

The Benefits and Harms of Existence and Non-existence: Guest Editor's Introduction

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Can a person be benefited or harmed by coming into, and by going out of, existence—and if so, what moral weight do these benefits and harms have? The articles in this special issue of *The Journal of Ethics*—entitled “The Benefits and Harms of Existence and Non-Existence”—explore some of the most intriguing and important aspects of these issues. I am extremely grateful to Angelo Corlett, the Editor-in-Chief, for affording me the privilege to serve as Guest Editor, and to the authors for their excellent contributions. What follows is a brief description of each paper.

According to a widely endorsed view, often referred to as “the Asymmetry,” the fact that someone would have an overall bad life is a moral reason against causing her to exist, whereas the fact that someone would have an overall good life is not a moral reason to cause her to exist. This view is questioned in the contributions by Jeff McMahan and Ben Bradley. More exactly, the target in McMahan’s paper, “Causing People to Exist and Saving People’s Lives,” is the second half of the Asymmetry. McMahan argues that, if a person’s life is worth living, coming into existence is a noncomparative benefit to her (although, he contends, it cannot be *better* for her than never existing). And this, he claims, provides us with a moral reason to cause her to exist—as can be shown by reflection on a variety of cases involving different kinds of benefits to present and future people. McMahan, however, also highlights several disturbing consequences of his position. One is that it can sometimes be better to cause someone to exist than to save people’s lives; another is the Repugnant Conclusion (well-known from Derek Parfit’s work). Indeed, McMahan closes by suggesting that the problems in this area of moral philosophy are so troubling that they constitute a greater threat to moral realism than do traditional arguments in metaethics.

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Bradley argues, in “Asymmetries in Benefiting, Harming and Creating,” that not only is the Asymmetry false, but there is not even any asymmetry in the *strengths* of the reasons involved. For instance, if the fact that someone would have a total well-being of -100 gives us a reason not to create her, then the fact that someone would have a total well-being of $+100$ gives us an equally strong reason to create her. A popular thought is that the former reason is stronger, since we should discount the positive well-being of “contingent” people (those whose existence depends on what one does), though not the positive well-being of “necessary” people (those who exist regardless of what one does) or the negative well-being of either contingent or necessary people. However, Bradley argues that this and similar views violate an attractive principle of independence of irrelevant alternatives: the addition of an option cannot affect the relative strengths of the reasons for the other options. To avoid this problem, Bradley’s opponents could instead claim that negative well-being has stronger reason-providing force in general than positive well-being; but this approach, he argues, is also untenable. In addition, Bradley defends the controversial thesis—denied, as we saw, by McMahan—that existence can be better or worse for a person than non-existence. Particularly, he addresses the common objection that a person cannot have a well-being level (not even a neutral well-being level) in a possible world where she never exists. This objection, Bradley argues, neglects the explanatory role that well-being is supposed to play in ethical theory.

My own paper, “Prenatal and Posthumous Non-Existence,” compares not yet having come into existence with going out of existence. The currently most popular view of the value of death is the “deprivation approach”: something is bad for a person if it deprives her of goods that she would have had if it had not taken place. In lots of cases, of course, death satisfies this condition. A serious difficulty for the deprivation approach, however, is that the same must apparently be said about prenatal non-existence: If I had been born earlier than I actually was, my life would have contained many additional enjoyments. Intuitively, though, my prenatal non-existence is not bad for me at all. In response, the deprivationist needs to show either that prenatal non-existence is a bad thing after all or that it is relevantly different from death. I examine two particularly prominent versions of the latter strategy. One of these—due to Thomas Nagel and, more recently, Frederik Kaufman—is based on the claim that whereas I could have died later, I could not have come into existence earlier than I actually did. The other proposal, by Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer, is based on the claim that death deprives us future pleasures, which we care about, whereas prenatal non-existence merely deprives us of past pleasures, which we do not care about. Both of these approaches, I argue, are unsuccessful.

The fourth paper is Eric Olson’s “The Epicurean View of Death.” According to the Epicurean view, death is in no case bad for the deceased. As Olson notes, critics of this view usually focus on finding flaws in the arguments for it (my own paper is, indirectly, an example of this). Olson’s article, however, is a direct attack on the view itself. He argues that if the view is to be of any real interest, it must be interpreted as “strong Epicureanism”: It can never be bad in any way at all for a person to die. Other versions—such as “moderate Epicureanism,” the thesis that it cannot be bad to *be dead*—fail to deliver what the Epicurean view promises: To

undermine both our aversion to death and the philosophical enterprise of trying to explain why death is bad (e.g., by appeal to the deprivation approach). Strong Epicureanism, Olson argues, is true only if nothing whatsoever can be bad—and indeed, only if nothing can be *good* either, including pleasure and desire satisfaction, and no one can ever have any egoistic reasons to act. Olson suggests that not only are these implications wildly counterintuitive; they also show that the Epicurean view fails to be a significant view about death in particular.

Is it possible, and prudent, to make oneself invulnerable to death—to ensure that death will not be able to harm one? This issue is discussed in the contributions by Stephen Hetherington and Steven Luper. An obvious way to achieve such invulnerability would be to arrange things so that continued life could contain nothing but misery; clearly, however, that course of action has little to recommend it. A more appealing option might be to perfect one's life—to make it maximally good—so that no addition to it could possibly improve it. In “Where is the Harm in Dying Prematurely? An Epicurean Answer,” Hetherington proposes that the way to do this is by reaching *ataraxia*, a state characterized by stillness and calm and a complete absence of fear and anxiety. When *ataraxia* has arrived, the person is ready for death, and cannot be harmed by it. In the typical case, of course, death comes before the person has attained *ataraxia*. But, Hetherington argues, while such a death is premature, this does not imply that it is harmful: The harm we tend to attribute to it is more properly ascribed to the regrettable way in which the person was leading her life. Hetherington also discusses the epistemological question of how a person could know that her death will not be premature.

In “Exhausting Life,” Luper argues for a more negative attitude towards disarming death. The main part of his paper consists in a detailed discussion of the “perfectionist” thesis that a person, well before she dies, can make her life as a whole maximally good. According to what Luper regards as the strongest argument for the perfectionist thesis, the only things that are good for a person are achieving her life plan and the individual aims that make up this plan; and since these achievements can be attained fairly early on in her life, she can perfect life long before she dies. Luper thinks, however, that this argument must be rejected after all, primarily because things outside our life plans can be good for us. In particular, regardless of how good one's life has been so far, it will become even better by the addition of further pleasures.

One of the most influential monographs in recent years on the value of existence and non-existence is David Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been* (2006). In this book, Benatar argues that coming into existence is always harmful and that it is always morally wrong to procreate. He puts forward two main arguments for this position. The first is that there is a crucial asymmetry between harms and benefits (illustrated by pains and pleasures, though Benatar stresses that analogous points hold for other harms and benefits). Whereas the presence of pain is bad and the presence of pleasure is good, the absence of pain is good even if there is no one who enjoys it, but the absence of pleasure is not bad unless someone is deprived of this pleasure. In support of this asymmetry claim, Benatar appeals in part to the above mentioned Asymmetry (under attack in McMahan and Bradley's articles), but also to a number of other considerations. Benatar argues that given his asymmetry claim,

while non-existence has one advantage over existence (absence of pain is better than presence of pain), existence has no advantage over non-existence (presence of pleasure is not better than non-deprivational absence of pleasure). Existence is therefore always worse than non-existence. Benatar's second argument appeals to the unreliability of self-assessments of quality of life. In particular, various psychological mechanisms lead us to neglect the vast amounts of bad things in our lives; in reality, our lives are much worse than we believe. Benatar's contribution to the present collection, "Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics," is a defense of these two arguments against recent objections from Ben Bradley, David DeGrazia, Elizabeth Harman, and others. He also responds to the charge that his view commits him to a favorable attitude towards suicide and specicide.