



Introduction

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Since the publication of his book *Better Never to Have Been. The Harm of Coming into Existence*,¹ the South African philosopher David Benatar is known as the leading contemporary proponent of anti-natalism. Anti-Natalism is the view that procreation is morally wrong and that we ought not to procreate.² It may be defended in various different ways, the most prominent being ecological anti-natalism and compassion-based anti-natalism. Some anti-natalists have argued that the “ecological footprint” of each individual that is brought into existence makes it morally unjustifiable to bring new beings into existence, particularly in times of climate change,³ others – and that includes Benatar – that we ought not to procreate because procreating gravely harms the being we bring into existence. The core idea of this kind of anti-natalism is that we should abstain from procreation to spare future individuals the pains and sufferings of existence.

The starting point of Benatar’s anti-natalism is his claim that there is an axiological asymmetry between the absence of pain and the absence of pleasure: whereas the absence of pain is always good, i.e. even if there is no one who perceives the absence of pain as such, the absence of pleasure is bad only if there is someone who is deprived of the pleasure. This, Benatar argues, shows that we harm individuals by bringing them into existence since by not procreating we spare potential people the pains and sufferings of existence, which is good for them, while not depriving them of the pleasures of existence (since only someone who exists can be *deprived of*

¹ David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been. The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

² For an overview on the history of anti-natalism and philosophical pessimism, see Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism. Philosophy, Ethics, Spirit*, Princeton/Oxford 2006, and Ken Coates, *Anti-Natalism: Rejectionist Philosophy from Buddhism to Benatar*, Sarasota 2016.

³ For a recent discussion of this variant of anti-natalism, see Felix Pinkert/Martin Sticker, “Procreation, Footprint and Responsibility for Climate Change”, *The Journal of Ethics* 25 (2021): 293–321.

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anything), which means that the absence of pleasure is not bad for them. Thus, prenatal non-existence is always preferable to existence. Moreover, according to Benatar, we even gravely harm those beings we bring into existence since the quality of our lives is much worse than we think it is and our self-assessments of our lives as being “good” or “happy lives” are unreliable. Benatar thinks that on all plausible accounts of well-being, our lives are very bad. And because it is morally wrong to inflict serious harm on other people, which we would do simply by bringing them into existence, we have a moral obligation to abstain from procreation. This view has far-reaching implications for bioethical questions and for population policy.

The first implication is that Benatar defends a “pro death view” regarding abortion. He claims that it is morally required to abort the fetus in the early stages of pregnancy (who is thought to not properly exist yet in any relevant sense) to spare the child that would result if it were not aborted the pains of existence. This does not mean that Benatar thinks that life, once it is there, should not be protected and preserved. Indeed, he makes a clear distinction between “lives worth starting” and “lives worth continuing” and stresses that lives, once started, may be worth continuing even though no life is worth starting. And because no life is worth *starting*, we should prevent sentient life from coming into existence whenever possible.

The second implication is that Benatar is willing to accept (and indeed welcome as a desirable outcome) that, if we all abstained from procreation, humanity would become extinct. According to him, it would be better if there were no sentient life on earth, and the best population policy would be one that aims at a phased and painless extinction of humankind.

In *The Human Predicament*⁴ Benatar develops these ideas further by linking them to questions regarding meaning in life, death, and suicide. Distinguishing between various forms of meaning, Benatar argues that there is no cosmic meaning: our fleeting lives have no impact on the universe and are, in this sense, ultimately meaningless. This absence of cosmic meaning is part of the “human predicament”, and it strengthens the case for anti-natalism by providing a further argument for not bringing into existence beings whose lives will be ultimately meaningless. With regard to death, Benatar argues that, even under anti-natalist premises, death can be seen as (and actually is) a harm, as it deprives us of the good things in life and annihilates us. So death, far from being a source of consolation to those who prefer prenatal non-existence to existence, makes our lives even worse. This is why we cannot escape from our predicament by taking our own lives. Once we exist, suicide comes with a cost that often outweighs the benefits of leaving existence, in particular the cost of harming others, friends and relatives, who are left bereaved. However, Benatar concedes that his views entail that suicide will be regarded as rational in more cases than one usually thinks it is.

Benatar can be seen as a successor to the famous philosophical pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860) in that he sees human life as a nightmarish time of grave but senseless suffering that no one, if he could choose, would rationally prefer

⁴ David Benatar, *The Human Predicament. A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

to prenatal non-existence. Bringing people into existence is like punishing the innocent: it means inflicting pain on those who have neither deserved it nor consented to it. In contrast to Schopenhauer, however, Benatar defends these views in the clear argumentative style of analytic philosophy. It hardly comes as a surprise that Benatar's views, although they have initiated a stimulating debate on the value of procreation, are rejected by most philosophers and are sometimes regarded as repulsive and offending.⁵ They run counter to our pro-life intuitions to a degree that Benatar himself, sometimes suspected of being a mere jester or *agent provocateur*, feels the need to emphasize that he is "entirely serious" in his arguments.⁶ However, this counter-intuitiveness should not be seen as a reason for discarding anti-natalism without closer scrutiny. Benatar should be given the credit of drawing our attention to a question that, surprisingly enough, is ignored even in books that focus on the "ethics of parenthood"⁷ or the "moral foundations of parenthood",⁸ in which one should think it deserves a central place: the question of how to evaluate and normatively assess not only reproductive techniques such as surrogate motherhood or gamete donation but procreation itself. Ought we to procreate? This question certainly deserves the attention that Benatar gives it by challenging the widespread intuition that, under normal circumstances, procreation is, if not morally laudable, at least morally neutral. Even if one rejects anti-natalism, one should acknowledge the importance of this question.

In this special issue we have done this by gathering seven papers that critically engage with Benatar's views, followed by Benatar's detailed response to each of them. Oliver Hallich offers a qualified defence of the asymmetry argument. He argues that, although the way it has been stated by Benatar is deficient, the asymmetry argument is ultimately correct and provides a reason for the claim that we always harm a being by bringing it into existence. Michael Hauskeller, by contrast, defends an optimistic attitude towards human life. He argues, first, that Benatar's distinction between "feeling one's life to be worth living" and "a life being *actually* worth living" is groundless so that there is no reason to assume that we overestimate the quality of our lives when assessing them as good. Second, he argues against Benatar that, since no existing person would have been better off if they had never existed, procreation is neither morally required nor morally prohibited, but morally neutral. Thaddeus Metz explores whether the lack of cosmic meaning that Benatar diagnoses in *The Human Predicament* supports the claim that all lives are bad or that procreation is impermissible. His answer is negative: even though he concedes to Benatar that there is no such cosmic meaning, he argues that this gives us no reason to complain since there is no reason to regret the absence of what is unattainable. Christine Overall takes up Benatar's point that every human life contains an enormous amount of suffering, conceding that this is correct and

⁵ Similarly dismissive, if not hostile reactions, though for different reasons, have been elicited by Benatar's third book, *The Second Sexism. Discrimination against Men and Boys* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

⁶ Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, p. 5.

⁷ Norvin Richards, *The Ethics of Parenthood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁸ Joseph Millum, *The Moral Foundations of Parenthood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

important, but argues that it does not undermine the legitimacy of giving birth to and rearing children since most people are glad to be alive and that, contra Benatar, they are the authorities on the assessments of their own lives. These assessments, Overall argues, cannot be dismissed as mere instances of self-deception. Nicholas Smyth, drawing on Nietzschean and Jamesian conceptions of philosophical temperaments, sees Benatar's philosophy as an expression of an "impersonal philosophical temperament" that identifies questions of practical importance with questions of maximizing overall value. This approach, he argues, ignores personal and agent-relative questions. When thinking about meaning in life and procreation, we should instead adopt the personal standpoint and resist the impersonal temperament. Ema Sullivan-Bisset challenges Benatar's view that anti-natalism does not commit us to recommend suicide. She argues that anti-natalism leads to pro-mortalism because the "human predicament" as depicted by Benatar is a fate worse than death and we would, on anti-natalist premises, be well advised to exchange the evil of life for the lesser evil of death. Finally, Erik Magnusson investigates the potential of risk-based arguments for anti-natalism, i.e. arguments that do not refer to the infliction of harm but to the fact that by procreating we expose our offspring to a serious *risk* of harm. Distinguishing between different versions of the risk-based argument, he concludes that one of them, the justificatory version – according to which it is unjustifiable to expose someone to the risk of catastrophic harm that is not necessary to advance his interests – is a promising argument for anti-natalism.

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