The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast #8 - David Pearce

[0:00:17] Hello everyone, welcome to episode 8 of The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast. I'm your host for today, Mark Maharaj. The roundtable discussion with Dana Wells, The Friendly Antinatalist, has been rescheduled until the next episode. In today's show I sat down to interview transhumanist philosopher David Pearce to discuss his views on antinatalism, transhumanism, and other related topics. Thank you to everyone in the antinatalist community that submitted questions. Hope you enjoy.

[0:00:45] **Mark Maharaj:** Have you listened to any of the episodes yet?

David Pearce: I have – well, I was just starting to listen to David Benatar before now.

Mark Maharaj: Oh, okay.

David Pearce: And he was — but… I haven't. Now, I'll be honest, you see, although I am an antinatalist, I don't go around with an antinatalist t-shirt. I have been surprised and impressed by the growth of the antinatalist movement, but it's not something I'd previously closely identified with, in spite of being a negative utilitarian, so …

Mark Maharaj: Yeah, actually, I found out about you – oh, by the way, thank you for being on the podcast, by the way –

David Pearce: No, thank you, Mark! *(laughs)*

Mark Maharaj: We've been social media friends for years, and this is the first time that we actually sit down and get to talk to you, so it's really nice. So, thank you for doing that.

[0:01:44] **Mark Maharaj:** So, I found out about you through the vegan movement. So, I was questioning my own ethics, and I really leaned toward the negative utilitarian point of view. And when I was trying to look at vegan negative utilitarians, I found you. And that's how I found out about more of your work through transhumanism, and I got interested in that because, even though I identify as an antinatalist, I still want to strive for reducing suffering in all possible ways that we can, and I got into the effective altruism movement as well through there. And then I saw your posts on antinatalism, so I was like, well, there's a lot of things we agree on! *(chuckles)* But I think I was surprised by your posts on antinatalism because, as you said, you don't have, like, the… you don't really carry the card around calling yourself that. So, how would you use the… would you self-describe as a 'soft' antinatalist? Because I believe you used those words before.

David Pearce: Yes, the distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' – 'soft' sound somehow weak-minded, but my problem with 'hard' extinctionist antinatalism is, sadly, I just don't see how it's going to work. It's the very nature of selection pressure that, if we're going to get rid of suffering, I think we're going to have to tackle its biological genetic groups, that simply choosing not to have children and encouraging others to do likewise, even though I do it, nonetheless, in some sense, what one is doing, one is creating selection — intensifying selection pressure against any predisposition not to have kids. And, yes, the very nature of selection pressure is such that any predisposition to "go forth and multiply" is going to be heavily selected for. In spite of the fact that, yes, most people in the course of a lifetime do sometimes undergo terrible suffering, nonetheless most people are determined to breed. Religious people tend to 'outbreed' atheists and secular folk by a landslide. And so, yes, back to your question: I describe myself

as a 'soft' antinatalist. I don't think one is ethically entitled to bring more suffering into the world. Nonetheless, I think the future belongs to fanatical life-lovers. And although I do think human extinction is going to happen, I don't see this as happening via universal childlessness, which is sociologically unrealistic, but instead us essentially rewriting our genetic source code. And we are already seeing the first – controversially – designer babies in China. Now, the fellow in question was almost certainly trying to do it not to prevent HIV, which was the nominal pretext for what he was doing, but essentially to create intelligent babies, because non-human animals who have the particular mutation in question he was engineering are actually smarter – improved cognition, memory, compared to mice that lack the mutation – and this wasn't innocence, he knew what he was doing. But rather than focusing on boosting intelligence, which is all very well and much harder, I think we should be — and this is it, if you have two people who are determined to have kids, as most people are, essentially, I think one has an obligation to load the genetic dice in their favour. And we already know that it's possible with even a handful of genetic tweaks to radically reduce the burden of suffering in individuals and indeed throughout the living world.

[0:05:56] **Mark Maharaj:** So, do you feel that these are — I feel like I'm in alignment with you, and I think Benatar mentioned this too: He doesn't believe that it's going to be a universal thing for antinatalism, but for the select few that happen to not breed this is a good thing. And isn't this – I don't know – is it not counterproductive to antinatalism to advocate for it if it helps the selection pressure for other life-lovers?

David Pearce: Well, there's a tension, as I said. Personally, I just don't see any way to justify bringing more suffering into the world. But it's not a global solution. I think antinatalists in general provide a very valuable service in the sense that they remind people, remind prospective or would-be prospective parents just what a momentous decision they're taking and how they are, in some sense, knowingly creating more suffering. They won't conceive of it, for the most part, like that, but, in that sense, I think we – the antinatalist movement – is valuable. But when antinatalism shades into human extinctionism, also Benatarianism, then, as I said, I have more problems. I most transhumanists, though I myself as a transhumanist, are optimists worrying about existential risk, as you know, there are institutes for prevention of existential risk. Most people, as soon as they hear the word 'antinatalism', still switch off, which is why, in a sense, I wear several hats: 'soft' antinatalist, transhumanist, effective altruist. But, potentially, I think it's possible to work together, because, even if one is, let's say, a 'hard' extinctionist antinatalist, why is this — why would it be good if there weren't any sentient beings? Because no sentience means no suffering. But if one takes the view of suffering-focused ethics without being a hard-line human extinctionist, it's possible to work with a broad coalition of other political–social groups. 20–30 years ago, we couldn't have this discussion, but, technically speaking, now one could have a hundred-year plan to phase out the biology of suffering, to genetically reprogram the biosphere. One can actually point to specific genes. The one I most commonly use because it's convenient is SCN9A nonsense mutations: You have no capacity to experience pain, but that tends to be problematic, especially in males, because they take all kinds of risk, but SCN9A is a kind of volume knob for pain, and you can say, you've got a choice: you can either choose not to have kids at all or to adopt, or if you *are* going to have children, you can actually choose the level of pain sensitivity of your future kid. Now, most parents will not want to have a child without any capacity to feel physical pain at all, which is indeed dangerous, but nonetheless it's possible, it would be possible to choose benign alleles of SCN9A, such that your child is, let's say, in the 0.1 % genetic outliers. If you've ever met the kind of person who says: "Oh, pain is just a useful signalling mechanism", and so on. They still have the function of nociception, but pain is relatively negligible for them. Now, psychological pain is more complicated, but even here one can point to particular genes and variations, such as, if you choose them, you are massively loading the genetic dice in favour of your future children. Now, I'm aware there's a tension here between saying, "I don't think that you should be bringing more Darwinian malware into the world that will suffer", and at the same time trying to bang the drum for this kind of biohappiness revolution. But, as I said, it's important to consider not merely what is technically feasible, but also what is

sociologically realistic. Because after all, Gautama Buddha, 2,500 years ago, why didn't he say, tell his followers: "Just stop having children"? Probably because he just recognized that it's not going to happen.

[0:11:17] **Mark Maharaj:** Yeah, I feel comfortable being in both camps because I think it's – listeners may be disappointed to hear this – but I think it's unrealistic to think that everybody is going to adopt not breeding. So, if you accept that there's going to be a certain amount of people that will, then you want them to have good lives. And I think we should strive for future people, and so, I think the existential risk stuff in terms of quality of life matters, and I think both the transhumanist and effective altruists movements work towards that.

David Pearce: Yeah, I agree with that, yeah.

[0:11:58] **Mark Maharaj:** What is transhumanism, and what is the – what was the project called again? – *The Abolitionist*…

David Pearce: *The Abolitionist Project*.

Mark Maharaj: *The Abolitionist Project*. And how do you differentiate, or how do you differ from other transhumanists in your philosophy, if you could summarize some of that?

David Pearce: Yeah, transhumanism is a very broad church, but may crudely be divided into the three 'supers': Transhumanist would like to see a civilization of super-intelligence, super-longevity, and super-happiness for all sentient beings.
Super-intelligence: What do we mean by super intelligence? Queue for a whole bunch of different stories, but this is the idea, that it's possible, can be possible, to radically augment our cognitive capacities with the help of AI, genetic engineering, and a host of interventions like that. And there are different forms of super-intelligence, ranging from people who think that humans are going to be replaced by our smart machines to Kurzweilians who think we're going to merge with AI or perhaps mind uploading. But there's also a stream of — a current of biological transhumanists who thinks posthuman super intelligence will be us, genetically rewritten, augmented by AI and implants, AI implants, and so forth, but essentially *us*.

Mark Maharaj: That's your position, right?

David Pearce: That is my position. I think classical digital computers are zombies, and, in one sense, they are invincibly ignorant, even though they can slaughter us in chess, go and outperform us in countless other cognitive domains, but, nonetheless, I don't think they're capable of phenomenal binding, they're not subjects of experience, they don't understand consciousness or the pleasure–pain axis. But this is a minority position amongst transhumanists, I should say, but this is my position. So, that's one strand of transhumanism: the super-intelligence.
Super-longevity: This is the idea that, just as we can replace silicon robots, their components, upgrade them indefinitely, likewise, ultimately organic robots, humans, it would be possible to phase out the biology of aging. And, unlike getting rid of suffering, there's still an awful lot of handwaving there. If you don't want to die, probably your best bet is to sign up for cryonics. But a lot of transhumanists are focused on defeating aging and senescence and age-related disease, particularly associated with the work of Aubrey de Grey, and also cryonics, Max More, Cryonics Institute, Alcor.
But there's a third strand of transhumanism and this is what I've always really focused on, which argues that we can replace the biology of pain and suffering with life based on gradients of intelligent well-being. Information sensitivity is critical that, yes, it'd be possible to wire up your reward circuitry, such that you essentially enjoy indiscriminate bliss, that there would be strong selection pressure against wire-heading. Most people, most parents are aghast at the idea, it's not going to happen like that. But based on existing freaks of nature, genetic outliers, people like my transhumanist colleague Anders Sandberg who, if pressed, will say: "Yes, I do have a ridiculously high hedonic setpoint." It is possible to ratchet up hedonic range and hedonic setpoint, such that an entire civilization is possible based on gradients of

intelligent well-being. Now, I predict, though I don't think it's morally urgent in the same way as getting rid of suffering as morally urgent, that our descendants will enjoy life based on gradients of superhuman bliss. But that's speculative, and, as I see it, the overriding moral urgency is to get rid of suffering, and it is possible to do this with recognizable extensions of existing technology this century. And that's counterintuitive, but I'm not invoking posthuman super-intelligence or singularity or anything like that. Gene editing, genome editing is now real, synthetic gene drives are now potentially real. If, I mean it's not going to happen, sadly, but if the World Health Organization were to launch a hundred-year plan to phase-out the biology of suffering, one can actually sketch out relative detail what would actually be involved. As I said, this is not a prediction, it's gonna take hundreds of years, sadly, I think hundreds of years of suffering still lie ahead, but as a third strand to transhumanism…

Once again, this is the triple-s civilization, this is a slogan, it's a simplistic summary. Most transhumanists are probably more focused either on super-intelligence or super-longevity. It's definitely a minority current, but phasing out the biology of involuntary suffering is, as I would see it, absolutely essential to becoming post-human.

[0:18:36]   **Mark Maharaj:** How did you come to antinatalism? Did something influence you, or was this, like, something that came through your negative utilitarianism or through the veganism? How did you come about this?

David Pearce: It's more of a label. Just as I didn't become a transhumanist until someone said "hey, you are transhumanist", I didn't become a self-diagnosed antinatalist until informed that this was my position. From a very early age, I decided I didn't want to have children, I thought I would be bringing more suffering into the world. But it never occurred to me really that it could be anything more than a personal position. I was delighted when David Benatar brought out, published *Better Never to Have Been* – kudos for Oxford University Press for doing so, I assumed that something like that would be unpublishable. And so, in spite of disagreeing with David Benatar's prescription and his well, his extinctionism, nonetheless, I think he's done everyone a service. There's this kind of tension because one isn't trying to make people depressed. On the contrary, one, in some sense, wants to accentuate the positives. It's more a case of would-be prospective parents, the ones really wanting to remind just how dreadful life can be a lot of the time for a lot of people… But I suppose more recently I have used the label more often, but this distinction between being a 'soft' and 'hard' antinatalist though is not original to me, I can't actually recall when I first came across this distinction, it is not widely known. One has to essentially define those terms.

Mark Maharaj: Yeah, it was more, where did the… not necessarily the label but the idea that bringing a sentient being into existence would be a negative, like you said, at an early age...

David Pearce: Well yes, this kind of teenager. In practice, this is it, you see, however much one thinks one is diagnosing the human predicament or the nature of reality, it's in many cases a form of a bleak autobiography. And I was a troubled, depressive, introspective teen wrestling with the problem of suffering and how one could get rid of it. And the idea of creating more of it would be abhorrent. Having said that, just occasionally, I would have a normal response, seeing a small child, "oh how sweet, how adorable!", and even now, if I'm presented with some new-born by an adoring mother, I don't think, "oh God, poor..." – well, I might think it, I would not say, "what is this poor Darwinian malware that you have brought into the world", but coo and make the appropriate noises. But, as I said, the formal — technically I'm a negative utilitarian, I have been since my teens. It's a lousy brand. Buddhist, calling oneself a Buddhist sounds much better, and Buddhism has a lot of metaphysical accretions one probably wouldn't want to buy into. Also, I'm not convinced that it's desire, and desire alone, that is responsible for the world's suffering. The term 'suffering-focused ethics' I think is probably the best one can do. But even so, of course, it sounds incredibly depressing. Perhaps the most useful tool I've found is the Ursula Le Guin story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas". Now, although I think the fable was designed – sorry, in case anyone listening hasn't come across this short story: This city of Omelas, this

city of fabulous delights, everyone in Omelas has an absolutely fabulous, wonderful time, and yet, for unexplained reasons, this wonderful city of delights depends on the torment of this single child, locked away, abused in a basement. And the people of the city of Omelas know about this child, but, in some sense, they feel that this is a price worth paying, after all, compared to all the wonders of life, this is relatively trivial, a mere pinprick, one might say. However, there are some people – how many we don't know – who walk away from Omelas, who somehow find this obscene. And I think a lot of people who read "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", they feel that walking away is appropriate, and they certainly wouldn't be inclined to condemn other readers who say they *would* walk away from Omelas. Yet what does actually walking away from Omelas entail? And I would say, yes, it involves not having children.

[0:24:37] **Mark Maharaj:** And does that apply to all sentient life including non-humans?

David Pearce: Yes, this is one of the reasons that some forms of antinatalism I don't really think fully address the problem, is that the most suffering living world isn't experienced by humans. The amount of human suffering is obscene, but nonetheless in spite of one's rather… idyllic view of nature encouraged by Disneyfied wildlife documentaries, life in the state of nature is mostly nasty, brutish and short, "nature red in tooth and claw", most non-human animals lead short, hungry, desperate existences. Probably, for the average, I can look outside the window and see a seagull. If you make it into adulthood, and most non-human animals in nature are probably not depressed – they don't self mutilate as captive factory farms non-humans tend to do unless they're tail-docked, debeaked, declawed, castrated, and so forth. But a lot of the living world is incredibly grim. And for the first time in history, we now have the ability to regulate the level of misery and malaise in nature, that the level of suffering in the world is now an adjustable parameter. And after we have shut, outlawed factory farms and slaughterhouses, as I think we will as the cultured meat revolution accelerates, I think we have a responsibility, the stewardship for nature. Now, personally, I wouldn't be sad if the whole monstrous apparatus of Darwinian life, pain-ridden, misery-ridden Darwinian life, was shut down, but this is not something that is sociologically credible. But this doesn't mean that we should just abandon free-living non-humans to their fate. There are powerful new technologies, and in particular I'm thinking of CRISPR-based synthetic gene drives, such that it's possible to remotely regulate the level of suffering or well-being of entire species, even at the price of a fitness cost to the individual. And if that sounds scientifically illiterate, that was my first response when I came across synthetic gene drives, too. But synthetic gene drives keep the laws of Mandelian inheritance, and they can be used to push through what would otherwise be deleterious mutations. First of all, they're probably going to be used to defeat vector-borne disease like malaria, if you ensure all of a mosquito's offspring belong to the same gender, it's going to be possible to wipe out particular species of Anopheles mosquitoes, for example. There are obviously profound risks here, too. But, yes, essentially, it's a tool for managing nature. Now, the idea, which hasn't been properly explored yet, of using synthetic gene drives to actually minimize free-living animal suffering probably sounds like sci-fi, but it's technically feasible, and, unlike giving up meat, it doesn't actually involve any personal inconvenience to people. So, it's premature to talk about doing this kind of thing now, but if humans were to go extinct tomorrow, what would happen? There would just be hundreds of millions of years of more pain, misery and suffering. Whereas, if we're prepared to assume responsibility, global stewardship of the biosphere, then, within a few centuries, theoretically, in a much shorter period, but, let's say, a few centuries, one can bring suffering under control and eventually eliminate it. Every cubic metre of the planet is going to be computationally accessible to micro-management and control. And if you take something like obligate predators, for example. Now, intuitively, the ecosystem needs predation because otherwise there would be an uncontrollable explosion of herbivores leading to mass starvation and more misery. But once again, there are technical fixes one can use some genetic tweaking to convert cats into herbivores with catnip-flavoured cultured meat as a kind of stopgap. One can use cross-species fertility regulation via immunocontraception, tunable gene drives. I go into more detail with some of these scenarios, not because I think that in 20 years time they're going to be dusted down for use. It's more that, only once people appreciate just what is and isn't technically possible, can we have a serious ethical debate as to how much suffering we want in the

living world: Do we want any suffering in the living world, do we want to preserve existing species and, if so, are we obliged to maintain the sanctity of the germline or are we allowed to tweak them? Any of your listeners who are thinking of "couldn't anything go wrong?" – I can think of thousands of things that can go wrong! But the point is all genetic — all sexual reproduction today, human or non-human, is a genetic experiment. And if we're going to either genetically experiment ourselves by having kids or allow genetic experimentation to continue in nature, we're now in a position to, in a sense, assume responsibility for how much suffering we cause or allow to continue.

[0:31:25]   **Mark Maharaj:** So, what life would be included in your – what's your project called again? – *The Abolitionist Project*?

David Pearce: *The Abolitionist Project*. In one sense, it's Gautama Buddha: "May all that have life be delivered from suffering." – "I teach one thing, and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering." And I call this *The Abolitionist Project*. What's different isn't the kind of core ethic but the fact that technology makes it possible now to draw up blueprints as to how it could be achieved. Which, and this is controversial, I think, potentially, at least in the future might be sociologically realistic, because one can show, or at least tentatively show, how in the new reproductive area of designer babies there's going to be selection pressure against genes predisposing to depression, pain-related disorders. After all, if you're not an antinatalist, you're determined to have kids, and you could actually choose the genetic dial settings, the pain sensitivity, hedonic tone, hedonic range, hedonic setpoints – what dial settings would you choose? And, other things being equal, most parents will want to have happy kids. Happy kids are more fun to raise, they're more likely to be successful. So, yes, I think there is gonna be selection pressure in favour of less suffering. In the case of non-humans, trying to — applying *The Abolitionist Project* to the rest of the living world at the moment would not really be computationally extraordinarily hard. It's sociologically unrealistic, but 50, 60, 70 years from now, I suspect it's eventually going to happen. One just sees the response of people in, let's say, a nature documentary. Ask people in the abstract: Do you think humans should intervene in nature or interfere? And most people will, of course, say no. But if they're watching a David Attenborough documentary and so on, and the cameraman is filming, let's say, some starving baby elephant or something, viewers are most indignant if the cameraman keeps filming rather than actually offers assistance. Now, in practice, since such is the nature of our about Disneyfied wildlife documentaries that a lot of the really nasty stuff just simply isn't shown. But nonetheless, when some pathos-inducing scene is actually played out, most people, quite rightly, said: "Why allow the baby elephant to starve?" And this level of surveillance, this kind of global panopticon – essentially, as I said, every cubic meter of the planet is going to be accessible to this level of surveillance. And, of course, it could be used for terrible Orwellian purposes, or it could be used for a kind of pan-species welfare state. And, clearly, I would very much favour the latter. Critics say: "Ah, but this is turning the whole living world into a zoo!" But I don't think that's really accurate. It's just as humans flourish best when we're neither wild nor incarcerated, this is the same with non-human animals, too, that, yes, one wants basic provision of health care and so on, but, yeah, light-touch surveillance in tomorrow's wildlife parks, for example. Obviously, I'm glossing over all manner of technical, political, sociological challenges. If anyone thinks I'm being facile and glib, I can sympathize with that, but if someone says there is no alternative, I think one is entitled to say, well, yes, actually there are alternatives.

[0:36:04]   **Mark Maharaj:** Yeah, you have a lot of your theory in *The Hedonistic Imperative*. I was curious if — will that ever become an actual physical book? Because it's really hard to read online!

David Pearce: Magnus Vinding did a Kindle. Essentially *The Hedonistic Imperative* – don't, any antinatalist listeners, don't be put off by the debauched title. This was this was back in 1995. I wrote this manifest essentially urging and tentatively predicting that we get rid of the biology of suffering and replace it by life based on gradients of intelligent bliss. And I would have liked to have called it "the moral imperative to use biotechnology to get rid of suffering", *The Hedonistic Imperative* is a snappier title. But it was written, as I said, goodness happens, 25 years ago now, and this was before the human

genome had been decoded, before — cultured meat was just sci-fi. Essentially, it needs an update, not because I've radically changed my views, though back in 1995 I wasn't able to write about CRISPR-based synthetic gene drives, but it was also written, well, sort of for analytic philosophers. This was 1995. The web was just beginning. No one had any real idea of its potential, and I, suddenly — and I realised that what I'd always assumed would be completely unpublishable ideas, I realised that, "hey, anyone can reach a wider audience", and halfway through the manifesto realizing, "well, I don't just need to write for analytic philosophers, I can write for a wider audience". But it was written in a rather kind of clotted academic style. And though I like to... since then, I've done much, a lot of stuff I would hope is more readable. What is really needed is a rewrite, a good accessible introduction to *The Abolitionist Project*.

I wasn't the first – I now know that's one, but one writer, Lewis Mancini anticipated the idea of life based entirely on information-sensitive gradients of well-being back in 1990. Great little paper, "Riley-Day Syndrome and a World Without Pain". I mean, it's counterintuitive, the idea that it's possible to have intelligent functional behaviour without actual states of suffering. Yet, though it's technically challenging, it is actually feasible. Sorry, that's a long-winded response to your question, but yes.

[0:39:12] **Mark Maharaj:** You said there would be setpoints… But would it be the parents' responsibility to determine that? Who would determine those things?

David Pearce: Initially, it would be the parents, inevitably. Although, unlike pain-sensitivity, there isn't a single, where one can actually point to, a volume knob for pain sensitivity. One can't point to a single gene for hedonic setpoint. But nonetheless, there are a handful of genes, the FAAH gene, the FAAH OUT gene, the COMT gene (catechol-O-methyl transferase), number of other genes there, such that, if one chooses benign settings, which in some cases would involve actual genetic engineering, in other cases would involve simply preimplantation genetic screening, then, initially, it would be the responsibility of parents to choose the approximate hedonic range and hedonic setpoint of their future baby. But as life, society evolves, it would possible for the individual to choose these things him- or herself. I'm sorry, just in case any — I'm prone to use jargon, apologies. This notion of hedonic setpoint, this is... It seems each of us has roughly an approximate level of well-being or ill-being around which we tend to approximate in the course of the lifetime. But six months after either winning the lottery or having a terrible accident that leaves you quadriplegic, most people will revert to the approximate level of well-being or ill-being they had before the accident. Many complications, it's very counterintuitive, a lot of people will imagine: "Yes, if I won the national lottery, the solution to all my many worries – *eureka*!" But natural selection has cleverly engineered things, such that most of the time we will regress towards this hedonic setpoint and… But people have differing hedonic setpoints. Most people, it's probably a little bit above or a little bit low hedonic zero, neutral experience. Surprisingly – and this came as a surprise to me – most people, their default hedonic setpoint is a little bit above hedonic zero. Most people are not clinically depressed, a large minority are, but nonetheless, if you ask people right now, "are you sad, very happy, or quite happy?", on average most people will actually say "quite happy". Which, in view of the amount of suffering in the world, might seem surprising. But, essentially, nature doesn't care. Nature plays around with the dial settings. Being depressed or depressive can have advantages, genetically speaking, a so-called depressive realism: One can be more astute in one's judgments. But equally people who are full of a kind of life-loving vitality, optimists, people with high hedonic setpoints, they're, for example, more likely to go out, explore the world, sadly, often do many unpleasant things: traditionally, the raping, looting, waging war, pillaging, all this kind of stuff, and leave more copies of their genes. So, essentially, there is a high genetic loading for hedonic setpoint. Sometimes it's relatively high by Darwinian standards, other times it's genetically low. And increasingly we're going to be able to choose this approximate hedonic setpoint. Now this, I'm making — I'm sounding like a genetic determinist. I'm not. Genes and culture co-evolved, and I'm as keen on social-economic reform as anyone else. But if we're serious about getting rid of suffering, we're gonna have to tackle both the social and the biological genetic.

[0:43:55] **Mark Maharaj:** So, when I was looking at the criticism, or at least people call it, like, they do consider it a reductio of negative utilitarianism: the 'benevolent world explorer' thought experiment. On at least … you were quoted as saying: "planning and implementing the extinction of all sentient life couldn't be undertaken painlessly. Even contemplating such an enterprise would provoke distress. Thus a negative utilitarian is not compelled to argue for the apocalyptic solution." A lot of the positions that we hold ethically, say, veganism or gene editing, causes distress in people, like, people are — some people don't want this. So, what, is it just not practical to, even as a thought experiment, as a challenge to NU – what would be your response to someone who says, "well wouldn't the reductio of NU be this 'benevolent world explorer' thing"?

David Pearce: Yeah, it appals a lot of people, which is suggestive, but if there was simply a clean off-button, initiate vacuum phase transition, no life, no suffering, effectively the end of the world. But there is no clean off-switch. And indeed, this is the rather unfortunate thing about negative utilitarianism: Rather than conjuring up an image of care and compassion and concern for all sentient beings, it triggers these apocalyptic images. And it is simply because humans can't be trusted. If history shows us anything, it's that good intentions can go awry. I think one needs to enshrine in law something like the sanctity of life, even though I don't literally believe in the sanctity of life, not just human but non-human life, that otherwise one actually defeats one's purposes. Let's assume that you and everyone listening agrees that, somehow, we want to get rid of the awfulness of suffering, what is the most realistic, practical way we can do this, safely, in the minimum amount of time? And it's going to involve working with people both secular and religious who have value systems very different from ours, but fortunately, most different secular and religious belief systems do at least allow some weight to reducing suffering. And so, I would hope that any believer in suffering-focused ethics can be thinking how we can form strategic alliances with other groups, so that we can work to this common goal. Because even though most people aren't negative utilitarians, and they give weight, at least some weight, to pleasure, in many cases, to religious goals, and a thousand and one other values, too, nonetheless, potentially, at any rate, I think we have a strong enough — there's enough common ground for us to work to this goal getting rid of involuntary suffering. It's worth stressing the 'involuntary', even though to me it's obvious, unfortunately a lot of critics have this idea that someone somewhere is gonna force people to be happy against their will. But back to your original experiment, I'm sure a lot a lot of your listeners, at least some of the time, will just think "oh, if only we could just stop the horror". But, sadly, there is no simple solution like that, we're gonna have to go through this. It's gonna take realistically hundreds of years.

[0:48:21] **Mark Maharaj:** On YouTube someone asks: "Let's say *The Abolitionist Project* succeeds and that no pain remains in sentient beings, through a myriad of technological advances. What about the future? What guarantees that there won't be any technological or technical failure that would let suffering come back?"

David Pearce: Short answer is, there's no guarantee. But nonetheless, if we are responsible, one can have, one could introduce multiple safeguards and AI, and, essentially, AI supervision. Something like smallpox, for example: In theory we could, or some malign agent could, reintroduce smallpox, bring it back to the world. But, touch wood, other things being equal, once we wiped out smallpox, it's gone for good. And I think, after we have phased out experience below hedonic zero, essentially, if we do it wisely and intelligently, we're going to introduce a whole bunch of safeguards to prevent anything like the dark ages from ever recurring. So, once again, if, in some sense, it would be possible to vacuum phase transition, no possibility of suffering or anything else ever occurring again, that would be a simple solution. But it doesn't exist and it's not going to happen. Whereas, if we work together for this goal not merely phasing out suffering but ensuring it never occurs anywhere again within our Hubble volume, then I think that's probably the most we can hope for.

[0:50:24] **Mark Maharaj:** "Even if a future devoid of pain is granted in a negative utilitarian perspective, *The Abolitionist Project* seems suboptimal compared to the extinction of life as soon as possible since waiting for the abolition of all forms of suffering entails accepting the appearance of suffering until the project's aims is attained. How does David Pearce view the abolitionist project as a better option than quick and painless life extinction?"

David Pearce: I understand the intuition, but this is the problem: There is no painless life abolition that is sociologically realistic. Technically, one could envisage some kind of mega-gigaton doomsday device, cobalt-salted, that would sterilize the planet or at least get rid of multicellular life, but essentially no… It's not going to get built, it's not going to happen. And although various other scenarios are conceivable, that I'm not going to go into, essentially, the most likely result would be more suffering. I think it's much safer to, as I said, enshrine in law the sanctity of life and work with all well-meaning people worldwide to ensure that suffering is not being abolished but can never recur. And sure, knowledge that this will probably realistically take centuries, that it's — reproductive revolution will involve ensuring that all babies are designer babies. And the obstacles are utterly daunting, and my heart sinks, whereas the idea of some simple off-button or off-switch, particularly if you're a depressive cast of mind, is attractive, but, essentially, it's not realistic, unfortunately.

[0:52:27] **Mark Maharaj:** A questioner asks: "I'd be interested to challenge him on his objection to radical antinatalism on the basis of selection pressure. He makes the assumption that, when an idea is genetically maladaptive, the selection pressure will weed it out. To me it seems the evolution of thought is largely independent from biological evolution and only superficially mirrors it. It's not like people that decide to have kids genetically pass on their natalist beliefs or any other belief they might hold as a matter of fact to their offspring. Not that I'm particularly optimistic about the antinatalist project, but that has different reasons, and I think to characterize the position as inherently self-defeating is false." What do you think about that?

David Pearce: Of course, I'm profoundly sympathetic to the goals of antinatalism, given how much suffering even a relatively fortunate child is likely to experience in the course of a lifetime. But essentially, evolution has bribed us with pleasure as well as pain. And although we have learned not to trust the judgment of heroin addicts, nonetheless, evolution bribes us all with endogenous opioids. And most people today, most potential mothers, for example, have a profound, yearning urge to reproduce. Involuntary childlessness, as we know, causes tremendous heartache, suffering. One sees the extraordinary lengths people will go to have kids. There is simply, as you probably know, there is simply no way that rational ethical argument can reach people who have this tremendous compulsion to breed and have kids, and it has, once again, this strong genetic loading. And the slightest predisposition to want to have as many kids as possible is amplified. Genes and cultures, as we were saying earlier, kind of co-evolved, and it's no coincidence that, shall we say, the depressive, negative utilitarians sort of like me, will not be actually passing on their genes to a new generation. So, as I said, this biblical injunction to "go forth and multiply", it has variants in different religions across the world, and there is simply no way that arguments are going to be able to penetrate to most people.

[0:55:36] **Mark Maharaj:** Someone asks: "Time and money spent on transhumanism is time and money not spent on antinatalism. How do you balance the two?"

David Pearce: I see them as complimentary, because transhumanists would like, or at least many transhumanists, would like to see human extinction. They wouldn't put it like this, they would say that they would like us to become transhuman and then posthuman to get rid of all the frailties of the body and flesh, to get rid of suffering, disease, and aging. And, likewise, the reason most people, most

antinatalists is not that giving birth is intrinsically bad, but rather giving birth is bad because one is bringing more suffering into the world. And, this is it, it's only a thought experiment, but imagine if we were to encounter an advanced civilization that had abolished any form of suffering, and that any new baby aliens were intrinsically, innately happy, that their lives are based on gradients of bliss, would the 'hard' antinatalist want to urge them not to have offspring, even though their having offspring in general suffering? And I would guess, realistically, that most antinatalists – well, I suppose some people would just dismiss this thought experiment – but I can, essentially, foresee in era in which there is no suffering, in which case antinatalism, as we understand it today, simply won't be relevant. Sadly, this is not imminent…

[0:57:42]   **Mark Maharaj:** Next question: "My question is: Transhumanism, as in working towards the betterment of human life experience evolving beyond its current physical and mental limitations, especially by means of science and technology, is and has been already happening. That's why, supposedly, we have the systems of economy, governance, medicine, application of science and so forth. Whatever is happening is happening. What is transhumanism saying, or more so doing, beyond what is happening, done already, and will be done anyway, other than futuristic projections?"

David Pearce: Yes, there is one sense in which one can take, one can treat, technological determinism that, sure, transhumanists have boosters for radical anti-aging research, but even though, at the moment, most people would accept the status quo and aging. If some miracle cure, anti-aging cure were to be developed and hit the stores, essentially, all people's resistance will rapidly be swept away… But, in the case of – although I think transhumanist technologies and intelligence augmentation and radical anti-aging probably happen anyway, sadly, at the moment most focus, most technical focus is not on improving mood, well-being, pain sensitivity. As I said, we're just at the very start of the revolution, reproductive revolution of designer babies, and most people are focusing on the issues of "is it right or wrong to engineer babies who don't have genetic disease, that's remediation, or are augmented?", and I think there is an important role for transhumanists in the broad sense, whether or not one calls oneself a transhumanist or not, to say that, if people insist on having kids, that they have a responsibility to minimize the amount of pain and suffering they bring into the world… I'm sorry I don't repeat want to myself…

[1:00:15]   **Mark Maharaj:** Another question: "I know he has commented he is an EFILIST." Have you actually commented that?

David Pearce: I think obliquely by saying, that if there really were just a clean off-button, I would actually press it…

Mark Maharaj: "I would like to know what he means by that and if he could elaborate."

David Pearce: Although it makes me uncomfortable because I think it's a distraction: Yes, I would personally press the off-button. I think there is obscene suffering in the world, and if it were possible cleanly to eliminate it, and this was the only way to do it, I would press it. So, in that sense, I would be an EFILIST. However, I'm not an EFILIST in the sense that I think we should be working for the destruction of all life because I think it is not merely infeasible, I think it is counterproductive, it will make enemies and it will lead to more suffering. So, that is it, in spite of being a negative utilitarian, I wouldn't use the EFILIST label. Other people might decide to apply it, and indeed in practice I think there need to be tremendous safeguards. Something like euthanasia, for example: If one is a doctor, a compassionate doctor, I'm sure a lot of doctors will think: "Oh God, this poor suffering person! Wouldn't it be better if she were out of her misery?" And yet it would be profoundly dangerous if doctors went around discreetly bumping off their patients playing God. So I'm aware of the fact that there is a tension between

being a negative utilitarian and saying one should have in law the sanctity of life, but there's less tension than one might imagine.

[1:02:18] **Mark Maharaj:** My next question: "What is the biggest existential threat facing humanity in your opinion?"

David Pearce: Well, in spite of the Great Plague that is upon us, I don't — essentially humanity is going to survive this little drama. Realistically, I think humans are going to become extinct in the next few centuries, but not in some apocalyptic event, though, sadly, I consider some forward nuclear war quite likely. Essentially, we are going to rewrite our own source code. And it's going to be a combination of AI, essentially, with a little sort of neuro-chip or implant you can have super-intelligence integrated within you, or narrow AI, together with this ability starting off with little light genetic tweaking, but eventually wholesale genetic rewrite. Essentially, we are going to cease to be human in a recognisable sense. I don't think there's going to be a specific cut-off where we cease to be *homo sapiens*, but if one were to flash-forward a thousand years, let's say, I don't think there would be any archaic humans around. Indeed, it would probably be grossly unethical to conserve brain-damaged and dysfunctional Darwinian life-forms. Now, this isn't, admittedly, what the term 'existential risk' is sometimes used to mean, but that's why I think we're going to become extinct in the next few centuries.

[1:04:08] **Mark Maharaj:** What is your opinion of Aubrey de Grey and his work on trying to defeat aging?

David Pearce: Well, I have tremendous respect for Aubrey de Grey. He's, single-handedly, more than anyone else, he has rescued radical anti-aging research from crank alley, and I'd recommend reading *Ending Aging*. I suspect Aubry is more optimistic about time scales than the evidence warrants, but, this is it, the unknown unknowns, revolutionary breakthroughs – aging is going to be fixable. What else can I say? I wish, in some sense, there were closer collaboration between SENS and the cryonics movement in that there is something almost cruel about promising people "yeah, science is going to find a cure for aging, probably shortly after you're dead". I can quite imagine that many of your listeners don't find the idea of radical extension, radical life extension especially appealing, but nonetheless, compared to the challenges of getting rid of defeating aging, it's much, much easier to defeat the biology of suffering and even the biology of boredom. And so… I would see… It's quite tightly intermesh there, but one shouldn't imagine that indefinite lifespans mean indefinite suffering, on the contrary.

[1:06:03] **Mark Maharaj:** Are you signed up for cryogenics – oh sorry, cryonics?

David Pearce: Cryonics. I did almost complete the process but… if I go down that route, it would be more likely to be cryothanasia. I'm personally skeptical that cryonics, if you wait 6–8 hours or whatnot, that, I suspect, irretrievable information loss will occur. If you do it at the age of 95 or whatnot, in what sense are you still the same person you are at the age you 60 or 30? I confess I'm very ambivalent here in that I don't think posthuman superintelligence would consider it ethical to reanimate brain-damaged Darwinians from a previous era. I'm sure they could get rid of whatever killed us, and they could massively upgrade us emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, if you like to. But in which case… why bother to have yourself suspended if you don't think it's going to be you who wakes up? The part of the reason for doing this, as I said, I feel I would be hypocritical not to do so if I urge, as I do, opt-out a cryonics option, for everyone there's a way of defying death, I fear it would be hypocritical for me not to do the same myself. But if I do go down this route, it would probably be cryothanasia. And the thought of sinking into decrepitude, not so much the physical as the intellectual decrepitude, does not appeal to me.

[1:08:11]   **Mark Maharaj:** How do you feel about the right to die? What restrictions if any should be in place for those seeking euthanasia?

David Pearce: Oh, heavens… Essentially, I don't think anyone should be forced to live who doesn't want to. But what is absolutely critical is to have massive safeguards. And one doesn't want older people feeling that they are in some sense obliged to die because otherwise they'll be eating into their children's inheritance. The issue of cost shouldn't even be raised. I would hope, though, that, as we actually understand more about reward circuitry, essentially, how to get rid of any form of pain and suffering, that no one will want to die. And I suspect, in spite of calling myself an antinatalist, negative utilitarian, I wouldn't be surprised if our successors regard this as some kind of depressive psychosis. So, I'm dodging the question by not actually spelling out in detail what the safeguards need to be. Another reason there need to be safeguards: Of course, it's not simply an individual who is impacted but their family, too. How much in the way of delays and bureaucracy should there be? Because many people today at least spontaneously at some stage, even people who think of themselves as temperamentally optimistic, will have moments when they would like to kill themselves, self-harm, and so forth – what level of safeguards are optimal? And it's messy…

[1:10:10]   **Mark Maharaj:** Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future?

David Pearce: The short-term, medium-term future: pretty pessimistic. I'm moderately confident that this century we're going to get rid of the horrors of factory farming and slaughterhouses in virtue of the development of cultured meat. So, in that sense, you could say I'm optimistic. But this century I also foresee, sadly, that there is probably going to be nuclear war, all manner of horrors, unknown unknowns. I'll be honest, this current Great Plague, Covid-19 – this took me by surprise. I knew it was possible in the abstract, but it doesn't seem real what's happening now. And, so, I foresee later this century all manner of pain and suffering. But if one looks further ahead – how far ahead I don't know, I would like to say 100 to 150 years, realistically, 300, 400, 500 years – I suppose I would count as an optimist. For technical reasons I think in combination with the pleasure principle and biotechnology, it means that first we're going to get rid of suffering. And rather than thinking, "well, ethical duties have all been discharged, now we can relax", in practice, essentially, we're going to go on ratcheting up hedonic range, hedonic setpoints, live lives of indescribable bliss far richer than today's peak experiences. And so, this I suppose would make me sound like an incredible optimist. I still have an incredibly dark conception of reality, I'm still a button-pressing negative utilitarian, but, yes, for purely technical reasons, I think heaven lies ahead of us.

[1:12:23]   **Mark Maharaj:** "How much of an obligation do we have to relieve non-human suffering in nature?" This goes on to say: "If aliens were to visit this planet, do you think that they would have any moral obligation to help Earthlings and relieve their suffering? If humans in the far future ever developed the ability to travel space, would we have an obligation to help suffering on other planets?"

David Pearce: Yes is the short answer. I did briefly, in *The Hedonistic Imperative*, discuss the possibility of cosmic rescue missions. I suspect, touch wood, that we are alone, at least within our Hubble volume, our cosmological horizon, and that, yes, therefore, cosmic rescue missions will not be needed. In one's darker moments one thinks humans are, in any case, more likely to spread suffering across the galaxy and beyond than relieve it. But, assuming that we do get rid of suffering on earth, by that stage, too, we'll have probably a better idea of whether it is likely Darwinian ecosystems have evolved elsewhere, and, if they do exist within our galaxy, yes, I think we have an obligation to send out probes and remedy them. This, of course, is the opposite of the prime directive of Star Trek. But what would a notional posthuman super-intelligence do with a planet like earth? I don't think posthuman super-intelligence would suffer from status quo bias, so they might think that we would all be best retired. But given that there is no, as far as we know, no posthuman super-intelligence, we essentially have got to

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become that super-intelligence and assume responsibility, cosmic stewardship for the rest of the galaxy, indeed the universe within our cosmological horizon. In practice that may turn out to be too grandiose, there are incredible obstacles to reaching other solar systems, and if you think they're likely to be lifeless lumps of rock or gas, then, yes, the attraction may pall. But we don't know this yet. And if there really are suffering life-forms elsewhere in our galaxy, then we have an obligation to help them.

[1:15:23] **Mark Maharaj:** What do you think antinatalists failed to see? What is your critique of it?

David Pearce: I'm guessing the questioner is thinking of 'hard' antinatalism. And this is just back to the argument from selection pressure. It is… this is it, so often one feels if one has a strong either intellectual or ethical argument, one makes it, it ought to be luminously self-evident, and the rest of the world ought to fall in behind one. But the world doesn't work like that. And I fear most antinatalists underestimate, downplay, or don't consider the nature, that the nature of selection pressure. And that's, yeah, I certainly wouldn't wish to discourage antinatalists from urging everyone to remain childfree. But what does one say to people who are determined to have kids? I think one should combine antinatalism with urging people to be responsible, planned parenthood, loading the genetic dice. Okay, right now it sounds far out, but as we know from the first CRISPR babies, essentially, they are coming. I can't, obviously, precisely time the reproductive revolution, but many and probably most people would think it is defensible to get rid of or prevent cystic fibrosis and other nasty genetic diseases. And I would hope that antinatalists, while maintaining their principles, would play a role in helping prospective parents to live up to their obligations, expressing our disagreement with the decision to have kids but nonetheless not just simply giving up there.

[1:17:38] **Mark Maharaj:** "Why is he a negative utilitarian?"

David Pearce: As distinct from some other position… There is something self-intimatingly awful and ghastly about suffering. If one is in that state, and it's primitive, I couldn't explain to someone who never suffered why suffering is so awful and dreadful. But anyone who is in that state just knows it is awful. By contrast, if someone who is already happy, or if there is inert matter and energy, there is no self-intimating justification to converting this inert matter and energy into pure bliss or helping the person who is already contented become superhumanly happy. I'm very relaxed about the possibility of doing so, indeed, I think it's gonna happen, that the future does lie in gradients of superhuman bliss. But there is this asymmetry, basic asymmetry there, ethical asymmetry, that suffering is intrinsically bad, there is something intrinsically wrong with it. Now, okay, just because there is something intrinsically, self-intimatingly wrong with *my* agony and despair, what bearing does this have on the suffering of others, and the anti-realists might say "well, that's just your personal opinion", to which I would respond that, okay, I can't access your agony and despair. But this is an epistemological limitation on my part, it's not a deep metaphysical truth about the world. And if I could access your despair and agony or, for that matter, of any other sentient being, I would appreciate why it is self-intimatingly bad and why I should help, and that a notional posthuman super-intelligence that could fancifully, notionally, impartially access all first-person perspectives, that super intelligence would, so to speak, collectively withdraw our hand from the fire. But once we have got rid of any form of experience below hedonic zero, I think ethical duties would have been discharged. But then, essentially, the world, the universe is our oyster, so it would be possible to do all manner of fantastic things. But I think the realm of morality belongs to Darwinian life, pain and suffering and our obligation to get rid of it.

[1:20:40] **Mark Maharaj:** Would it be a bad or sad thing if there were no humans or sentient beings in the universe?

David Pearce: Personally, I don't think so. There was nothing wrong with the universe ten billion years ago. However, today a lot of people do find the idea of getting rid of their most precious experiences and so on, they value, want to preserve, perpetuate, and extend them. And because, as a negative utilitarian, one wants to eradicate even the faintest hint of disappointment, I think one is entitled to say, as a negative utilitarian, that one favours the creation of life based on gradients of bliss, a future that is far more magical than that most people can even conceive. And one is entitled to say this in virtue of being a negative utilitarian, because negative utilitarians want to get rid of any form of unpleasant experience, including disappointment and frustration.

[1:22:00] **Mark Maharaj:** What do you think is the strongest argument for antinatalism?

David Pearce: Essentially, by having offspring one is bringing creatures into the world without their consent. And, if it were the case that one were bringing life into the world that was incapable of suffering, as may one day be the case, I wouldn't have a problem. But the fact is, when one as a child today, that child is, in the course for a lifetime, at some stage, going to undergo incredible suffering, and I don't consider this kind of genetic experiment to be ethically justified.

[1:22:50] **Mark Maharaj:** Norwegian-Canadian philosopher Herman Tønnessen, who is transhumanist and antinatalist, said: "If we can't genetically fix our nature I agree with Zapffe to leave world to a deserted behind is better than to continue this grotesque carousel of procreation." Do you agree with this? Should these things go hand in hand, rejection of procreation as long as the transhumanist project is not implemented? In other words, given the current human situation are you not only transhumanist but also antinatalist like Tønnessen?

David Pearce: Yes, I'm an antinatalist, I couldn't possibly justify bringing more suffering into the world. The problem is, of course, that most people will ignore the antinatalist arguments for evolutionary reasons, most people are determined to breed, to have children, that nature doesn't merely inflict suffering upon us, it also drives us with pleasure, quite literally with endogenous opioids. Now, by common consent the judgment of heroin addicts can't be trusted, but each of us has an endogenous opioid system, and nature has bribed us, and consequently being involuntarily childless causes tremendous suffering, too. Many people will go to quite extraordinary lengths to have children. And so, though I would personally urge people not to bring more suffering into the world, I also accept that strong, 'hard' antinatalism is not going to solve the problem of suffering. So, yes, as a transhumanist, I urge biological genetic solutions which, unlike strong antinatalism, aren't vulnerable to the argument from selection pressure.

[1:24:56] **Mark Maharaj:** Do you not consider that maybe such experiments on humans as genome rewiring attempts will only worsen the human situation? We do not know what it'll really look like. On the one hand, created humans may feel even more objectified and manipulated because of this, as custom-made items with more and more specific features, still created not for their own sake but for the pleasure of their creators, for their optimistic visions, another innocent victim sacrificed to another utopian God. On the other hand, immortality may seem desirable but could also cause indescribable suffering. For example, it may be a punishment of an infinite prison in a cramped cell without the possibility of suicide. Which dictator would not be delighted with such possibility of punishing his enemies? If genome modification will be possible, it will be possible to modify it not only to feel less pain and more pleasure, but also to feel more pain and less pleasure. New tortures, more intense than anything we know – this seems to be a great potential method of controlling societies. Similar objections have Professor John Gray in his *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*: "If anything about the present century is certain, it is that the power conferred on 'humanity' by new technologies will be used to commit

atrocious crimes against it. If it becomes possible to clone human beings, soldiers will be bred in whom normal human emotions are stunted or absent. Genetic engineering may enable age-old diseases to be eradicated. At the same time, it is likely to be technology of choice in future genocides. Those who ignore the destructive potential of new technologies can do so only because they ignore history. Pogroms are as old as Christendom; but without railways, the telegraph and poison gas there would have been no Holocaust. There have always been tyrannies; but without modern means of transport and communication, Stalin and Mao could not have built their gulags. Humanity's worst crimes were made possible only by modern technology." Do you have no doubt that playing God, even bigger than it was in the case of ordinary procreation, can bring even more terrible results? It is said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and our history, human history, teaches us that indeed is often so, good intentions and progress often bring hell. John Gray mentions the holocaust and gulags, but there is also, for example, industrial farming. Thanks to good intentions and progress, we often even surprise nature itself in cruelty and causing suffering.

David Pearce: Oh, a lot of material, a lot of good points there, and I can't pretend to do them justice. Okay, starting though right at the beginning: Let's assume that we decide that we, as a society, we want to create first, shall we say, no-pain babies and then eventually a no pain civilization. And let's assume, and this is a very big assumption, that someone like Jo Cameron with her unique double mutation – she's this 72-year-old retired vegan Scottish schoolteacher, she never gets depressed or anxious but she's socially responsible, she's sensible enough to avoid noxious stimuli, sometimes she's had problems because of this. Now, I'm not suggesting that we go gung-ho to replicate her unique double mutation, but let's say, cautiously, we decide to create, for prospective parents who are determined to have kids, let's say, we do decide that it's ethically appropriate to have kids with very high pain thresholds, high hedonic setpoints, so that their offspring will not undergo the worst forms of suffering that people undergo today. I can see horrendous pitfalls, ethical dilemmas, things that can go wrong, and so forth, but it's the question of weighing risk/reward ratios, and given that most people, essentially, are determined to have children, and they're not going to listen to antinatalists, I think what we ought to be doing is aiming to help them load the genetic dice in favour of their future offspring. So, okay, that's the first part of the objection/question as I understand it.

The second part: How could these technologies be abused? Yes, I'm worried about s-risk, that the worst form of s-risk, as I can see it, is that in theory a deep understanding of the molecular pathways of pain and suffering could be used to create more suffering, not get rid of it altogether. So, yes, one has to take desperately seriously all the ways new technologies can be abused, but life on Earth passed 540 million plus years, it's been pain, misery, and suffering, together with intermittent good bits, but, essentially, unspeakable suffering. And so, we've essentially got a choice what to do about it, without biological genetic interventions, together, of course, with a massive social revolution, pain and suffering will continue indefinitely. That practicing individually antinatalism may be right, but it's not going to get rid of the biology of suffering. So, as I see it… well, if I had my way, essentially one would be seeing a kind of a hundred-year plan under the auspices of something like the World Health Organization to phase out the biology of suffering, which would be multi-stranded, ranging from the fairly obvious, like getting rid of factory farming and slaughterhouses, to the less obvious, in terms of reproductive revolution of designer babies, synthetic gene drives used to mitigate and eradicate suffering throughout the biosphere. Tremendous technical challenges, but they can be defeated, but immense political sociological changes, challenges, too. And, sure, I can think of so many things that can go wrong. But, this is it, a sweeping generalization, most people may be callous and self-centred, but we're not, on the whole, systematically malicious or malevolent. And, essentially, getting rid of, trying to get rid of suffering throughout the living world now would be — well, it couldn't be done now, it could be feasible later this century, but if the actual personal inconvenience is minimal, I think most people will go along with it and support it. That might be unduly optimistic, but take something like anaesthesia for surgery: When it was first introduced, not many people know this, but, essentially, there was vigorous opposition from some traditional religious people that "this was against the Bible, women were destined to suffer in childbirth". But nonetheless, essentially, it swept the globe, and now, essentially, surgical anaesthesia

is the norm, and we're not going to go back to surgery without anaesthesia. Or something like getting rid of smallpox: Yes, it's possible that smallpox or something like smallpox could be used as a weapon of war in the future, but nonetheless, essentially, there was a global consensus that it was a frightful disease and we should get rid of it. And now smallpox is extinct.

In terms of – you must help me, I'm not sure I've covered all the points – in terms of creating fearless super-soldiers: In practice any wars of the future are more likely to be conducted with robots and AI than traditional biological robot-soldiers. Of course, like so many people, I would hope that we are going to phase out war, which is probably utopian for the foreseeable future, but just as the development of the nation-state which claims a monopoly over the use of violence, I would anticipate that eventually something like the UN, hopefully democratically elected, will assume a kind of monopoly of the use of force, essentially, sort of universal application of the rule of law. I can imagine your listeners, many of them thinking "well, this is just incredibly utopian and optimistic", and I'm not. Unfortunately, I foresee centuries more of pain, misery, suffering, anxiety disorders, depression, suicide, you name it. But insofar as we are morally serious about getting rid of suffering, this is the only approach, the only way I know to go forward: some kind of biohappiness revolution. That is quite extraordinary power, it does give us mastery of our engineering source code, the ability to reprogram the biosphere. And if so-called 'soft' antinatalists, believers in suffering-focused ethics, essentially, work together with religious, secular ethicists, the broader community, then it would be possible to get rid of suffering, as I said, in spite of being an über-pessimist by temperament, for technical reasons, I think a combination of the pleasure principle and modern biotechnology is going to lead to a biosphere without suffering, indeed, probably life based on gradients of intelligent bliss. And by focusing on building political alliances, essentially one can take the project forward of getting rid of suffering. Whereas, and I'm sure you and quite a few of your listeners, if one says something like "oh, it would've been better if we'd never existed", that if only they were an off switch, and so on, and I've obviously had these thoughts, too, one will alienate potential allies and supporters, because, of course, it's not just radical antinatalists who think suffering is terrible – most of the religious tradition, most secular ethical traditions give some weight, and usually a lot of weight, to getting rid of suffering, but they also have other values, too. And so, although I'm not personally, sadly, a political activist, your movement builder if I were, this would be the direction I would be urging, with antinatalists, we believers in suffering-focused ethics, we need as many allies as possible. And it's also good to mug up on the science to become scientifically literate and understand what is and isn't possible.

[1:38:12] **Mark Maharaj:** So, one of the questions is: "How do you feel about the war on drugs? What is the best policy to relieve the suffering of those who were addicted to drugs?"

David Pearce: Yes, so, my instincts are libertarian. There are complications. I would not be very happy if it's, say, unrestricted use of antibiotics, for example, which actually harms others. Nonetheless I, rather than focusing on prohibition, I think we, medicine, science, ought to be focused on devising safe recreational euphorians. Something like coffee, for example: It's a mind-altering drug, but, essentially, one carefully calibrates the amount of coffee one wants to take. In terms of recreational drugs, sadly, what most of them do is they tend to kick into gear the negative feedback mechanisms of the brain. In some cases, users discovered that the drugs are making them unhappy and stopped, but in other cases something like opioids, it's too late, and the user is actually, essentially, going to be dependent indefinitely. But… so… I mean, yeah, I could, as you know, whole books have been written on the drug war, and I could repeat a lot of platitudes. But I should I think it should be regarded as a medical rather than a legal issue. But having said that, of course, someone, let's say, has an opioid habit and is reduced to stealing to gain resources to fund it – this is profoundly undesirable.

[1:40:28] **Mark Maharaj:** Is it moral to introduce modern Western technology to tribal peoples to relieve their suffering, or is it better to just leave them alone?

David Pearce: I think one essentially has an obligation to help. This is it, if one encountered a tribe of cannibals, one wouldn't feel that one has a duty to allow them to continue to practice cannibalism. In that sense, one would be imposing our values. But in the case of, let's use a less exotic example, imagine some primitive undiscovered tribe – there probably aren't any more of those anymore – essentially, assuming that they are typical humans, they will suffer pain, depression, disease, anxiety, all manner of illness, infirmity, and some of these will already be curable with modern medicine, and in the future, all of them will be. Essentially, compared to our successors, humans today are akin to toddlers, toddlers who harm themselves. And, although it sounds paternalism, and the reason we should be suspicious of paternalism today is the suspicion that those who would want to, in a sense, tell us what to do or instruct us or look after us wouldn't solely have our interests at heart. But though I suppose this does sound patronising, but in an important sense we know what primitive pre-scientific tribes don't: how to cure all manner of nasty diseases, for example. So I think we do have an obligation to intervene.

[1:42:29] **Mark Maharaj:** Okay, are you a materialist, idealist, pan-psychist? Does your metaphysical worldview influence your ethics? If so, in what way?

David Pearce: Tentatively I'm both a realist and a physicalist, and I'm also very tentatively an idealist. Now, that probably sounds like schizophrenic word salad. I think the world is exhaustively described by the equations of physics. But materialism can't solve the hard problem, it's inconsistent with the entirety of the empirical evidence of one's own consciousness. So, yes, I would struggle to defend materialism to close the explanatory gap. Whereas I do take seriously this possibility, the so-called intrinsic nature argument, that experience disposes the intrinsic nature of the physical, and non-materialist physicalism has tremendous explanatory predictive power. And it's also empirically adequate. Once again, that is a tentative view. The so-called intrinsic nature argument has enjoyed a modest revival in recent years, but it's not necessary for any listener to buy into my, shall we say, somewhat unusual, idiosyncratic metaphysical views to think that it'd be great if we got rid of suffering. Has this position influenced my ethical views? Not as much as you might imagine, no. Idealism, even physicalistic idealism, non-materialist physicalism, of the kind I was outlining just then might be associated with many people with fluffiness or mysticism or some kind of rosy cosmic view of things, but, no, it's simply a way to close the explanatory gap and solve the so-called hard problem.

[1:44:41] **Mark Maharaj:** I was curious about your views on antinatalism advocacy, because I think you have a couple of websites on antinatalism now. And I was wondering, like, what where do you see the movement going or should be going? What would you like to see in terms of what we're doing in this community?

David Pearce: Well, a friend, at one stage, was thinking of actually launching a kind of World Antinatalist Association. I think this project is currently on hold. Essentially, thinking about all the pain, suffering, and misery in the world, urging antinatalism, it can take a real toll on one's mental health. And I think antinatalists in general have an obligation to take care of their own mental health because that way they can generally do more good helping others. As I said, although I am personally an antinatalist, a 'soft' antinatalist, I haven't got a clear strategy for the antinatalist movement as a whole, beyond working with other groups, organizations, effective altruists, transhumanists, the wider community in working on tools to minimize suffering. Yes, I — very, very important, not if possible, bringing new life into the world, if you really want kids, adopt rather than have biological kids yourself. But, essentially, recognise: Why are we antinatalist? Because we want to reduce, to prevent, to mitigate suffering. And I would like to see the antinatalist movement building as many bridges as possible, also taking responsibility for the mental health of its own members, because one can do more good if one is basically happy oneself. And by constantly focusing on – accurately, I feel – on just how awful life is

for so many beings, that it can make one even more miserable, unhappy. There's this kind of optimal balance to strike, and I don't know, I won't pretend I've got the right balance.

[1:47:33]   **Mark Maharaj: D**o you have any tips or advice for people that are trying to, like, focus on the suffering-focused ethics and the — I feel like burnout would be common for this type of thing, as you said, it takes a large emotional load on a person. Is there anything that you do personally or that you could advise others on, so they don't burn out on this kind of thing?

David Pearce: Partly. Just in terms of general health, there's this trinity of optimal nutrition, good sleep, good sleep discipline, and aerobic exercise. Strong social bonds. Exploring, if need be, if one is personally depressed or has loved ones or close friends who are depressed, the different options: antidepressants – well, they sound depressing, but nonetheless they do help some people. But any particular tips? No, essentially, for the past 25 years or so I've been plugging away, trying to fly the flag for this particular strand of transhumanism, hoping that, essentially, this current doesn't – as I said far, more transhumanists are focused on radical life extension, super-intelligence – wanting to essentially keep the, what I would see as absolutely essentially important, the case for a biohappiness revolution. But have I got any tips for individual listeners? It's a case of recognising one's own strengths and weaknesses, not beating oneself up about one's own limitations, but just – I'm sorry, I'm repeating myself – but the actual obligation to take care of oneself. No, I wouldn't say this to Donald Trump, that he ought to be kinder on himself or something. But all antinatalists, in some sense, I would say, have got an obligation to try to look after their own well-being. If they're doing something that is making them unhappy or depressed, that, if possible, that they should stop, that they'll be actually able to help more people for longer if they actually feel relatively well.

Mark Maharaj: Right, yeah.

David Pearce: Even if this involves an element of is escapism.

[1:50:21]   **Mark Maharaj:** Yeah, I agree. Is there anything that you'd like to – now that we're coming to a close – is there anything else you'd like to add before we end?

David Pearce: Well, no, I just really wanted to say, thank you, Mark, for the work you're doing. Thank you for inviting me on. Sorry if I haven't properly answered any of the questions put by your listeners. I am aware of the fact that sometimes I must have caused some of them frustration, but I'm not the kind of transhumanist that is totally kind of gung-ho about technology I promise, and that I have a profound sympathy and admiration for antinatalism and the antinatalist movement. And my reservations, such as they are, tend to be technical rather than ethical. So thanks again for having me.

Mark Maharaj: Thank you very much for coming on, it's been great. And I wanna thank everybody from the antinatalist community for submitting questions, and I hope you have a relatively great day.

[1:51:35]   Thank you everyone for listening. The next episode will be a discussion with the YouTuber Dana Wells, The Friendly Antinatalist. If you have any questions for The Friendly Antinatalist that you would like asked on the show, you can contact the Exploring Antinatalism team on social media via Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, or email at exploringantinatalism@gmail.com. Take care everybody.