Should People Come Into Existence?
The Unqualified Pessimism of David Benatar

> So this guy's looking at his Google news feed; he's shaking his head and says "Jeeze! Things are bad all over and they don't get better no matter how hard we try! Sometimes I think it'd be better if nobody'd ever been born." Then this other guy says "Ah! We should be so lucky!" Sigmund Freud comments on a similar joke and declares it to be "nonsensical" and based on unconscious fantasy [SE VIII, 57] (mis-cited in Benatar, 3-4). In this talk I'm going to explicate and critique the argument of someone for whom the guy's thought is certainly not nonsense, and although impracticable now, ought eventually to be put into practice and realized.

From Ecclesiastes, Job, and Jeremiah to Sophocles to Petrarch to Voltaire to Heinrich Heine to Schopenhauer sentiments (if they are sentiments and not serious positions) concerning the vanity and futility of human existence and the preference for non-existence have been asserted without nuance and with unapologetic candor, but until now I knew of no sustained Anglo-analytic style argument claiming to show that all sentient life is a serious harm and that human pro-creation is immoral. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* [Oxford 2006] by David Benatar, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cape Town, South Africa is a serious argument that has not, or not yet, received the sort of attention a book concerning the value of the existence of all sentient life, and especially human life, on planet earth should likely receive.[1] For this talk I'll focus on the Introduction and the Conclusion to the book where the author makes his baldest assertions. The remainder of the book concerns applications of and counter-arguments to possible positions –

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[1] This past summer I saw a television news report concerning a teenage brother and sister who, perhaps inspired by Benatar, had sued their parents because, they stated in the lawsuit, they "never asked to be born" [See below].There is a fluffy piece in *The New Yorker* ("The Case for Not Being Born" Nov. 27, 2017), a few YouTube interviews, and one inconsequential—but not unserious—debate with a popular psychologist. Benatar is referred to, but not discussed, about a dozen times at the capacious Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy site. Benatar himself thinks it probable he will not be taken seriously, given an intuitive aversion his conclusions. However, he points out that there was a time when arguments against slavery or arguments in favor of voting rights for women seemed absurdly counter-intuitive.

"possible" positions because his arguments are not being taken seriously enough to openly confront.

After asserting in the first sentence of the book the "central idea" that "coming into existence is always a serious harm", he later clarifies that "[t]here is a difference […] between (a) saying that coming into existence is always a harm and (b) saying how great a harm it is":

> This recognition is important for warding off another potential objection to my argument. One of the implications of my argument is that a life filled with good and 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. The objection is that this is implausible. […]It is [nevertheless] true of the person enjoying this charmed life marred only by a single brief sharp pain, that as pleasant as his life is, it has *no advantages* over never existing [emphasis mine]. […]We can acknowledge that the harm of coming into existence is miniscule without denying that it is harm […] who would deny that a brief sharp pain is a harm, even if only a minor one? And if one acknowledges that it is a harm—one that would have been avoided had that life not begun—why should one deny that a life begun at that cost is a harm, even if only a minor one? […]If all lives were as free of suffering as that of the imagined person who suffers only a pin-prick, the harms of coming into existence would easily be outweighed by the benefits to others (including the potential parents) of that person coming into existence. In the real world, however, there are no lives even nearly this charmed (48-9).

This argument rests upon another of his primary claims—the "asymmetry of pleasure and pain" (pp. 30-40 and 49-59) which he imports from Petrarch : "A thousand pleasures do not compensate for one pain"; and from Schopenhauer:

> It is quite superfluous to dispute whether there is more good or evil in the world; for the mere existence of evil decides the matter, since evil can never be wiped off, and consequently never be balanced, by the good that exists along with or after it […]For that thousands lived in happiness and joy would never do away with the anguish and death agony of one individual; and just as little does my present well-being undo my previous sufferings [*The World as Will and Representation* II, 576 (Dover ed.)].

From the Introduction:

(13-16) Benatar reasons that we cannot say that the non-existent ("possible people who never become actual") are better off than those who do actually exist (because they—the non-existent—don't exist, so we can't assert anything but that about them—which is why Freud declares this whole line of thinking ridiculous), but we can say that all who *do* exist suffer (at least a little bit) and thus *everybody* would be better off (at least a little bit) never having been born.

He writes that no one will argue against the assertion that coming into existence is sometimes a harm, but *always*? There is another asymmetry. The absence of a Bad (any bad thing) is always good, even if there is no one to benefit from the absence. (For example, there is no polio on Mars—is that not a good thing?) But the absence of a Good (any good thing) is bad only if someone is deprived of that Good. (For example, there are no polio prevention measures on Mars—is that bad? Should something be done about it?) So, to eradicate the Bad by not existing—by refusing to pro-create—is *always* good; to sacrifice the Good by not existing—by refusing to pro-create—is only *sometimes* bad.

(8-13) Benatar is an anti-natalist (i.e. he opposes people giving birth) and, given the harm that in his view *always* attaches to existence, there is a moral duty to be so.

> ➤ Pro-natalists often cite evolution as evidence in favor of pro-creation, but this is ultimately a primitive, "backwards" way of thinking. (Who remembers Katherine Hepburn's great line to Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*? "Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above.")
> ➤ If not evolution, politics, for various pragmatic and ideological reasons, influences pro- or anti- natalism. If it is argued that we can work to alleviate suffering and then feel morally justified in pro-creation, Benatar will disagree asserting, "there could be *much* less suffering and yet pro-creation would remain unacceptable".

➢ When told by a colleague (who had engaged Benatar's arguments at a conference) that she was pregnant, Benatar said, "I *am* happy for *you*. It is your expected child for whom I am not happy" [*The Human Predicament,* Oxford UP 2017, 216 n.9].

➢ Religious views supporting pro-natalism are non-binding, open to interpretation, and susceptible to disagreements.

➢ Sentience does not come into existence all at once at conception; it is a complicated and gradual process. Nonetheless, at the very early stages of gestation, indisputably prior to any sort of pre-conscious 'wakefulness', there is reason to support and encourage abortion, Benatar argues. This is his "pro-death" view of abortion which he believes to be right. This deserves some serious attention and is of interest to pro-choice activists, expanding their position significantly. Abortion at the pre-sentience stage dutifully *ought* to occur because the growing fetus will become a person who will suffer.

(14) "[E]ven the best lives are not only much worse than people think but also very bad." The quality of life cannot be determined by any arithmetic involving Good and Bad. Overwhelmingly, when asked to think in general about the quality of their lives, people tend to discount any Bad that is happening or has happened to them, and overvalue anything else so that a positive sum is reached even if that positivity lies only in the future. The tendency towards optimism is virtually universal no matter how dire the circumstances. *Dum spiro spero* ("when there is breath, there is hope"). But whether one adopts hedonism, desire-fulfillment, or objectivity life can be shown to be irredeemably worse than you want to think it is. Some pains, discomforts, sufferings are so prevalent in so many people's lives that they tend to discount them altogether! The pains are simply deemed a 'part of life' and not a consequence of practical factors that could be otherwise.

(15) Human existence is doomed to extinction anyways. Given that, Benatar favors a sort of 'phasing out' of human existence so that extinction happens sooner rather than later, and a great magnitude of suffering would be avoided.

(16) Benatar's views solve the 'non-identity problem' which has become a moral/legal/ethical issue of considerable importance among Anglo-analytic philosophers and which has and will continue to have an effect on Law (including Torts (i.e. lawsuits involving money)) and Public Policy in the years to come. [See below]

From the Conclusion:

(202-08) The argument that there ought to be no more conscious life on this planet is "counter-intuitive, ridiculous and even offensive". But what is at one time counter-intuitive at another time is self-evident (non-human creatures are not animated automatons for us to treat anyway we like, e.g.). The asymmetry of pain and pleasure disrupts utilitarian arguments about the overall value of existences. The absence of pain is always good; the absence of pleasure may be bad, may be indifferent, or may be good — is overall neutral. But suppose we say that absent pleasure is *always* bad? Then we are morally committed to creating happy people, and we are morally disturbed by the absence of people in uninhabited regions of our planet and by the absence of people on Mars, Mercury, and elsewhere in the Universe. Now suppose that absent pain is only *sometimes* good—is overall neutral. Then we no longer morally regret creating a suffering person. Creating or not creating a suffering person might be good, might not.

Coming into existence is a harm even if that existence contains a mere iota of suffering (like a pin-prick). Even if an existence with only an iota of suffering were not considered a harm, it is counter-intuitive to think that any such existence exists anywhere in the real world. What's more, most people intuitively think it okay to create lives that contain more than an iota of suffering. Thus humans are *dogmatically*,

not rationally, optimistic about well-being—in fact or in potential. (Like it or not, I think that if we commit to rejecting Benatar's views, we commit ourselves to the condoning of an immense amount of suffering happening from right now at this moment until the ultimate demise of all life, and we ought be thoughtful about our condoning.)

(208-11) An optimist may agree with a pessimist that there is more pain than pleasure but say that the pleasure makes up for the pain. A pessimist may agree with an optimist that there is more pleasure than pain but deny the compensatory quality of that pleasure. For Benatar, life's pleasures (however immense they may be) do not necessarily make a life morally worthwhile to start, and life's pains (however brutal) do not necessarily make an existence not worth continuing. 1) Optimism and pessimism must be evaluated by evidence, not by how they make us feel; 2) one can regret existence without self-pity (not that there's anything wrong with pity); and 3) some are better off than others, but that does not imply any moral. Were those who had first class cabins on the Titanic morally better off than the rest? In fact, pessimists generally have a more accurate view of their lives than optimists, but pessimists ought not *avoid* pleasure as if to solidify their point of view; there is no rational reason make Bad even worse.

(211-21) That existence is always a harm does not entail the desirability of death and suicide. That it is always better never to have been does not entail that it is better to cease to be. The threshold for a life worth starting is higher than the threshold for a life worth continuing. Is death bad? Most people will think that murder harms a victim, even though the victim is dead. Is a dead person deprived of anything? Is there a difference between a deprivation of existence altogether and someone existing deprived of further life? Is there a difference between my own non-existence prior to

my birth and my non-existence post-mortem? If I had been born sooner or later than I was, I would be a different identity. If prospective parents decide not to conceive now but instead sometime later, they are not delaying the coming into existence of anyone in particular. But after death there is, and will always be, someone (some identity) associated with that death. Ante-nativity (before birth), there is no definite 'who' (no identity); post-mortem, some definite 'who's' existence (some identity) will have been truncated. Benatar needs to weigh in on these issues because he is definitely not *uniformly* advocating death as an alternative to the harm of existence. For example, there is no general case for suicide since suicide frequently harms others (and so makes something bad even worse). Yet Benatar thinks that rational suicide ought be more respected than it is, and some who do not commit suicide despite their wretched lives sometimes harm those around them even more than if they did commit suicide (and so not committing suicide may make something bad even worse).

(223-25) I think Benatar is a new style pessimist, but he considers himself a "philanthropic misanthrope" in that the end of all *anthropos* would be Good since *all* human suffering would cease. "[I]t is quite likely that my views either will be ignored or dismissed", but he writes (and I agree with this) that such an intellectual indifference to his argument is a self-congratulatory moral indifference to a great magnitude of suffering.

The Non-Identity Problem:

(18-28) It is common intuition to believe it possible that a life may be so bad that its coming into existence must be considered a moral and/or a legal wrong. (Could offspring sue their governments—or their parents—for not adequately attending to all kinds of public harm issues: genetics, vaccinations, pollution, climate change,

smoking, economic policies, political corruption, etc. etc.?)[2] If such a life cannot come into existence without that harm, then the only alternative is for it not to have come into existence at all, is it not? Benatar takes this position to the extreme—*every sentient life brought into existence is harmed.* There are philosophers and jurists for whom existence and harm are separable; for Benatar, they are not. For these philosophers and jurists, even a life so bad that it is deemed not worth living is not necessarily, not logically, harmed by the sheer fact of existing because to be harmed is to be "worse off" than otherwise. Benatar and others argue that existing and non-existing are not comparable because, if anything, non-existence is eternally unique and cannot be otherwise. Benatar will argue that if a person says that their life is so bad that they would 'be better off dead' they are not claiming that their no longer existing will be a discretely more tolerable way of being than their intolerable existing. If we agree that a life may be so bad that the person will justifiably wish for death, then how is that life having come into existence not wronged even if we assign to no entity any legal, ethical, or moral responsibility? But again, the comparison is not between a person's *two* lives—one of which is, and one of which is not and never has been—but between a person's single discretely miserable existence and a state-of-affairs in which no such person ever existed. (This leaves Benatar's readers in limbo because the title of the book implies that existing or having existed is "worse". Existing or having existed entails particulars—some someone—, but never having existed does not entail particulars. So we can say who is/was "worse", but who would be "better "? If we cannot say, or if strictly speaking no one in particular is "better "

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[2] Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* (1984) and Gregory S. Kavka's 'The Paradox of Future Individuals' from *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 11/2 (1982) are the chief subjects of counter-argument in this section.

because there is no one who has never been, then how is this book not a ridiculous fantasy or dogmatic sentimentality?)

It may be objected that there is—at bottom, in the profoundest sense—no life not worth continuing and therefore no life not worth starting. But one can only judge a life "worth continuing" for a sentient existent already existing, and even if we agree that there is *no* life not worth living, not worth continuing, it may still be (and for Benatar it is) preferable not to come into existence. Already to exist—in any circumstances, however grotesque or however benign—is radically different from and incomparable to a state of affairs that does not include existing. The latter state of affairs is one in which it is ask-able whether a potential life may be worth starting or may not. Many potential parents (but not only parents!) think about this every day. In this latter state, the question *Is it harmful to come into existence?* can be a relevant and rational question. If we agree that the question is rational, then it must be that it *may be* harmful to come into existence, and if it may be harmful then it may also *always* be harmful—which Benatar insists on.

Are existence and harm, for Benatar, *metaphysically* inseparable as they are for Petrarch, Schopenhauer, Macbeth, Leopardi, Camus's Sisyphus and countless others? Anglo-analytic philosophy was created by the young Wittgenstein, Russell, Ayer, and many others as a 'cure' for metaphysics. Benatar remarks about the "(European) 'continental' tradition" that the writing is "literary and evocative" but, despite "widespread appeal", is deemed by analytic philosophers to be "excessively obscure and insufficiently precise" [*The Human Predicament,* xv-xvi]. Okay then, if harm and existence are not metaphysically inseparable, are they logically inseparable? Benatar always uses the word "always" to characterize the relation; he does not ever say "necessarily". If existence and harm do not entail each other, then the relation is

contingent, but that would require extensive qualifications which Benatar nowhere provides. So, unless I am missing something, that leaves dogmatism or—and I think Benatar would not like this—'mystery' as in Jewish and Christian theological thinking about the problem of Evil. But non-believers (like Benatar himself) will dismiss all religious mysticism as pernicious dogma of the worst sort, leaving Benatar's readers still fundamentally confused about the author's most subjective (most underlying) commitments. What is he not telling us?

Be that as it may, has Benatar magnified an issue of genuine gravity—the reality of suffering—that ought to be seriously argued (even if we first have to argue *how to* argue the issue), or has he reduced the seriousness to a nonsensical fantasy? Should humans be sanctioned—or indeed sometimes encouraged—to pro-create given the harm that Benatar says is always involved? Benatar's answer is 'No. Never'. If our answer is 'Yes. Always', then what is/are our moral (or other) justifications? If our answer is 'Sometimes. Not always', then what is the moral (or, for that matter, legal or ethical) status of the distinction (or distinctions)? If the question is irrelevant, is it morally irrelevant? If it is morally irrelevant, then what relevance neutralizes the morality? If the question is morally relevant, has Benatar made a convincing case for his answer? If the question is morally relevant, but the morality is intuitively overruled—and as a consequence we dismiss the question entirely, which Benatar thinks likely—then what sort of status are we granting our intuitions, and how confident are we in them? What are we not telling ourselves?

Thomas Wall   *National Taipei University of Technology*