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Thaddeus Metz

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Are Lives Worth Creating?

Thaddeus Metz

Critical Notice of David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006)

> *L'Chaim*! (To life!)
> —Traditional Jewish toast

1. Introduction

The weaker one's premises, and the more surprising or even outlandish one's conclusion from them, the better one's philosophical argument, at least in one major respect. In his book *Better Never to Have Been*,[1] David Benatar presents an argument with this structure, concluding that it is generally all things considered wrong to procreate, such that if everyone acted in a morally ideal way, humanity would elect to extinguish the species. Virtually no commentators have given Benatar's reasoning a fair shake,[2] something that I aim to do. My goal is to pinpoint precisely where one would have good reason to step off the train of argument taking one to a place one does not want to end up.

I begin by clarifying Benatar's 'anti-natalist' conclusion with care, forestalling misinterpretations of it and also comparing and contrasting it and its major motivations with related positions in the literature (Section 2). Then, I critically explore the two major arguments Benatar gives for anti-natalism in his book. The most powerful and interesting argument, the one that has garnered the most attention (even if

1 Page citations in the text refer to this book.

2 Exceptions are Elizabeth Harman,'Critical Study of David Benatar. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*', *Nous* 43 (2009): 776-785; and David DeGrazia, 'Is it Wrong to Impose the Harms of Human Life? A Reply to Benatar', *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 31 (2010): 317-331.

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inadequate analysis), and the one that I devote the most space to discussing, is the notorious 'asymmetry argument' (Section 3). Here, Benatar argues that uncontroversial ideas about the differential valuation of benefits and harms entail that it is always a net harm to create a person. Benatar's other argument for anti-natalism is more familiar and less fiendish, but still quite worthy of reflection. It more or less argues in favour of a Schopenhauerian or Nagelian appraisal of the quality of human life from an extremely external point of view, the 'point of view of the universe', which entails that our lives are very badly off (Section 4). I conclude this critical notice by noting some ways to take discussion of Benatar's two anti-natalist arguments forward in other work and by adumbrating important topics in *Better Never to Have Been* that I have not addressed (Section 5).

2. Anti-Natalism and Benatar's Argumentative Strategy

By 'anti-natalism' Benatar means the view that it is generally wrong on balance to create new human persons. It is not merely the weak thesis that it is always wrong to *some* (*pro tanto*) degree to procreate, but it should not be construed so strongly as to imply that it is literally always wrong all things considered to do so. Benatar admits that there could be rare situations in which there is most moral reason on the whole to create a new person, when (and probably only when) it would substantially reduce the suffering of other, existent persons (182-193). It is still quite a robust thesis for Benatar to maintain that, apart from very unusual circumstances, there is no moral justification on the whole for procreating.

In an ecologically fragile world with seven billion people, more and more of whom are becoming consumers of meat, cars and sundry technological gadgets, anti-natalism is increasingly voiced and defended on the ground that the consequences of creating person X would be bad

for other people Y (or even animals Z).[3] Such a rationale entails that it would be permissible to create people if there were fewer people or if many people lived in a way that were less destructive of the natural world. However, Benatar's anti-natalism is driven by different considerations and has radically different implications. For Benatar, 'a cumulative population numbering only one person would have been overpopulation' (166) for the reason that creating person X is *always* on balance bad for X.

Note Benatar's uncompromisingly strong claim about 'always' in the context of welfare, even if not morality. In the context of his asymmetry argument, Benatar aims to establish that it is *invariably* bad all things considered for a person to have been created, no matter how great the amount of goodness, and how little the amount of badness, that she undergoes afterward. As Benatar notes with characteristic frankness, his position entails that it would be wrong to create someone even if she were to experience 'a life of utter bliss adulterated only by the pain of a single pin-prick' (48); it would be wrong because such a life would still be on the whole bad for this person, or so Benatar maintains we are driven to believe by virtue of some uncontroversial claims.

Benatar's anti-natalism, the view that agents typically have the most moral reason not to create any more human persons, neither is nor implies the view that agents typically have the most moral reason to kill existing human persons, and, indeed, as I explain below, part of Benatar's rationale for anti-natalism implies a rejection of what he calls 'pro-mortalism'. He denies that it is morally permissible for one to kill other human persons for their sake, as they should have the autonomy to decide their own fate (196, 218), and the logic of his view commits him to thinking that it would often be imprudent for people to kill themselves.

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3 For an early proponent, see Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), and for a more recent case, see Thomas Young, 'Overconsumption and Procreation: Are They Morally Equivalent?', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 18 (2001): 183-192.

To begin to grasp the plausibility of holding anti-natalism without pro-mortalism, consider the useful distinction that Benatar draws between two ways to understand the phrase 'a life worth living'. On the one hand, the phrase might connote the idea that a person's life is worth continuing, while, on the other, it might indicate the idea that person's life was worth starting. Benatar argues that the existing reasons in the literature for thinking that the two must stand and fall together are weak (20-28, 212-218). He points out that it is logically consistent to maintain both that that no one's life is worth starting and that people can, and often do, have lives worth continuing.

A crucial claim that makes sense of believing anti-natalism but not pro-mortalism is that death itself is something bad to be avoided. Interestingly, part of what makes a life on the whole bad and hence impermissible to create, for Benatar, is precisely the fact that it will end! Death is something undesirable on a par with pain, disappointment and grief (29, 89-91, 196, 212-217). 'Coming into existence is bad in part because it invariably leads to the harm of ceasing to exist' (213). Given that creating people is bad partially because their lives will end, Benatar should clearly not be construed as a pro-mortalist, someone who thinks people have most reason, whether moral or prudential, to end their lives sooner rather than later. In his view, once people have been (wrongfully) created, a moral agent ought, *ceteris paribus*, minimize the harm that he does to them, and since death is a harm, he usually ought not to kill them: 'Although it may be bad for anyone of us to die, it is still worse to die earlier than we need to' (196). Benatar's rejection of pro-mortalism can now be seen as sensibly combined with the view that creating people is always a net harm to them, so that it would have been better for them not to have been created in the first place.

Benatar's asymmetry argument for anti-natalism without pro-mortalism is readily seen not to appeal to 'negative utilitarianism', the moral theory roughly according to which only the reduction of bad, and not the production of good, has ethical weight. More specifically, it is the basic principle that one's sole basic duty is to minimize the amount of

pain, or more generally undesirable quality of life, wherever and however one can in the long run. Since that state of affairs would be achieved if no sentient being procreated, or even if all sentient beings were painlessly euthanized, negative utilitarianism entails that if an agent could do either one, he would be obligated to do it, regardless of the amount of pleasure or otherwise desirable quality of life these beings could have had. However, Benatar is not a negative utilitarian. For one, as I have said above, he believes that people have a right to life and that death is itself a bad, and, for another, he counts the action of depriving an existing person of good to be *pro tanto* wrong.

Indeed, the logic of Benatar's asymmetry argument in some ways fits better with a standard deontological morality, one that accords negative duties not to harm stronger weight than positive duties to prevent harm or to benefit. Friends of non-consequentialism believe that it would be wrong to push a fat man in front of a trolley so as to prevent it from running over four persons, and that it would be wrong to forcibly harvest organs from one person so as to save the lives of four others who would die without them. In general, it is wrong to impose harm on some for the sake of helping others, let alone for the sake of oneself. Benatar argues in a similar way: since procreating is unavoidably a net harm for the one created, there is usually no moral justification in doing so for the sake of others, let alone oneself as a parent.

Benatar says little about the underlying moral theory that might underwrite the inference to anti-natalism. Logically speaking, the asymmetry argument has two major stages, the first one stopping at the *welfarist* conclusion that *being created is a net harm* for the individual, and the second inferring from that claim the anti-natalist, *moral* thesis that people *ought not procreate*. In between the welfarist, intermediate conclusion and the ultimate conclusion of anti-natalism there has to be a moral 'bridge' premise to the effect that one would be wrong to impose net harm on people under certain conditions. However, Benatar does not carefully construct the bridge, resting content with vague mid-level principles such as these: serving one's own interests is usually not

justified when doing so inflicts significant harm on others (98), and one ought not to treat people merely as a means (129-131).

When specifying and applying such mid-level principles with care, a lot turns on the precise nature and degree of harm being done to someone for the sake of oneself or others. And Benatar indeed acknowledges at certain points that if the harm on the one procreated were small enough, it could be morally justified to inflict it so as to prevent great harm to others or perhaps even to confer great benefits on others (98-99, 191-193, 207n6). After all, nearly everyone these days believes it is permissible to tax those who have acquired wealth without force or fraud in order to help others who are much worse off, where that is precisely to lower the quality of life of some (the rich) so as to raise that of others (the poor). In short, in order to derive the anti-natalist conclusion, Benatar needs not merely the intermediate conclusion that procreation is always a *net harm* to the one created, but also the claim that it is a *significant* net harm to the one created—relevantly unlike taxing those who make over $100,000 a year.

Now, Benatar *does* argue that procreation is a significant net harm to the one created (60-92), but my present point is that he does *not* do so in the context of the asymmetry argument (18-59). Benatar's standard position is that the two arguments for anti-natalism work side by side and on their own, labelling the argument from the point of view of the universe as 'independent' (14, 61) support for the anti-natalist conclusion that the asymmetry argument is meant to support in its own right. However, reflection on the nature of the moral bridge principle that could plausibly lead one from the intermediate, welfarist conclusion that existence is always a net harm to the one created to the ultimate conclusion that it is immoral to procreate shows that the asymmetry argument *cannot* stand alone; it must be conjoined with an argument indicating that the net harm of procreation is *great*, which is the function of the point of view of the universe argument (and which Benatar presents in a separate chapter titled 'How Bad is Coming into Existence?').

In the following, therefore, I treat the asymmetry argument and the point of view of the universe argument as two parts of a single, overarching rationale for anti-natalism. With the former argument, Benatar purports to establish that being created is invariably a *net harm* (discussed in Section 3) and with the latter, he aims to show that it is usually a *great harm* (Section 4). From those two intermediate conclusions, he could then, by appealing to quasi-Kantian moral considerations, fairly draw the conclusion that it is almost always wrong on balance to procreate.

3. The Asymmetry Argument

At this point, readers are no doubt getting itchy, wanting to know how in the world someone could reasonably draw the conclusion that it is generally immoral to create a human person since it is always a net harm for her, even supposing that her life were well worth continuing for including substantial amounts of goodness and inconsequential amounts of badness. Having clarified Benatar's conclusion and his general argumentative strategy, I now proceed to the nitty-gritty, the way he executes it.

Benatar suggests, reasonably, that in order to know whether it is worth starting a person's life, we must compare the state in which the person exists with the state in which the person does not. He points out that most people judge whether a life is worth starting by looking solely at the good and bad within the life that would exist, but that fails to include all the relevant information: one must compare the tally of good and bad in the life of the existent person with the tally that would obtain were the person not to exist.

The rub is in the comparison of the tallies. Benatar begins by noting that the state in which the person exists is one in which there is (reasonably expected to be) badness, say, the experience of suffering pain, and in which there is (reasonably expected to be) goodness such as the feeling of pleasure. Where things get contested is Benatar's construal of the state in which the person has not been created: it is a condition in

which no one will suffer pain, which he says is *good*, and in which no one will feel pleasure, which, for him, is *not bad*. Benatar suggests that, upon comparing these goods and bads, non-existence is better on the whole than existence. For one, existence includes states of both good and bad, whereas non-existence includes no states of bad, and only states of good (43-44). For another, with regard to pain, non-existence is clearly to be preferred, since the presence of pain is bad in existence and the absence of pain is good in non-existence, and with regard to pleasure, although the presence of pleasure is good in existence, that is 'not an advantage over non-existence, because the absence of pleasures is not bad' (41).

Where is the 'asymmetry' in this argument? It is between the valuation of pleasure (benefits) and pains (harms) in the state of non-existence. There is symmetry between their valuation in the state of existence, as the former is *good* and the latter is *bad*. There is asymmetry in their valuation in the state of non-existence, as the absence of pain is *good* and the absence of pleasure is *not bad*. It is this latter claim that drives Benatar to infer that non-existence is preferable to existence.

3.1. Questioning the Arguments for Asymmetry

Why believe the asymmetry thesis? It is most carefully expressed as the combination of these claims: (A1) the absence of pain is good even if there is no one who exists and could have experienced the pain, and (A2) the absence of pleasure is not bad, unless there is someone who exists and would have been deprived of it. Why hold (A1) and (A2)? Benatar presents three basic arguments for believing them, which are a matter of contending that (A1) and (A2) best explain a variety of uncontroversial judgments, decisions and emotions. For each argument, I suggest that one can equally well explain the intuitions without appealing to the asymmetry thesis, after which I provide reason to doubt not only the asymmetry thesis itself, but also Benatar's contention that the asymmetry thesis is sufficient to entail that it is better never to have been.

First, Benatar points out that most of us (who are not positive, total utilitarians) believe that there is a duty not to bring suffering people into

existence, but that there is no duty to bring happy people into existence. Our judgment that we must not create suffering people is best explained, in part, by (A1), the idea that the absence of pain is good even if there is no potential bearer of the pain. And our judgment that we do no wrong in failing to create happy people is best explained, in part, by (A2), the claim that an absence of pleasure is not bad unless someone already exists who could have experienced it. Or so Benatar argues.

Benatar is correct about our intuitions regarding the duties governing procreation, but they are not obviously best explained by the asymmetry thesis. First, the judgment that we have a duty not to create suffering people is at least equally well explained by the principle that *it is permissible to start a life if and only if it would be worth continuing*. And the judgment that we lack a duty to create happy people is well explained by the same principle; for it being permissible to start such a life does not imply a requirement to do so.

Consider how my explanation of the relevant judgments differs from Benatar's. I say that the duty not to create suffering people and the absence of a duty to create happy ones is best explained by the principle that it is permissible to start a life if and only if it would be worth continuing. A life is worth continuing, more or less, if: the good will (largely) outweigh the bad, and there will be no period of torturous badness. Working with this account of what it is for a life to be worth continuing, and adding in the substantive claims that suffering or unhappiness is bad and pleasure or happiness is good, I can straightforwardly account for the two judgments about the duty that obtains and the one that does not. Note that my explanation of these judgments appeals solely to facts about the nature of the lives that would exist upon their being created, whereas Benatar's appeals to those kinds of facts plus facts about non-existence. My explanation is simpler, for appealing to facts of fewer kinds, and, is also, I submit, more intuitive.

Benatar's second rationale for the asymmetry thesis starts with the allegedly uncontested data that people routinely and sensibly decide not to

create a child *because* they expect the child will suffer, whereas people neither routinely nor sensibly decide to create a child *because* they expect the child to benefit. He maintains that the decision not to create a suffering child is best explained, in part, by (A1), the claim that the absence of pain is good even if there is no one who would have experienced it. And we could not account for the fact that we do not decide to 'have a child for that child's sake' (34n27) if absent pleasures were bad regardless of whether there exists a particular person who has been deprived of them. In other words, only on the supposition that (A2), the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is already a potential bearer of it, can one account for the idea that it is unusual and odd 'to give as a reason for having a child that the child one has will thereby be benefited' (34).

Some will say that it is not 'strange' (34) to create a child at least in part for the reason that there would be another happy being on the planet. However, I am willing to grant Benatar the claim that it is strange. I rather contest the best explanation of why it is strange, supposing that it is. Benatar says that the reason it is strange is that the absence of pleasure is *not bad* if there is no potential bearer of it. However, an equally good explanation is that the absence of pleasure is *not good* unless there is already a potential bearer of it, which explanation is symmetrical with the alternative explanation I now suggest for why it is clearly not strange to decide not to create a child that one foresees will suffer. Benatar says that the reason people often and coherently decide not to procreate when they know the offspring will live a miserable life includes the idea that an absence of pain is *good*, even if there is no one who could have felt it (and that the experience of pain is bad). A no less reasonable alternative, however, is the idea that an absence of pain is *not bad* (and that the experience of pain is bad).

Here is Benatar's third major argument for the asymmetry thesis. He points out that it is common to exhibit emotions such as regret, sadness and feeling sorry about the fact that others are suffering, particularly those beings we have created, whereas it is uncommon to exhibit such emotions about the fact that no one was created and therefore missed out on

pleasure or happiness. Again, Benatar suggests that these emotional reactions are best explained by the asymmetry thesis. In particular, we exhibit negative emotions toward unhappy lives because pain is bad and its absence is *good*, and we do not exhibit negative emotions toward non-existent lives that lack happiness because the absence of happiness is *not bad* when there is no one to be deprived of it.

However, I submit that the objection I made to Benatar's second argument applies with equal force to his third. That is, an equally attractive explanation of why we exhibit negative emotions toward unhappy lives is that pain is bad and its absence is *not bad*, and an explanation that is no less plausible of why we do not exhibit negative emotions toward non-existent lives that lack happiness is that the absence of happiness is *not good*. A symmetrical account of the values of benefits and burdens under conditions of non-existence is a powerful alternative to Benatar's asymmetrical explanation.

3.2. Questioning Asymmetry Itself

Benatar is aware that a glaring alternative to asymmetry is the one I have advanced here (39-40), the idea that the absence of pain is *not bad*, supposing no potential bearer of it exists, and that the absence of pleasure is *not good*, supposing the same. He does not explore this alternative in the context of the arguments put forth in favour of asymmetry, but rather considers it as a rival to asymmetry itself. Now, there is probably no qualitative difference between claiming that the absence of pleasure upon the non-existence of a person is 'not bad', as per asymmetry, and saying that it is 'not good', supposing that the latter is not meant to imply that it is bad, as I have above. Benatar says that the former is 'more informative' (40) and hence to be preferred, but that is not a matter of substance. What this means is that the real linchpin of Benatar's argument appears to be not (A2), but rather (A1),[4] viz.,

4 However, see discussion below (3.3) about the pleasures of the existent not constituting a 'real advantage' over the absent pleasures of the non-existent.

whether one should construe the absence of pain upon the non-existence of a person as 'good', as per asymmetry, or as 'not bad', as per my suggested alternative.

On this score, Benatar at two points in the text defends his asymmetrical construal, claiming, first, that the judgment that the absence of pain is not bad 'is too weak. Avoiding the pains of existence is more than merely "not bad". It is good' (39). In reply, I submit that Benatar's reasoning here is fallacious, so that asymmetry does not follow. Note that the claim that the absence of pain, supposing no potential bearer of it exists, is good is an *evaluative judgment about a state of affairs*. In support of this claim, however, Benatar makes a *normative judgment about an action*. To say that 'avoiding' pain is 'good' is to say that one *has reason to do something*. It is not to say that the *state of affairs* in which there is not pain is *desirable*. The quoted statement is a *non sequitur* with regard to establishing asymmetry.

Benatar could respond that the best explanation of why there is good reason to avoid pain is that pain is bad and the absence of pain is good. However, an equally good explanation of why there is good reason to avoid pain is that pain is bad and its absence is not bad. At this point, Benatar should be providing reason to favour the asymmetry explanation, which the quote above does not do.

The second time Benatar addresses this powerful rival to (A1), he says that claiming that absent pains are merely 'not bad' (as opposed to 'good')

> would commit us to saying that we have no moral reason, grounded in the interests of a possible future suffering person, to avoid creating that person. We could no longer regret, based on the interests of a suffering child, that we created that child. Nor could we regret, for the sake of miserable people suffering in some part of the world, that they were ever created (204).

However, these statements are mere assertion, in the face of what I have argued above. For example, we could *easily* regret, based on the interests of a suffering child, that we created that child, if we held the following: pain is bad and the absence of pain is not bad, even if there is no potential bearer of the pain. Knowing that one could have opted for a

situation in which there was nothing bad, and instead opted for a situation in which there is something bad, is enough to ground negative emotional reactions such as regret. Similar remarks apply to the other cases Benatar mentions.

Furthermore, I submit that there are two major reasons to favour the symmetrical account of the valuation of happiness and unhappiness in conditions of non-existence, that is, to prefer the view that the lack of pain in non-existence would be *not bad*, and the lack of pleasure in non-existence would be *not good*. One reason is the fact of symmetry itself. As many physicists, mathematicians and philosophers of science have pointed out, symmetrical principles and explanations are to be preferred, *ceteris paribus*, to asymmetrical ones. There is still substantial disagreement in the literature about precisely why symmetry provides *pro tanto* reason for belief, with considerations of elegance, simplicity and probability being invoked, any of which could presumably be extended from the realm of science to that of value, conceived objectively, or at least realistically.[5]

Second, the symmetrical account coheres better with uncontroversial judgments about the relationship between experiences such as pleasure and pain and their degree of dis/value. A natural story is this one: the amount of pleasure is well represented with a positive number, which number also tracks degree of goodness, and the amount of pain is well represented with a negative number, which number also tracks degree of badness. Roughly, the more pleasure, the better off one is, and the more pain, the worse off one is, such that one is neither well off nor badly off if one experiences none of either, viz., has a score of zero. Benatar's asymmetry principle is inconsistent with these straightforward principles, in that it deems the absence of pain to be *good*, i.e., well represented not with a zero, but with a positive number. There might well be reason to deviate from this schema in the final analysis, but my point is that it would take more argument than Benatar has provided in the book.

5 An extension that Robert Nozick has made in his *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), esp. pp. 81-83, 289-291.

3.3. Questioning the Inference from Asymmetry to the Harm of Existence

So far, I have objected to Benatar's arguments for the asymmetry thesis, and have questioned the asymmetry thesis itself. Now I grant the asymmetry thesis, and consider whether it truly supports the conclusion that non-existence is preferable to existence. Return, now, to the two grounds on which Benatar bases this inference. First, recall his idea that existence includes states of both good and bad, whereas non-existence includes no states of bad, and only states of good. Benatar puts it this way:

> There are benefits both to existing and non-existing. It is good that existers enjoy their pleasures. It is also good that pains are avoided through non-existence. However, that is only part of the picture. Because there is nothing bad about never coming into existence, but there is something bad about coming into existence, it seems that all things considered non-existence is preferable (43-44).

I believe this reasoning is too quick. If we grant asymmetry, then, yes, existers have good and bad, but non-existers have only good and nothing bad. But we lack enough information to judge whether non-existence is preferable, or vice versa, because we have not been told anything about the *magnitudes* of the goodness and the badness. Intuitively, if the goodness of existing were much greater than the goodness of non-existence, and so great as to outweigh the badness of existing (which would not be torturous), then existence would be preferable to non-existence. Benatar is adamant that the asymmetry argument is designed to show merely that existence is always a harm, and that it does not indicate how great the harm is (48). However, in order to conclude that existence is a harm relative to non-existence, one seems to need to know something about the degree of badness and goodness involved.

Benatar does reply to this objection, but it basically involves him appealing to his second rationale for moving from asymmetry to the conclusion that it is better never to have been (45-47). Here, the idea turns on the concept of a 'real advantage' as opposed to a merely

apparent one. With regard to pain, non-existence is clearly to be preferred, since the presence of pain is bad in existence and the absence of pain is good in non-existence. In addition, though, Benatar claims that with regard to pleasure, although the presence of pleasure is good in existence, it does not constitute a real advantage relative to non-existence, since the absence of pleasures in that state are not deprivations.

> Just as absent pleasures that do deprive are 'bad' in the sense of 'worse', so absent pleasures that do not deprive are 'not bad' in the sense of 'not worse'. They are not worse than the presence of pleasures. It follows that the presence of pleasures is not better, and therefore that the presence of pleasures is not an advantage over absent pleasures that do not deprive (41-42).

Let me unpack the key, first sentence. The first clause says that if one exists, and if one is prevented from experiencing pleasure, then one is badly off in the sense of worse off than one could have been. The second clause says that if one has not been created yet, and so has not been deprived of pleasure, then one is not badly off (to complete the parallel) in the sense of worse off than one could have been. My question is: why believe the second clause? Why is one not badly off in the sense of worse off than one could have been *had one existed*?

Benatar provides an analogy intended both to illustrate and to motivate the crucial claim that experiencing the pleasures of existing is 'not a real advantage' relative to the absent pleasures in non-existence, or, equivalently, that the absent pleasures in non-existence are 'no worse' than the pleasures of existing (42). Consider two individuals, S (Sick) and H (Healthy), where S is prone to sickness but is able to recover quickly, and where H never gets sick but also lacks the ability to heal speedily. Of these two, Benatar makes the following point:

> The capacity for quick recovery, although a good for S, is not a real advantage over H. This, in turn, is because the absence of that capacity is not bad for H. H is not worse off than he would have been had he had the recuperative powers of S. S is not better off than H in any way …. (42).

This fascinating analogy is supposed to show that the pleasures of those who exist are not a real advantage over the absent pleasures of those who do not exist *because the absence of those pleasures is not bad for those who do not exist*. This reasoning is intended to finesse the above concern regarding the magnitudes of pleasures and pains, for no matter how great the pleasures of existing are, they simply do not count when compared with the absent pleasures of non-existence.[6]

Benatar's appraisal of the desirability of being H relative to S is surely correct, and so I focus on whether the analogy is strong. In the case of S and H, the capacity to heal is labelled a 'good' merely because it is needed to minimize the bad of ill-health. However, in the case of one who exists, feeling pleasure is a good not merely because it is needed to minimize the bad of pain. So, consider an explanation of why S's capacity to heal is not a real advantage relative to H that differs from Benatar's. Benatar says this is because 'it is not bad for H' to lack this capacity, but that is perhaps a broader principle than is warranted; a more narrow principle is that it is because H does not need this capacity to avoid a bad condition. And the narrower principle does not apply to the case of comparing an existing person with one not yet created.

Benatar's analogy has *clarified* the claim that the pleasures of those who exist are not real advantages relative to the absence of pleasures of those who do not exist, but it has not obviously *justified* it. That analogy, and the claim that pleasures of those who exist are no real advantage over absent ones in the case of non-existence, warrant more reflection than I give them here. In the rest of my discussion, for the sake of argument, I grant Benatar the asymmetry thesis and his claim that it entails that non-existence is preferable to existence in terms of the interests of the one who exists. Establishing that it would be better never to have been would be a major accomplishment in itself, but, of course,

6 For this point, see also David Benatar, 'Christopher Belshaw's Review: Better If It Had Never Been', available at: http://www.utilitarianism.com/benatar/betanar-reply.html.

Benatar aims for more, trying next to infer anti-natalism, the claim that one morally should not procreate.

4. The S*ub Specie Aeternitatis* Argument

Suppose that with the asymmetry argument Benatar has shown that it is invariably a net harm for a person to have been created. If the amount of harm were small, then, as I pointed out above in Section 2, it could well be justifiable for others to create him nonetheless, say, for the sake of third parties. So, in order to draw an anti-natalist conclusion with confidence, Benatar needs to demonstrate that the harm of existence would be large.

Before considering Benatar's reasons for thinking that existing is dreadful, I note that there could be additional reasons, besides that of helping others, to create a person in spite of the fact that doing so would impose a (minor) harm on her. Benatar's reasoning focuses on the *interests* or *well-being* of an individual, with pleasure and pain being representative examples, but there are probably additional individual-centred values that would need to be weighed up against the former before coming to a conclusive judgment about whether one should procreate. For example, I have encountered the suggestion that if human life or personhood had a dignity, that might provide a moral reason to create a person, even if that person's well-being would not be fostered thereby.[7] In general, if a certain kind of entity has a superlative final value that demands respect, then there is some reason to ensure that it is instantiated (even if not maximally promoted), despite coming at some cost to less weighty goods such as happiness.

For another example, consider the value of meaning in life.[8] Elsewhere I have discussed cases in which meaning would plausibly

7 See David Spurrett, 'Hooray for Babies', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30.2 (2011), 197-206.

8 Benatar takes meaningfulness to be one aspect of well-being, something likely to appear on the 'objective list' version (82-84). I do not, instead deeming it to be a different value-theoretic category altogether.

accrue to an individual not merely in spite of the fact that she has been harmed, but precisely because of it. For a quick and dirty case, consider someone who volunteers to be bored, or otherwise have a lower quality of life, so that others will not.[9] Taking on harm can be a way to enhance meaning in one's life. If so, then the fact that existence is a net harm need not entail that it would be wrong to make someone exist, at least if the created person would still have an opportunity to make something meaningful of her woeful existence.

Again, the best way for Benatar to respond would be to demonstrate that the harm of existence is significant, so significant as to outweigh considerations of dignity, meaning or any other individual value, let alone the usefulness of one's existence as a way to help others. This is the function of the point of view of the universe argument, the conclusion of which is that 'even the best lives are very bad, and therefore that being brought into existence is always a considerable harm' (61).

To defend this conclusion, Benatar takes up all three of the major accounts of well-being in the literature, namely, hedonism, the desire satisfaction theory and the objective list view. With regard to the first two, appealing to facts about our lives that human beings have a tendency to downplay, Benatar plausibly contends that we undergo much more pain and frustration than we are initially willing to acknowledge.

I believe that the most vulnerable—and most interesting—part of Benatar's reasoning is in the context of the objective list view, according to which a person is better off for being and functioning in certain ways that are good not merely because they are pleasurable or desired. For instance, it is typical of objectivists to believe that one's life is going well insofar as one has made achievements, sustained friendly or loving relationships, acquired an education, maintained mental and physical

9 See Thaddeus Metz, 'The Meaning of Life', in Edward Zalta (ed) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2007), available at: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning.

health, and exhibited autonomy in decision-making. Against the objective list view, Benatar points out that the list is invariably constructed from a human point of view. Theorists and laypeople take the relevant mind-independent conditions to be good for human beings *from a human perspective*. When determining what is objectively good, virtually no one takes up the *sub specie aeternitatis*, the point of view of the universe. And Benatar finds a human-centred judgment poorly motivated.

Benatar presents several interesting arguments for questioning judgments of objective goods that are informed by a human perspective (82-84). First, he points out that they are likely to be informed by the limits of what human beings can expect or what is within our control, but he reasonably asks what reason there is to think that impossible standards should be excluded *a priori* when ascertaining the quality of human life. Second, Benatar notes that most of those writing on the meaning of life reject the subjectivist view that an individual's life is meaningful for obtaining the objects of her contingent propositional attitudes, e.g., desiring something and getting it, or adopting a goal and realizing it. Most maintain that the individual's viewpoint is too arbitrary to ground judgments of meaning, as it counterintuitively entails that, say, counting blades of grass could be a very meaningful project. By analogy, Benatar suggests, most should maintain that humanity's viewpoint is too arbitrary, and should rather opt for a more encompassing standpoint. Third, most of us believe that our lives are much better than those of non-human primates, let alone those of beings such as cats or mosquitoes. If so, Benatar asks, why should we not reasonably judge other possible lives to be much better than ours, so that our quality of life is seen to be poor on the whole?

These arguments merit careful and thoughtful responses, but rather than rebut Benatar's arguments,[10] I provide more food for thought by

10 I have, in effect, responded to these arguments in some of my work on life's meaning. I

offering positive reason to doubt that the point of view of the universe is the relevant perspective to invoke when appraising the quality of human life. One of the arguments is dialectical, in the sense of appealing to premises that Benatar himself accepts, but that I do not work to show are true. The other is assertoric for appealing to claims that might be external to Benatar's worldview, but that I put forth as true.

The assertoric argument appeals to meta-ethical considerations about the likely source of our value judgments. I presume that readers will agree that human beings are a product of natural selection and, furthermore, that making value judgments was probably instrumental for us to flourish as much as we have. It is quite common for contemporary moral theorists to maintain that cooperating made it much more likely for us to succeed as a species and that cooperating was made much more likely by having acquired, biologically and socially, the disposition to make certain (emotionally coloured) judgments of what is good and bad, right and wrong, blameworthy and free from culpability. Now, if this naturalist story about the origin of our value judgments is broadly correct, then it is extraordinarily unlikely that they would be informed by the point of view of the universe. A resolutely human perspective would be what is most likely to have enabled us to evolve by virtue of judging the behaviour of oneself and others.

The remaining, dialectical argument against thinking that human life should be appraised from the point of view of the universe is a version of the familiar 'partners in guilt' strategy. For one, notice that Benatar

have argued that intuitions about when a life is on the whole meaningful are best systematized so that, although judgments of when a life counts as 'meaningful on balance' are not a function of what a given human being or even the species on average can obtain, they probably are a function of what is maximally possible, given the laws of nature, for beings that were born human but that could morph into something non-human. Roughly, while I reject the view of those such as Martha Nussbaum and Leon Kass, that value judgments must be grounded in human nature, I accept the view, *contra* Benatar, that they must be grounded in what is *available to* human nature. See Thaddeus Metz, 'Imperfection as Sufficient for a Meaningful Life: How Much is Enough?', in Yujin Nagasawa and Erik Wielenberg (eds) *New Waves in Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 192-214.

makes plenty of judgments about what we *ought* to think, which views are more *justified* than others, and which theories are *better* than others. For instance, he maintains that we have sufficient reason to believe anti-natalism, that it is more worthy of belief than is pro-natalism. Benatar is quite comfortable making judgments of shoulds and goods in the context of *belief* without appealing to the standpoint of the universe, making it incoherent for him to suggest that we must appeal to the standpoint of the universe when making judgments of shoulds and goods in the context of *action*.

For another, consider that Benatar routinely makes judgments of what is immoral and what is harmful, again, without appealing to the point of view of the universe. He claims to know that murder is immoral, that procreation is immoral, that it is wrong to treat people merely as a means, that pleasure is good, that pain is bad, etc. If he can know *which* conditions are good or bad without appealing to a non-human standpoint, then why can we not make judgments of *how* good or bad something is without appealing to such a standpoint? In short, to defend his own argument for anti-natalism, Benatar has often appealed to what appear to be human-centred evaluative and normative judgments, making it unfair for him to set a different, and extremely higher, standard at other points.

If we reject the point of view of the universe, and accept an objective list account of human well-being, at least where the non-experiential goods are more weighty than any hedonistic elements that might be on the list, then it is far from obvious that the best human lives are all that badly off. Many people are not utterly neurotic, are not entirely controlled from without, are not completely ignorant, are not systematically shunned by other human beings, are not devastatingly sick, and so on. Naturally, I would not like to have been plunked into the Congo in the 1990s and suffered from war, crimes against humanity, malnutrition, bugs and parasites, humidity and heat, and the lack of quality education, healthcare, infrastructure and transport. And I certainly do not look forward to old age and death. But I presume most

readers are like me in deeming themselves to have acquired enough objective goods to judge their lives to be, if not good, then at least not very bad, from a human standpoint. And if Benatar has not convincingly argued that the harm of existence is great, then the door remains open to argue that non-welfarist considerations such as dignity, meaning in life and help to others could morally justify creating an individual, even if the asymmetry argument succeeds in showing that existence would unavoidably be a net harm for her.

5. Conclusion

My critical notice has been critical, but that is to give Benatar's book the intense scrutiny that it deserves and should be taken as a sign of respect; Benatar's defence of anti-natalism is extraordinarily thoughtful and worthy of reflection. I have sought to add to the literature by carefully questioning the premises and inferences that lead Benatar to draw the conclusion that it is almost always wrong to procreate, and I like to think that I have indicated several places where a reader could sensibly elect to disembark from the train of argument heading toward anti-natalism.

Of course, even if I have succeeded in reasonably questioning Benatar's justification of anti-natalism, it does not follow that I have provided conclusive reason to reject that view or even his justification for it. I have pointed out, for instance, that the field should reflect more on Benatar's intriguing claim that the pleasures of those who exist are not a 'real advantage' over the absent pleasures of non-existence, since no one is deprived of them in that context. It should also ask whether Benatar could find strong reason for thinking that the absence of pain is not merely not bad, as I have suggested, but also good, as per his asymmetry thesis. And the field needs to think more about why the point of view of the universe continues to be so compelling to value theorists such as Benatar, and how one might find a principled way to reject its relevance. Where, if at all, one can reasonably draw the line between a very subjective standpoint, say, a blip of the experience of a single individual, on the one hand, and the *sub specie aeternitatis*, on the other?

There are several other issues that Benatar takes up with erudition and insight that I have not addressed in this article. A key example is his discussion of precisely *when* a person is created and its implications for the morality of abortion, with Benatar maintaining that abortion in the early stages of pregnancy is usually morally required because no person has been created by that time. Also revealing are his discussions of the ethics of population and extinction as well as of when appealing to intuitions is informative or misleading. In all, *Better Never to Have Been* has made me think, and I submit to the reader that engaging with it would, at the very least, prevent one's life from being as bad as it would have been without doing so.[11]

University of Johannesburg
tmetz@uj.ac.za

11 I thank the editor, Ward Jones, for comments on an earlier draft of this article.