

Pre-Birth Consent: A Proposal for a New Framework in Reproductive and Population Ethics — The Birth Consent System (BCS)

1. What “Pre-Birth Consent” Means (and Why It Differs From Current Practice)

The Birth Consent System (BCS) proposes that a future individual must be asked—prior to being brought into existence—whether they wish to be born. Birth would be permissible only when consent is granted by the very person whose life will unfold.

In contemporary society, consent is required for actions that expose a person to risk or irreversible harm—contracts, medical procedures, sexual relations. Birth, which determines the entire trajectory of a life, is the striking exception. Parents are currently permitted to impose existence unilaterally, even though they cannot bear the lifelong consequences on behalf of the child.

BCS argues that this asymmetry is ethically indefensible. If life necessarily contains suffering, risk, and irreversible costs, why should the individual who must bear those costs have no agency in deciding whether that life should begin? BCS reframes birth not as a parental privilege, but as a moral act requiring the explicit authorization of the person most affected.

2. How BCS Differs from Population Ethics, Reproductive Ethics, Natalism, and Antinatalism

Current reproductive-ethics debates focus almost entirely on the rights and choices of already-existing agents—parents, mothers, or the state.

The perspective of the potential child is rarely considered, and where it is, it is usually assumed that coming into existence is automatically beneficial.

Antinatalism challenges this by arguing that existence is always a net harm and should therefore never be imposed. This sets up a binary:

- natalism: “new lives should be created,”
- antinatalism: “no new lives should be created.”

Both positions share a crucial flaw:

Neither includes the autonomous perspective of the future person.

Both assume that someone else may decide on that person’s behalf.

BCS introduces a third framework:

- Birth is permissible only if the future individual autonomously agrees to accept the risks and burdens of life.
- The locus of authority shifts away from parents or states and toward the person who will actually live the life.

This framework does more than bridge natalist and antinatalist positions. It identifies a problem internal to antinatalism itself:

even if life contains suffering, not all individuals would judge life to be a net harm.

Some may willingly accept suffering for the goods they expect life to contain.

Antinatalism, like natalism, erases the evaluative standpoint of the person who matters most.

BCS preserves the insight that life contains harm, while correcting the omission shared by both traditions: the absence of the individual’s own evaluative judgment.

3. Risks of State-Driven Intervention in Reproduction

Both pronatalist and antinatalist policies carry serious ethical dangers.

UN reports highlight how such policies can undermine bodily autonomy and instrumentalize citizens for demographic or economic purposes.

Policies built around optimization—whether for national strength, productivity, or genetic standards—create fertile ground for ableism, eugenic reasoning, and exclusion.

BCS rejects these frameworks entirely. Birth should not serve states, economies, or demographic goals. It must be authorized by the one person who will bear the moral, psychological, and physical costs of existence.

4. What Human-Rights Harms BCS Seeks to Prevent

BCS targets the fundamental harm identified by antinatalism: the imposition of unavoidable suffering on a non-consenting individual. Under BCS, existence—and the suffering unavoidably tied to it—would be permissible only when the future person themselves consents.

A central component of BCS would be the development of a pre-birth informational framework—not a predictive technology in any strict sense, but a system designed to present the future individual with a balanced, good-faith account of the kinds of benefits and harms that life in the actual world typically involves.

The aim would not be perfect accuracy—something likely unattainable—but the provision of sufficient, non-misleading information to enable an autonomous decision about whether to enter into existence.

BCS thus places a clear ethical demand on present societies: if they wish future individuals to consent to being born, they must cultivate social, political, and material conditions under which choosing birth would be a reasonable and attractive option.

In this sense, BCS functions as a catalyst for global ethical reform, motivating societies to improve justice, welfare, and human-rights conditions.

Methodological Clarification

BCS does not presuppose any fully developed technology or metaphysically contentious mechanism for pre-birth decision-making. Its aim is to articulate the ethical requirement that sufficient, good-faith information must be available for a future individual to make an autonomous judgment about entering existence.

This mirrors historical precedents in ethics: principles such as informed consent and international human-rights norms were articulated before the institutional or technological means to realize them fully existed. Similarly, BCS should be understood as a normative framework—an ethical constraint on the permissibility of creating new persons—rather than a technical blueprint.

5. Research Questions I Wish to Explore in Graduate Study

Historical and Ethical Continuity

Just as non-consensual sexual acts or violence—once normalized—are now universally condemned, will non-consensual birth come to be regarded as morally unacceptable?

System Design and Governance

What would an ethical, abuse-resistant implementation of BCS require?

How could the system be protected from state misuse, demographic engineering, coercion, or informational manipulation?

Legal and Human-Rights Foundations

How could BCS be grounded in international human-rights law?

Would new legal categories—such as rights of the not-yet-existent—be necessary?

What safeguards would ensure that the individual's decision remains free, autonomous, and informed?