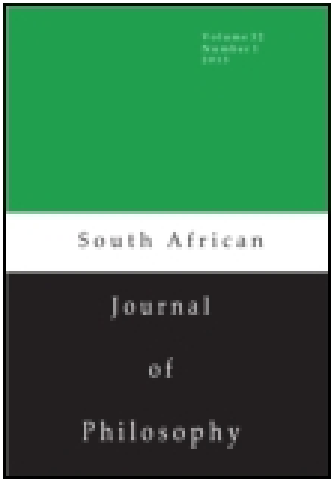

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Hooray for babies

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Hooray for babies[1]

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Abstract

David Benatar has argued that the coming into existence of a sentient being is always a harm, and consequently that people who have children always do wrong. The most natural objection maintains that in many lives (at least) while there is some pain, there are also goods (including pleasures) that can outweigh the suffering. From Benatar's perspective this move, while possibly useful in assessing the lives of those who actually exist, is not an effective defence of procreation. In the case of people who do not yet exist, he maintains that there is a crucial asymmetry arising from the putative fact that the absence of pain is good even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom that absence is a deprivation. For the potentially existing, he concludes, preventing the pain of existence is justified, but not so facilitating enjoyment of its pleasures. I argue that the asymmetry is insufficiently motivated. I also sketch two additional lines of argument against the asymmetry. First, it may not include all relevant factors. Second, plausible duties to prevent pain require possible sufferers, but do not apply straightforwardly when extended to include preventing the sufferers themselves.

'Maybe the earth would be better off without us.
Safe and clean and perfect …
…like a toy nobody ever played with.'
– E Horne & J Comeau

1. Introduction

David Benatar argues that the coming into existence of a sentient being is always a harm to that being no matter how good the life as long as it contains *some* pain, and consequently that people who have children always do wrong (1997, and 2006). If human beings did the right thing in this respect, which means refraining entirely from procreation, the consequence would be the extinction of the human species. Consistently, Benatar maintains that this would be a morally desirable outcome – a world

1 After I had chosen this title it found it was already the title of two books, one about children and one for them. The title was not intended as a nod in the direction of either book. I am indebted to Adriano Palma for thoughtful and detailed comments on an earlier draft, as well as to Patrick Lenta, Julia Clare and an anonymous reviewer for their feedback. Thad Metz, Andrea Hurst, Elisa Galgut and Olga Yurkivska made useful comments and criticisms on presentation of this paper at the January 2011 meeting of the PSSA. I have not done full justice to their contributions in this brief paper, but hope to in ongoing work.

without human beings is indeed preferable to one containing them. A hypothetical "last generation" persuaded of this view, and seeking a final solution would, Benatar concedes, live out its last years of dreadful suffering in a world where social order had collapsed, but should nonetheless be admired for their supererogatory heroism (354).[2]

These are very strong claims, and it is surely worth evaluating the arguments putatively in their favour before rushing off and trying to bring about the end of humanity.[3] In what follows I outline Benatar's argument (as stated in his 1997), then critically discuss his defence of some key premises. I find the defence he offers wanting, and identify additional reasons for suspicion that the premises are true, or that they can bear the weight he wishes to place on them. The very preliminary and brief evaluation I offer here is broadly 'internal' in the sense that the framework of Benatar's position, especially the identification of pains and pleasures as paradigmatic benefits and harms, is not subject to criticism.

2. Benatar's argument

Benatar describes himself as identifying faults with a 'common assumption' to the effect that "one does no wrong by bringing into existence people whose lives will be good on balance" because (a further assumption) "being brought into existence (with decent life prospects) is a benefit (even though not being born is not a harm)" (1997:345).

He begins by noting some relatively uncontroversial empirical facts, including that "bad things happen to all of us" (1997:345) and that you need to exist in order to suffer: "Only existers suffer harm". The same, of course, goes for good things – "Pleasures, joys, and satisfactions can be had only by existers". Even at this stage, Benatar's priorities are discernible. The three vague plural nouns of "pleasures, joys, and satisfactions" are all he has to say about good things. For the bad we get "hardship", "poverty", "disability", "ill-health", frailty", "pain", "disappointment", "anxiety", "grief", and "death". "Suffering" comes up three times, and he finds it worth pointing out that suffering can be "excruciating" but wastes no adjectives on joys or satisfactions. Death is a harm he finds worth mentioning repeatedly, while life doesn't make the list of goods, not even as a means to enjoying other goods.

He then considers the "cheerful" who hold that a life should be assessed according to the balance of pleasure and pain, where a life that is on balance pleasurable is worth being born for. He rejects this "because there is a crucial difference between harms and benefits which makes the advantages of existence over non-existence hollow but the advantages real" (1997:345). Taking pains and pleasures as exemplars of harms and benefits, he asserts that the following four claims are 'uncontroversial':

1) the presence of pain is bad
2) The presence of pleasure is good
[…]
3) the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone

2 All page references are to Bentar (1997).

3 And maybe more. Non-human animals suffering the harm of existence but whose parents are incapable of practical deliberation will continue to suffer unless energetic Benatarians embark on a global programme of (painless) sterilization for them. Committed members of the last generation should probably also organise the delayed destruction of all non-suffering life to make sure sentience doesn't evolve again. Better safe than sorry.

> 4) the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation. (1997:345-6).

The supposed asymmetry between (3) and (4) is the keystone of the 'anti-natalist' case. Benatar claims that this view is "widely shared", and cites a number of reasons in support of his claim. Among them it is supposedly the "best explanation for the commonly held view that while there is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence, there is no duty to bring happy people into being" (1997:346). A further reason is that it "seems strange" to "give as a reason for having a child that the child one has will thereby be benefited" even though "sometimes we do avoid bringing a child into existence because of the potential child's interests" (1997:346). The last reason offered (in Benatar 1997) is the "related asymmetry […] in our retrospective judgments", such that we can regret bringing someone into existence for their sake, but cannot regret not bringing someone into existence for their sake, or the sake of anyone not already existing. "Remorse about not having children is remorse for ourselves" (1997:346).

Someone contemplating procreating is, Benatar argues, chosing between two scenarios – in one a further person (or persons in the ghastly case of multiple births) is brought into existence, in another nobody is. Given the asymmetry the scenarios can be represented as follows:

Scenario A (*X exists*)		*Scenario B* (*X never exists*)	
1)	Presence of Pain (Bad)	3)	Absence of Pain (Good)
2)	Presence of Pleasure (Good)	4)	Absence of Pleasure (Not Mad)

Figure 1 ***(Benatar 1997:347)***

The anti-natalist conclusion falls out fairly directly: An actual life can be assessed by its balance of pleasure and pain, which could well be negative. (Benatar thinks that the balance is far more often negative than the living themselves realize, which is to say that most people mistakenly think their lives are much better than they are, but that is another matter.) According to Benatar a possible life not made actual, though, *has* to be better than neutral – it's a combination of the good (lack of suffering) and the merely not bad (which is all that absent pleasure amounts to). I am not making this up. Here's Benatar: "Because there is nothing bad about never coming into existence, but there is something bad about coming into existence, *all things considered* non-existence is preferable" (349, emphasis added). And "so long as there are *some* negative aspects […] life is not preferable to never having come into existence" (349, emphasis added).

The most common first response, in my experience talking about Benatar in the classroom and upon explaining anti-natalism to non-philosophers, is to object that in many lives (at least) while there is some pain, there are also goods (including pleasures) that can outweigh the suffering. This is, of course, not so much an objection to the argument, as an expression of hostility to the conclusion. From Benatar's perspec-

tive this move, while it may be useful in assessing the lives of those who actually exist, is not an effective defence of procreation precisely because of the asymmetry between (3) and (4) as compared to (1) and (2). In the case of people who do not yet exist, he maintains that the absence of pain is good even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom that absence is a deprivation. For the potentially existing, he concludes, preventing the pain of existence is justified (it does good), but not so facilitating enjoyment of its pleasures. So going on about the supposed fact that some of the existing have good lives is, even if true (which he also mostly denies), irrelevant.[4] How plausible this response is depends in large measure on how well the asymmetry represented by claims (3) and (4) above can be defended.

3. Evaluating Benatar's defence of the asymmetry

Reason 1

Benatar's first reason is that the truth of the asymmetry is supposedly the "best explanation for the commonly held view that while there is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence, there is no duty to bring happy people into being" (346). The view apparently explains the asymmetry because failing to bring a happy person into existence is merely not bad – there's nobody to enjoy the 'missing' pleasure, whereas bringing a suffering person into the world is bad, because the absence of suffering is good even if nobody enjoys it.

Even if there was some threshold level of common holding that was epistemically justifying, we'd need evidence that the threshold was met or exceeded, and Benatar provides none. (He also makes the related claim – again with no evidence – that "only a few" (346) of those who think that there are positive duties think that there is one to bring happy people into being.) Even if he did, and the view turned out to be *very* commonly held, it wouldn't help by itself because that a view might be commonly held yet false, which is why appeals to popularity are generally regarded as fallacious. The very opposite view is, furthermore, commonly held, which is to say that lots of people think that there *is* a duty to bring people into being.

The claim that there is a duty to procreate is commonly found in religious settings. The God of Genesis says "be fruitful and multiply" to Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:28), Noah (Genesis 9:1) and Jacob (Genesis 35:11, as well as the fish and fowl, in Genesis 1:22). He also kills Onan for spilling his seed upon the ground, even though it was only a first offence (Genesis 38:4-11). These considerations have been extensively used – among other things – as grounds for opposing abortion, same-sex activity, formal same-sex unions, masturbation, and bestiality. They're invoked repeatedly in sometimes elaborate theories which give central place to the ideas that there is indeed a duty to procreate, that the proper purpose of sex is procreation (hence the unacceptability of gay sex, solitary sex, etc.) and that the proper purpose of marriage is to provide a suitable institution for (among other things) procreative sex and child rearing (hence the unacceptability of adultery, fornication, same-sex marriage, etc.).

Aquinas gives a highly influential – within Christianity – account of sex and sexual vices of various kinds. Rape and incest are wrong by his lights because there is some-

4 It isn't *entirely* irrelevant, because the supposed satisfaction of (most of) the living can be used as part of an objection to Benatar. The idea is that the living can infer from their own lives that those brought into existence will be likely enough to come to approve of that fact. This is part of why Benatar argues in later work (Benatar 2006) that most people have mistakenly high opinions of their own lives. I'm not going to get into this here.

thing wrong with how people engaged in them relate to each other. But "unnatural vice" (including sodomy, fellatio, cunnilingus and masturbation) is wrong, and *more* wrong, because such activities are not suited to the *purpose* of sex, which is procreation (*Summa Theologiae*, Questions 153 and 154). This reasoning informs recent Catholic policy, including Pius XI's 1930 encyclical on marriage, which referers to the "horrible crime" of Onan (Gallagher 1993:399). Movements within the Catholic Church favouring more tolerant policy on contraception have failed, and the 1968 encyclical of Paul VI (*Humanae vitae, 2,* in Carlen 1981) sticks to Thomistic guns: the purpose of sex (the 'marital act'!) is procreation, any sexual activity that is not potentially procreative, and any act which thwarts procreation is wrong. The force of the duty has been so strongly felt that the ban on barrier contraception has firmly been maintained almost to the present in the face of compelling evidence that condom use reduces the transmission of various pathogens, especially the human immunodeficiency virus.

These putative reasons may not be very good even by the flickering light of theological argument. The fact that God also tells the fish and birds to "go forth and multiply" is taken by some to mean that the utterance must be read as more as a blessing than a command (Daube 1977:3).[5] And aficionados will happily point out that Onan's real crime was effectively practicing *coitus interruptus* to avoid impregnating his dead brother's childless widow, because a child would have divided Onan's inheritance. On this view what angered God was Onan's failure to respect the duties he owed his dead brother, so the episode doesn't warrant a policy on birth control or masturbation. That experts can find some wiggle room doesn't change the fact that the crude interpretations have commanded wide support among many, for millennia.

I'm pressed for space here, and could not begin to survey the main expressions of the duty to procreate as they occur in other religions. For now I merely note that while most Protestant major denominations endorsed the view that contraception was permissible in the decades between the 1930s and 1960s (Stanford & Larimore 1998), this was almost invariably by way of statements that took care to recognize a duty to procreate in conventional marriages, but where contraception might allow other ends of (married) sexual activity to be pursued, and to allow the timing and spacing of child birth to be partly a matter of conscience for parents.

Outside religion, various nationalistic projects have recognised or asserted positive duties to procreate, and enacted policies of various kinds, including a tax on unmarried men under Mussolini (Albanese 2006:54), who also instituted formal maternity leave, a national holiday celebrating motherhood and infancy, and tax exemptions and prizes for fertility (Albanese 2006:55). Demographic nationalists are sometimes also hostile to homosexuality for similar reasons – it reneges on the duty to reproduce.

I'm not for a moment suggesting that we should think that there is a duty to procreate *because* either some band of misogynistic homophobes with imaginary friends or some gaggle of more modern nationalistic creeps claim there is one. Popularity carries no evidential weight here at all, except against the claim that the view that there is no duty to procreate is 'commonly held'. The view is very commonly *not* held, so the premise is false. Even if it was, being commonly held is not a generally decent

5 I note in passing that this reasoning is anachronistic. As late as the 19th century European courts were prepared to try (not always *in absentia*) and sentence non-human animals, including pigs, dogs, rats and various insects, for crimes including murder, indecency (!) and damage to property. There have also been trials of non-living objects, including sculptures, carts, swords, doorposts. For a recent discussion see Humphrey (2002, Chapter 18). A key historical treatment is Evans (1906).

epistemic reason, and we stand in need of a justification for thinking that it is in this case.

Reason 2

A further reason is that it "seems strange" to "give as a reason for having a child that the child one has will thereby be benefited" even though "sometimes we do avoid bringing a child into existence because of the potential child's interests" (346). It's hard to decide what to make of this. There are, after all, plenty of strange truths, and no shortage of non-strange falsehoods. But even if seeming strange was epistemically motivating (sub-atomic physics, general relativity, the germ theory of disease, etc., all being thereby damned), it's not clear that the claim really *is* strange, or strange enough, or strange to a large enough number of people.

We do indeed sometimes say that conditions are such that it would not be good to have a child, and this is sometimes because the prospects for a good life seem too tenuous, or of a desperately horrid life too high. Regarding this, Benatar is clearly correct. This, though, is entirely consistent with the fact that some of us also sometimes talk (without remarking on the strangeness of it) about the benefit of possible children *to the children themselves*. People just *do* say, sometimes, to those who are, or who they think would be, dedicated, generous, loving and effective parents things like "You should have a(nother) child. You would be good parents *for that child*." It's all very well to point at such views and call them names like "strange", but there's a burden of proof to be shouldered here. What is strange about them? Is it a truth-undermining kind of strangeness? What – if anything – is strange about saying that since you can't be kind to those who don't exist, you need to have children before you can be kind to them?

Reason 3

The last reason offered (in Benatar 1997) overlaps in some respects with the one just considered, and concerns the "related asymmetry […] in our retrospective judgments", such that we can regret bringing someone into existence for their sake, but cannot regret not bringing someone into existence for their sake, or the sake of anyone not already existing. "Remorse about not having children is remorse for ourselves" (346).

This is a very strong claim. Elsewhere Benatar expresses a version of the claim without reference to regret: "Children *cannot* be brought into existence for their own sakes" (351, emphasis added). Is this true? One place to start approaching this question would be looking at Benatar's reasons, but they turn out to be statements of a claim weaker than the one being defended. The reason we 'cannot' regret the non-existence of the unborn is that *in fact* remorse about not-having children is self-directed. Well, even if it *was* true that remorse was like that, it doesn't follow that it *has* to be, any more than the fact that I'm not standing on one foot establishes that I *can't* do so. And we're surely within our rights to want to see a justification for thinking that it *is* like that at all. The premise effectively asserts an astonishing level of self-centrism in parental motivation. As with the supposedly 'strange' view discussed immediately above, why should we think that nobody *ever* regrets not having a child because of the benefits that child might have enjoyed?

Plenty of people clearly *think* they do things for their *actual* children – including paying massive opportunity costs in pursuit of highly convenient forms of adult entertainment, allocating substantial material resources, and taking sometimes remarkably extravagant steps to secure their welfare after the death of the parent. Perhaps all of

this really is self-serving, not genuine kindness but the fool's kindness of those Benatar repeatedly derides as the 'cheerful'. Of course, if nobody ever really did anything for the sake of anyone else, then it would be more believable that nobody ever brought anyone into existence (partly) in order to do good for them. But we need to be given reasons for thinking so. And they need to be very good reasons for it not to turn out that losing the chance to be kind in these ways *for the sake of the recipients*, is either never regretted, or outright impossible to regret.

In very brief review, then, the three reasons we're given don't seem up the heavy lifting we'd want to motivate the end of humanity. Two of the key premises seem to be false – the putatively common isn't that common, and the putatively strange not very strange. In those cases even if the premises were true, being commonly held isn't generally truth conducive, and being strange isn't generally truth-defeating. Finally, it's not clear that people don't regret what Benatar says they don't, and even if it was true that they didn't, that wouldn't prove that they *couldn't*.

4. Against the asymmetry

Recall Benatar's table of consequences (in section 2 above). This is supposed to represent the costs and benefits of someone coming (or not coming) into existence. We can ask at least two questions about this table: Does it leave anything out? Is it correctly filled in?

On the question of completeness, we can unproblematically agree for present purposes that the two columns are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive – a person either exists or she does not. It is less clear that we can say the same about the rows, because it is far from obvious that the only relevant considerations concern pleasure and pain. Benatar considers pains and pleasures as 'exemplars of harms and benefits' (345). That much seems fair enough, but being exemplary is far from being exhaustive. If there were benefits and harms besides pleasures and pains, they ought to be factored in, in case they made a difference.

I propose that there could be least one missing row, and that relates to (human) life itself. It is by no means controversial or sensational to claim that an individual human life is a valuable thing. (Smilansky (1995) has in fact argued from this and other premises to a conclusion directly opposed to Benatar's, to the effect that there is a duty (an inclining and conditional one) upon those who can to have children). If we accept the premise that an individual life is valuable, along with the claims that the presence of value is good, and its absence bad, then we might revise Benatar's table as follows:

	Scenario A (*X exists*)		*Scenario B* (*X never exists*)
1)	Presence of Pain (Bad)	3)	Absence of Pain (Good)
2)	Presence of Pleasure (Good)	4)	Absence of Pleasure (Not Mad)
5)	Presence of a valuable human life (Good)	6)	Absence of a valuable human life (Bad)

Figure 2 (adapted from Benatar 1997:347).

Now things are messier. Benatar's version has the advantage of very elegant simplicity – actual life might be some balance of good or bad that's not easy to figure out, but never having existed has *got* to be better than neutral. But with two goods and a bad in the 'existing' column, and one good, one bad and one not bad in the 'never existing' column, you need to assign quantities to the cells to work out any net advantage. Clearly you probably *shouldn't* have children during the siege of Stalingrad, but maybe you could (or even should?) in some other cases.

I've barely sketched this line of criticism of Benatar, and so need to be careful not to make too much of it. The point I take myself to have made is merely that *if* there are harms and benefits besides pleasures and pains which deserve to be factored in, this might change the outcome. Benatar might well respond that *any* absent benefit is merely 'not bad' (unless someone loses out), whereas any absent harm is 'good' (even if there is nobody to benefit), and so trying to populate the table with further rows of non-pleasure benefits and non-pain harms is a pointless distraction. But the reasons he's offered for that asymmetry aren't convincing, and so it's difficult to see that it should be allowed to hold trumps without additional defence. I hope to develop the argument for adding at least one row in future work.

What about how the table is populated? We are asked to agree that absent pains are good, even if there is nobody to enjoy their absence, but that absent pleasures are merely 'not bad' unless there is someone who is deprived.

Let's start with the latter claim. It seems very plausible. Why think that absent pleasures are merely 'not bad' unless someone exists to lose out on them? One reason is that pleasure is a state of an entity, rather than an entity itself. The notion of an independently existing, free-floating pleasure in the absence of someone to enjoy it, that is, feels slightly nonsensical. Nobody enjoys a party that nobody goes to partly *because* without anyone there, there's no party at all.

This doesn't only go for pleasures and people. Someone who doesn't own an Alfa Romeo, saying "I never have any Alfa Romeo reliability issues" is not making the same claim as an owner asserting the same words. The former one is likely making a joke. (The latter may well be lying.) The plausibility of Benatar's claim (4), that absent pleasures without possible enjoyers are merely 'not bad' arises, then, at least in part because our default serious understanding of 'absent pleasure' is something like "pleasure that isn't happening in a case where it is *possible* that it could".

It's not that we *can't* make sense of the idea of absence of a state because of the absence of whatever it can be a state of. We recognize that, in some sense, slaughtering the poor would lead to "poverty reduction", and that firing everybody would mean that there would be no "workplace accidents". But those are unusual interpretations – not what we're normally thinking or intending when we support poverty reduction or reduced workplace accidents. What we mean is more like 'less poverty without losing people', or 'fewer accidents without reduced employment'.

I've drifted into using illustrations that are about absent harms (poverty, accidents) while, I hope, making the same point. This is because it seems that the considerations supporting Benatar's premise (4) count against his premise (3). It's not *good* in our default, serious sense, for there to be free-floating pain that nobody suffers from, because when we approve of the absence of pain we mostly mean the absence of suffering without the absence of the sufferer. We want our anaesthetists to prevent the pain of surgery by means *other* than preventing us from existing. So absent pains are good when there's someone who gets to suffer less.

Benatar unsurprisingly disagrees. Having introduced his table, he considers some variations in how it is populated, and rejects the option of filling it in so that absent pain isn't positively good. He says that way of assessing absent pain in the right hand column is "too weak" and that avoiding "bringing a suffering child into existence is more than merely 'not bad'" (348). The formulation of his objection is striking, and also invites at least two interpretations which confer spurious plausibility to it. We can agree that bringing into existence a person whose life will on balance have more pain than pleasure is a bad thing. But if we agree with that, we are not agreeing with what Benatar should be allowing himself to say here. That's one kind of spurious plausibility, because the design of his argument precisely requires us not to confuse the case of the lives of the actual with merely possible lives. So he doesn't mean *that*.

We also *can't* interpret the sentence, despite the fact that its construction makes this tempting, as saying "taking an already suffering entity and bringing it into existence" because the non-existent have no properties and don't suffer. From a folk dualist point of view it's all too easy to imagine the immaterial minds of the not-yet born waiting around, and thus to interpret "bringing a suffering child into existence" as taking an already sad mind and making things worse by adding the burden of existence. Benatar sn'doet intend any such interpretation, of course. My point is merely that the tenses he uses invite it – the present continuous 'suffering' hints at suffering that's already going on when being brought into existence.

So Benatar's claim about "bringing a suffering child into existence" doesn't give an independent reason for regarding the absence of pain as good in the absence of sufferers, which is what we need here.

There's room for one remaining objection. We assuredly do sometimes speak approvingly of the absence of pain in cases where this absence is achieved by the non-existence of the sufferer. When contemplating the fate of an individual we know will suffer from terrible birth-defects, leading to a life of little more than suffering, many of us do approve of an outcome where birth is prevented *because* there is 'less pain'.[6] We also do the same thing in some end of life cases, where it is difficult or impossible to see, because of the nature and extent of someone's injuries or illness, that a continued life would be desirable. But when we say 'there's no more pain' in these cases, I submit that our approval depends on an evaluation of the left hand column of the table, precisely the sort of consideration that cannot independently motivate regarding absent pain as good in the right hand column. Suppose that a mostly health young person has a heart attack that is highly treatable, and where were it treated they would have decades of decent life afterwards, but they contingently don't receive treatment in time and die. In that case we precisely cannot comfort their loved ones by pointing out that there's 'no more pain' – the relevant contrast case is different when there's hope worth taking seriously.[7]

5. Conclusion

Although there's much more that could be said, I've argued for two main conclusions here. First the reasons Benatar (1997) offers for his crucial asymmetry are less convincing than they should be, especially for an argument calling for as drastic an outcome as human extinction. Second, there are independent reasons for suspecting that the inequality is implausible. Pains that are absent because there's nobody to benefit

6 I'm grateful to Elisa Galgut for making this point in the case of birth defects.

7 This response occurred to me in discussion with Thaddeus Metz.

from them are not good, and the cases where they seem to be good are ones where we're assessing the absence by the lights of the left hand column, which isn't what we need for a defence of the inequality. There may be better ways of looking after people than preventing them.

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