

Is Having Children Always Wrong?

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Life stinks. Mel Brooks knew it, David Benatar knows it,¹ and so do I. Even when life does not stink so badly, there's always the chance that it will begin to do so. Nonexistence, on the other hand, is odor free. Whereas being brought into existence can be harmful, or at least bad, nonexistence cannot be harmful or bad. Even if life is not clearly bad, it is at the very least extremely risky. David Benatar argues, somewhat notoriously, that since it is better never to exist, one is harmed by being brought into existence and, therefore, procreation is likely always wrong and certainly always morally problematic.²

Procreation is an activity widely engaged in and often considered virtuous, life affirming, and generous. It is important to know whether, contrary to most views, procreation is always morally problematic or even impermissible. Most people find it deeply counterintuitive to consider the fact that having children may always be wrong, yet many have found Benatar's arguments difficult to escape. I have the opposite problem: I am very sympathetic to the intuitions that inspire these arguments and I think the conclusion is probably right. But I have yet to find an argument to support it.

In this paper, I will explain Benatar's arguments and show how, though they are often relied upon, and widely cited, they do not succeed in showing that procreation is always wrong due to the harmfulness of existence.³ I will be forced to conclude that, until such time as a more convincing argument is conceived of, procreation has not been shown to be always morally wrong or always morally problematic.

I Are Pleasure and Pain Asymmetrical?

Benatar grounds his argument regarding the harm of coming into existence on the claim that there is an asymmetry between pleasure and pain. Benatar argues that al-

1 See David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*, Oxford University Press, 2006 and "Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 34 (3), 345-355, July 1997.

2 Benatar, *op cit*.

3 Caspar Hare, "Voices from Another World: Must We Respect the Interests of People Who Do Not, and Will Never, Exist?" *Ethics* 117(3), 512-513, 2007; M. Häyry, "A Rational Cure for Prereproductive Stress Syndrome," *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 30, 377-378, 2004; David Wasserman, "The Non-Identity Problem, Disability, and the Role of Prospective Parents," *Ethics* 116(1), 132-152, October 2006; Elizabeth Harman, "Can We Harm and Benefit in Creating?" *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18, 2004; Frances Kamm, "Is There a Problem with Enhancement?" *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 5(3), 5-14, May 2005; and Stuart Rachels, "Is There a Right to Have Children," *The Philosophical Review*, 114(2), 288-290, 2005, among many others.

though, *a*: the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone; *b*: the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.⁴ I will refer to Benatar's pain/pleasure asymmetry as "Benatar's Asymmetry". From *a* and *b*, Benatar concludes that it is always better never to come into existence since nonexistence is always 100% good by virtue of its being a state of absence of pain. Existence pales by comparison because no matter how good it is, it is never 100% good;⁵ it is thus never more advantageous than nonexistence. Put another way, Benatar's asymmetry is intended to show that, since the absence of pain is good even if it's not enjoyed by anyone (*a*) and the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is someone deprived by the absence (*b*), nonexistence is a win-win situation. It's all good. Existence, on the other hand, is sometimes bad. And, since all good is better than partially good, existence is worse than nonexistence. Since existence is worse than nonexistence, we harm, and hence wrong, people by bringing them into existence.

Benatar defends his asymmetry on the basis of its alleged explanatory power. He argues that his asymmetry best explains four other plausible beliefs:⁶

1. *Although there is a duty to avoid bringing unhappy people into existence, there is no corresponding duty to bring happy people into existence.*⁷

Benatar argues that the reason we think that there is a duty not to bring suffering people into existence is that the presence of this suffering would be bad (for the sufferers) and the absence of the suffering is good (even though there is nobody to enjoy the absence of suffering).

2. *It is strange to claim that one had a child for the reason that the child will be thereby benefited but it is not strange to say that one avoided having a child for the sake of the child's interests.*⁸

Benatar further argues that his asymmetry best explains belief 2. If belief 2 were false, he argues, there would be a moral reason for many people to have many more children, but that is not the case (see belief 1).

3. *Whereas one can regret bringing a child into existence for the sake of that very child, one cannot regret not bringing a child into existence for the sake of that very child (that one would otherwise have brought into existence).*⁹

Here too, Benatar argues that although we regret bringing a miserable child into existence (for the sake of the child), "The reason we do not lament our failure to bring somebody into existence is because absent pleasures are not bad."¹⁰

4. *Although we are sad for miserable people who live far from us, we are not similarly sad for people who, had they existed, would have been happy.*¹¹

4 Benatar, "Why it is Better Never to Come into Existence," *op. cit.*, p. 346; *Better Never to Have Been*, *op. cit.*, p.30. For the remainder of my discussion of Benatar's argument, I will cite the later work.

5 *Better Never to Have Been*, *op. cit.*, p.37.

6 Benatar, *op. cit.*, p.31.

7 Benatar, *op. cit.*, p.32.

8 Benatar, *op. cit.*, p.34.

9 Benatar, *op. cit.*, p.34.

10 Benatar, *op. cit.*, p.35.

11 Benatar, *op. cit.*, p.35.

Benatar accounts for this belief by reminding us that, “we regret suffering but not the absent pleasures of those who could have existed.”¹² And, the argument goes, his asymmetry best explains this belief.

As explained above, Benatar argues that, given his asymmetry, coming into existence is always a harm (since existence, at best partially good, is worse than nonexistence, which is always all good).¹³ Whether this follows from his asymmetry, I will leave open. It does not matter because Benatar’s asymmetry ought not to be granted. Recall that Benatar’s argument in favor of his asymmetry is based on its explanatory power. Setting aside the fact that many would dispute the plausibility of the four beliefs that Benatar’s asymmetry supposedly explains (indeed, the implications of Benatar’s view may be more counterintuitive than the four beliefs are intuitive), I will accept their plausibility and argue that there are two far simpler and more fitting explanations of the beliefs which Benatar argues are best explained by his asymmetry. The first explanation is a simple and obvious metaphysical fact, the second a (related) common moral principle. The common moral principle that explains the four beliefs is the view that our moral obligations are to persons who do or will exist, i.e. to persons with moral standing.¹⁴ We are thus obligated to refrain from causing persons to suffer but we are not obligated to confer benefits upon hypothetical entities that will never exist since merely hypothetical entities have no moral standing and hence can make no moral demands upon us. Only persons who do or will exist are candidates for our duties. Those not convinced by this view can ignore this explanation in favor of the metaphysical fact that also explains the beliefs Benatar cites, namely: All interests are contingent upon existence. Unless an entity exists at some point, it cannot have any interests because, in the absence of an entity that exists at some point, there is no real subject for the interest. (In my view, the metaphysical fact grounds the moral principle but that is not critical to the ways in which they both better explain the four beliefs). I will now show how the above-mentioned metaphysical fact and moral principle explain the four beliefs that Benatar thinks are best explained by his asymmetry.

The important metaphysical fact is that all interests are contingent upon existence at some point since in the absence of an existent entity, we have no real subject for interests at all. Thus, there may be a duty to avoid bringing unhappy people into the world because those existent, interested people would be unhappy, presumably setting back their interests in happiness. But, there’s no corresponding duty to bring would-be-happy people into existence because “failing” in that “duty” would not cause anyone’s interests to be set back. Since interests are contingent upon existence, unhappy existent persons’ unhappiness counts, morally, and makes sense, metaphysically. That’s why we may have a duty to avoid bringing unhappy people into the world. In contrast, the hypothetical happiness of merely hypothetical entities, who never did exist and never will, does not count morally or make sense metaphysically, since there are no real subjects for said happiness. That’s why we have no duty to bring people into existence who would be happy, were they to exist. There are no real subjects for that duty. That explains the first belief.

12 Benatar, *op. cit.*, p.35.

13 Benatar, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-49.

14 Caspar Hare has argued that we ought not to confine our concerns to those who do or will exist (see “Voices from Another World: Must We Respect the Interests of People Who Do Not, and Will Never, Exist?” *Ethics* 117(3), 2007, pp. 498-523). I believe his view fails but for reasons irrelevant to this paper. I argue against this unusual view here and elsewhere (see “Existence: Who Needs It? The Non-Identity Problem and Merely Possible People,” *Bioethics*, forthcoming).

It may be strange to claim that one procreated in order to benefit one's child since the act of procreation is undertaken before there is any subject for whatever benefit one may have in mind. Having a child in order to benefit that very child may seem a conferral upon no one because interests are contingent upon existence. However, since the child, presumably, will eventually exist, many people actually think that it is not strange to claim that one procreates to benefit one's child. Still, if it is strange to make that sort of claim, it's because there seems no subject for the benefit. It may not, however, seem strange to say that one avoided having a child for the sake of that child's interests because that decision is made by imagining one's existent, suffering child and that existent, suffering person is someone with interests. Of course, once one decides not to have that child there again seems no one who has benefited from or been considered by that decision and that is why many think, contra Benatar's 2, above, that it actually does seem strange to say that one avoided having a child for the child's sake. Still, if it is not strange to refrain from procreating for the sake of the person that would exist, if procreated, it is because the person who would exist if you did procreate would be an existent suffering person, with interests that you have foreseeably (and unjustifiably) thwarted. We tend to think it wrong to deliberately create miserable people because we care about existent people and don't want them to have been deliberately created to suffer unduly. (We don't have similar views about the need to create people to benefit since there seems no one to suffer the cost of not having been created.) If we deliberately do procreate the miserable, we can foresee that our action will result in a real person's suffering and that gives us a reason to refrain from procreation in that case, for the sake of the foreseeable existent person. (We need not do an action in order for its foreseeable results to give us reason not to do that action.) When we foresee that procreation will result in an existent person's relentless suffering, it is the foreseeability of the existent person's suffering that gives us reason not to procreate, just as foreseeing that we would have to break a promise gives us reason not to make the promise for the sake of the person to whom we would have made, and broken, the promise.¹⁵ One might decide against procreating the miserable to comply with the norm that constrains the way we act toward interested beings for the sake of interested beings. In this way, the fact that interests are contingent upon existence explains the second belief.

One may regret bringing a child into existence for the sake of that child since, presumably, something about that interested being's existence is so terrible as to make you regret bringing that child into existence (for the child's sake). However, it is more difficult to understand regret for not bringing a child into existence for sake of that child since there is no real subject for that sort of regret. Since interests are contingent upon existence, we can't regret not doing something for the sake of a nonexistent entity since there is no real subject for that regret, but we can regret doing something for the sake of an existent entity since there is a subject for that regret. The fact that interests are contingent upon existence thus explains the third belief.

We may be sad for miserable people who live far from us since interested existent persons can be the subject of our feelings. Of course we are not similarly sad for non-existent people who would have been happy had they existed. There are no subjects for those sorts of feelings since, in the absence of existent entities, there is no one to

¹⁵ I thank David Boonin for this analogy.

feel sad for; there are no interested entities to care about.¹⁶ The fourth belief is therefore also explained by the fact that all interests are contingent upon existence.

Thus, the fact that existence is required for interests explains all that Benatar's asymmetry is supposed to explain and, in my view, the explanation it provides is simpler and more consistent with our ordinary moral and metaphysical views: it does not require us to deem existence always harmful (counterintuitive to many) and it does not require us to think that the absence of a negative sensory state is good even if no sensory being exists to enjoy its absence or even to simply exist in its absence (complicated). Instead, the explanation provided by the fact that existence is required for all interests is simple and intuitive: of course a non-existent entity cannot have interests because there is no real subject for any interests. No subject, no interests. Simple and intuitive.

For those who prefer to keep metaphysics out of ethics, here is how a common sense moral principle can explain the beliefs that Benatar's asymmetry is supposed to explain (and can do so more simply and in a manner more consistent with common moral views). The moral duty to avoid bringing unhappy people into the world, if it is, in fact, a duty, can only be based on our duties to those who will exist and suffer unduly. If we violate this duty, we will cause real people to suffer. We have no corresponding duty to bring happy people into existence because our duties are confined to those who do or will exist, not to those who could exist but will not. Not bringing happy people into existence harms no one because there is no real person to suffer nonexistence but bringing a miserable person into existence harms that real person.

Similarly, if it is strange to say that one procreated to benefit one's child, the strangeness is due to the fact that our duties to benefit are confined to those who do or will exist, making it odd to think of existence itself as a benefit conferred. It may not be equally strange to say that one refrained from having a child for the sake of the child's interests since if one did have a child, it would be a person to whom one had duties of beneficence. If that child's life would be devoid of value, having that child might foreseeably violate duties of beneficence toward that child. The foreseeability of the violation of our duties of beneficence to those who will exist if we do procreate serves as a reason for us not to procreate. Just as I don't make an existing person suffer because that would foreseeably result in my violation of my duties toward that (real) person, I don't create a miserable person because that would foreseeably result in my violation of my duties toward that (real) person.¹⁷ If the child's life would be fantastic, however, some may well think of themselves as having procreated in order to benefit that child with its fantastic life. This argues against the plausibility of the belief Benatar seeks to explain. If we accept the belief, however, we can explain it best, I think, by deeming it an intuition about conferring existence as a benefit, and our responsibility for the foreseeable results of our actions, that is explained by our views re-

16 Our views in these kinds of cases can be foreseen prospectively and experienced retrospectively. We can predict that we will be sad or regret causing (or having caused) or hearing about the suffering of real people but we won't be sad or have regrets about hypothetically possible entities that will never exist but would have been or would be happy had they existed.

17 See metaphysical explanation of this belief, above, for further clarification regarding how one can refrain from doing something for the sake of the person whose interests would be foreseeably set back by the act even though refraining from the act results in no one's interests being affected at all (with the exception of those already in existence whose interests may be affected by the decision to refrain from procreation).

garding the kind of entities toward whom we can have duties. That explains the first two beliefs.

Onto the third. We can regret bringing a child into existence for the sake of that child since that existing child is owed our beneficence and our bringing that child into existence may violate our duties of beneficence toward that child (see above). We cannot regret not bringing a child into existence for the sake of that very child since our duties are confined to those who do or will exist, leaving us with no reason to regret anything with respect to a non-existing merely hypothetical person.

Finally, we are sad for the distant miserable since we may have some duties of beneficence person who are far from us,¹⁸ and we therefore regret and may be sad about their misery. We are not similarly sad for people who would have been happy had they existed because we have no duties toward non-existing hypothetical persons, regardless of how happy “they” might have been were “they” to have been persons.

Since Benatar’s asymmetry relies on its unique explanatory power for its force, and that explanatory power has been met by what I take to be two more persuasive explanations of the beliefs the asymmetry allegedly explains, I see no reason to accept the asymmetry. Just as the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is someone for whom it is a deprivation, the absence of pain is not good unless there is someone for whom it is a benefit.¹⁹

Whereas Benatar’s *b* is true, his *a* is false; pleasure and pain are symmetrical: good or bad, respectively, only insofar as they affect interested entities.

Existence remains, then, what it has generally been thought to be: a mixed bag of benefits and burdens, generally deemed worthwhile so long as the burdens are outweighed, overridden, or relatively less important than the benefits. Thus, the denial of Benatar’s asymmetry refutes his claim that procreation is always wrong because one is always harmed by being forced out of blissful nonexistence into the mixed bag of existence. The alternative explanations of the beliefs do not, by themselves, tell us whether procreation is usually or always permissible but they do tell us that procreation is not always wrong due to the fact that existence is always a harm by virtue of the asymmetry between pleasure and pain. Whether existence is harmful because life is bad is a separate issue that I will address in the next section of this paper.

Benatar might claim that his asymmetry is not about persons at all but is, instead, about states of affairs. On this view, a world with no pain is a state of affairs that is intrinsically good but a world without pleasure is not a state of affairs that is intrinsically bad. Indeed, Benatar’s asymmetry is explicitly about states of affairs in the absence of interested parties. However, pleasure and pain are essentially interest-bound goods, good or bad only in virtue of the interested subjects that they affect.²⁰ In the absence of subjects, pleasure and pain are meaningless terms; there is no value in the uninhabited states of affairs that contain their “presence” or “absence.” Even if some goods, e.g. beauty, may be seen as intrinsically good regardless of the existence of interested beings, the same cannot be said regarding pleasure and pain. Sentience is implied by the very meaning of the terms pleasure and pain; they are *feelings*, impossible and meaningless in

18 Distance *per se* does not do away with our duties of beneficence even if it can sometimes substantially weaken or eradicate said duty if the distance poses practical or epistemic barriers to our beneficence or, on some views, if we have stronger duties to those within our social or political community and only weak duties to distant persons.

19 Please see endnote no. 1 on pages 36-37 below.

20 See Nagel’s argument to the effect that the very subjectivity of pleasure and pain is the source of their objective value. (Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. 158-162).

the absence of *feelers*. It is therefore no accident that Benatar's arguments in favor of his asymmetry speak of duties, interests, and regrets in reference to sentient beings (there being no other way to meaningfully talk about pleasure and pain). Even though Benatar's asymmetry seems to be about states of affairs, his arguments in favor of his asymmetry speak of pleasure and pain in reference to people and these arguments all fail once we note that all interests are contingent upon existence (at some point in time) and/or our duties are restricted to entities that exist at some point.

But, even if Benatar's asymmetry fails, we may still wonder about the general notion that it is more important to avoid pain than it is to acquire pleasure, or something along those lines. If this intuition, which is not all that uncommon, is correct, then it truly is always better not to come into existence since existence virtually always includes some suffering. But there seems no obvious reason for this asymmetrical intuition to be true, aside from the tendency of some toward risk aversion. Common life choices testify against the asymmetry between pain and pleasure: we cross busy streets, drive cars, ride bicycles, eat at restaurants, shake hands with strangers – sometimes even kiss them as a greeting. We accept risks in our pursuit of what we take to be of value and not just in order to avoid pain. The expression, "life is risk or nothing at all" implies that a bland, safe life is worse than the risk of misfortune, or at the very least no better. That's what many people seem to think, and, in the absence of evidence or argument to the contrary, seem entitled to continue to think.

II Does Life Really Stink?

The facts of life remain to be addressed. Benatar argues that life is, overall, objectively bad and that procreation is, therefore, wrong.²¹ Is life bad? Before we address that question, it is worth noting that in order for procreation to always be wrong due to life's badness, the badness must be bad enough to override the interests that existing people have in procreating.²² But I leave that aside for now and turn back to the assessment of life and the human condition.

Most people, though certainly very far from all, think their lives are well worth living and that they are relatively happy and well off,²³ despite the fact that all life includes significant suffering.²⁴ Benatar is well aware of this and attributes the common, positive subjective assessment of one's life's quality to what he takes to be the human tendency to accentuate the positive and unrealistically overlook the negative.²⁵ Benatar cites psychological studies showing the human tendency to forget or ignore one's life's negatives and adopt a rose-colored glasses perspective on one's life. There is also research showing that depressed people tend to have a more realistic view of their own abilities and their future prospects. Note that this research does not show that depressed people have a

21 Benatar, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-93.

22 See Rivka Weinberg, "Procreative Justice: A Contractualist Account," *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 16(4), October 2002, 405-425.

23 See Diener, Ed., Carol Diener, "Most People Are Happy," *Psychological Science* 7(3) 1996, pp. 181-185; David G. Meyers and Diener, Ed., "The Pursuit of Happiness," *Scientific American* 274(5), 1996, pp. 70-72; Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, and Willard L. Rodgers, *The Quality of American Life*, The Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1976, pp. 24-5; Margaret W. Matlin and David J. Stang, *The Pollyanna Principle: Selectivity in Language, Memory and Thought*, Schenkman Publishing Company, Cambridge, MA, 1978; pp. 146-7; among many others.

24 Some may dispute that but I think it would be very difficult to find someone who lived more than a few days or so yet experienced no significant suffering. In any case, for argument's sake, it is worth granting this point.

25 See Benatar, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-69.

more accurate view of reality, generally speaking, or of the human condition. Benatar argues that the tendency to focus on the good things in life (irrationally, in his view) is something of an adaptive preference, both psychologically and evolutionarily: we are alive, so we are highly motivated to put a good spin on it while we are stuck here; and a tendency towards accurate assessments of life would be naturally selected against since it would likely decrease reproduction and increase the likelihood of suicide.²⁶ He argues that life is, objectively, bad, which we would likely recognize were our perspectives not skewed by our Pollyanna tendencies and evolution's natural selection of unrealistic optimists.²⁷

Of course Benatar is right to note that it helps us cope to think that our lives are worth living or even good. But being unrealistic Pollyanna optimists does not, by itself, entail that the bad parts of life would decisively outweigh the good if considered from a more objective perspective.²⁸ One cannot simply dismiss the argument that subjective, positive assessments of life can be taken as evidence for life's goodness. One must wonder whether the perspectives of individual people must suffice for our assessment of the value of human life, yet from which other perspective can this assessment matter to us? More importantly, which other perspective can we possibly access? These questions make it hard to be persuaded by the view that life seems good to people but, from the objective perspective of the universe, is actually bad for them.²⁹ If life is bad *for* us, it seems like it must be bad *to* us. This is not because all value is inherently subjective but is, instead, because the perspective of ourselves and other people are the only ones available to us from which we can, in any meaningful way, conduct the evaluation of the value of human life.

The common preference for life is not analogous to standard adaptive preference cases wherein, for example, an oppressed woman expresses a preference for her second class social status. That woman's perspective might be skewed by her lack of other, better, viable options and we, on the outside, may be better positioned to understand this. Life, however, is something we are all stuck in (so long as we deem suicide a less attractive option, as most do) so there seems no "outside" position from which to assess the preference for human life. We are not only stuck in life, we are even more stuck, so to speak, in the confines of the perspectives of ourselves and other people, from which, to most, life usually seems worth living despite its challenges. Sometimes even *because* of its challenges.

In his 1999 Academy Award acceptance speech, the director Roberto Begnini enthusiastically and sincerely thanked his parents, "for the greatest gift of all: *poverty!*" The actress Cate Blanchet, whose adored father died suddenly when she was ten, "has called bereavement 'a strange gift.' In many essential ways....her father's death was the shadow that informed her brightness. 'It's chiaroscuro,' she said."³⁰ This sort of outlook is not limited to the film industry (though, as in all other things, we hear from them most because they get the most air time). The psychologist Victor Frankl famously did not regret his excruciating experience in the Nazi death camps because he felt that the experience enriched his understanding and appreciation of the meaning of life.³¹ One may argue that it is the benefits that are valued in these cases and not the pain that it took to acquire them but that is not how the value is described by the people in the examples above. They describe the pain itself not as an unfortunate yet necessary means to benefit but as itself a benefit. A very depressed and lonely friend of mine, to my great surprise, once said em-

26 Benatar, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-69.

27 Benatar, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-93.

28 I thank Paul Hurley for this point.

29 See Benatar, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-86.

30 John Lahr, "Disappearing Act," *The New Yorker*, February 2, 2007.

31 Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Hogger and Stoughton, 1971.

phatically, “I love life.” I laughed very hard at this and looked at him quizzically. He looked back at me, surprised at my obtuseness, and said, “Yes, of course I’m unhappy right now, but basically, I love life and have always loved life.”

Of course, this life affirming view is not the only way to perceive life. H.L. Mencken said, “How little it takes to make life unbearable: a pebble in the shoe, a cockroach in the spaghetti, a women’s laugh.” Now this (minus the misogyny) comes much closer to my life outlook but I see no vantage point from which to argue that my outlook is, “objectively,” or in some other authoritative sense, correct. Although life is treacherous, many people claim that suffering can be meaningful – even enjoyable, etc. From what vantage point can this claim be authoritatively denied? I don’t see any vantage point accessible to us that can claim this sort of authority.

The fact that suffering can be meaningful or valuable does not mean that we are morally permitted to inflict suffering on others,³² because we cannot rely on subjective interpretations to justify our (initially) pain-inducing action. If life was objectively bad for people or only pain-inducing then the fact that people may tend to retrospectively invest it with meaning and value might still not, by itself, make procreation morally permissible. But the fact remains that we have no perspective from which to judge that life is, objectively, bad. There are different ways of viewing and experiencing life, obviously. My point is not that most people find life worthwhile and therefore it likely is worthwhile. As we know, the ubiquity of a view is not conclusive evidence of its truth. Rather, my point is that among the different ways of experiencing or viewing life, no way is more authoritative or objective than another, nor has Benatar shown that one is. We therefore have no vantage point from which to conclude that the view that life is meaningful, worthwhile, or good is mistaken. We are forced to take people’s views at face value and most people claim to experience and consider life meaningful, worthwhile, and good. (Remarkable but there it is.)

I conclude, perhaps too simply, that people are strangely constituted:

But what a shining animal is man
 Who knows, when pain subsides, that is not that,
 For worse than that must follow – yet can write
 Music, can laugh, play tennis, even plan

– Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Sonnet CLXXI*³³

People may be the sort of creatures born to enjoy their suffering. If that is the case, it is still not clear that it is wrong to procreate, especially given our interests in procreation. Alternatively, life may be enjoyable or meaningful to all but the most deprived or depressed. In either case, it seems unwarranted to conclude that procreation is always wrong due to the badness of life. Life does seem bad to me and my melancholic kind³⁴ but that may just be us. So long as we have no way to prove the optimists wrong, so long as we are in the extreme minority,³⁵ and so long as people have a very strong interest in procreation, it

32 Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Hogger and Stoughton, 1971.

33 I thank David Benatar for raising this objection.

34 If the kind of melancholic outlook that I refer to here can be shown to be genetically transmitted, it may make procreation by the melancholic quite problematic indeed.

35 Although my point is that there is no authoritative or objective perspective from which to assess the value of human life, generally, if most people found life not worth living that would, in my view, count

seems unpromising to claim that procreation is always wrong due to life's inherent or "objective" badness.

III Death

Does the fact that we will die, and live most of our lives with this knowledge, make life tragic? "All our stories have sad endings. We all die in the last act."³⁶ According to The World Health Organization, about 56.6 million people died in 2001.³⁷ The sheer number of deaths as well as the ubiquity of premature death due to disease, war, and natural disasters, is cited by Benatar in partial support of his view that we exist in a world of suffering.³⁸ (Benatar has much evidence grounded in everyday life to this effect, though, so even if he is wrong about death's contribution to life's badness, the effect of taking death off his list might not be all that significant.) Does life contain too much death to be good? On its face, this seems eminently plausible. Death is bad, life is full of it and always ends in it, ergo life is bad.

However, more needs to be said in order for us to assess how the badness of death affects quality of life and the nature of human existence. On some existentialist views, death robs life of its meaning and purpose since all that we devote ourselves to necessarily ends (often abruptly, unexpectedly, and inconveniently) and comes to nothing. Yet Benatar does not commit himself to this existentialist conception of death's badness. Instead, he seems to take death as straightforwardly and simply bad. It might be instructive to hear more about what Benatar thinks makes death bad. Nowadays, many view death as bad because it deprives the person who died of continued (good) life. But if death is bad because it deprives us of continued life, does that not imply that life is good? Claiming that life is bad because we die can seem like claiming that a gourmet dinner was bad because it didn't last forever, so Benatar cannot be referring to the deprivation account of the badness of death in his listing death as something that makes life so terrible. Perhaps he is thinking of the loss of loved ones that death causes those still alive to suffer, though this loss is sometimes a gain (depending on how the person who dies would affect others if she continued to live instead). Finally, it is worth noting that it is also common to think that death infuses life with precious meaning precisely because it renders life finite and precarious. In order to assess the impact death has on human well-being, we must arrive at a clearer understanding of the nature and value of death. Only then can we decide how death affects life. As things stand, Benatar has not demonstrated that the bare fact of death renders life not worth living.

IV Suicide

If suicide is painless, it may offer us an easy way out of some of our procreative worries. We may think that if our children feel like existence is not a risk worth taking, or is plainly worse than nonexistence, then they can just kill themselves and be done with it. They can, in effect, undo what we have imposed upon them. But, as many have noted, suicide is difficult and not just because one tends to get used to living.³⁹ Suicide requires some skill, it can result in very unpleasant effects if it doesn't work out as planned (if you jump out the window and live, your life will likely be even worse than it

as an important reason against procreating (since we ought not, *ceteris paribus*, deliberately procreate the miserable).

36 Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other*, Ballantine Books, Random House, 1996, p. 119.

37 World Health Organization, *The World Health Report 2002* (Geneva: WHO: 2002), p. 186.

38 Benatar, *op. cit.*, 88-92.

39 See Benatar, *op. cit.*, pp. 211-220.

was before your tried, and failed, to end it), it forces one to knowingly face death, and it usually causes great suffering to those who might miss us or feel guilty for not having made us happy enough to want to stick around. Lastly, it is not clear that death is the equivalent of nonexistence. It likely comes awfully close but many view existence as irreversible. Once in, you can never really opt out: you may die but you still, arguably, exist as a subject of reference, you almost certainly have had some effect on existent entities, and what's left of you after you die will continue to inhabit the world, albeit as fertilizer or ash, etc. Given these considerations, we ought not to be so easily comforted by the idea that suicide can undo procreative errors.

V Conclusion

Given that most people not only do not regret being brought into existence but, to the contrary, are glad of it, I don't see how we can say that procreation is always wrong or always morally problematic due to life's badness *per se* or as compared with nonexistence. Life, while not quite the bowl of cherries the cheery seem to think, is (mysteriously) rather valued and enjoyed by most, even though, like all good things, it too comes to an end. So while I still think that life stinks, and is not worthwhile, I know of no argument to show that my view is somehow more "objectively" or "scientifically" correct. I am forced to conclude that procreation is not always morally wrong or problematic due to its objective or all-things-considered badness.⁴⁰

Endnote 1

Benatar argues that since there is an asymmetry between the absence of pain and pleasure, it follows that it is always better never to come into existence, as his diagram illustrates.

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 bad)

In support of the above-diagramed asymmetry, Benatar rejects the alternative diagram that replaces 3 (good) and 4 (not bad) with 3 (good), 4 (bad), because if the absence of pleasure in scenario B is bad, then we would have to regret the nonexistence of x, something we do not actually deem regrettable. I accept that claim (though many don't). Benatar also rejects the alternative diagram that labels 3 (not bad) and 4 (not good) because he thinks that incorrectly implies that avoiding bringing a pure sufferer into existence is not a good thing, but just a "not bad" one. Yet the real reason we deem avoiding bringing a pure sufferer into existence a good thing is because it allows us to avoid option no. 1 (bad), under scenario A, not because it enables us to fulfill Benatar's option 3 (good) under Scenario B. Avoiding the conception of a pure sufferer is good because it allows us to avoid harming the interests of a (future) person, namely, the person who would exist under option 1, Scenario A. This has nothing to do with

⁴⁰ I am very grateful and indebted to Jonathan Adler, Elizabeth Anderson, David Benatar, Jeanine Diller, Zev Gruman, Paul Hurley, Amy Kind, Thaddeus Metz, Suzanne Obdrzalek, Dion Scott-Kakures, Charles Young, the members of the Claremont Work-In-Progress Discussion Group, and the members of the Benatar Antinatalism Workshop for helpful comments and discussions.

Scenario B. We have no obligations to anyone in Scenario B because Scenario B does not include any interested entities.

The true Scenario B is different from any alternative that Benatar considers. The correct diagram replaces Benatar's 3 (good) and 4 (not bad), with 3 (neither good nor bad) and 4 (neither good nor bad):

Scenario A: <i>x</i> exists	Scenario B: <i>x</i> never exists
1. Presence of Pain (bad)	3. Absence of pain (neither good nor bad)
2. Presence of Pleasure (good)	4. Absence of pleasure (neither good nor bad)

According to my diagram, if *x* never exists, then the absence of pain and pleasure are neither good nor bad because the nonexistent *x* has no interests; pleasure and pain are neither good nor bad in the absence of any interested parties. It is only when *x* does exist, under Scenario A, that *x* has interests and, therefore, in Scenario A the presence of pain is bad and the presence of pleasure is good. As for the absence of pleasure and pain, symmetry reigns.