



# Anti-natalism, Pollyannaism, and Asymmetry: A Defence of Cheery Optimism

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In a series of books<sup>1</sup>, David Benatar has argued that because pleasure and pain are axiologically not symmetrical (i.e. the absence of pain is good even if not experienced, but the absence of pleasure is *only* bad if somebody is deprived of it), non-existence is always preferable to existence no matter how good that existence is, and we therefore have a moral duty to prevent new people from coming into existence. The fact that most people are unwilling to accept this, preferring to remain “cheery optimists”<sup>2</sup> instead, is explained as the result of primal psychological biases and mass self-deception.

In this article I will try to establish two conclusions. First, I will argue that Benatar’s claim that those cheery optimists – those who think that life is, despite everything, worth living – vastly overestimate the quality of our lives is baseless because it relies on the unwarranted assumption that even when we feel that our lives are worth living, they may *actually* not be.

Second, while I share and accept the moral intuition that not causing the existence of happy people is not wrong but causing the existence of unhappy people is, which according to Benatar is best explained by the *axiological* asymmetry claim, and I also agree that we would not be worse off if we had never existed, I will argue that we would still not have been *better off* if we had never existed, or in other words that non-existence is *not always* preferable to existence (although in *some* cases it may be), and that, as a consequence, we do *not* have a general moral duty to stop reproducing.

This is because we do not have obligations to merely possible people, but only to existing people and those that *will* exist, which is why procreation is neither

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<sup>1</sup> 1 David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been. The Harm of Coming into Existence*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006; David Benatar and David Wasserman, *Debating Procreation. Is It Wrong to Reproduce?* New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015; David Benatar, *The Human Predicament. A Candid Guide to Life’s Biggest Questions*, New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, opus cit., p. 211.

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generally morally prohibited nor generally morally required, but simply, in most cases, morally permissible. This sufficiently explains and justifies the apparent asymmetry<sup>3</sup> in our moral obligations regarding possible children, so that there is no need to postulate a fundamental axiological asymmetry between pleasure and pain whose merits are dubious at best.<sup>4</sup>

## 1 Are We Engaged in a Mass Self-Deception about how Wonderful Things Are for Us?

David Benatar defends the seemingly absurd view that we would all be better off if we had never been born and that, precisely for this reason, it is a) morally wrong to bring children into existence, b) morally wrong *not* to abort a fetus before it comes into existence “in the morally relevant sense at around twenty-eight or thirty weeks gestation”<sup>5</sup>, and c) morally desirable that our species (and indeed all sentient species) go extinct earlier rather than later. Even if one’s children are going to have a comparatively good life (which one can never be sure of in advance), it is still never good enough to outweigh the harm of existence, and the longer humanity carries on with prolonging its existence by procreation, the more unjustifiable suffering there will be.

In this respect, Benatar’s outlook on life is very much like Schopenhauer’s (whom he occasionally cites), except that Benatar shows no interest in metaphysics and the puzzling and rather disconcerting question *why* the world is as bad as it is – “Life’s big questions ... are not big in the sense of being unanswerable. It is only that the answers are generally unpalatable. There is no great mystery, but there is plenty of horror”<sup>6</sup> – and that, unlike Schopenhauer, he does not believe that our salvation lies in total annihilation, for one thing because he does not find the prospect of *ending* our existence at all desirable, and for another because he does not believe that salvation is possible for those of us who have the misfortune of already existing. That is in fact why according to Benatar our human predicament is so desperate: there is simply no way out. Life is bad, much worse in fact than we commonly care to realize because we are very good at deceiving ourselves, but death is *also* bad (mainly because it deprives us of the goods we could have enjoyed had we lived longer, and because death annihilates the self), so that, once we are born, we have no good options left.

Naturally, Benatar is well aware that few people will be willing to accept his conclusion, no matter how compelling his argument may be. The world is, after all, full of cheery optimists who stubbornly and seemingly against all logic cling to the belief that their life is, all things considered, not so bad, that bringing children

<sup>3</sup> See Jeff McMahan, “Problems of Population Theory”, *Ethics* 92/1 (1981): 96–127.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Thaddeus Metz, “Are Lives Worth Creating?”, *Philosophical Papers* 40/2 (2011): 233–255; Aaron Smuts, “To Be or Never to Have Been: Anti-Natalism and a Life Worth Living”, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17/4 (2014): 711–729; Erik Magnusson, “How to Reject Benatar’s Asymmetry Argument”, *Bioethics* 33/6 (2019): 674–683.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., p. 7.

into the world is a good thing or at least not something that is generally morally wrong, and that we have a moral obligation not to endanger the continued existence of humanity.<sup>7</sup> However, Benatar claims that these deeply ingrained intuitions are not trustworthy because they are simply the psychological effect of evolutionary pressures. We only think that way because it promotes the survival of the species: “Those with pro-natal views are more likely to pass on their genes.”<sup>8</sup> That is why we are very good at seeing the silver lining, but not so good at seeing the cloud, whose continued existence we tend to ignore. Instead of seeing life as it really is (namely bad), we are “engaged in a mass self-deception about how wonderful things are for us”.<sup>9</sup> The fact that most people do not regret having come into existence does therefore not count against the argument because it is not rational reflection that leads people to be happy with their existence, but their “primal” psychological biases, which have been shaped by the process of natural evolution. Benatar thus uses the same kind of evolutionary debunking argument to discredit widely held moral intuitions (in his case: that it is *not* morally wrong to reproduce and not morally wrong *not* to abort a healthy child, and that it *is* morally wrong to prevent the existence of future human life) that for instance Peter Singer uses to debunk anti-utilitarian intuitions.<sup>10</sup>

Because his claim that non-existence is preferable to even the best possible human existence is highly paradoxical, going against some of our deepest instincts (although they are by no means shared by everyone), Benatar needs this evolutionary debunking argument that suggests we vastly overestimate the quality of our lives to provide us with a reason not to trust how we tend to feel about the issue. But for this to be a plausible move, we need to accept the assumption that we may be *mistaken* in finding our lives worth living. What Benatar is saying is that even though we may be perfectly happy with our lives, we *ought* not to be happy, that even though we may not regret at all having been brought into existence, we *ought* to regret it. Life is in fact pretty bad, but we are constitutionally unable to see it.

Benatar has developed and defended this claim at length in his latest book, *The Human Predicament*<sup>11</sup>, whose main focus is on meaning as a feature in our life that can potentially make said life good if it is there and bad if it is not (even though the quality of our life may occasionally be negatively affected by an action or event that gives our life meaning, for instance when we sacrifice our life or well-being in the service of a good cause). Benatar argues that when we wonder what life is all about, the correct answer is: “ultimately nothing”,<sup>12</sup> which he thinks adds another layer of badness to the already considerable misery of life. Benatar does not deny that our lives can be meaningful in various different ways or on various different levels, but he claims that the ways in which they can be meaningful cannot make up for the way

<sup>7</sup> See Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1984.

<sup>8</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, opus cit., p. 100.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Singer, “Ethics and Intuitions”, *The Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005): 331–352.

<sup>11</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, opus cit.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

in which they are definitely *not* meaningful. While we can indeed have meaning to one another and perhaps to society, or even, if our impact is global enough, humanity, our lives have “no broader point or purpose”: “We are insignificant specks in a vast universe that is utterly indifferent to us.”<sup>13</sup> This cosmic insignificance allegedly makes our lives a lot worse than they would otherwise be.<sup>14</sup>

In line with Benatar’s overall strategy (of making our lives appear a lot worse than we tend to think or feel they are) he distinguishes between subjective meaning and objective meaning. There is a difference between how meaningful we *feel* our lives to be (= subjective meaning) and how meaningful (or meaningless) they really *are* (= objective meaning). A life can feel meaningful without being meaningful and be meaningful without feeling meaningful. According to Benatar, a meaningful life “is one that transcends one’s own limits and significantly impacts others or serves purposes beyond oneself.”<sup>15</sup> Since our lives do not serve any cosmic purpose (which Benatar seems to think is self-evident), they are objectively meaningless on that level. This is bad for us even if we don’t care much for cosmic purposes or if we (mistakenly, of course) believe that our lives do matter cosmically (i.e. if our lives are subjectively meaningful on the level of the universe). It is the objective meaning or meaninglessness that counts. “Whatever other kinds of meaning our lives might have, the absence of *this* meaning is deeply disturbing to many.”<sup>16</sup> Human nature, Benatar claims, “tends to abhor a meaning vacuum”. At the same time, however, there are “strong psychological impulses that impel most but not all people to cope with this, either by denying the vacuum or by denying its importance.”<sup>17</sup>

So, according to Benatar, cosmic meaninglessness is abhorred by us (rightly, because it is really bad), but we also feel psychologically compelled to deny that it bothers us very much. In other words: even though we find it terrible not to have any cosmic significance we are unwilling to admit this to anyone, perhaps not even to ourselves. It follows that if people say they are not bothered by this, then this does not at all count against the claim that cosmic meaninglessness (or other supposedly bad-making features of our lives) is really bad for us. It simply shows that people deceive themselves. But here is the problem: if few people admit to being seriously concerned about the apparent cosmic meaninglessness of their lives, how can we (or Benatar) be so sure that they nonetheless *are* seriously concerned about it, let alone that they *should* be concerned about it?

A similar problem arises with respect to Benatar’s overall assessment of human life as bad and not worth living. Benatar claims that life is very bad, objectively (because of a lack of cosmic meaning, but also, and even more so, because of the large amount of suffering in it and because we have to die). How come then that some people don’t see it that way, people who think that life is actually, for many

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2

<sup>14</sup> For a refutation of this claim, see Thaddeus Metz, “Does the Lack of Cosmic Meaning Make Our Lives Bad?”, in *Journal of Value Inquiry*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-022-09885-7>.

<sup>15</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

people, pretty good? No doubt there are such people out there. I happen to be one of them. People like me very much like and appreciate being alive. Yes, we have needs and desires like everyone else, which sometimes remain unfulfilled. We get tired and hungry and thirsty and occasionally feel the need to relieve ourselves, and sometimes we are sick. We also know that we are going to die, and we are not particularly keen on doing so. But none of this bothers us all too much. It does not seriously affect the way we feel about our lives. It is a price we are very happy to pay for getting the chance to live the life we have got. Perhaps life could be in some respects better than it is, but as far as we cheery optimists are concerned it is good enough because it has still got plenty to offer. Of course, we are aware that all that we treasure about this life can easily be taken away from us, but as long as that has not happened, we see no good reason to think of our life as bad. So is our life, as Benatar would claim, *actually* much worse than we think it is?

Benatar confidently claims that the reason why so many people seem to be rather happy (or at least not overly unhappy) with their lives is that people do not want to know the truth about them. They refuse to acknowledge what is obvious to unbiased observers such as him who are not afraid to tell us the truth: that life is so bad that it would be much better for us not to be (and that ending our lives would be entirely reasonable if death were not also an evil). “The quality of human life is, contrary to what many people think, actually quite appalling.”<sup>18</sup> People don’t realize this because they are generally “very unreliable judges of the quality of their own lives”.<sup>19</sup> But why should we believe that? Benatar cites studies that purportedly show that people tend to overestimate the quality of their lives. In other words, people are often happier than they should be. This is known as “optimism bias”.

However, the results of those studies are not quite as straightforward as Benatar thinks they are and do not lend support to Benatar’s claim.<sup>20</sup> Myers and Diener for instance present findings suggesting that people “are happier than one might expect, and happiness does not appear to depend significantly on external circumstances. Although viewing life as a tragedy has a long and honorable history, the responses of random samples of people around the world about their happiness paint a much rosier picture.”<sup>21</sup> So unlike Benatar, those people do not view life as a tragedy. Myers and Diener conclude from this that people’s subjective well-being is largely unaffected by their life situation. Crucially, however, they do *not* conclude that people are *mistaken* about how well their life is going. They do not commit to the view that life is *in fact* a tragedy, but only that we rarely see it as such.

Benatar also cites Andrews’ and Whitley’s *Social Indicators of Well-Being*<sup>22</sup>, in which the authors present and discuss findings from surveys of subjective well-being in different social groups in the US, suggesting possible ways to measure levels of

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> For a critical discussion see also Iddo Landau, “Benatar on the Badness of All Human Lives”, *Philosophia* 49/3 (2021), 333–345: especially pp. 340–344.

<sup>21</sup> David G. Myers and Ed Diener, “The Pursuit of Happiness”, *Scientific American*, May 1996, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> Frank M. Andrews and Stephen B. Withey, *Social Indicators of Well-Being: Americans’ Perceptions of Life Quality*, New York: Plenum Press 1976.

subjective well-being and attempting to determine social indicators of different levels of well-being. Again, the authors do not make any claims about objective quality of life being different from subjective quality.

This is not very surprising because it is difficult to see how one would derive an objective measure of one's quality of life that can be contrasted with how one *feels* one's life is going, other than by identifying some objective features that supposedly make a life go well or contribute to its going well. If it is then found that people whose lives lack some of those features seem to be just as happy as those whose lives possess them, then we can conclude that those whose lives lack those features overestimate the quality of their lives. The problem is, however, that we could just as well conclude from those findings that the features we thought are needed to make a life good are actually *not* needed and that the quality of a person's life is in fact independent of those features. Objective list theories of well-being are only convincing to the extent that they reflect people's *actual* needs and preferences. This is what gives them their authority. If I need a big expensive car to be happy and you are just as happy with your old junker, then that doesn't mean that you overestimate the quality of your life (or of your car). Similarly, if you need a young and fit body to be happy and I am just as happy old and flabby, then that doesn't mean that objectively my life is worse than yours. There is simply no convincing way to measure the quality of someone's life objectively, independent of how they feel about it. As Rivka Weinberg has pointed out, "if life is bad *for* us, it seems like it must be bad *to* us."<sup>23</sup>

There are of course some optimistic evaluations that *can* be measured against an objective standard, like for instance self-assessments regarding one's talents and skills. I may for instance falsely believe that I have a great singing voice, or that I am a deep thinker. And perhaps it is true that most people think rather too highly of their own abilities. But that has got nothing to do with the quality of their lives. Taylor and Brown, in yet another paper on the subject referenced by Benatar, just point out that those subjective distortions have a positive impact on subjective well-being.<sup>24</sup> Once again, they do *not* suggest that our quality of life is, in those cases, not as good as we think it is, but merely that it tends to become (subjectively) better if we think well of ourselves. The rest of the referenced empirical studies relate to Pollyannaism and specifically the tendency to remember pleasant events more accurately than unpleasant events, which may certainly have, again, a positive impact on our quality of life, but that does not show in any way that we are mistaken about said quality.

I am not denying that there are of course situations and life conditions that are really bad, but they are bad precisely because it is very difficult, if not impossible, for us to be happy and live and feel well in them. But for many of us, such circumstances are the exception, not the rule. It is also worth pointing out that even in the worst objective conditions we don't have to deceive ourselves about the nature of

<sup>23</sup> Rivka Weinberg, "Is Having Children Always Wrong?", *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31/1 (2012): 26-37, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Shelley E. Taylor and Jonathan D. Brown, "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health", *Psychological Bulletin*, March 1988, Vol. 103, No. 2, pp. 193-210.

our situation to still find things to be rightly happy about and thus to make our life *actually* better than it would otherwise be. Viktor Frankl, in his well-known account of the time he spent in a German concentration camp, famously argued that “life holds a potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones”.<sup>25</sup> Whether or not it does ultimately depends on our attitude, which according to Frankl should be that of a “tragic optimism”,<sup>26</sup> which means that we should remain optimistic in spite of pain, guilt, and death (the “tragic triad”), that we should say yes to life no matter what the circumstances are we find ourselves in, that we should “make the best of any given situation”.<sup>27</sup> The reason for this is not just that this makes it easier for us to cope. Optimism is in fact *justified* because every suffering can be turned into a human achievement, every instance of guilt into an opportunity to change oneself, and life’s transitoriness into “an incentive to take responsible action”.<sup>28</sup> Suffering, then, is nothing to be unhappy about because it reminds and challenges us “to make the best possible use of each moment of our lives”.<sup>29</sup> More than for happiness, we long for reasons to be happy, and such reasons, Frankl insists, can always be found.

Did Frankl suffer from an optimism bias? It is surely question-begging to assume that he *must* have been. In truth, claims about biases are wonderfully powerful devices to protect an argument against objections because every objection we make can now conveniently be blamed on our biases. “The optimistic biases are so deeply ingrained in people (not least because of the evolutionary roots of these biases) that most people will simply deny that humans have them. However, that compounds a delusion with obstinacy. The evidence for an optimism bias is quite clear.”<sup>30</sup> But is it really? In a way that is *relevant* to the case in question (i.e. the quality of our lives)? If there is, Benatar has failed to provide it.

## 2 Does the Asymmetry Argument Show that Procreation is Wrong?

Now, Benatar could accept all this and still insist that we would have all been better off if we had never existed and that it is wrong to procreate and bring new people into this world, which is why we now need to have a closer look at the arguments that are put forward by Benatar to support those two views. Naturally, since I am a cheery optimist myself (i.e., I do not regret having come into existence and do not feel guilty of having brought others into this world), I find it difficult to agree with Benatar’s conclusions. However, I do accept, like he does, that while we do not have a moral duty to cause the existence of happy people, we do have a moral duty not to cause the existence of unhappy people. It would seem, then, that I do accept the

<sup>25</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, New York: Rider 2004, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>30</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., p. 187.



claim that not causing the existence of happy people is not wrong, but causing the existence of unhappy people is. I also agree that we would not be *worse off* if we had never existed. What I do *not* agree with, however, is the claim that we would have been *better off* if we had never existed. While existence may not be preferable to non-existence, even if that existence is rich and rewarding, neither is non-existence generally preferable to existence (though it might be in some cases). If that is correct, then we do not have a duty to procreate (at least not for the sake of those we bring into existence), but neither do we have a duty *not* to procreate.

In his first book on the issue, *Better Never to Have Been*, Benatar argues that non-existence (or more precisely not *coming* into existence, which, as we have seen, for Benatar is different from *ceasing* to exist) is always preferable to existence for the following reasons: *first*, even the most blissful human life is still subject to various forms of inevitable suffering: “pain, disappointment, anxiety, grief, and death”<sup>31</sup>. No matter how lucky we are, it is simply not possible to avoid all of these harms once we have started existing. The only way to avoid them is by *not* coming into existence. “Only existers suffer harm.”<sup>32</sup> *Second* (and most crucially), this suffering is not outweighed by the many good things that we may enjoy when we are alive, even if those good things in our life by far outnumber the bad things. While this may be sufficient to make our existence worth *continuing*, it is not sufficient for our life to be worth *starting*.

Now, the reason why the good things cannot outweigh the bad things is that there is a basic *asymmetry* between pleasures (positive experiences, satisfied preferences, or goods of any kind) and pain (negative experiences, unsatisfied preferences, or the lack of goods), such that the absence of pain is good even if that good is not experienced by anyone, while the absence of pleasure is *not* bad unless someone exists who is deprived of that pleasure.<sup>33</sup> So in other words, while non-existence is better than a bad existence, it is *not* worse than a good existence. This asymmetry is thought to be the best explanation for why we tend to believe that it is a moral duty not to bring people into existence that we know are likely to have a miserable life, but *not* that it is moral duty to bring people into existence that are likely to have a (comparatively) good life. If we wanted to insist on the symmetry between pleasure and pain, then we would *either* have to claim that there is nothing wrong with bringing people into the world that we know will have a miserable life, *or* that we are morally obligated to bring as many happy people into the world as possible.<sup>34</sup> If we are not prepared to subscribe to either of those two views, then, Benatar argues, we have to accept the asymmetry between pleasure and pain. Yet if it is good to prevent the existence of a life with pain in it, but not bad to prevent the existence of a life with pleasure in it, then it seems to follow that even “a life filled with good

<sup>31</sup> Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, opus cit., p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> As argued for instance by Richard M. Hare, “When Does Potentiality Count”, in Richard M. Hare, *Essays on Bioethics*, 84–97, P. 90.



containing only the most minute quantity of bad – a life of utter bliss adulterated only by the pain of a single pin-prick – is worse than no life at all.”<sup>35</sup>

In *Debating Procreation*, published nine years after *Better Never to Have Been*, Benatar’s argument basically remains the same, although he now puts more emphasis on the existential risks that we expose our children to by bringing them into the world, which may be read as a tacit acknowledgement that maybe not *all* lives are so bad that they are not really worth starting. Even if this were so, he now argues, for each and every child there is always a non-negligible *risk* of ending up with a really miserable life. It may not be likely, but certainly possible. And since we should not be playing Russian roulette with our children’s lives, we should not procreate.<sup>36</sup> Benatar now also fully adopts the *misanthropic argument* that he only alluded to in his previous book: humans are really so prone to doing so much damage to each other, to non-human animals, and to the environment, that the world would be a much better place if we stopped being around. Whatever we may think of this argument, the fact that Benatar makes so much of it in his second book on the subject clearly shows that his main concern is not primarily *theoretical* (i.e. to establish the truth of the claim that existence is always harmful), but *practical* (i.e. to convince us that it is always wrong to reproduce). However, the theoretical claim that existence is *always* harmful for the one whose existence it is still constitutes the foundation of his anti-natal position, and the argument he presents in support of this claim presents the greatest philosophical challenge to those who, like me, are unwilling to accept his practical conclusion. So this argument – the (axiological) asymmetry argument – needs to be dealt with.

We have seen that what the asymmetry argument seeks to establish is that “even if there were more good than bad, the presence of *any* bad would be sufficient for coming into existence to be a harm. Because every life includes some bad, coming into existence is always a harm.”<sup>37</sup> This supposedly follows from the fact that while it is bad to cause harm (or more precisely to allow harm to exist), it is not bad not to cause benefit (not to allow benefit to exist). While the absence of harm is always good, the absence of benefit is neither good nor bad, i.e. “not bad”,<sup>38</sup> unless someone exists who is deprived of that benefit. For this reason, no amount of good in a possible future life can outbalance even the slightest harm in it. This axiological asymmetry between harm and benefit explains why (as most people would acknowledge) “we have a duty to avoid bringing into existence people who would lead miserable lives”, but “no duty to bring into existence those who would lead happy lives.”<sup>39</sup>

Benatar finds the axiological asymmetry thesis not only true, but “clearly true”. Moreover, he accuses those who reject it of “moral callousness” and “moral insensitivity”,<sup>40</sup> once again echoing Schopenhauer, who accused Leibniz and other

<sup>35</sup> Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, opus cit., p. 48.

<sup>36</sup> Benatar, *Debating Procreation*, opus cit., p. 65.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

optimists of his time of the same.<sup>41</sup> So by daring to doubt the thesis we would reveal not only our essential blockheadedness – because we would allow our truth-tracking reasoning abilities to be compromised by “powerful biological drives with deep evolutionary roots”<sup>42</sup> – but also a regrettable lack of moral character. I would like to give it a try anyway, even if that puts me at risk of being found wanting both intellectually and morally. Is the axiological asymmetry thesis obviously true? I think not. In fact, like others before me, I think it is quite obviously false.

The main problem with the thesis lies in the fact that it is difficult to make sense of the claim that it would have been good for me if I had never existed, because if I had never existed there could not possibly have been anything that was good for me since there would have been nobody *for whom* it could have been good. Yet even if we thought a non-existing person could be benefited by the absence of the harms that existence would have inflicted on them, it would not, as Erik Magnusson has quite rightly pointed out,<sup>43</sup> lend any support to the axiological asymmetry thesis, because in that case it would seem equally possible for a non-existing person to be harmed by the absence of the benefits that they would have enjoyed had they come into existence. There is thus no axiological asymmetry between harms and benefits. The presence of harm is bad, and so is the absence of benefit. In fact, many of the harms we suffer *are* absences of goods, for instance the absence of health, the absence of freedom, the absence of friends, or the absence of love.

Yet even if we accepted the axiological asymmetry claim, this would not warrant the conclusion that no life, no matter how good it might turn out to be, is actually worth starting: even if Benatar were right that never-coming-into-existence has its advantages (it is good that there is no pain and other evils), but no disadvantages (it is not bad that there is no pleasure and other goods that the living enjoy), what follows is merely, as Aaron Smuts has shown,<sup>44</sup> that prenatal non-existence is never bad, but *not* that existence cannot be better than prenatal non-existence, namely in all those cases where it comes with a sufficiently large number of goods. While non-existence is always a net benefit, existence is not always a net harm and very often a net benefit that is larger than the benefit of non-existence.<sup>45</sup> This why the axiological asymmetry argument, even if granted, cannot stand on its own. It only leads to the conclusion that procreation is always wrong if there are never enough goods in anyone’s life to outweigh the bad things and thus to create a net benefit. This is of course exactly the case that Benatar is trying to make with his quality-of-life arguments, which largely consist in enumerating and puffing up the many evils that we supposedly can and often do encounter in our lives, which ranges from minor discomforts like the need to eat or to urinate<sup>46</sup> to the absence of all the great and wonderful things that we do not and can never have, such as immortality and omniscience (and

<sup>41</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume 1, Paragraph 59.

<sup>42</sup> Benatar, *Debating Procreation*, opus cit., p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Magnusson, opus cit. p. 677.

<sup>44</sup> Smuts, opus cit.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 715.

<sup>46</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., p. 71.

cosmic meaning!), in comparison to which our actual life span and knowledge reveal themselves as badly deficient and hence bad.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, all the goods we experience are said to be trivial, fleeting, weak, infrequent, and therefore hardly worth considering. And yet, it would be very easy to list an equally large number of goods and joys that we can and often do experience on a daily basis. And since Benatar is more than happy to include even the slightest actual discomforts among the evils as well as the superpowers that might be good for us to have but are impossible to achieve (on the grounds that it all adds up), we should include among the goods all the tiny comforts that we also experience most of the time as well as the fact that we do not have to suffer many of the horrors we can imagine ourselves to suffer.<sup>48</sup> If it is bad for us not to be in heaven, then surely it is also good for us not to be in hell.

Ultimately, however, the question whether there is more good or more bad in life is undecidable because life's goods and bads do not come to us in measurable units. They are different for each of us, and we experience them in different ways and in different combinations, which sometimes makes all the difference. But if we did try to count and measure all the goods and bads in our lives, it is far from clear that the bads would come out on top for the vast majority of us. This is why, just as for it to work the asymmetry argument needs to be backed up by the quality-of-life argument, the quality-of-life argument relies for its plausibility on the optimistic-bias argument, which denies that people can be trusted when they think, feel, and say that they don't regret their existence (or their ever *coming-into-existence*).

Now, if the asymmetry argument is unconvincing, why is it generally thought to be wrong to bring a child into existence that (we know or can reasonably assume) will have a miserable life, but thought to be not wrong *not* to bring a child into existence that is likely to have a very happy life? And why are we concerned about the bad in the lives of existing people, but not generally about the good lives that *could* exist if we had created them? Does that not imply that for anyone who could have existed, but does not, the absence of suffering is good and the absence of pleasure is not bad (i.e. neither bad nor good)? No, it does not. It merely implies that any moral obligation we may have is always an obligation to existing people, and never to merely possible people.<sup>49</sup> *If* (!) we are going to reproduce, we should be reasonably sure that the life that results from our decision is a reasonably good one. A reasonably good life is one that has sufficient access to life's goods and is sufficiently devoid of life's harms. If we know it is not going to be a reasonably good life, then we should abstain from reproducing. If we know it is, then we are *free* to reproduce, meaning that the quality of our future child's life does not constitute a moral reason *against* reproduction. What it does *not* mean is that we have a moral reason *for* reproduction.

Generally speaking, we neither have a moral obligation to bring new people into the world, nor do we have a moral obligation not to bring new people into the world. More precisely, we do not have such an obligation *to the possible people* that

<sup>47</sup> Benatar, *Debating Procreation*, opus cit., p. 52.

<sup>48</sup> See Landau, "Benatar on the Badness of All Human Lives", opus cit., p. 339.

<sup>49</sup> See Weinberg, "Is Having Children Always Wrong?", opus cit.

could be in the world if we brought them into it. In contrast, we may very well have moral obligations to *already existing* people as well as to people that are *going* to exist independently of our decision to procreate or not to procreate. If, for instance, we think that the world suffers from overpopulation, then we may conclude that it would be wrong for us to add to the problem by bringing even more people into the world. This is entirely sensible, drawing on our common moral intuitions. Likewise, if society suffered from a *lack* of children, we might find that it is our duty to do our bit to alleviate the problem by reproducing. Or if we knew that our child is likely to be a very bad person who will cause a lot of harm to others, we might also feel that we have a moral duty to not have that child. Likewise, if we knew that our child would be likely to do a lot of good, then we might conclude that we should reproduce. But in general terms, it is neither wrong (morally *prohibited*) nor right (morally *required*) to reproduce. Instead, it is, in the absence of *particular* circumstances that speak against reproduction here and now (of which there may well be quite a few)<sup>50</sup> or particular circumstances that speak for it, merely *permissible*,<sup>51</sup> which is not to say that procreation can never be wrong. Life certainly has its risks, and it is certainly our responsibility to assess, in every single case and as best we can, whether the risks are worth taking for those we consider bringing into the world.

The reasons for all this are not very difficult to grasp: if we do decide to reproduce, then there will be new people whose existence we have caused, and we do have moral obligations to them, just as (and to the same extent that) we have moral obligations to any other person that exists or is going to exist (such as future generations of people, whose identity is not defined, but who we can reasonably be sure will exist). If we knew that the child that we were going to have was likely to have a bad life full of suffering, then we may justly be accused of having caused harm to that child by allowing it to have such a bad existence (and the greater the harm the more difficult it becomes to justify our decision to them). Likewise, if we knew that the child we were going to have was likely to have a life that lacks most of the pleasures, satisfied desires, or benefits that we feel constitutes a good life, then we may *also* be accused of having caused harm to that child. Crucially, in both cases the child that we will have harmed is not the *possible* child, but the *actual* child that will exist if we decide to bring it into the world. The presence of pain (or more generally any kind of harm), and the absence of pleasure (or any kind of benefit) is equally bad *for that child* and may serve as a good (moral) reason for us to abstain from procreation. It is thus *not* the case that while the absence of pain is good, the absence of pleasure is merely not bad. The one is as bad as the other (especially as the absence of goods is generally a cause of suffering). While neither harms a *possible* child, both harm any *actual* child that will result from our decision to procreate, and in both cases we need to be able to justify the harm we inflict or allow to happen. While a good life requires no justification (and creating it is therefore permissible), a

<sup>50</sup> See Rivka Weinberg, *The Risk of a Lifetime: How, When, and Why Procreation May Be Permissible*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015.

<sup>51</sup> See Metz, "Are Lives Worth Creating?", opus cit., p. 241.

bad life *does* require justification (and creating it is, to the extent that a justification cannot be given, impermissible).

This is all very much common sense and does not demand any commitment to a fundamental axiological asymmetry between harm and benefit, or the existence of impersonal harms and the non-existence of impersonal benefits.

### 3 Concluding Remarks

I hope to have shown that Benatar has failed to provide us with good reasons to distrust our intuitions when and if we think and feel that our lives are well worth living (and were indeed well worth beginning). Neither has it been demonstrated that we habitually overestimate the quality of our lives and that we think and feel that our lives are worth living while in fact they are not, nor does the fact that we normally believe that it is morally wrong to bring children into the world if there is a strong possibility that they will have a bad life, but not that we are under any obligation to do so if we can be reasonably sure that they will have a good life, compel us to conclude that we would be all better off if we had never been born. Naturally, that does not mean that the case for anti-natalism cannot be made on other grounds. If I am right that, as his more recent writings and the plurality of arguments he uses to support his conclusions would suggest, Benatar's goal is ultimately practical in the sense that what he wants to establish is that it is wrong to procreate, and that the claim that it would have been better for us if we had never come into existence mostly serves the purpose of establishing that practical conclusion, combining the philanthropic and the misanthropic argument, both of which he uses in *Debating Procreation* and elsewhere<sup>52</sup> to bolster his anti-natalist stance, and a more sustained focus on the amount of suffering in the world that we both experience and cause through our existence may prove, precisely because it is so difficult to accurately measure and assess, to be a more persuasive argumentative strategy than an exclusive reliance on the far more technical asymmetry argument.

However, if we take those arguments seriously and reach the conclusion, as Benatar does, that because of all the suffering even the luckiest of us have to endure and all the suffering we are likely to cause to others it would be better if humans became extinct "sooner rather than later"<sup>53</sup>, we would also be justified, contrary to what Benatar thinks, to conclude that we have a moral duty to "embark on a 'speciecide' programme of killing humans".<sup>54</sup> This is because the amount of suffering in the world would "be radically reduced if there were no more humans,"<sup>55</sup> and the deliberate destruction of humanity could be accomplished much sooner than if we simply stopped reproducing. For obvious reasons Benatar does not encourage this inference, claiming that it would be wrong for a

<sup>52</sup> See e.g. David Benatar, "Kids? Just say no", *Aeon*, 19 October 2017.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, opus cit., p. 196.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

moral agent to kill somebody “without proper justification”, mostly because cutting a human life short is supposed to add to (rather than to diminish) the harm of their existence. But the most commonly cited reason for why death is bad, i.e. that by dying we miss out on the good that we would otherwise have enjoyed, is not available to someone who claims that life is so miserable that it would be wrong to subject anyone to it, simply because if that is indeed true, then all that death deprives us of is a vast amount of suffering and at best a tiny and in the face of all that suffering negligible amount of happiness. We may of course, as Benatar points out,<sup>56</sup> fear annihilation itself, but while it is clear why we fear postmortal non-existence but not prenatal non-existence (because one cannot fear what is in the past), it is unclear why no longer existing should be in any way *worse* than never having existed in the first place. The only reason for why death, i.e., no longer existing, is harmful while never-having-existed is not, that remains open to Benatar is that people usually have an *interest* in, or *preference* for not dying or in other words that they do not normally *want* to die. Death “thwarts an interest in continued existence”<sup>57</sup> that we would not have had if we had never existed. Yet if non-existence is not *in itself* bad, then why should we let ourselves be guided by our natural bias against death? Why should we respect it more than the “deep biological drive to have children”<sup>58</sup> and our tendency to make the best of even the most adverse circumstances, both of which Benatar asks us to ignore and override because these allegedly are merely the psychological effects of evolutionary pressures? Is our strong disinclination to die not also such an effect? If those “with pro-natal views are more likely to pass on their genes”<sup>59</sup> and thus to promote the survival of the species, then surely we can say the same about those who hold, like most of us, anti-death views. And if the former should not influence our decision-making because they are just the product of evolutionary pressures, why should the latter? Anti-natalism, after all, also thwarts a strong human interest, namely that in procreation and continuing the life of the species.

A consistent anti-natalist should therefore also be a pro-mortalist,<sup>60</sup> especially since even if we acknowledge that there *is* harm in killing people, we can still weigh this harm against the harm that would result from allowing the human species (or for that matter, our own individual self) to continue to exist. In other words, the fact that we would be responsible for the continued suffering of many more generations of humans that would be brought into existence if we did *not* kill everyone off surely *does* give us “proper justification” because the harm we would inflict on those that already exist would be more than outweighed by the many billions of lives that we would save from “the immense amount of suffering that this will cause between now and the ultimate demise of humanity”.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., p. 104.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>58</sup> Benatar, “Kids”, opus cit.

<sup>59</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., p. 8.

<sup>60</sup> See Rafe McGregor and Ema Sullivan-Bisset, “Better No Longer to Be”, *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31/1 (2012): 55-68.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

The reader may disagree, but I for one would much rather be accused of being a cheery optimist than accept such a decidedly cheerless conclusion.

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