To be or not to be fruitful and multiplying:
A reply to Tyron Goldschmidt and Jeremy Wanderer

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It comes as no surprise that two respondents in an Association for the Philosophy of Judaism symposium should focus on the two pages in *Better Never to Have Been* in which I briefly engage religious opposition to the anti-natalist ideas defended in that book. Nor is it surprising that neither see those two pages as a cure for religious – and more specifically Jewish – pro-natalism.

In *Better Never to Have Been* I argued that coming into existence is always a serious harm and that we ought not to create new people (or any other sentient beings). These pessimistic and anti-natalist views have only a little more popularity than pork has in Me'ah She'arim. My arguments for them are unambiguously secular, but in the book's conclusion I noted that some people will reject my arguments on religious grounds. In other words, any secular argument, no matter how compelling, will be dismissed because of the perceived inconsistency with a tenet of their religion. As an example of such a tenet, I pointed to the biblical commandment to be fruitful and multiply.

In response, I noted that such a religious argument assumes the existence of God – a big and controversial assumption. Even if one does make that assumption, there remain questions. There are many Biblical commandments that religious people do not take to be operative. I gave the example of the *ben sorer u'moreh*, but there are plenty of others too.

A third, and more interesting response, I said, was to note that each religion is not monolithic. Notwithstanding the dominance of pro-natalism in religion, there are strands of religious thinking that are either explicitly anti-natalist or, at least, compatible with anti-natalism. To this end, I pointed to quotations from Jeremiah (20:14-18) and Job (3: 204,6, 10, 11, 13, 16) in which they rue their existence. And then I outlined the famous debate between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai recounted in Eruvin 13b.

In his good-natured and good-humoured response[1], Tyron Goldschmidt says that when "religious texts point us in different directions, each should be interpreted in the light of the rest of the tradition, as well as what else we know about the world."

What we do – or should – know about the world is that it is a terrible place, notwithstanding the assertions early in *Bereishit* (at least about the prelapsarian world). It is a world in which millions of humans are living in extreme poverty, and in which people are succumbing to such horrors as devastating infectious diseases and cancer. It is also a world in which billions of animals are being eaten alive every minute, and in which billions more are being reared in appalling conditions and then killed by humans. (This is certainly not *tikkun olam*!) Thus, what we know about the world should, at least prima facie, lead us towards, not away from, anti-natalism.

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[1] For example, I enjoyed his contrast between the Bnei-Atar – the *Or HaHayyim* and the "*Hoshech HaHayyim"*.

In response to the unfortunate facts about the world, Dr. Goldschmidt, in referring us to two papers he has co-authored, asks us to believe two (nearly?) impossible things before breakfast. The first is that "the doctrine of reincarnation helps answer the problem of evil" and that the Vilna Gaon says that the debate in Eruvin is referring to reincarnation rather than to one's initially having come into existence. The second impossible thing we are asked to believe is that "even if harm and suffering now make it better never to have been, after history is rewritten [by the "Divine Proofreader"] there will never have been harm and suffering, and it will not be better never to have been." I doubt that this will be very comforting to those currently enduring torture and other unspeakable horrors. ("Don't worry, it will become the case that you never suffered".)

What about Dr. Goldschmidt's suggestion that we must interpret conflicting religious texts "in the light of the rest of the tradition"? The suggestion here seems to be that the strands of religious thinking to which I have pointed are not normative. He is quite correct that "the final word of orthodox Jewish law is that having children is obligatory for men and that abortion … is generally forbidden".

Jeremy Wanderer reaches approximately the same point, albeit after a more extended discussion of the *baraita* in Eruvin 13b. In this discussion, Dr. Wanderer begins by considering Ephraim Urbach's alternative reading of the debate in Eruvin, according to which the two rabbinic schools in fact were *not* debating whether it was better for humans to have been created, but rather whether it would have been better if particular evil-doers had not been created. Dr. Wanderer acknowledges that this is a non-standard reading of the text.

He then asks whether the Talmudic rabbis did indeed favour the view of Beit Shammai. Here he focusses on the qualification added after the purported endorsement of Beit Shammai's position, namely that now that humans have been created, "one should examine one's deeds; others say, one should consider one's deeds". He outlines three possible interpretations of this qualification and argues that only if the first of these interpretations is correct can we conclude that the Talmudic rabbis endorsed the position of Beit Shammai. He does not argue against that first interpretation, but rather shifts the burden of proof to me.

Dr. Wanderer recognizes that I need not care about these twists and turns. He correctly notes that my argument for anti-natalism does not rest, even in part, on the (purported) view of Beit Shammai. However, he expresses frustration that I did not say more. He says that my brief discussion of the religious objection is "unlikely to have any impact on anyone who feels its pull". He says that "it is not possible to limit the discussion to the mere citation of text and counter-text alone without engaging both with the historically-extended process of interpretation of such texts and with the interplay between lived experience and the process of interpretation through which such texts are taken as meaningful".

He concludes his commentary with a variant of a quip that has become *de rigueur* in discussions of my book. He says that without a more thorough engagement, "it would have been better for the discussion of 'the religious objection' never to have been".

I am not so sure! Because Drs. Goldschmidt and Wanderer are correct that no Jewish religious argument is ever going to defeat the dominant pro-natalist norms of Judaism, a more detailed religious argument, had I provided one, would not have convinced those whose pro-natalism is rooted in Judaism. Accordingly, it was not my aim to provide such an argument. Nor was it my aim to show how the anti-natalist features of Jewish thinking should be reconciled with the normative pro-natalist ones, which both Drs Goldschmidt and Wanderer have sought to do.

Instead, my goal, as mentioned earlier, was merely to provide some evidence that religious views are not monolithic and that there *are* anti-natalist strands of thought in Jewish and other religious thought. I concluded "that religious traditions can embody views that superficial religious thinkers would take to be antithetical to religiosity" (p. 223). The presence of such complexity should give pause to religious people, *some* of whom might then be able to consider the secular arguments with a more open-mind.

Concluding irreligious postscript:

Although my two commentators do not mention it, it is worth noting that anti-natalism faces resistance from even many *ir*religious Jews (*qua* Jews). This arises from a concern for cultural continuity. This concern is shared by almost all human cultures. However, some are less endangered than others. There are approximately 15 million Jews in the world – less than half of one percent of the world's population. In the shadow of the Holocaust, during which a third of world Jewry was exterminated, many Jews have felt a special duty to compensate for this genocidal onslaught by ensuring that they have Jewish progeny. Emil Fackenheim's suggestion that after the Holocaust there is a 614th commandment, namely not to hand Hitler posthumous victories, comes to mind. This demographic worry has special significance in Israel, which can remain a democratic Jewish state only if the Jewish demos remains a large enough proportion of the country's population.

I understand the psychological force such considerations wield. There is, however, another possible response to the Holocaust, namely not to give future Hitlers further victims. Jewish history is an abject lesson in the enduring nature of human suffering. Jewish continuity, like the continuity of humanity more generally, comes at a very steep cost to those created to do the continuing.