answer with what her own decision would be if she were at the switch point, and if she turns the switch to the left it means that the trolley kills her. Hence, in the second scenario, it might seem that the participant is under threat and put outside a safety zone, but this is not the case. It is no doubt clear that the participant continues to stay inside a safety zone because she is never under threat to be killed by the onrushing trolley in her actual situation looking at a computer screen on her desk. Jesse might be killed but the participant is not. The participant is protected and safe.

Hence, it seems to me that we have two kinds of safety zones in the trolley problem. The first kind of safety zone is the place where the person who decides the direction of the trolley is situated, such as the place where a bystander or the driver is located in the original, simple trolley cases, and the place where Stimson and Truman were located in the case of Stimson’s interpretation of the dropping of atomic bombs. The second kind of safety zone is the place where people discuss the trolley problem such as classes at universities and venues of academic conferences, the place where a participant in questionnaire research is located, and the places the readers of this chapter are located. I do not know where you are now, but that place must be a safety zone in this sense. We easily forget these two kinds of safety zones when discussing the trolley problem. This is the most important part of the third aspect of the problem of the trolley problem.

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<sup>17</sup> Huebner and Hauser (2011), p. 82.

*The Fourth Aspect: "Possibility of Becoming a Victim"*

I discussed the problem of a safety zone in the previous section. You may say the situation would be the same in the case of the author of this chapter, because the author is also in a safety zone, hence the author would never be immune from the above problems of the trolley problem. I think this might be correct in a sense, but the situation is not so simple.

My father was on the Japanese main island when an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. At that time he was a college student living in a small city facing the Sea of Japan, to the northeast of Hiroshima city. If he had traveled to Hiroshima city, which was not unimaginable, or if the warplane carrying an atomic bomb had not been able to drop it on Hiroshima for some reason and continued flying to the northeast and dropped it on that small city, which was highly unlikely but not unimaginable, my father might have been killed, and as a result, I might not have been born.<sup>18</sup> This shows, against our first guess, that the author of this chapter might have been a person who was indirectly bound to a track, deprived of any freedom of choice, and placed under the threat of annihilation. The author might not have been inside a safety zone.

If we enlarge this line of thought, it becomes clear that everyone who participates in the discussion of the trolley problem, including the reader of this chapter, might have been a person who was at least indirectly bound to a track of some sort, deprived of any freedom of choice, and placed under the threat of annihilation, at some point in the past. And each of us might become such a person bound to a track at some point

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<sup>18</sup> My mother was on the Korean peninsula at that time.

in the future.

Although all of us might have been and might become the powerless victims of an event that contains the logic of the trolley problem, we are naturally and tactfully guided to discuss the problem solely from the perspective of a person who is on the side of choosing whether or not to turn the lever. This is the fourth aspect of the problem.

*The Fifth Aspect: “Lack of the Perspective of the Dead Victims Who Were Deprived of Freedom of Choice”*

The trolley problem lacks the perspective of the people who are bound to the track, under threat of being killed, and deprived of any means to reach the lever. In the discussion of the trolley problem, we have many arguments and analyses made from the perspective of the driver or a bystander who is capable of deciding whether or not to turn the lever, but we can never hear the voices of people who are ruthlessly bound to the track and deprived of their choices. Of course, in the trolley problem people on the track are surely taken into account, but they are incorporated into the discussion only as formal human lives to be saved or let die, not as flesh-and-blood people who are capable of thinking, having emotions, and having huge expectations about the choice that the person at the lever will make. I believe that this is the most essential aspect of the problem of the trolley problem. I want to discuss this point more in detail.

Let us return to the discussion of the “Bystander’s Three Options” case and the “Driver’s Three Options” case in Thomson (2008). In these two cases, a bystander or the driver is under threat of being killed, because if she turns the lever to the left, the trolley is going to kill her, hence a flesh-and-blood

person who is under threat on the driver's seat or by the lever on the ground is incorporated into the discussion. However, there is a great difference between the situations of "the bystander or the driver" and "the people bound on to the track;" of course both parties are under threat of being killed, but while the former has the freedom of choice about whether or not to turn the lever, the latter is completely deprived of such freedom. All the latter can do is continue to be bound to the track and just wait to see the result of the decision made by the former. It must be noted that in Thomson's 2008 paper, although the perspective of the person who is going to be killed by her own decision-making is discussed in detail, the perspective of the people who are bound to the track and deprived of any freedom of choice is completely ignored.

Let us take another example from Frances M. Kamm's book, *The Trolley Problem Mysteries*. She discusses whether the relation between the five people on the current track and one person on the branch track might affect the distinction of the morality of killing and that of letting die, and calls this the "InterVictim Killing/Letting-Die Distinction."<sup>19</sup> The end-and-means relation is one example of what she has in mind when discussing this matter. If one person is killed on the branch track as a consequence of removing the threat to five on the current track, this killing is considered to be done as a side effect of the removal of the threat to the other five, but if one person is killed as a result of hitting him to stop the trolley, this killing is considered to be done as "a mere means"<sup>20</sup> to remove the threat to other five.<sup>21</sup> In these two cases, their

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<sup>19</sup> Kamm (2015), p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> Kamm (2015), p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> This is not her original discussion in her book. She actually discusses three

inter-victim relations are utterly different. Kamm tries to figure out whether this difference would have any effect on the permissibility of the acts done by the driver or a bystander.

We should keep in mind that throughout her intricate and complicated discussion, what she tries to make clear is the morality of decision-making or the morality of action that the driver or a bystander would perform in front of the victims bound to the tracks, and how inter-victim relations would affect the morality of their decision-making and their acts. The end point of her discussion lies on the driver/bystander side that enjoys the freedom of choice, not on the victim side that is deprived of that freedom. In this sense, it must be noted that although the perspective of victims is incorporated into her discussion as the relation between two victim parties, this perspective is used as a mere means to clarify the moral status of actions taken by the driver or the bystander. She is standing on the driver/bystander side, not on the victim side, even when she discusses inter-victim relations. Here appears a typical characteristic of the discussion of the trolley problem.

We should also pay attention to the hypothesis that victims are “bound to the tracks.” There are commentators saying that such settings are highly unusual and unrealistic; however, if we look at people’s lives in our society with unclouded eyes, we can see that there are many people who are actually bound to unwanted situations in their workplaces, homes, and living places, in terms of gender inequalities, economic disadvantages, and racial discrimination. Furthermore, many of these people cannot immediately flee

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alternatives, in pages 74-75, namely, killing five, killing two other people to save five, and killing a fat man to save five.

their places for a number of reasons when they are suddenly faced with a huge threat, for example, a natural disaster, an economic crisis, mass violence or war. People are bound to an unwanted track for many reasons, and those who enjoy the freedom of choice often fail to see the situations that those who do not have such freedom are bound to. What binds people to the tracks is rarely talked about in the discussion of the trolley problem. The trolley problem is a problem for those who have freedom of choice posed by those who also have such freedom.

#### 4. The Trolley Problem and Spirituality

I have discussed five aspects of the problem of the trolley problem. These five aspects can be further simplified and rearranged, in terms of their key features, into a set of three groups:

*Feature 1:* The trolley problem often misleads us to believe that events that contain the logic of the trolley problem in their decision-making processes rarely exist, and that even if such events should occur, the trolley's brakes are broken, hence, it is inevitable for the trolley to speed into the victims.

*Feature 2:* In the discussion of the trolley problem, it is very hard for us to be conscious of the privileges we enjoy at present—that is, that the freedom of choice is given to us and we are protected in a safety zone. It is very hard for us to imagine the possibility that we might have been deprived of such privileges in the past if the conditions surrounding us had been different, and that we might lose them in the future if the conditions surrounding us change.

*Feature 3:* In the discussion of the trolley problem, the perspective of the people who are bound to the track, deprived of freedom of choice, and under threat of being killed, is excluded and ignored.

How should we respond to these three features?

In the first and second features, important aspects that we have to take into account when we discuss the trolley problem are placed out of our perspective and have disappeared from our sight.

Concerning the first feature, what we have to do is try to escape from such misconceptions and correct them every time we find them. This is our professional duty as scholars.

Concerning the second feature, we have a moral duty to broaden our imagination to become aware of the privileges that we have at present and of the possibilities that we might have been deprived of such privileges in the past and that we might lose them in the future, because it should be our moral duty, as human beings, to keep remembering the privileges we enjoy when we discuss the trolley problem. This is our inner duty. If we forget it, our thoughtlessness might become evident to the people surrounding us and cause them emotional distress. We have to take responsibility if we are accused of thoughtlessness by someone, especially by those who once were the potential victims of a trolley problem, or by those who were the family or friends of the dead victims of a trolley problem. We have to take this point very seriously. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we have a moral duty to explicitly refer to these privileges and possibilities when discussing the trolley problem. We are free to discuss the trolley problem without explicitly referring to the problem of

the trolley problem no matter how ugly we may look to the surrounding audience, unless our words deeply hurt those who were potential victims or the loved ones of dead victims. Moreover, if they come to us and say that they have been hurt, then we should stop our discussion and listen to their voices carefully. This is our moral responsibility to them.

What about the third feature? Is there anything we can do to respond to it? As I have already pointed out, the trolley problem is established as a problem by excluding the perspective of the people who are bound to the track and under threat of being killed. Once we incorporate that perspective, the trolley problem will inevitably change into something that is completely different from the original problem. Inside the paradigm of the trolley problem, we can never see the situation from the perspective of the people being bound to the tracks and deprived of freedom of choice, because the trolley problem is a problem about who we kill, not about what those who are under threat of being killed would think.

Does this mean we cannot do anything to respond to the third feature when discussing the trolley problem? I do not think so. I would like to propose moving away from the level of ethics and proceeding on the level of spirituality.

I have friends whose parents or relatives were exposed to radiation in Hiroshima or Nagasaki. Some of them have survived but others died soon after the blast. Every time I hear the discussion of the trolley problem I cannot help imagining what the dead victims of atomic bombs would feel if they listened to the discussion in our seminar room. I think they would be dismayed to learn that the perspectives of the dead victims are excluded and the victim's voices are never

reflected in our discussions.

I used the term “spirituality” above. The reason for this is that the third feature is closely connected to our spiritual relationships with dead people who fell victim to events that contained the logic of the trolley problem and died in grief and anguish. Everywhere in the world, when someone is killed ruthlessly on the street, people get together and lay flowers on the ground. This is because they still continue to have spiritual relationships with the dead person even after the person has disappeared from this world. They lay flowers to show that the living do not forget the grief and anguish of the dead, to pray that such a tragedy will never happen again, and to send their words of condolence to the dead, imagining as if the dead person were still alive and listening to their words. Not only religious people but also non-religious people share this attitude. This way of reacting is truly transcultural. Spirituality here does not mean that of a specific religion. By the word “spirituality” I mean the dimension in which the living perform a kind of dialogue with the memory of the dead, or with the traces of the dead, or with the voices we hear from the dead. When we lay flowers on the ground or at the cemetery we sometimes murmur a word to the non-existing other. This is the dimension of spirituality I am talking about here in this context.

I believe that those who talk about the trolley problem are automatically placed in the sphere of “expectation of response on a spiritual level,” and in this sphere they are expected to have some kind of spiritual response to our memory of the dead victims who were killed in the events that contained the logic of the trolley problem in their decision-making processes.

What kind of response we are to have is completely up to

us. Putting our hands together and praying before a discussion might be one way of responding to the expectation. Laying flowers on a place associated with the event before going to the venue of the discussion might be another way of responding. Just adding words of commemoration in one's presentation, or simply imagining the suffering of the victims in one's head before giving it might work as an act of responding. The way of responding does not necessarily need to become public to an audience. The important thing is that those who talk have an intention to respond to the memory of the dead victims in some way or another. If they have such intentions, their inner emotions are naturally conveyed to the audience through their unconscious words and attitudes. In this sense, we can say that their spiritual responses are being carefully watched by the people who are listening to the speakers' presentations.

Let us take a closer look at the central point. When a speaker in front of an audience conducts a thought experiment in which the death of a person or persons inevitably happens, the speaker is encouraged to examine her thought experiment from the following perspectives.

- 1) Whether or not the actual events that contained the logic of her thought experiment occurred in the past.
- 2) Whether or not the voices of dead victims of such actual events in the past are ignored or sanitized in her thought experiment.
- 3) Whether or not the speaker believes that it is necessary to perform her thought experiment in such a sanitized way.

If the answers to all three questions are yes, then the speaker is automatically placed in the sphere of “expectation of response on a spiritual level,” and whether and how to respond to this expectation is left entirely up to the speaker. Her response will be silently watched by her audience. This logic is applied not only to the trolley problem, but also other thought experiments that contain the inevitable killing of someone. The “expectation of response on a spiritual level” is not a topic peculiar to the trolley problem, and I think that even if the speaker does not know, because of her ignorance, that events that contained the logic of the thought experiment existed in the past, she is to be automatically placed in the sphere of expectation all the same. This way of reasoning might sound very harsh, but it is one of the important points I want to emphasize in this chapter.

It should be noted that ignoring this expectation and giving no response to the memory of the dead victims may cause a grave problem on a spiritual level. Honestly speaking, I felt a sense of disgust when I first heard the discussion of the trolley problem at a philosophy conference. The main reason was probably that I could not find any (verbal or nonverbal) responses on the spiritual level in the lively discussion of the trolley problem. At the time I was not able to put that feeling into words, but now I can verbalize it in this way.

I want to once again stress that we do not have any “moral duty” to respond to this expectation, because it is a matter of “spirituality,” not a matter of “morality.” However, the important thing to remember is that our reaction is always being watched by others, both inside and outside our community, and perhaps, by our memory of the dead people who reside in the hearts of every one of us.

It might still be hard to understand the concept of a response on a spiritual level. Let me give one striking example. After World War II, a monument that commemorates the victims of the atomic bomb was built at ground zero in Hiroshima city. On the monument, the following text was inscribed: “Let all the souls here rest in peace; for we shall not repeat the evil.”<sup>22</sup> This is an oath not to repeat such a tragic war again in the future. The word “we” means not only people in Hiroshima city, but also all human beings on earth, including the entire Japanese and US citizenry. The creators of this message intended to convey these words to the memory of the dead victims of the atomic bomb, in other words, to the people who would have lived there if the atomic bomb had not been dropped on that summer day. This was a message arising from the relationship between the Hiroshima citizens who survived the atrocity and their dead fellow residents. This is one example of a response on a spiritual level performed seven years after the dropping of the atomic bomb.

It was notable that when the then US president Barak Obama first visited Hiroshima on May 27, 2016, the atomic bomb survivors attending the ceremony did not ask him to apologize. Instead, they were sitting silently, listening to every translated word, carefully watching every movement of his countenance, and trying to read the president’s inner intentions and emotions. I believe that what they were expecting first of all was not a response on the level of morality, but a response on the level of spirituality, that is, a spiritual response to the memory of the dead victims who were killed

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<sup>22</sup> Hiroshima city’s webpage:  
<https://www.city.hiroshima.lg.jp/site/english/9707.html> (Visited May 3, 2016).

by the US atomic bombs 70 years ago.

Of course, in the course of human history, there has been immeasurable grief and anguish associated with intentional killings or the allowing of death on both a large scale and a small scale. Hiroshima and Nagasaki are no more than just two examples of this. What we have to do is to expand our imagination when talking about thought experiments like the trolley problem, and to think about the possibility of our spiritual responses to the dead victims who were killed by past events similar to those thought experiments.

Looking at my argument from a different angle, we could also say the following. If you had been a person who participated in the construction of the atomic bombs, you would have felt a sense of condolence toward the bombing victims after seeing the pictures of ground zero. Or if you learned the stories of victims who died soon after the blast in unbearable pain, you would have the same feeling towards them. These are natural responses to the dead victims on a spiritual level when we know the reality of such a tragedy. My argument is that not only such people, but also those who perform a sanitized thought experiment, in which the voices of the people under threat to be killed are ignored and dismissed, are automatically placed in the sphere of “expectation of response on a spiritual level.” This is one of the most important claims I have made in this chapter.

I have said that we do not have a moral duty to respond to the dead victims on a spiritual level, but this does not mean that we are free from the discussion of the morality of dropping atomic bombs. There are philosophers, although not a majority, who doubt Truman-Stimson’s type of justification. For example, Elizabeth Anscombe argues that the dropping of

atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki should be considered acts of murder because a very large number of innocent people were killed “all at once, without warning, without the interstices or the chance to take shelter, which existed even in the ‘area bombings’ of the German cities.”<sup>23</sup> John Rawls argues that “both Hiroshima and the fire-bombing of Japanese cities were great evils.... An invasion was unnecessary at that date, as the war was effectively over.”<sup>24</sup> Japanese philosopher Toshiro Terada, while basically agreeing with their criticisms of the bombings, points out that some of their arguments are based on incorrect assumptions, and such mistakes have to be corrected.<sup>25</sup> I believe that the mass killing of small children and babies by the dropping of atomic bombs should not be justified. Ronald Takaki quotes Truman’s words: “My object is to save as many American lives as possible but I also have a humane feeling for the women and children in Japan.”<sup>26</sup> The philosophical discussion of the morality of the dropping of atomic bombs has not been settled, and should therefore be continued more vigorously than ever in the future.

Finally, I will summarize the main points of this chapter here. First, I showed that the dropping of atomic bombs was a typical example of events that contained the *logic* of the trolley problems in their *decision-making* processes and *justifications*; second, I discussed five aspects of the problem of the trolley problem in detail; and third, I argued that those who talk about the trolley problem are automatically placed in

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<sup>23</sup> Anscombe (1957), p. 64.

<sup>24</sup> Rawls (1995), p. 326.

<sup>25</sup> Terada (2010).

<sup>26</sup> Takaki (1995), p. 329.

the sphere of an expectation of response on a spiritual level.

I hope that my contribution will shed light on the trolley problem from a very different angle that has not been examined by my fellow philosophers.

\* I would like to offer sincere condolences to the victims of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and to other victims around the world who died or were killed in events that contained the logic of the trolley problem in their decision-making processes, and hereby strongly wish that such atrocities will never be repeated in the future.

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## Appendix 2024

In August 2020, the journalist Richard Fisher featured my paper “The Trolley problem and the Dropping of Atomic Bombs” (this chapter) in the web magazine *Future*, which is run by the BBC, and compared my argument with Professor Roger Fisher’s controversial proposal.<sup>27</sup> Professor Fisher asks us to imagine the following case: Instead of carrying a briefcase that contains the codes for launching nuclear missiles, the President of the United States must retrieve the codes from inside the heart of a person who always accompanies them, killing this person in the process. The reason this kind of system should be adopted is that before launching nuclear weapons the leader should first have to “look at someone and realize what death is – what an innocent death is. Blood on the White House carpet.”

This is a gruesome thought experiment, but I feel that this point is closely related to the third aspect of the trolley problem, the problem of the safety zone, although this particular case was not discussed in my original paper. The *Future* article poses a fundamental question about life and death, but it does not give us any conclusive answer. All the work of finding the answer is left to the reader.

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Fisher. “Can Nuclear War Be Morally Justified?” *Future*, BBC, August 6, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200804-can-nuclear-war-ever-be-morally-justified>



## CHAPTER FIVE

# Philosophy of Life in Contemporary Society

### 1. Introduction

Academic bioethics and environmental ethics were imported from the United States and Europe to Japan in the 1980s. At that time I was a graduate student. I started studying the English literature on these disciplines, but I soon developed a huge frustration with them.

The first reason for this was that bioethics at that time lacked deep philosophical investigations on the concept of life and the concept of death, and without having undertaken such investigations its practitioners were trying to figure out sound guidelines on difficult ethical issues surrounding advanced medicine. Of course, consensus building is very important, but it seemed to me that pursuing consensus without a deep philosophical understanding of life and death was senseless and fruitless.

For example, in the 1970s and 80s there was a worldwide debate on whether or not brain death is human death, and many advanced nations concluded that a human being that has lost the integrated function of the whole body should be considered dead, and that when the function of the whole

brain is irreversibly lost the integrated function of the human being should be considered to disappear permanently. However, in the debate about brain death, the fundamental question of “what is death?” has rarely been investigated from a philosophical point of view. Philosophically speaking, the reason that a human being that has irreversibly lost the function of the whole brain should be considered dead is not so crystal clear. It should also be noted that this question was heavily discussed in the Japanese debate on brain death in the 1980s and 90s.

The second reason for my frustration derived from the fact that bioethics in the 1980s was established in the disciplines of medicine and biotechnology even though the term “bioethics” had been first defined by V. R. Potter in 1970 as the science of survival in an age of global environmental crisis. At its inception, therefore, bioethics was conceived as a kind of “environmental ethics,” and this aspect was stripped away from the concept of bioethics later in the 1980s. I was frustrated because I had the intuition that our moral attitude toward human life should be deeply connected with our moral attitude toward nature and the environment. I believed that bioethics and environmental ethics should never be separated from each other.

On the other hand, I cannot help feeling something is amiss when I turn my eyes to the discipline of contemporary philosophy, because while we have “philosophy of language,” “philosophy of religion,” “philosophy of law”, and so on, we do not have “philosophy of life” as an independent philosophical discipline. This is a very strange phenomenon. Of course we have “*philosophie de la vie*” and “*Lebensphilosophie*,” but these terms only mean a series of philosophical theories that

appeared in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, for example, those of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, and other philosophers. It is clear beyond doubt that philosophies motivated by a keen interest in the phenomenon and concept of life had appeared in the age of ancient Greece, and other parts of the ancient world such as India and China. In Japan, we have many philosophers who contemplated the philosophy of life from the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the modern period. We have to broaden our eyes to include different traditions, continents and centuries when talking about the philosophy of life.

## 2. Images of Life

In the late 1980s, I conducted a questionnaire study on the image of life in contemporary Japan. I asked ordinary people and children to write freely about what kind of image they have when hearing the word “life” (“*inochi*” in Japanese). I collected more than 1,000 responses from them. In 1991, I published the paper “The Concept of *Inochi*,” which was republished under the title “The Concept of Life in Contemporary Japan” in 2012.<sup>1</sup> While there were many books on Japanese views of life, what was discussed in them was the views of life held by famous scholars or religious figures in the past. I could not discover any ideas of life currently held among ordinary people just by reading such books. This was the main reason I conducted the above questionnaire research.

Here is an example of the image of life found among ordinary citizens. The following is a response from a female

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<sup>1</sup> Masahiro Morioka, “The Concept of Life in Contemporary Japan,” *The Review of Life Studies* Vol.2 (April 2012):23-62. (<http://www.lifestudies.org/inochi.html>)

Christian in her 30s.

... I feel that life means something which embraces one's whole life, one's mind, one's way of life, love, and whole human existence. And I think one's life is something that is entirely given. I think life is irreplaceable because we cannot get it at all by our own will, nor with effort, nor with money.... If my life is irreplaceable, then others' lives must be the same. Others' lives are connected to mine, and all these are in the stream of a large life. Life is, on the one hand, each individual being, unique and irreplaceable. On the other hand, however, it is also one large life of the whole human race.... Aren't formless reminders of a deceased person, such as their influence, the impression they gave, their way of life, thought, and religious belief, a part of life? In this sense, I think lives could be taken over, be connected, and meet each other beyond space and time.<sup>2</sup>

She says she is a Christian, but I do not find any specifically Christian ideas on life in her response. This is a very well written image of life that is frequently expressed by ordinary Japanese people, and I suppose many people in the world would be able to share her view of life. This might show that basic views of life are shared by people in various cultures and traditions around the world. The difference is in the way they express their ideas.

By analyzing the responses I received, I found two key

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-34.

terms: “irreplaceability” and “interrelatedness.” Many respondents use these two words dialectically when thinking about life. I formed the hypothesis that there is a metaphysical position among people that “Life is irreplaceable because it is interrelated. Life is interrelated because it is irreplaceable.” I called this “the metaphysical structure of life.”

Another interesting feature of the responses is that many respondents were thinking about life in connection with nature and the environment. They talked about the life and death of a human being against the backdrop of nature: the rising sun, flowing rivers, singing birds, and breathing wind. They seemed to think that human life and nature are closely connected on a deeper level.

### 3. Proposal of “the Philosophy of Life” as a Philosophical Discipline

I gradually began to think that “the philosophy of life” should be a discipline of academic philosophy. In today’s academic philosophy, we have “the philosophy of biology,” which deals with creatures’ biological phenomena, “the philosophy of death,” which concentrates on the concept of human death, and “the philosophy of the meaning of life,” which investigates difficult problems concerning the meaning of life and living. However, we do not have “the philosophy of life,” which deals with philosophical problems concerning human life and the life of non-human creatures. Hence, I proposed the establishment of “the philosophy of life” as an academic discipline, and started publishing a peer-reviewed open access journal entitled *Journal of Philosophy of Life* in 2011.

This journal defines “philosophy of life” as follows:

We define philosophy of life as an academic research field that encompasses the following activities:

- 1) Cross-cultural, comparative, or historical research on philosophies of life, death, and nature.
- 2) Philosophical and ethical analysis of contemporary issues concerning human and non-human life in the age of modern technology.
- 3) Philosophical analysis of the concepts surrounding life, death, and nature.<sup>3</sup>

We have published papers and essays on a variety of subjects such as “the ethics of human extinction,” “death and the meaning of life,” “the Fukushima nuclear disaster,” “whether or not God is our benefactor,” “Hans Jonas and Japan,” “Heidegger and biotechnology,” and “feminism and disability.” All these topics are considered to be examples of philosophical approaches to life, death, and nature. Some of them are topics in the field of applied philosophy or applied ethics, and others are meta-philosophical and metaphysical.

In recent issues of the journal, we have particularly concentrated on the issue of philosophical approaches to “meaning of/in life.” The question of “meaning of/in life” is a central axis of the philosophy of life in contemporary society. In 2015 we published a special issue entitled *Reconsidering Meaning in Life: A Philosophical Dialogue with Thaddeus Metz*, in which philosophers around the world intensely discussed Thaddeus Metz’s book *Meaning in Life* (Oxford

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.philosophyoflife.org/>

University Press, 2013), and in 2017 we published a special issue entitled *Nihilism and the Meaning of Life: A Philosophical Dialogue with James Tartaglia*, which deals with James Tartaglia's book *Philosophy in a Meaningless life* (Bloomsbury, 2016). In the field of analytic philosophy, there has not been so much philosophical research on meaning of/in life, but important works are now beginning to emerge and attract readers. Metz is currently looking at East Asia, especially Confucian traditions in China and Japan, and trying to connect some good aspects of Confucianism with Analytic discussions. We may be witnessing the emergence of a philosophy of life that bridges East Asian traditions and analytic philosophy.

The following is a list of the topics in the field of philosophy of life in which I am strongly interested.

#### 1) *Meaning in life in a secular society*

Thaddeus Metz classifies philosophical approaches to meaning in/of life into three categories: supernaturalism, subjectivism, and objectivism (see Chapter Two). Supernaturalism maintains that the meaning of life is given by a supernatural being such as God. Subjectivism asserts that meaning in life differs from one person to another. Objectivism holds that we can judge which is more meaningful, A's life or B's life. Metz himself argues that objectivism is the best approach to the question of meaning in life, but I do not agree. I have argued that there is a layer of meaning in life that cannot be compared with anything, and I have called this "the heart of meaning in life." My approach is different even from subjectivism in that I argue that the heart of meaning in life cannot be legitimately applied to another

person's subjective meaning in life.<sup>4</sup> This can be called a “solipsistic” approach to meaning in life.

### 2) *From antinatalism to birth affirmation*

From Sophocles to Schopenhauer, there has been a line of powerful arguments insisting that human beings should not have been born at all. One of the recent advocates of this thought is David Benatar. As I have noted in Chapter One, Benatar argues that having been born is always wrong. I think his argument is flawed; however, I highly appreciate his having reintroduced one of the most important issues in the philosophy of life into analytic philosophy. Contrary to Benatar, I have long proposed the concept of “birth affirmation,” which means “the state of being able to say ‘yes’ to the fact that I have been born,” and I think this concept should be placed at the center of philosophical discussions of human life. Which should be the basis of our lives, a negative attitude to one's life or an affirmative attitude to it? And how can we advocate the latter philosophically?

### 3) *The problem of life extension*

“Life extension” and “age-retardation” have been among the most ardently pursued goals in human history. Today, some scientists argue that using future technologies we will be able to live indefinitely without aging. Although many people would welcome life extension and age-retardation technologies, some philosophers suspect that these technologies will not bring true happiness and meaning in life

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<sup>4</sup> Masahiro Morioka, “Is Meaning in Life Comparable?: From the Viewpoint of ‘The Heart of Meaning in Life,’” *Journal of Philosophy of Life* Vol.5, No.3 (2015):50-65. (Chapter Two of this book.)

to humans. For example, Hans Jonas and Leon Kass argue that in the age of super life extension our lives will become superficial, and we will lose meaning in life because our lives can become meaningful only when they are limited and not indefinite in this world. This topic is closely connected to the question of how we can accept our own death in a secular society.

#### 4) *The connection of the living and the deceased*

In Japan, as well as other countries in East Asia and many other areas of the world, there are ordinary people who do not think that a deceased family member completely disappears from this world. They are inclined to think that a deceased family member continues to exist somewhere in this world and sometimes comes back to the place she died or lived, and that they can meet the deceased family member's spirit there. Some people say that our society is composed not only by the living but also by the deceased. The topic of "the deceased as an indispensable piece of our society" has not been fully discussed in the field of philosophy.

After the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, local people have said that they sometimes can feel the presence of a missing/dead family member, for example, in the breeze at the seashore near their home. Philosophers should think deeply about what these local people are experiencing when they have such unusual experiences. By doing this, we can shed a new light on the concept of personhood from a very different angle.

#### 5) *The dignity of the human body*

In the debate over brain death in Japan, more than a few

scholars and journalists argued that the body of a brain-dead patient has its own preciousness even though the patient is considered to have lost her self-consciousness. In modern European philosophy, dignity has been considered to be found in a person's rationality, not a person's body, and this idea created the personhood argument in bioethics, which insists that only the person who has self-consciousness and rationality has the right to life. I have long argued that the body of a human being has its own dignity that is different from the dignity of the mind of a human person. Interestingly, the French law on bioethics states that the human body is inviolable ("*le corps human est inviolable*"), which can be interpreted to mean that the human body has dignity. The value or preciousness of the human body is an important theme of the philosophy of life in the age of biotechnology.

6) *The connection and difference between biological life and human life*

Our intuition tells us that biological life is completely different from human life because while the existence of self-consciousness is the essence of the latter, the former lacks this. But if this is correct, why do we apply the same word "life" to biological life and human life? Don't we see the same essence both in biological life and human life, and call that essence "life"? This is a fundamental question in the philosophy of life. Hans Jonas tried to connect these two dimensions. He wrote in his *The Phenomenon of Life* that "[a] philosophy of life comprises the philosophy of the organism and the philosophy of mind. This is itself a first proposition of the philosophy of life, in fact its hypothesis, which it must make good in the

course of its execution.”<sup>5</sup> Jonas also writes that a philosophy of life “must deal with the organic facts of life, and also with the self-interpretation of life in man.”<sup>6</sup> This is the point where the philosophy of life parts company with the philosophy of biology. The philosophy of life deals with a biological aspect of life, an existential aspect of human life, and the connection between these two dimensions of life.

#### 7) *The history of ideas in the philosophy of life*

As I have said earlier, philosophical thoughts on life, death, and nature can be found in every philosophical tradition and in every area of the world. The philosophy of life should not be equated with *Lebensphilosophie* or *la philosophie de la vie*. In ancient India, we can find very interesting philosophies of life in the texts of the Upanishads and Buddha’s teachings. In ancient China, we can find them in *Analects* (論語), *Tao Te Ching* (老子道德經), and *Zhuangzi* (莊子). In ancient Greece, we find them in the writings of pre-Socratic thinkers and Aristotle. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we find them in philosophy of biology, deep ecology, autopoiesis, *biopolitique*, and other philosophical approaches. Of course, bioethics and environmental ethics should be included in this list of relevant disciplines.

The most important philosopher in contemporary philosophy of life is Hans Jonas. His books *The Phenomenon of Life* and *The Imperative of Responsibility* are fundamental texts for philosophers who are interested in this field.

In Japan, the study of philosophy has long been

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<sup>5</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, (Northwestern University Press 1966, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jonas, p. 6.

considered the study of “Western” philosophy. However, in order to study the philosophy of life we have to go beyond “Western” philosophy to include every philosophical tradition in the world from ancient times to the current century. This is truly a practice of studying world philosophy.

\*This chapter was presented at the Fifth China-Japan Philosophy Forum, held at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan, on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Painless Civilization and a Fundamental Sense of Security

A Philosophical Challenge in the Age of Human  
Biotechnology

### 1. Introduction

One of the most debated topics today in the field of bioethics is the ethics of manipulating fertilized human eggs, especially for the purpose of selecting a better child or producing an enhanced child. For example, so-called post-humanists encourage progress in this kind of manipulation, saying that there are no serious ethical problems with these technologies. In contrast, Leon Kass and Bill McKibben doubt the progress of these technologies, and caution that they can never offer the happiness we are seeking. In Japan, too, a similar academic discussion has begun among philosophers, bioethicists, and sociologists. In 2003, I published the book *Painless Civilization*, and discussed this topic from the viewpoint of “preventive pain elimination” and of its fundamental effects on our sense of “love.”<sup>1</sup> After the book’s

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<sup>1</sup> Masahiro Morioka, *Painless Civilization: A Philosophical Critique of Desire*, in Japanese, Transview, Tokyo, 2003. (The English translation of

publication, there appeared a number of comments and criticisms from within and outside the academy. In this chapter, I would like to outline some of the points I discussed in the book, and correlate them with current bioethical debates surrounding this topic.

Before moving on to the discussion of painless civilization, I would like to examine the ethical analysis of prenatal diagnosis in the report, *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*, by the President's Council on Bioethics published in 2003.<sup>2</sup> This report was written under the strong influence of the chairman, Leon Kass. Although I do not necessarily agree with Kass's conservative ideas about abortion and the family, I believe this report is a masterpiece of recent American bioethics, particularly in that the discussion was made in terms of philosophical anthropology. (And as an Asian agnostic philosopher, I really enjoyed the Judeo-Christian flavor in its discussion of ethical issues.)

## 2. The Problem of Disempowerment

This report examines the morality of preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), and points out that “the goal of eliminating embryos and fetuses with genetic defects carries the unspoken implication that certain ‘inferior’ kinds of human beings—for example, those with Down syndrome—do

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Chapters One through Three is downloadable from  
<https://www.philosophyoflife.org/tpp/painlesso1.pdf> and  
<https://www.philosophyoflife.org/tpp/painlesso2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Leon R. Kass (ed.), *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*. Harper Collins, 2003.

not deserve to live.”<sup>3</sup> Of course the use of this technology will remain voluntary, but “its growing use could have subtly coercive consequences for prospective parents and could increase discrimination against the ‘unfit’.”<sup>4</sup> The report says that there is the prospect of “diminished tolerance for the ‘imperfect,’ especially those born with genetic disorders that could have been screened out,” and as a result, disabled children and their parents may be gazed at with the unspoken questions “Why were you born?” and “Why did you let him live?” In the end, “it may become difficult for parents to resist the pressure, both social and economic, of the ‘consensus’ that children with sufficiently severe and detectable disabilities must not be born.”<sup>5</sup>

The report’s discussion reminds me of the voices of Japanese disabled activists. In 1972, disabled people with cerebral palsy began a movement to fight against the government’s effort to introduce a special clause for selective abortion into the Eugenic Protection Law. They harshly criticized the government policy to annihilate disabled babies by way of prenatal diagnosis and selective abortion. They also criticized ordinary non-disabled people’s latent “egoism,” the egoism to think that disabled people do not deserve to live in our society. Disabled activists thought that our society was filled with this kind of discriminative consciousness, and that this hidden consciousness was the real problem of selective abortion.

I have written about it elsewhere in Japanese and

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<sup>3</sup> *Beyond Therapy*, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Beyond Therapy*, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Beyond Therapy*, p. 56.

English,<sup>6</sup> so in this paper I would like to skip the detailed analysis of their opinions and try to present my interpretation of their thoughts on prenatal diagnosis and disability. These disabled activists discussed two problems that lurk behind prenatal diagnosis with selective abortion.

The first problem is that it psychologically disempowers existing disabled people. If such technologies become prevalent in society, many ordinary people will gradually come to think in front of them, “Why were congenitally disabled people like you born in the age of prenatal screening?” and “I wish you hadn’t been born.” Surrounded by these kinds of unspoken words and glances, disabled people will gradually be deprived of the power to affirm themselves and the courage to live. In such a society, the majority of people would choose to abort severely disabled fetuses; to existing disabled people, this means that the majority of people do not wish to live with them. Even if they don’t speak out, their unconscious attitudes and glances would naturally express their inner thoughts about disabled people. Seeing such attitudes many times, disabled people will come to fully realize that they are unwelcome guests to society as a whole, and this consciousness will deprive them of self-affirmation as people with disabilities.<sup>7</sup>

This was the essence of their view when they were faced

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<sup>6</sup> Masahiro Morioka, *Life Studies Approaches to Bioethics: A new Perspective on Brain Death, Feminism, and Disability*, in Japanese, Keiso Shobo, Tokyo, 2001. / Masahiro Morioka, “Disability Movement and Inner Eugenic Thought: A Philosophical Aspect of Independent Living and Bioethics,” *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics* 12, (2002), 94–97. Available at <http://www.lifestudies.org/disability01.html>

<sup>7</sup> See Morioka, “Disability Movement and Inner Eugenic Thought: A Philosophical Aspect of Independent Living and Bioethics.”

with the possibility of selective abortion performed after amniocentesis in the early 1970s. Their approach can be fully applied to future ethical problems that will be caused by PGD and other screening technologies. We can find a similar discussion in the President Council's report. I am surprised by disabled activists' foresight on this point. I would like to talk about this topic later from a different angle.

### 3. Fundamental Sense of Security

The second problem is that prenatal diagnosis and selective abortion systematically deprives people with disabilities of a sense of security and the joy of existence that we feel when we can exist without being imposed upon by anyone regarding any particular conditions. Japanese disabled activists did not use the words "sense of security," but I believe that one of the messages they tried to express in their fierce activism can be fully grasped by using this term. If this kind of prenatal screening becomes prevalent, disabled people come to think, "I would not have been born if my parents had undergone current prenatal screening tests," and come to feel that "my existence is not welcomed or blessed by my parents and other people who are accepting such technology in our society." As a result, they feel they are utterly deprived of a very important sense of security that ordinary healthy people enjoy. Disabled activists at that time accused ordinary people of possessing "inner eugenic thought," and concluded that this was the main cause of discrimination.

I would like to label this feeling a "fundamental sense of security." This is the feeling that one's existence is welcomed unconditionally. This is a sense of trust in the world and

society, a sense of trust that provides us with a solid foundation to survive in our society. This is a sense of security that allows me to strongly believe that even if I had been unintelligent, ugly, or disabled, at least my existence in the world would have been welcomed equally, and whether I succeed, fail, or become a doddering old man, my existence will continue to be welcomed. This is the sense of trust that our existence was welcomed when we were born, and will never be denied when we become old or sick. This is a sense of security with which we can believe that we will never be looked at by anyone with unspoken words like “I wish you had not been born” or “I wish you would disappear from the world” in their mind. This is the basis of our ability to keep sane in this society. Disabled activists tried to stress that prenatal screening is “wrong” because it systematically deprives us of this fundamental sense of security.

Bioethics to date has not engaged in sufficient discussion of the fundamental sense of security, but I believe that this is the most serious problem raised by selective abortion and preimplantation genetic diagnosis. Of course, this is not the sole factor that erodes our fundamental sense of security. Our fundamental sense of security has been eroded by a number of technologies and social systems right up to the present. However, it is at least certain that current and future prenatal screening technologies will increase the level of erosion of the sense of fundamental security. This is what I have learnt from the literature of disabled people and from discussion with them. Philosophical discussions about contemporary bioethical issues in Japan, including mine, have been greatly influenced, from the beginning, by the thoughts and actions of disabled people. In this sense, Japanese discourse might

differ slightly from that of Korea and China. (Another notable factor is “feminism.”)<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. The disappearance of the “Conviction of Love”

In the previous section, I used the words “the sense that our existence is welcomed unconditionally.” We can find similar expressions in the report of the President’s Council. The council says what is at risk is the idea that “each child is ours to love and care for, from the start, unconditionally, and regardless of any special merit of theirs or special wishes of ours.”<sup>9</sup> If prenatal diagnosis becomes prevalent, the report says, “the attitude of parents toward their child may be quietly shifted from unconditional acceptance to critical scrutiny.”<sup>10</sup> The report discusses this topic from the viewpoint of “unconditional acceptance,” and I think their insight is correct. In the book *Painless Civilization*, I, too, undertook a detailed discussion of the conditional acceptance of our children and its impact on our society.

Let us imagine a society where almost every adult accepts a set of prenatal screening tests. When a couple wants to have a baby, they make a number of fertilized eggs outside the female’s body, and scrutinize each fertilized egg one by one, using PGD techniques. After examining the characteristics of each egg, they choose a couple of eggs to be born, according to their wishes and plans about their children. What does this

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<sup>8</sup> See Morioka, “What Do We Learn from Japanese Feminist Bioethics?” *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics* 8, (1998), 183–84. Available at <http://www.lifestudies.org/feminism01.html>

<sup>9</sup> *Beyond Therapy*, p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> *Beyond Therapy*, p. 54.

society look like? In such a society, people successfully come into the world after it has been confirmed that they satisfy some conditions their parents or society require. This is a society where almost everyone tacitly knows that if they had not satisfied the conditions required, they would have never been born. And when these people get married and have children, they naturally examine the genetic makeup of their fertilized eggs, and do the same thing that was once done to them by their parents. In this way, the act of conditional acceptance of babies is handed down from generation to generation.

In this society, the primary sense that “I was allowed to be born to this world under certain conditions” is going to be stored in the deep layer of people’s consciousness. This sense erases from people’s mind a certain emotion—the emotion of love. To be loved means to be given the conviction that one’s existence is affirmed by someone even if one does not satisfy certain conditions; in other words, to be given the conviction that one’s existence is affirmed and welcomed just as it is now.

However, in the society described above, it is very hard for people to acquire this kind of conviction. People are born after being examined concerning their quality of life, and when they give birth they impose conditions upon their children. In this society, people talk about unconditional love; yet they know that they themselves were only allowed to be born because they satisfied certain “explicit” conditions imposed by their parents. They perceive the mark of “conditional love” as just beneath their own existence. “Am I, in fact, not loved by anyone?” This is the sense shared by ordinary people in an unspoken way in this society. This is a society that systematically deprives people of the “conviction

of love.” As is now clear, the greatest problem of prenatal screening and the genetic manipulation of unborn children is that those technologies deprive people of the “conviction of love” in a crucial way. This is, I believe, what lies at the heart of an uncomfortable feeling when hearing the justification for selective abortion. Probably this feeling exists even in the hearts of the people who justify selective abortion. This should become the basis for the criticism of human reproductive medicine. It is the “possibility of love” that lies beneath the ethics of reproductive technology.

This is another version of a philosophical dispute about “conditional love” and “unconditional love.” There have been many discussions about whether only unconditional love deserves the name of love (I have discussed this topic elsewhere).<sup>11</sup> Everyone knows that unconditional love is more beautiful and noble than conditional love, but we also know that it is nearly impossible to love someone unconditionally in real life. We have to look straight at our own egoism and desire. This does not mean that the justification of our egoism and desire is needed first and foremost, because simple justification frequently leads us in the wrong direction. What is really needed is a deliberate examination, rather than a hasty justification.<sup>12</sup>

## 5. Painless Civilization

Let us examine why many people choose to abort when a congenital disability, such as Down syndrome, is found in the

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<sup>11</sup> See Morioka, *Painless Civilization*, Chapter 2.

<sup>12</sup> See Morioka, *Painless Civilization*, Chapter 2.

fetus. There are various reasons for this decision. Some would say that a severe disability will bring great suffering to the child itself in the future, and others would say that it is the duty of the parents to give birth to a baby without any special disabilities in cases where they can be screened. However, I believe that one of the strongest reasons for choosing selective abortion is that parents tend to think that having a disabled baby may cause great pain and suffering to the parents themselves, both economically and psychologically. Many people believe that bringing up a disabled baby would take extra time, money, and effort—and more than anything else, it would place a huge mental burden on them.

They try to avoid pain and suffering that may fall upon them in the future, and usually this avoidance is accomplished in a preventive way. I have called this kind of act “preventive pain elimination.” Selective abortion and prenatal screening are good examples of preventive pain elimination, because by using these technologies we can expect to eliminate, in a preventive way, pain and suffering that would be brought about by having disabled babies. We can find a variety of acts of preventive pain elimination in our society, from daily health care to “preventive war” carried out by superpowers. A surveillance society that uses security cameras to prevent unforeseen crimes would be another good example. In contemporary society, we are surrounded by a number of devices to eliminate pain. I call a “painless civilization” one in which the mechanism of preventive pain elimination spreads throughout its society. Society in highly industrialized nations is now gradually turning into a “painless civilization.”

From this perspective, prenatal screening and other future technologies can be seen as examples of devices for the

preventive pain elimination, and these devices constitute the dynamism of painless civilization. This means that the ethics of human biotechnology can be seen, or should be seen, from the broader perspective of painless civilization. One of the reasons I use the word “civilization” is that the preventive pain elimination, which constitutes an important pillar of current human biotechnology, actually began in ancient times when civilizations developed several thousand years ago. People started engaging in agriculture and the maintenance of rivers in order to preventively eliminate pain and suffering caused by the unexpected effects of wild nature, for example, famines and floods. Since then, we have developed big cities, built houses that typhoons cannot destroy, and have established a stable supply of food through the mass production of agricultural goods. These facilities have contributed greatly to the preventive elimination of various kinds of pain. And in an extension of this line of development, today we have a variety of pain elimination methods in our society, including that of prenatal screening.

I have a number of things to say about the development of painless civilization, but here let us return to the concept of “preventive pain elimination.” The biggest problem that comes from the preventive pain elimination is that it makes us lose sight of the possibility of transforming the basic structure of our ways of thinking and being. Let us imagine the case of a disabled fetus. By developing prenatal screening systems, the probability of having disabled babies will decrease. This may be good news for those who want healthy babies; however, we have to take a closer look at the other side of this issue.

A friend of mine once told me the following story. A man,

a close friend of hers, wanted to have a cute healthy baby, but when his baby was born, he discovered she was severely disabled. He was shocked. He despaired of the future of his baby and himself. The master plan for his life collapsed. He cared for his child but lost any hope for his future. However, after going through some years of experience of rearing his disabled baby, he suddenly realized that he had escaped despair somewhere along the line. It was a very strange feeling for him. While caring for his child still remained a burden, it was no longer cause for despair. The reason for this was that his basic framework, including his way of thinking, feeling, and being, had been profoundly transformed. This transformation came about because of his encounter with the “unwanted” child and his continuing to care for this child. After experiencing this transformation, he started to feel that his life was not one of despair; hence, he never wanted to go back to life before the birth of the child, because his child had taught him many precious truths of life that he had never known before. He finally gained self-affirmation of his life living with his disabled child.

What would have happened if there had been advanced prenatal screening technologies? He would have had a “healthy” baby, but in exchange for this, he would have lost the chance to attain self-transformation and to know the “precious truths of life” mentioned above. This is the crucial point. (I undertook a further analysis of this issue using the terms “the desire of the body” and “the joy of life” in the book *Painless Civilization*.) The more we pursue the preventive reduction of pain, the more we lose the chance to transform the basic structure of our way of thinking and being, and the more we are deprived of opportunities to know

precious truths indispensable to our meaningful life. Preventive pain elimination means preventive elimination of the possibility of “the arrival of the other” (to borrow a phrase from Emmanuel Levinas). It leads us to a situation where all of us live in a state of the living dead; in other words, a situation in which we are able to reduce pain and suffering and gain pleasure and comfort, but as a result gradually lose the opportunity of experiencing the joy of life that comes from encountering an unwanted situation and being forced to transform ourselves to find a new way of thinking and being we have never known. Recall the discussion about the disappearance of the “conviction of love” in Section 4. This is closely connected to the current topic, because to love someone means to be forced to transform one’s self, and to feel this unexpected transformation as bliss.

The above is the most significant problem that accompanies the preventive pain elimination. One may think that even if there is such a danger in the preventive pain elimination, this does not necessarily mean that we have to stop the development of this kind of technology. This might be so, but please note that what I am primarily concerned about here is not social policymaking but the fate of our contemporary civilization; in other words, the question of what we have to bear as a fate if our current civilization continues to develop in this direction. To clarify the fate of contemporary civilization, and to show a way to escape from our dark future (which, of course, might include the abolishment of certain technologies and policies) is the main criticism of a painless civilization. I believe current bioethical issues must be discussed from this point of view.

## 6. Conclusion

I think one of the most exciting approaches in the area of bioethics is that of “philosophy,” particularly, that of the “philosophy of life.” Hearing this term, you might imagine an individual’s personal perspective on life. However, I mean it in a broader sense that is capable of addressing humans’ life and death in contemporary society, our attitudes toward nature and living creatures, and the meaning of life in the age of science, capitalism, and globalization. The criticism of painless civilization is also an important part of the “philosophy of life.” Leon Kass, too, stresses that what is most needed in current bioethics is “philosophy” and a “proper anthropology.”<sup>13</sup> I am planning to develop the foundation of the “philosophy of life” by communicating with scholars interested in this approach. The philosophy of life deals with not only bioethical issues, but also such topics as environmental issues and the question of the meaning of life in contemporary society. I hope this discussion will be of interest to those trying to tackle difficult and complicated problems around the world caused by contemporary society and civilization.

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<sup>13</sup> Leon Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*. Encounter Books, 2002, p. 18.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Painless Civilization and the Fate of Humanity

### A Philosophical Investigation

#### 1. Introduction

*Painless civilization* is a term I coined in my Japanese book of the same title, which was published in 2003. Contemporary civilization aims to provide pleasure and comfort and eliminate pain and suffering as much as possible. This is especially evident in advanced countries. Contemporary civilization is moving toward a painless civilization. However, in a painless civilization, we are deprived of the joy of life, which is considered a fundamental source of meaning in life, and we are led toward the situation of drowning in a sea of pleasure. This is a kind of dystopia, and we cannot find an easy way to escape from it. It is important to pay special attention to this aspect of contemporary civilization when we think about the future of our planet.

The reasons that I came up with the idea of a painless civilization were as follows. The first was an episode in which a patient was in a deep coma in intensive care. A nurse was caring for the patient, who did not feel any pain or suffering

and just slept peacefully and comfortably in a clean, temperature-controlled hospital room. The nurse said to me, “In the end, isn’t this the form of human existence modern civilization is trying to create?” I was shocked to hear this and began to think that we might be destined to be peaceful, happy, and painless inhabitants of modern cities surrounded by advanced technologies.

The second was the paradox of addictive experiences. When people are absorbed in addictive experiences, such as gambling, alcohol, pornography, and self-injury, many of them have contradictory emotions: on the one hand, they feel strong pleasure, but on the other hand, they have the sense that what they really want to pursue is not that kind of pleasure. Here, pursuing pleasure does not lead to true happiness and fulfillment. However, because they are deeply trapped by addictive and repetitive pleasure, they cannot find an escape from this tragic, vicious cycle.

Third, I was confronted with a philosophical problem concerning pleasure and pain. Looking back on my past experiences, I cannot but feel that pleasure seeking and pain elimination do not necessarily lead to true joy and happiness. Engaging in these pursuits made me lose sight of something very important that is necessary for living a meaningful life. I could not find deep fulfillment in life just by increasing pleasure and decreasing pain. However, strangely enough, many people did not agree with me. They argued that it was a good thing to increase pleasure and decrease pain in almost all situations. I sensed a major philosophical problem here.

The fourth reason was the problem of the environmental crisis and capitalism. In the 1980s, I studied the ethics of global environmental problems. I read many books that

argued that one of the fundamental causes of today's environmental crisis is global capitalism. Some of these books became bestsellers in Japan, driven by the power of capitalism. I was surprised that the books that criticized the movement of global capitalism were printed in large numbers and worked as driving forces for advancing the movement of capitalism itself. I thought something new was happening. I sensed that this was a problem that should be examined from a civilizational perspective.

## 2. The Desire of the Body

The book *Painless Civilization* has been translated into English (Chapters One through Three are available on the internet),<sup>1</sup> Korean (the entire book), and Turkish (Chapters One through Three).

A painless civilization is a civilization in which the system of enhancing pleasure and comfort and eliminating pain and suffering extends to every corner of society. Today's society has not reached this stage, but it is certain that contemporary civilization is heading toward a painless civilization. We can see a variety of signs of painless civilization in many cities in advanced countries. It is hard to criticize a painless civilization because an act of criticism can be utilized by a painless civilization itself as a tool for further advancing its movement.

In order to better understand what a painless civilization is, let us look at the history of human civilization. A painless

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<sup>1</sup> Masahiro Morioka (2003, 2021) and Masahiro Morioka (2003, 2023).

civilization is an evolutionary form of self-domestication, a concept proposed by Egon von Eickstedt in the 1930s. Von Eickstedt argued that humans domesticated not only animals but also themselves in the process of forming human civilizations. This means that humans have modified themselves in the same manner as they have modified animals, such as goats and sheep.

The following are the main characteristics of self-domestication, expanded and redefined by me:

- 1) Humans have placed themselves in an artificial environment.
- 2) Humans have built a system that can automatically supply food.
- 3) Technology has enabled humans to overcome natural threats.
- 4) Humans have learned to manage their reproduction (e.g., family planning and reproductive medicine).
- 5) Humans have tried to improve the “quality” of their offspring (e.g., eugenics and recent reproductive technologies).
- 6) Humans have gradually gained control over death (e.g., elimination of unexpected deaths and death with dignity).
- 7) The emergence of voluntary subordination (voluntary subordination to a comfortable modern civilization).

We can easily find these phenomena in advanced countries around the world today. A painless civilization is a civilization in which the self-domestication of humans develops to the

highest possible degree. Our society is heading toward a painless civilization, and all of us are being forcibly incorporated into the current of painlessness. The four episodes described at the beginning of this paper are examples of self-domestication that are growing in a society moving toward a painless civilization. However, what is the driving force that is moving us toward this development?

I proposed the hypothesis that there is a basic desire inside human beings—the “desire of the body”—and it has driven humans to domesticate themselves. The desire of the body has five aspects:

- 1) Seeking pleasure and avoiding pain.
- 2) Maintaining the current state of affairs and planning for stability.
- 3) Expanding and increasing itself if there is an opening.
- 4) Sacrificing other people.
- 5) Controlling (human) lives, (biological) life, and nature.

The desire of the body is deeply imprinted into human life. We cannot easily escape from this desire.

A painless civilization is a civilization whose movement is driven by these five aspects of the “desire of the body,” which are inscribed in the deepest layer of our existence. Let us examine these aspects one by one.

First, in a painless civilization, we seek pleasure and comfort and avoid pain and suffering. Social systems that support these actions extend into every corner of our society.

Second, in a painless civilization, we maintain the

current state of affairs if it is considered beneficial to us, and we seek to protect the stability of this state.

Third, in a painless civilization, we seek to expand our territory and sphere of influence if there is a chance.

Fourth, in a painless civilization, we sometimes seek to benefit by sacrificing others. We close our eyes to such exploitative actions, and many technologies that help turn our eyes from them have been invented.

Fifth, in a painless civilization, we control our lives' itineraries, the lives and deaths of living creatures (including humans), and the natural environment as much as possible. This control is made possible by scientific and social technologies. This is the most important characteristic of a painless civilization.

The five aspects of the “desire of the body” are deeply inscribed in humans. This is because four of the five were created long before the human race appeared on Earth. We must take the history of biological evolution into account when we think about the “desire of the body.” Its second characteristic, “maintaining the current state of affairs and planning for stability,” was formed when primitive cells, which were the ancestors of all creatures on Earth, appeared four billion years ago. They began maintaining their cell structures by exchanging particles through their membranes. This is called metabolism. The third characteristic, “expanding and increasing itself if there is an opening,” was formed when the primitive cells began dividing themselves and proliferating. The fourth characteristic, “sacrificing other people,” was formed when unicellular organisms began eating other unicellular organisms on ancient Earth. This is called phagocytosis. (In this context, we should say, “sacrificing

other *creatures*"). This behavior was handed down to other multicellular creatures through biological evolution. The first characteristic, "seeking pleasure and avoiding pain," was formed when animals equipped with central nervous systems appeared on Earth. In addition to the above, the fifth characteristic, "controlling (human) lives, (biological) life, and nature," was formed when the human race appeared and created civilizations by making use of controlling technologies.<sup>2</sup>

It is striking that four of the five characteristics of the "desire of the body" were formed before the appearance of the human race. We have four billion years of biological evolution inside our bodies and are heavily bound by it. I believe that this is why the "desire of the body" is so deeply inscribed in us and it is very difficult for us to escape from the movement toward painless civilization.

### 3. Technologies in a Painless Civilization

The fifth characteristic of the desire of the body, "controlling (human) lives, (biological) life, and nature," has led to the creation of a network of technologies that seek to control everything in society and society's relationship with the surrounding nature. These technologies function as fundamental driving forces for advancing painless civilization. Technologies in a painless civilization have at least three

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of the relationship between the desire of the body and biological evolution, see my 2022 paper "The Concept of Painless Civilization and the Philosophy of Biological Evolution: With Reference to Jonas, Freud, and Bataille."

important characteristics: 1) preventive pain elimination, 2) double-controlled structures, and 3) pain elimination devices.

The first is “preventive pain elimination.” This is a preventive or preemptive action that seeks to eliminate future pain before it actually emerges. In the book *Painless Civilization 1*, I wrote, “This is a system that not only eliminates suffering that already exists but carefully predicts suffering that could arise to threaten us in the future and preventatively eradicates here and now whatever seems likely to be a cause of this future suffering” (p. 30). A good example is cancer screenings; if we find cancer in its early stages, we can remove it quickly. This is a typical act of preventive pain elimination.

Another example is selective abortion. Today, we can test amniotic fluids to see whether a fetus has severe disabilities, and if it does, we can abort it under certain conditions. This technology can also be applied to fertilized eggs that have been artificially created outside a woman’s body. Eggs that have disabilities will simply be discarded. The number of human traits that can be tested is expected to radically increase in the future. A painless civilization is a civilization where these kinds of technologies can be found throughout society.

At first sight, it is unclear what the problem with preventive pain elimination is. The problem arises when technologies for preventive pain elimination accumulate in society. In such a society, where we are surrounded by a variety of preventive pain elimination technologies, we realize for the first time that we are being deprived of the possibilities of encountering otherness and being reborn, which are very important for living an authentic life.

However, painless civilization is clever. It deceives us by

using double-controlled structures. So, what is a double-controlled structure?

A double-controlled structure is a structure that a painless civilization creates in our society. A painless civilization never tries to erase all pain and suffering from our lives. It seeks to eliminate pain and suffering from society as a whole, but at the same time, it intentionally leaves pain and suffering in small corners of our society, and it even positively brings our attention to them. A painless civilization positively leaves room for us to be able to enjoy small amounts of pain and the expectation of risk.

A good example of this is the human-centered, shrewd control of the environment that will be found in future nature parks in which we can enjoy the wilderness and the sense of risk of losing our lives in untamed nature, but in reality, we never lose our lives and seldom injure ourselves because the natural environment in the area is shrewdly controlled by painless technologies. Because these painless technologies are sophisticatedly hidden within the controlled environment, we do not recognize their existence during the time we are enjoying the park.

A nature park that extends to a planetary scale is the goal of the environmental protection that a painless civilization seeks to advance. I call this a “double-controlled structure”: here and there, we can encounter the uncontrolled violence of nature, but true dangers are almost completely suppressed by technologies.

Inside such a double-controlled structure, we are encouraged to actively enjoy a sense of risk and to experience pain and accidents in nature. At the same time, we are allowed to forget that the whole system is skillfully controlled. This

shows that a painless civilization never seeks to eliminate all the pain and suffering we encounter in our daily lives. On the contrary, it makes us concentrate on the non-severe pains, and in exchange, it makes us forget that the whole system is sophisticatedly controlled.

In other words, a double-controlled structure is a structure in which people's freedom to escape from society's control is secured in small parts of society, whereas in society as a whole, such freedom is almost completely controlled. A painless civilization tries to deceive us as much as possible by using pain elimination devices. So, what is a pain elimination device?

A pain elimination device is a device that seeks to eliminate pain and suffering from our lives and make us forget that we are being controlled by a painless civilization's double-controlled structures. Painkillers, alcohol, and narcotics can work as pain elimination devices at the physical level. At the psychological level, psychotherapy and religion can work as pain elimination devices that reduce mental and spiritual pain. However, the most important devices are 1) mass media, 2) discourses that influence our way of thinking, and 3) entertainment products, such as TV shows, movies, dramas, and music, that can divert our attention away from the vague anxieties that we sometimes feel in a society moving toward a painless civilization. These entertainment devices circulate various moving stories of love and compassion and argue that although it is true that we live in a society full of pain and suffering, we will finally be able to reach a state of happiness and fulfillment through the power of love and compassion. Ultimately we are guided toward the opinion that the basic framework of a painless civilization does not have to be

altered and that there is no problem with living inside it.

#### 4. What Is Wrong With a Painless Civilization?

Readers may think, “Okay, I understand the essence of painless civilization, but what is wrong with it?” I believe there is a big problem with living in a painless civilization. I would like to shed light on one important aspect and try to clarify its essence.

A painless civilization is a civilization that encourages us to seek pleasure and comfort, eliminate pain and suffering, maintain a current framework that is beneficial to us, and control our lives so that they can proceed the way we planned beforehand. What is missing here is the possibility of rebirth after experiencing grave, unforeseen suffering. In our lives, we sometimes encounter grave, unforeseen suffering: we may lose a beloved family member, we may acquire severe disabilities from a traffic accident, our business may fail and leave us without money, or our children may commit a serious crime.

In such cases, we hit rock bottom. We think that our life is over and that there is no way out. We experience awful pain and scream in agony. However, sometimes a very strange thing occurs—after having gone through such pain, the psychological framework we have strongly maintained is dismantled, and a new framework, or a new view of life that has been unknown to us, appears in front of us. The place that we considered a hell becomes a good place in which to live. A huge reformation of our worldview occurs in us. We are reborn at the lowest point of our life. We feel an unexpected sense of joy.

I have called this kind of unexpected joy that we feel after going through huge suffering the “joy of life.” This “joy of life” is indispensable to being able to lead an authentic and meaningful life. Because we are not robots that maintain the same framework throughout our lives, this kind of rebirth experience plays an extremely important role in our lives. Without the “joy of life,” many of us feel suffocated as if we were drowning in a sea of sugar, unable to escape from the framework of a painless civilization.

The central problem of a painless civilization is that it systematically erases the possibility of this “joy of life” from the lives of the people inside it.

However, we must pay special attention to the fact that there remains another desire within us that seeks to dismantle the “desire of the body.” I have called this the “desire of life.” The “desire of life” is a desire to dismantle our current framework and see a new world or a new framework that we have not imagined before. In a society moving toward a painless civilization, we are faced with a battle in our inner world between the “desire of the body” and the “desire of life.” This battle causes various types of pathology in a painless civilization, for example, self-injury. However, self-injury is not necessarily an illness to be healed. Instead, it is a form of hope, because self-injury is an act of courageous attack by the “desire of life” against the “desire of the body.” What is needed is to guide the energy of the “desire of life” in another direction and try to find ways of escaping from a painless civilization.

The “desire of life” is a key concept in the theory of painless civilization. True hope breathes inside the “desire of life.” Interestingly, the “desire of life” is actually a transformation of the “desire of the body.” Philosophically

speaking, the “desire of life” is a desire that attempts to transcend the realm of the “desire of the body.” This is because the “desire of the body” has the desire to expand itself beyond its limits, and this leads to attempts to transcend its inclination to protect its own framework. Here, the “desire of the body” transforms into another desire, a desire to dismantle the “desire of the body,” which I call the “desire of life.” The “desire of life” is a desire that strongly supports the possibility of the “joy of life,” which is an indispensable element for us to be able to acquire the meaning of life in a society moving toward a painless civilization. In the relationship between the two desires, we can see an interesting dialectic of life. However, the “desire of life” is not an almighty counter-concept to the “desire of the body.” We need a more detailed analysis of our desires in contemporary civilization. (I have discussed the dialectic relationship between these two desires in Chapter Five of *Painless Civilization*.)<sup>3</sup>

The power of the “desire of the body” is very strong. The basis of our existence is made of this desire. Therefore, the battle against the “desire of the body” means a battle against oneself. In order to escape from a painless civilization, we have to fight against an intertwined system of preventive pain elimination, double-controlled structures, and pain elimination devices, which are deeply inscribed into current civilization. There is no easy way out.

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<sup>3</sup> The “desire of life” is different from the “joy of life.” In this chapter, I do not discuss this point much further. Those who have an interest in this issue are encouraged to read forthcoming translated chapters of *Painless Civilization*.

There is no prescription for dismantling the negative side of a painless civilization. This is because if there were such a prescription, a painless civilization would jump on it, spread the discourse on the prescription as an attractive commodity throughout society, and by doing so try to reduce the power of our act of dismantling. (This is similar to a situation in which, no matter how many books on environmental issues may be published, the actual environmental issues are not solved.) An argument alone will not solve the problem of painless civilization. We must be careful lest our arguments be utilized by a painless civilization.

In a society moving toward a painless civilization, it is not those who do not have power or money who need to be aware of the problem of painless civilization. It is those who do have power and money that need such awareness. This is because those who have power and money are more deeply bound by their “desire of the body” than those who do not. They seek pleasure, comfort, painless situations, the maintenance of the current framework, and the maintenance of their preferable lives. These lives look gorgeous, but the people living them have almost entirely lost the possibility of experiencing the “joy of life,” which can only be granted when their stable framework is destroyed by encountering the other or the advent of otherness.

I am frequently asked, “Why do we have to fight against a painless civilization? Isn’t it okay to lead a pleasurable and painless life?” My answer is that it might be okay for you to live such a life in the short term, but in the long term, it is likely that our society will become more and more painless, and it will become very hard for us to escape from the situation of “drowning in a sea of sugar.” What is needed is to

broaden your imagination and think, from the bottom of your heart, what kind of society you would like to live in.

In this sense, the theory of painless civilization is an endeavor to think deeply about ourselves and try to remember what the meaning of life was when we were younger and more sensitive than today. What was the meaning of life when we were younger and less bound by our “desire of the body”? As an adult man who has been alive for a long time, I recognize that I have also been heavily bound by my own “desire of the body,” and in this regard, my life has had a significant problem. However, I am constantly saying to myself that I will never turn my eyes away from the fact that I am heavily bound by my “desire of the body.”

Of course, it is clear that just criticizing myself in this way does not solve any problems arising from the “desire of the body” and painless civilization. The theory of painless civilization is a call to readers from me. I would like you to deeply reconsider your own life in a “civilized” society and think about what sort of life you wish to live, sharing hope with other people in this society. Sometimes I am asked why I am talking about people who are living pleasantly and comfortably, while many people are struggling with painful and miserable lives. Yes, it is true that there are many people who are in great suffering. However, what would these people wish for after escaping from their painful lives? Would they not wish for a life full of comfort, pleasantness, less pain, and stability supported by modern technologies and medicine? This implies that the problem of painless civilization is a problem not only for rich and successful people, but potentially also for poor and suffering people. It is a problem for the entire human race.

## 5. Love in a Painless Civilization

One thing that is destined to disappear in a painless civilization is the possibility of unconditional love. To love someone without placing any conditions on them has always been very hard to do, from ancient times to the present. A painless civilization seeks to completely erase the possibility of unconditional love from society.

The love found in a painless civilization is radically different from what we imagine when we hear the word “love.” In *Painless Civilization 2*, I wrote the following:

To be loved is to be given the belief that your existence is affirmed by someone even if you do not meet certain criteria. The belief that my existence, simply being here, right now, in whatever state I may find myself, is being affirmed by someone else. To be given this kind of belief is to be loved.

This future society is one that systematically removes this kind of belief in love from the depths of every human heart. It is a society that minimizes suffering and burdens on the basis of the elimination of the possibility of love. It is a society in which everyone lives their everyday lives, forming human relationships and trying to preserve a stable way of life, while carrying deep within their hearts a vague unease: “It may be that I am not actually loved by anyone.” “It may be that I am not actually loved by anyone” is the fundamental feeling that lies submerged at the bottom of this society. (pp. 62–63)

The fundamental sense that people are forced to have in this society, which is deeply embedded in their minds, will be this: “The person existing here and now didn’t have to be this ‘me.’ Anyone else would have done just as well if they’d satisfied the conditions.” However, because living in a society that is moving toward a painless civilization is full of pleasure and comfort, people are apt to turn their eyes away from this fundamental problem and deceive themselves.

Love in a painless civilization is a type of love that protects our own pleasant frameworks and seeks to care about someone as long as our “love” does not destroy them. This is conditional love, but people in a painless civilization mistakenly believe that this kind of love is what they actually wish to receive from their partners. Because we are heavily brainwashed by the ways of thinking provided by painless civilization, simply singling out the problem of conditional love and seeking ways to overcome it do not lead to meaningful solutions. What is needed are attempts to solve the problem of love in connection with the entire problem of the painless civilization into which all of us are deeply incorporated. The problem of painless civilization lies not only in the infrastructure of society but also in our inner realities and the mindsets that we cling to in our daily lives. In *Painless Civilization 2*, I linked the concept of love to that of the “fundamental sense of security.” I wrote, “A fundamental sense of security is a social foundation upon which people can live their lives peacefully and meaningfully. It is something like trust or confidence in the world and a society that supports the existence of human beings” (p.65). I believe that this concept should be one of the foundations of morality in

the age of painless civilization.

The concept of my own death is another important subject in the theory of painless civilization because at a deep layer of our “desire of the body” there is a strong urge to attain immortality in this world or some other world. “I do not want to die” is one of the driving forces that creates a painless civilization. Therefore, to overcome painless civilization is to overcome our desire to live forever in this world, in the next world, or in heaven. This implies that we should seriously reconsider the worldview of religions that say that we will be able to acquire eternal life somewhere outside of this world. In this sense, the criticism of religions may be one of the main subject matters of the theory of painless civilization. The point is not that religions should be rejected in our society, but that any religion, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism, can serve as a painless device to lure us into the realm of painless civilization. I would like religions to think deeply about their possible relationship to a painless civilization in contemporary society. Of course, it is true that religions have the potential to dismantle the movement toward a painless civilization. I would like to discuss this further with readers who are interested in the theory of painless civilization.

## 6. Conclusion

There are a number of other topics that should be discussed from this perspective. My book *Painless Civilization* is currently being translated into English, chapter by chapter, so readers will be able to see the whole picture of my argument in the near future. I hope that you will join our discussion on the future of our civilization and the fate of the

human race.

There have been many previous studies on the painlessness of modern civilization. Aldous Huxley's book *Brave New World* (1932) depicts a dystopian world in which people's pleasure and pain are cleverly controlled by advanced scientific technologies. Ernst Jünger's book *On Pain (Über den Schmerz, 1934)* discusses the philosophical meaning of pain and its relation to modern technology and war. In his book *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (1964), Erich Fromm discusses the fate of humans in modern society, who are deprived of the energy of life and mesmerized by necrophilia. Karl Marx's *Capital (Das Kapital, 1867)* is considered to be one of the first studies to deal with the incessant movement of painless civilization. Japanese philosopher Shozo Fujita's book *Totalitarianism Toward 'Comfort'* (1995) gives an interesting discussion of pleasure, pain, and joy and was a precursor to my theory of painless civilization. Leon Kass et al.'s book *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness* (2003) deals with a painless civilization appearing in the medical world. Byung-Chul Han's book *The Palliative Society: Pain Today (Palliativesgesellschaft: Schmerz heute; 2020)*, which was published after the publication of my *Painless Civilization*, discusses the same subject from a post-modern perspective. Although it was published in 2003, *Painless Civilization* remains unfinished. I am now trying to write a long, final chapter (Chapter Nine) in Japanese and complete my argument on painless civilization.

Although there is no easy answer to the problem of painless civilization, we must tackle it from various angles and try to find ways of escaping from the painless stream flowing

through society. Recall the five aspects of the desire of the body: seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, maintaining the current state of affairs and planning for stability, expanding and increasing itself if there is an opening, sacrificing other people, and controlling (human) lives, (biological) life, and nature. These five aspects of the “desire of the body,” which have been propelling the progress of painless civilization, are all incorporated deep inside each of us living in a society moving toward painlessness.

What I want to stress is that, in order to envision a better future for our civilization, we must seriously reexamine our understanding of the meaning of life and the meaning of having been born. A philosophical re-examination of ourselves is what is truly required now.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# What Does Doing Philosophy Mean to Me?

Translated by Robert Chapeskie

\* This is an English translation of a slightly modified version of my Japanese essay “What Does Doing Philosophy Mean to Me?,” which was published in the August 2022 issue of *Contemporary Thought* [現代思想] (Special Feature: How Philosophy is Made). It offers insight not only into my way of thinking about philosophy but also into the world of contemporary Japanese philosophy.

### 1. Disappointment with University Philosophy

To me, philosophy is the relentless pursuit of 1) how I am to live and die from this moment forward and 2) the meaning of my having been born. This pursuit does not stop until I reach an understanding that satisfies me. If I expand my field of view slightly, it is to understand where humanity came from and where it is going through an intellectual lens. When I entered the ethics program at the University of Tokyo, I thought I could do this sort of thing at a university. This expectation, however, was utterly betrayed. The study of philosophy at Japanese universities in the 1980s was mainly

the study of writings by Western philosophers. What was undertaken in the ethics program and neighboring philosophy program was the close reading and interpretation of detailed elements of texts by great philosophers, always in the original language, and this was considered to be philosophy and ethics. I strongly opposed this even as I entered graduate school, and my first presentation given to the Japanese Society for Ethics when I was a graduate student was a critique of this organization. I thought this presentation, “Three Syndromes Making Current Japanese Philosophy Dull and Uninteresting,” would have a strong impact on the society, but in fact there was almost no reaction. After writing several papers for the journals of multiple academic associations, I then turned my back on such organizations and made the world of commercially published books the venue for my activities.

In this essay, I will not discuss my ups and downs since then in detail. Instead, I will present my relationship with philosophy divided into three topics. In this special feature in *Contemporary Thought*, senior philosophers such as myself are presumably to discuss “How I have lived in the world of philosophy,” and I will do so now. I am well aware that such an undertaking is not looked on favorably by young philosophers, but I will proceed with it nevertheless. I do so because to me philosophy is nothing other than closely examining one’s own life, and in doing so revising one’s own interaction with the world and other people. I call this method “life studies.”

## 2. My Death, Life Studies, and “Frigid Men”

I have written about this episode many times before, but

as it is very important to me I would like to begin this essay by recounting it once more. One day, when I was around ten years old, I was struck by the question, "What will happen to me when I die?" This then expanded into the question, "What will happen to this universe when I die? Will it go on existing without me?" An image of perfect nothingness transfixed me. I felt the fear of death. In this moment I became a philosopher, or, more accurately, I was forced to become a philosopher. Until that point in time I had lived in the happy world of children. From then on, however, I became someone unable to forget the conceptual problem of my death even for a moment. Ever since then I have had the urgent feeling that I cannot die without being given a satisfactory answer to this question.

This is the type of philosopher I am, so in fact I don't know much about other types of philosophers. This question I am facing is the only one I want to resolve. Of course, this inevitably develops into other questions and the themes I must examine thus expand without limit, but this question is at the root of my inquiry. For me philosophy is an effort to find an acceptable answer to this question that pierced my mind. Fundamentally, therefore, I do philosophy only for myself. To achieve my aim, however, I must draw on the work of others, both those active today and in the past, and move forward in tandem. I want like-minded people to support each other from afar in this work of excavating that tends to be lonely.

When I think about "my death," to begin with I am faced with the question of who exactly is dying. The one who is dying here is not "I in general," of whom there are many all around me, but "this I who exists in a special form of which there is only one in entire universe." But what is that? A ray of light

was shone on this question that had captivated me since I was young by *The Upanishads*, which I read in the University of Tokyo's library. I felt that the phrase "You are that!" in this text was an adage that hit upon the essence of "this I who exists in a special form of which there is only one in entire universe." Forty years later I was able to put what I learned from *The Upanishads* into words in "The Immortal, Transmigrating Ātman (Self)," Chapter 4 of *Is It Better Never to Have Been Born?*<sup>1</sup> Since then, through a debate with Hitoshi Nagai, I have been developing this idea into the concept of "solipsistic penetration."<sup>2</sup>

The intuition that "my death" can only be properly examined in the dimension of solipsity lead me to the idea of life studies. Life studies is a method of inquiry in which the person doing the studying is never excluded or disconnected from what is being studied. It is a methodology in which I consider a particular problem while always including within my field of view how "this I" is involved in the problem in question and is going to be involved in it going forward. In life studies, academic inquiry is directly connected to my way of life. I think of life studies as a methodological form of inquiry like phenomenology. This is an approach that should mature into a method of acquiring knowledge that transcends philosophy and is applicable to various domains of inquiry.

Most scholars discuss ethical and social issues while keeping themselves outside the frame of what is being considered, but life studies rejects this approach. Before

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<sup>1</sup> Chikuma Shobō, 2020, in Japanese.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 5 "Solipsity that Opens Up through Penetration" in Hitoshi Nagai and Masahiro Morioka, *Confrontation Regarding "I"* (Akashi Shoten, 2022, in Japanese).

talking about others, I must consider what exactly is going on in my own case. This is my starting point. I introduced the term “life studies” in my first book, *An Invitation to Life Studies*.<sup>3</sup> It was then fully developed in *How to Live in a Post-Religious Age*<sup>4</sup> and *Confessions of a Frigid Man*.<sup>5</sup>

*Confessions of a Frigid Man* was received as a men’s studies text that unflinchingly excavates male sexuality. In bookstores it is often put in the gender section. But this book is a work of life studies that never stops considering the self, and a philosophical attempt to determine how I am to live my one and only life. Readers with a background in philosophy will presumably perceive it in this way. In *Confessions of a Frigid Man* I reject speaking of male sexuality in general. Instead, I discuss what kind of sexuality I myself have lived and to what sort of places this sexuality has driven me. I talk about my existence being threatened by a post-ejaculation feeling of emptiness, trying to avoid confronting this anguish, and being captivated by the delusion that somewhere there is a world of wondrous pleasure that offers something different. I also relate being sexually attracted to school uniforms and my desire to ejaculate on the institution of “school” itself.

I also talk about having a “Lolita complex” of being sexually attracted to the bodies of young girls, and the idea that behind this lies regret at having taken the male path at the fork in the road of pubescence. I conclude that my Lolita complex is nothing other than the unrealizable desire to go

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<sup>3</sup> Keiso Shobō, 1988, in Japanese.

<sup>4</sup> Hōzōkan, 1996, in Japanese.

<sup>5</sup> Complete edition Chikuma Bunko, 2013, original 2005, in Japanese. For an English translation see Morioka (2017).

back in time to the age when the paths of men and women diverge and try taking the other path and living as a girl from the inside. This was a desire to become a teenage girl and relive my life again as the opposite gender. This is different from cross-dressing; I don't want to wear women's clothing, I want to wear a teenage girl's *body*. Bringing this sexuality that had been submerged within me to light allowed me to experience a minor rebirth. I write about this in the afterword to the paperback edition of that book (2013). Phenomena that emerged after its publication, such as men who are fond of using drawings or photographs of girls as their profile icons on twitter or men who become beautiful girl "VTubers (美バク肉)," suggest that this desire to wear a girl's body is widespread in Japanese society.

*Confessions of a Frigid Man* was written using the "confessional method," one of the methods of life studies. It is also a book that asks the reader what they think about their own sexuality. The posing of this question is made meaningful by my having spoken so frankly about my own case. This extremeness may seem to preclude this text from being discussed in philosophical academia or in philosophy courses, but in fact it falls squarely within the "philosophy of sex." (Regarding this branch of philosophy, see *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Sex and Sexuality* (2022). The same method is also used to discuss the Aum Shinrikyō incident in my *How to Live in a Post-Religious Age*). Speaking in terms of the topic of this special feature, "how philosophy is made," the "confessional method" of life studies employed in *Confessions of a Frigid Man* can indeed be considered one of the orthodox schools of "making philosophy." It is, after all, a style of philosophy that goes all the way back to Augustine.

### 3. Painless Civilization Theory

My philosophical interest has been directed toward my own life and existence, but it has not stopped there; I have also focused on where humanity came from and where it is going. This interest grew out of a question that caused me much anguish in my twenties and thirties. I do my best to avoid pain and seek pleasure, so why am I not happy? Why do I instead find myself being swallowed by an anxiety that feels like drowning in a sea of sugar? Driven by such concerns, I came up with the concept of “painless civilization.”

Painless civilization is a kind of civilization in which systems of avoiding pain and suffering and pursuing pleasure and comfort have been put in place in every corner of society. I have discussed it extensively in the previous two chapters, so I do not repeat it here. It is not so easy for us to escape from it. We keep looking for reasons it is not necessary for us to get away from painless civilization, and tell ourselves that staying in such a civilization is fine and there is no need to escape. Fueled by such thoughts and actions, painless civilization swells even further. I too am caught up in painless civilization. Nightmarish self-referentiality in which exposing the systems of painless civilization itself contributes to the development of painless civilization is indeed the essential quality of this civilization. Many readers consider *Painless Civilization* my most significant work.

This is a work of philosophy, but there has been very little consideration of painless civilization theory in philosophical academia. Professional philosophers seem to have no interest in it. One reason for this is that current Japanese philosophy

has lost interest in large narratives that attempt to explain society as a whole. Another is that civilization theory as a field of inquiry has been driven outside the domain of philosophical thought. In the past, movements such as Marxist thought, the cultural anthropology of thinkers like Levi-Strauss, and the civilization studies of Japanese scholars such as Kinji Imanishi and Tadao Umesao were also discussed in the world of philosophy. That era is over. Today, in addition to the study of individual Western philosophers, the main interest of Japanese philosophy is disciplines such as analytic philosophy, analytic ethics, and analytic aesthetics. This is precisely the opposite orientation to the kind of integration found in civilization studies. Of course, these fields of inquiry are also quite interesting, so I myself have written papers in these domains, but I would object to the suggestion that this is all that should properly be considered philosophy. I would object for the same reason I did when I was told “the study of philosophers is philosophy.” I believe philosophy must not discard the kind of integration found in civilization studies.

As a result, for me the second element in how philosophy is made involves addressing the question of where humanity came from and where it is going by engaging in civilization studies-style integrative thought from an original perspective. *Painless Civilization* stops before reaching a conclusion, so I plan to write a follow-up volume. I would also like to bring painless civilization theory into the philosophical discourse. To this end I must find philosophers and scholars with an active interest in this approach. The world’s march toward painlessness has progressed in the twenty years since I wrote this book. The opioid crisis in US society is a crisis caused by the pursuit of painlessness. I suspect there are many people

around the world who are hungry for philosophy equipped with a civilizational perspective.

#### 4. Philosophical Academia, Philosophy of Life's Meaning, and Birth Affirmation

After publishing *Painless Civilization* in 2003, I felt as though I had run into a dead end. I had written this book using the methodology of life studies, but I realized it would be difficult to cool-headedly and objectively discuss complex philosophical problems relying only on such dramatic methods. In other words, I came to believe two kinds of philosophical methods were necessary: the methodology of life studies in which I myself am never pushed out of the frame, and the methodology of academic philosophy in which I put myself to one side for the moment and closely examine problems on their own terms. This is by no means a rejection of the methodology of life studies. The life studies approach and the academic approach are two wheels on a cart. Both are necessary.

This is why I returned to academia after having at one point abandoned it. After two decades of working outside the academy, by reading the latest academic journals and attending conferences I gradually rehabilitated myself. Eventually I completed a Ph.D. thesis on the philosophy of brain death.

What I sought in academic philosophy was a “philosophy of life” in which life is given comprehensive philosophical examination. Such a domain, however, did not exist in philosophical academia, and in the English-speaking world there was no journal targeting such a field.

I therefore decided to begin by founding a peer-reviewed English language journal with contributions focusing on the philosophy of life. With the help of some friends, I launched *Journal of Philosophy of Life* on the Internet in 2011. All published articles were made available for open access download from a university library repository. We decided not to charge an open access fee to authors. At first there were many things I didn't know and a lot of trial and error, but ten years have passed and today the operation is stable. Through the process of running this journal, I learned that a new "philosophy of life's meaning" field had emerged in the world of English language philosophy. It philosophically examines questions such as what do people live for, is there meaning in life, and what gives meaning to life. This field had neither international conferences nor its own academic journals. I reached out to one of its leading figures, Thaddeus Metz, and in 2015 the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* published a special feature on one of his books. Right around this time Hokkaido University's Nobuo Kurata began working in this field, so I joined his research group. Then in 2018 the first "International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life" was held at the University of Hokkaido with Kurata as its chairperson. This international conference was the first full-fledged, open academic conference held in this domain, and since then, while changing organizers, it has been held at Waseda University, the University of Birmingham, the University of Pretoria, and Tohoku University. Recognition has grown among those with an interest in the field, and there are many presenters from all over the world. *Journal of Philosophy of Life* is the current venue for the results of this academic conference to be published as refereed papers.

Various things occurred to me in the midst of returning to philosophical academia and having these experiences. First, open access (downloadable by anyone free of charge) is the ideal form of publishing for philosophical papers. But I think the current publication system of open-access papers through the English-language journals of prestigious academic publishers should perish, because they charge the author a ridiculously expensive fee. A new system for publishing peer-reviewed academic journals needs to be put in place internationally. *Journal of Philosophy of Life* has a narrow focus, and its papers have already gone through a conference presentation, so it can operate with volunteer editors and reviewers and university research funds.

I also believe that the Japanese philosophical community focuses too much on how to respond to trends in the English, French, and German-speaking worlds and not enough on the ideas put forward by Japanese speakers. This is a longstanding weakness of Japanese philosophical academia, and it remains unreformed. We already have the original philosophy of Shōzō Ōmori, for example, but Japanese philosophers have not engaged in the collective work of developing his thought through constructive criticism to create a new paradigm of philosophy. And what do academic philosophers think of the work of Mitsu Tanaka, which has served as a wellspring of contemporary Japanese feminist thought? Have male philosophers even read it? Why hasn't philosophical academia elevated, through constructive criticism, the work of Hitoshi Nagai and Motoyoshi Irifuji, in which they construct a novel metaphysics in Japanese, to a major movement in the contemporary era? I know some attempts have been made by academic associations, but they

have only ever been sporadic. It seems Japanese philosophical academia does not seriously believe the next innovative school of philosophy could come from today's Japanese philosophers.

With these circumstances in mind, recently I have begun to switch my approach toward publishing the results of my academic work in English. The original concepts I am currently putting forward in academic philosophy are “birth affirmation” and “animated persona.” The former is the affirmation of one's own birth, that is, to say “I am truly glad to have been born,” and I propose analyzing it using the possible world interpretation and the anti-antinatalistic interpretation. The latter is a concept I proposed as a phenomenological mechanism that makes it possible for a person who is brain dead to seem truly alive in the eyes of their family, allows us to vividly sense the presence of a person who has died in our daily lives, and enables us to perceive a robot as being just like a living person (See Morioka [2021d] and [2023b]). This has received a positive response from people overseas, so I would like to develop it further. The philosophy of antinatalism has attracted a lot of attention recently, as is reflected in the special feature in the November 2019 edition of *Contemporary Thought*, and I wrote a paper examining it comprehensively from three angles: the roots of this idea in ancient Greece, its origins in India, and the 20<sup>th</sup> century anti-procreationism movement (Morioka [2021c], Chapter One of this book). This paper has become a popular general overview of the subject.

My third point about how philosophy is made is this: when you have an original philosophical idea, it may well develop more fruitfully if you present it to the world from the start. You can directly interact with philosophers from Asia,

Central and South America, Africa, and so on. The audience is overwhelmingly large. (Of course, it is also important to have a critical view of English-language imperialism.)

On the other hand, I have great hopes for Japanese commercial philosophy magazines such as *Contemporary Thought* [現代思想] and *Philosophy and Culture* [フィルカル]. These magazines do not seem overly influenced by the authoritarianism of Japanese philosophical academia, and I think they have the adroitness to elevate new concepts and original methodologies that arise here in Japan going forward. It makes sense for commercial magazines to take on things that are difficult to do within Japanese philosophical academia. Presenting the results of one's efforts in book form is important in philosophy, so I think commercial magazines connecting with books to elevate philosophy created in Japan is a good allotment of resources. I would like to support this myself as much as I can. To be clear, I repeat that I am not criticizing the detailed study of Western philosophical thought itself. What I am criticizing is the view that the study of Western philosophical thought should unquestionably be considered the main subject of philosophy and the suppression of original Japanese philosophy this view engenders. In addition, the prejudicial view that "Western philosophy is philosophy" permeating university philosophy is another major problem. For example, the philosophy program at the University of Tokyo only covers Western philosophy, so it seems strange to call this a "philosophy" program. This is in fact a prejudice also held by the Western philosophical world itself. Most Western philosophers consider Asian philosophy to be something that merely resembles Western philosophy, and are reluctant to call it

authentic philosophy in its own right. This is evinced by the fact that what they refer to as the “history of philosophy” is almost always merely the “history of Western philosophy.” This is an antiquated way of thinking out of step with the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Going forward I believe young people will turn Japanese philosophical academia into something better. I have not touched on them in this essay, but it goes without saying that there are countless urgent issues that must be addressed, such as the problem of gender inequality in academic associations and graduate schools, the problem of teaching positions, and the problem of fixed-term employment. The culpability of my generation and previous generations who failed to change these realities is great.

In my work going forward I would like to engage both in life studies and in the academic philosophy of life. I suspect these two fields will always stand in contrast to each other, maintaining a tense relationship without ever being unified, but I think this dynamic tension itself has value. I hope to crystalize this in a major work tentatively entitled *Philosophy of Birth Affirmation*. This will be my second major work. As in the past, I plan to proceed in a manner of my own choosing.

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## About the Author

Masahiro Morioka, Ph.D., is a professor at Waseda University, where he teaches philosophy and ethics. His specialties include philosophy of life, bioethics, gender studies, and civilization studies. He was born in Kochi Prefecture, Japan, in 1958. He graduated from the University of Tokyo and worked for the International Research Center for Japanese Studies and Osaka Prefecture University before coming to Waseda. He is considered by many to be one of the leading figures in contemporary Japanese philosophy.

Official site: <http://www.lifestudies.org/>

Email address: <http://www.lifestudies.org/feedback.html>

## BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR



# Painless Civilization 1

A Philosophical Critique of Desire

Open Access Book

Tokyo Philosophy Project (2021)

**Freely downloadable from:**

<https://www.philosophyoflife.org/tpp/painless01.pdf>

The elimination of pain and the acquisition of pleasure seem to be the ultimate aims of our civilization. However, paradoxically, the endless tendency to eliminate pain and suffering makes us totally lose sight of the meaning of life that is indispensable to human beings. How are we to battle against this painless civilization? Published in Japanese in 2003. The translation of Chapter One was published in 2021 under the title *Painless Civilization 1*.

## BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR



# Painless Civilization 2

Painless Stream and the Fate of Love

Open Access Book

Tokyo Philosophy Project (2023)

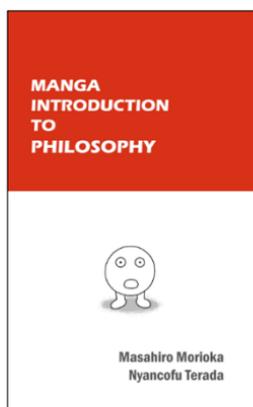
**Freely downloadable from:**

<https://www.philosophyoflife.org/tpp/painless02.pdf>

This is the English translation of Chapters Two and Three of *Painless Civilization*. In this volume, I examine the problems of painless civilization from the perspective of philosophical psychology and ethics. I discuss how the essence of love is transformed in a society moving toward painlessness and how the painless stream penetrates each of us and makes us living corpses.

In order to tackle the problems of painless civilization, we must look inside our inner world because the “desire of the body” that lurks within us is the ultimate cause of our society’s movement toward painlessness. Love and the meaning of life are the central topics of discussion in this volume.

## BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR



# Manga Introduction to Philosophy

An Exploration of Time, Existence, the Self, and the Meaning of Life

Open Access Book

Tokyo Philosophy Project (2021)

**Freely downloadable from:**

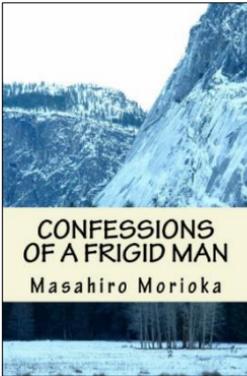
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351578340>

or

<https://www.philosophyoflife.org/tpp/mangaphilosophy.pdf>

As the title says, this book is an introduction to philosophy. I tried to write about questions like “What is philosophy?” and “What does it mean to think philosophically” for a general readership. This is not a book that presents easy-to-understand explanations of the theories of famous philosophers. Instead, I have tried to express as clearly as possible how I myself think about four major topics: “time,” “existence,” “I,” and “life.” By following this route, the reader will be led directly to the core elements of philosophical thought.

## BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR



### Confessions of a Frigid Man

A Philosopher's Journey into the  
Hidden Layers of Men's Sexuality

Open Access Book

Tokyo Philosophy Project (2017)

**Freely downloadable from:**

<http://www.philosophyoflife.org/tpp/frigid.pdf>

The most striking feature of this book is that it was written from the author's first person perspective. The author is a professor who teaches philosophy and ethics at a university in Japan, and in this book he talks about his own sexual fetishism, his feeling of emptiness after ejaculation, and his huge obsession with young girls and their developing female bodies. He undertakes a philosophical investigation of how and why sexuality took such a form within a person who had grown up as a "normal," heterosexual man.