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“I’m Sorry for Being Born”: Contemporary Japan’s Answer to Antinatalism in the works of Aso Haro and Morioka Masahiro

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"I'm Sorry for Being Born"
Contemporary Japan's Answer to Antinatalism in the works of Aso Haro and Morioka Masahiro[1]

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The falling birthrate in Japan is often explained in the media by three structural factors: economic, interpersonal, and gender inequality. Japanese media usually emphasize the economic factor: lack of employment security, lower wages, worries regarding pension funds are considered the main reasons for Japanese people not getting married, and foregoing having children, the former tending to be a necessary condition of the latter. Western media, focusing on the interpersonal factor, are more interested in a supposedly unique type of social alienation and a lack of libido among young Japanese[2]. This pseudo-theory, suitable for click-baiting but lacking empirical evidence, tends to confuse correlation with causation and has strong techno-Orientalist overtones. Within this narrative, Japanese society represents a posthuman future characterized by a lack of intimacy and an indifference to the species' continuation.

Contrary to this interpersonal theory, issues related to gender inequality are based on substantial evidence. Primarily, we cannot ignore the damage caused by pregnancy discrimination in the workplace and the general misogynistic climate of Japanese society. Trying to avoid structural reforms that could address gender

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[1] I'm sorry for being born is a translation of the subtitle given by Dazai Osamu to his novel *A standard-bearer of the twentieth century* (『二十世紀旗手』: *Umarete Sumimasen* (『生まれて、すみません』). This paper is a short essay aiming to frame the question of antinatalism in Japan. We intend to develop this issue more in-depth in future papers.

[2] Both arguments are summed up in the following article from *The Atlantic* https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/07/japan-mystery-low-birth-rate/534291/ Also, as many journalists point out, the obsession with the Japanese birth rate is mainly caused by a lack of immigration policies. Other advanced economies, such as Canada or Germany, also have relatively low birth rates, but it is not considered a societal problem because population growth is fueled by immigration. Also, we might question the intention behind this obsession for population growth. Unfortunately, the desire to increase the population is less about celebrating family life and more about sustaining a consumer-based capitalist society.

inequality or a lack of child-care support, the Japanese government favors a targeted approach based on direct payments to parents (*kodomo teate* law). This "throw away money at the problem" approach allows the government to avoid tackling the root cause of the falling birthrate while pretending to offer a solution to the economic uncertainty facing young couples. Although Japan and other countries facing a declining birthrate need to create an environment favoring child-rearing, the media too often ignore another more difficult issue related to low-birthrate: more and more people are opposed, on philosophical ground, to procreation. In other words, they are advocates for antinatalism. This paper aims to offer a brief look at how some Japanese intellectuals and artists engage with the idea of antinatalism and how the seemingly desperate situation in Japan can offer some hope for reassessing our relationship to having children. After outlining a particular resurgence in Western antinatalist philosophy, we will summarize the efforts of one Japanese thinker, Morioka Masahiro, to give meaning to the experience of living. Finally, we will show how Japanese popular culture aimed at a young audience is trying to address contemporary life's anxieties while giving reasons to live and give life.

In recent years, there seems to be a strong interest in philosophical systems questioning the ethical ramifications of giving life. At the outset, we must make an important distinction: thinkers associated with the antinatalism movement do not advocate for the morality of ending the lives of people already living. They are not Thanos in disguise[3]. They generally question the ethical ramifications of giving life to sentient beings with an understanding of time, aware of their finitude, and hungry for justice in a world inherently unfair. This question has been addressed by many religious movements, including Buddhism and countless philosophers

[3] This reference to the end of Marvel's universe movie *Avengers: Infinity War* is to show that antinatalists do not see the destruction of existing life as an ethical choice. They usually advocate for an end to the creation of new sentient life. In recent years, right-wing commentators have mistakenly used Thanos, a Titan who uses the infinity stones to destroy half of life in the universe in order for the other half to thrive, as an analogy for population control or environmental activism. This is an apparent misunderstanding of any environmental movement as well as antinatalist movements. Furthermore, most prominent environmentalists, such as Greta Thunberg, are openly against the antinatalist philosophy. They do not see the creation of human life as a negative, but they attack our current use of natural resources. This is not to say that some environmental activists do not advocate some form of population control. For ethical reasons, this needs to be vehemently opposed. Population control policies inevitably lead to hazardous forms of biopower.

(most notably Schopenhauer or Cioran). Besides these existential concerns, there is also a movement trying to limit the number of children for environmental reasons. Although not a new idea, having fewer children to save the Earth is gaining traction among some environmentalists.

Also, through direct representation in American literature and popular culture, antinatalist ideas are getting more mainstream. For example, the first season of *True Detective* has a character advocating ideas expressed by Thomas Ligotti in *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, a book that substantially impacted horror writers and scholars of the horror genre (such as Eugene Thacker)[4]. Ligotti, himself a horror writer associated with weird fiction, frames his argument using vocabulary often used within this genre: "This is the tragedy: Consciousness has forced us into the paradoxical position of striving to be unself-conscious of what we are — hunks of spoiling flesh on disintegrating bones" (Ligotti 28). His overly pessimistic worldview, also expressed in his horror fiction, leads to only one conclusion: the human race needs to "cease reproducing" (29). If Ligotti is right, most people do not create complex ontological and ethical arguments like antinatalist thinkers, but they are "forced to admit this pretense [living with the pretense that being alive is all right] — they just do not linger over it long enough to make it a philosophical point of pride and sing their own praises for doing so. (49)" Are some people in Japan affected by this ontological doubt? Can the low birthrate be caused in part by a loss of faith in the act of giving life? Even though popular culture does not seem at first glance to be haunted by an antinatalist philosophy, we can see an effort to wrestle with these concepts among philosophers and a desire to represent the existential struggles of young people dealing with the weight of heritage and transmission in popular culture.

Concerning a philosophical response to antinatalism, the most interesting thinker in Japan today is Morioka Masahiro. Mostly known in the English world for his

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[4] It is important to note that, in *True Detective*, the antinatalist character Rust Cohle (played by Matthew McConaughey) holds his pessimistic views as a result of a long intellectual search for the truth, but because he suffered the loss of his two-year-old daughter in a car accident. His philosophical ideas are not portrayed as an objective truth but as the result of past trauma. Cohle wanted to have children, but his daughter's meaningless death creates his need to find meaning in a philosophy that emphasizes the absurdity of life and the need to end sentient existence, the cause of all suffering. In other words, the narrative wants to show that antinatalism is not an intuitive belief that is more often than not the result of past trauma.

book *Confessions of a Frigid Man: A Philosopher's Journey into the Hidden Layers of Men's Sexuality,* his more relevant book in Japanese is probably *Painless Civilization.* In 2020, he published a book on antinatalism: *Umarete-konai Hōga Yokkatanoka?* He also contributed to vol.47-14 of *Gendai Shisō* (2019) on antinatalism. His 2020 book is a very comprehensive explanation of the historical evolution of the concept and its different iterations influenced by religion or culture. It aims to familiarize readers with a concept that seems to be mostly foreign to the Japanese intellectual tradition. For English-speaking readers familiar with antinatalism, this book is essential so far as it shows a need to articulate these ideas in Japanese. To understand Morioka's interest in antinatalism and his contribution to addressing the questions raised by antinatalist philosophers, we have to look back at the main ideas developed in *Painless Civilization.*

Using the concept of "domestication/being transformed into cattles" (家畜化) and "control" (管理) he warns the reader against a civilization aiming to satisfy our bodily needs to the detriment of the joy of living (Morioka 18). Morioka's notion of domestication can be summed up easily. Contemporary humans, especially when they live in cities, can meet all their human needs without any effort as long as they have money. Life became convenient and very secure, but more and more people started to lack purpose or a desire for risk. Morioka likens our state to the one of a comatose patient, safely being taken care of in a hospital but not living our lives. Written in 2003, this book is prescient of our Covid-era defined by a large number of people confined to their apartment, receiving the necessary food at their doors, and having the ability to work using the Internet. According to Morioka, when animals are domesticated, when they become cattle, their life loses any purpose outside of satisfying human needs. They live, and die for us. When humans become domesticated, they become enslaved to their bodily needs. Also, we could say that they are stuck in an endless cycle of work for the sake of work. Similar ideas have been expressed before, but Moriaka's originality lies in his ability to show from a philosophical point of view how our painless society created an army of living dead, as well as an exit strategy to reconnect with the joy of living. In doing so, he also implicitly opposes one of the most cited arguments by the antinatalists: life, being a source of pain and discomfort, should not be given to other sentient beings who did not ask for it. For Morioka, pain is the

essence of life. People need to take risks in order to be alive. In a sense, we are not authentically alive because we live joyless lives. Before asking the question about our progeny, we should first consider if the life we live right now is fulfilling our existence's potential. Morioka looks at the evolution of the antinatalism movement in his last book, but it seems that the real question he is always asking: is what does living means? He asks the reader to consider what should be a fulfilling life.

This fundamental question is a common subject in philosophy and literature. It is also the basis for many manga stories, especially those belonging to the *shōnen* and *shōjō manga* genres. Although widely read in Japan regardless of gender or age, these two genres were first aimed at a readership of young men and women. They often use the themes of friendship and family when exploring issues of teenage angst and social exclusion. Most characters are trying to solve complex issues and find a purpose in their lives. In recent years, more intense depictions, with horror undertones, have become increasingly popular with the *shōnen manga* genre. In 2019, a Netflix adaptation of *Alice in Borderland* used the metaphor of a parallel universe to question the notion of life in our society.

The eight-part live-action adaptation of *Alice in Borderland*, a manga series by Aso Haro published between 2010 and 2016, was a major international success for Netflix. According to a few estimates, it was in the platform's Top 10 most-streamed content in more than 40 countries. The plot revolves around a group of people transported to a parallel universe[5] where everyone must periodically participate in a series of games to survive. The winners receive a playing card from a traditional 52-card pack and have their "visa" extended, allowing them to remain alive for a few more days until the next game. A mysterious laser beam kills those who lose or refuse to play the games. The series' two main characters are Arisu and Usagi (meaning rabbit in Japanese) to emphasize the intertextual reference to Lewis Carroll's stories). Borrowing tropes from traditional manga storytelling, the manga and the live-action adaptation portrays characters, including Arisu and Usagi, who faced in the "normal" world difficult family issues influenced by their

[5] This universe is a perfect replica of contemporary Tokyo, except for the fact that almost no one lives there, and most buildings are repurposed as locations for the deadly games.

gender. Following a family dynamic omnipresent in the *shōnen manga* genre, Arisu, a young male, is traumatized by his mother's death and resents his father. Being an extension of a shōjō manga's protagonist, Usagi is emotionally wounded by her father's absence, whom she loves and admires unconditionally. Other characters also have to grapple with difficult family situations. In fact, because of family issues, mostly everyone in Alice in Borderland was only half-living, trying to escape through different means the eternal grind of everyday life. Arisu was utterly lost in the world of video games, and Usagi was attempting to be one with nature, using her father's survivalist skills. More importantly, other characters portrayed as people succeeding in life, for example, Arisu's father or his younger brother, are living a version of Morioka's conception of domestication. These characters do not question the system they live in, only trying to fulfill their purpose without taking any risks. They try to satisfy their bodily needs, ignoring the joy of life entirely. During the eight episodes, viewers learn about the past family traumas of most of the main characters. Another important example would be Hikari, who, until the series' final battle, does not use her combat skills taught by her father, who cut ties with her after learning she identified as a woman.

Arisu, who was bored with his life in Tokyo, is forced to recognize the importance of living when confronted with death's real possibility. His father and brother used to mock his lack of ambition and obsession with useless video games, but the problem-solving skills he learned while escaping the real world are why he can survive in the parallel universe. Obviously, playing deadly games a few times a month is not the world envisioned by Morioka. People do not need to be always on the verge of death to be truly living. *Alice in Borderland* is a caricature that highlights how our risk-averse society has led us to live unfulfilling lives. It also shows the despair of youth having to integrate into our society. After all, except for a few minor exceptions, all the players of the games in *Alice in Borderland* are relatively young, the median age probably being around 25 years old. It is not a place for adults who have already decided how they wanted to live and how they expect to die ultimately. It is a space for youth to confront the fear of death and the fear of life.

When we look at this series through antinatalism's prism, we do not have a character like in *True Detective* who directly explains his antinatalist views. Most

of the characters, just out of childhood, are not ready to think about having children themselves. The two main characters, Arisu and Usagi, although depicted as being in love with each other, refuse to have any physical contact: partly because they want to focus on surviving the game, partly because they want to keep their relationship in a pre-adult stage[6]. Before they can commit to a relationship, they need to solve their past family trauma. This is where the sub-genre of *shōnen manga* can indirectly represent the most common antinatalist feeling in Japan. This feeling might not be based on the Western philosophical tradition but a rejection of Morioka's contemporary social model, where life is more secure but less enjoyable. It is normal to be hesitant to give life if the life we create will not really be alive. The passive rejection of the current social model is expressed in this refusal of the family unit. The characters in *Alice in Borderland*, as well as many other *shōnen manga* (and per extension, the younger generation), need to first solve tons of issues, including a rethink of the social and family structure, before having a pro-natalist view of the world. Some *shōnen manga* and philosophers such as Morioka try to rethink the way we experience life in a more fulfilling manner.

This short introduction to antinatalist sentiment needs to be expanded in future papers to understand how this is represented in contemporary popular culture in Japan and elsewhere and the solutions hinted at in some of these cultural productions. We also need to analyze Morioka as an essential thinker who helps us understand Japanese society.

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[6] We can also add that following the traditional structure of horror movies, characters who survive are those who refuse physical relationships, who remain "pure."

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