

## MISERABLE, MEANINGLESS LIVES AND UNWELCOME DEATHS

FRIDERIK KLAMPFER

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, Slovenia,  
friderik.klampfer@um.si

RESEARCH PAPER ▪ SUBMITTED: 12/9/2024 ▪ ACCEPTED: 1/12/2024

---

**Abstract:** David Benatar has been championing the cause of the overall badness of human lives since the turn of the century, most forcefully in his 2006 academic bestseller *Better Never to Have Been*. In his more recent book, *The Human Predicament* (OUP, 2017), he added some extra layers of dark paint to his sinister portrait of human destiny by arguing that our lives are not just miserable, but also insignificant, i.e. devoid of (cosmic) meaning and purpose. And yet, just like in *Better Never to Have Been*, he has once again shunned from taking what appears to be the next logical step from such revelation and concluding that a quick and painless death would be a relief and a blessing for every one of us. And yet, if human life is not only of poor quality but also mostly meaningless, how come death is not (more) welcome? If human life, or existence, is a problem and a burden, how come death, which ends it, is not a solution and a relief? In the paper, I take up this challenge and investigate whether Benatar’s particular blend of existential pessimism and cosmic nihilism can offer a plausible solution for it.

**Keywords:** quality of life, the meaning of life, life worth living, the badness of death

---

‘Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering –  
and it’s all over much too soon.’  
(Woody Allen)

### Introduction

David Benatar has been championing the cause of the overall badness of human lives since the turn of the century, most forcefully in his 2006 academic bestseller *Better Never to Have Been*. In his follow-up, *The Human Predicament* (2017), he added some extra layers of dark paint to his sinister portrait of human destiny by arguing that our lives are not just miserable, but also insignificant, i.e. devoid of any (cosmic) meaning and purpose. And yet, just like in *Better Never to Have Been*, he has once again shunned from taking what appears to be the direct implication of such an insight and concluding that a quick death would be a relief and a blessing for every one of us.

Most critics – and there has been no shortage of them – have focused on Benatar’s mixture of existential pessimism and anti-natalism, i.e. his view that coming into existence is always an overall harm and that for that reason alone, it is wrong to bring human beings into existence, and

whether what Benatar calls ‘basic axiological asymmetry’ between the goods and bads of (non-)existence provides sufficient support for a blend of these prima facie counterintuitive views. While I find these criticisms mostly accurate and convincing, in this paper, I want to focus on another, so far more or less neglected issue, namely whether avoiding and postponing one’s own death (as well as regretting, and grieving over, the death of those near and dear to us) can still make sense against the background of Benatar’s anti-natalist assumptions. More precisely, I’m interested in the following question: If human life is not only of poor quality but also mostly meaningless, how come death is not (more) welcome? In the paper, I take up this challenge and investigate whether Benatar’s particular blend of existential pessimism and cosmic nihilism can offer a plausible solution for it.

Here is the outline of the paper. I begin by stating what I label the Woody Allen Paradox. The said paradox arises for anyone who is deeply pessimistic about life but nevertheless nurtures a negative attitude towards death. I then contrast the account of the human predicament, presented and defended by Benatar in his 2006 bestseller *Better Never to Have Been* (which, for convenience, I term Human Predicament 1.0 or HP 1.0 for short), with a new, refreshed, and upgraded account of human destiny given in his more recent book, *The Human Predicament. Life’s Biggest Questions* (which I label Human Predicament 2.0 or HP 2.0). After that, I focus on what I consider the biggest challenge for Benatar’s uncompromising existential pessimism, namely his reluctance to draw any radical axiological and/or practical conclusions from it. More precisely, what is suspiciously absent from Benatar’s short list of rational responses to the recognition of HP 2.0 (the most prominent among them being the presumption against procreation), the acknowledgment of not just utter misery, but also insignificance of human lives, is indifference to one’s own (and other people’s) death(s). In the second part of the paper, I critically discuss Benatar’s reasons for rejecting death as a solution to human predicament and find them wanting. In Benatar’s glum universe, and despite his ingenious arguments to the contrary, death will remain more choice-worthy than continued life. Benatar, I conclude, has thus failed to solve the Woody Allen Paradox.

## **The Woody Allen Paradox**

The Woody Allen Paradox (WAP for short) about life arises for anyone who believes the following two propositions:<sup>1</sup>

- (i) Life is terrible.

And yet,

- (ii) we are not afforded enough life.

The conjunction of (i) and (ii) generates a puzzlement: How can it be rational to want for yourself more of the thing that you know fine well, or sincerely believe, is bad (for you)? Benatar seems to offer an elegant way out of this impasse. Not only do we want more life for ourselves even though life is bad, given that both alternatives to a longer miserable life, which everyone surprisingly longs for, namely death and immortality, are also pretty bad, Woody Allen’s

---

<sup>1</sup> In a more general form, WAP reads like this: ‘X is very bad and there is far too little X around.’ (Or, alternatively, ‘X is very bad and I miss X.’) I have formulated it as a paradox about the disvalue and length of (human) life.

seemingly paradoxical attitude turns out to be perfectly rational after all. Here, then, is Benatar's own version of WAP:

(i) Life is terrible.

But

(ii) so is death (hence, we shouldn't welcome or hasten it). And

(iii) so is immortality (hence, you better not wish for it).

Therefore,

(iv) it is perfectly rational to wish for more of it.

What makes Benatar's position so interesting, both theoretically and practically, is that he turns the usual truism about the value of life and the disvalue of death on its head. Life is terrible; and yet, it doesn't follow from this that death is good or any better than a miserable life for terminating, or putting an end to, it; on the contrary, death is pretty bad as well; but then, it also doesn't follow from the badness of death that immortality would be a good thing (all things considered). In other words, there is no fun in life and no escape from the trap of life in death. But there is also no comfort in the hope of an afterlife. Life is a heavy burden, but one that we cannot lay down, we are destined to carry it to the bitter end.

The commonplace is 'Life is good and (that's why) death is bad'. Sometimes, its corollary is defended, namely that '(When) life is bad, death is good.' Benatar, however, turns this upside down. We must admit, after having carefully considered, and weighed against one another, the good and the bad aspects of a typical human life,<sup>2</sup> that

(for almost every person P, P') life is (overall) very bad.

But then, so is P's death...

Benatar insists that both life and death can stink, and so death often won't be a (rationally) acceptable solution to the predicament of (unchosen/harmful) human existence. But can this be correct, because, intuitively, it cannot be?

Here is the seemingly inconsistent set of propositions, then.

From

(NE) Never existing is not bad.<sup>3</sup> and

(E) Existing is overall bad.

it follows that

---

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Harman (2008) presents a convincing case against this thesis, by arguing that while Benatar may make a solid case for believing our lives are much worse than we dare to think, he fails to show that they are overall bad. But I won't dwell on this. For the sake of the argument, let's simply grant that all human lives, without exception, are overall bad.

<sup>3</sup> This is probably the least controversial of Benatar's core premises. See, for instance, Luper (2017) for a defense of the view that never existing is neither good nor bad.

(CoE) Coming into existence is a net/an overall harm.

(a-N) Bringing into existence is (always) wrong.

And yet,

(CeE) Ceasing to exist is also bad. (And so, killing oneself or others is, in addition to being morally impermissible, also imprudent.)

Therefore,

(a-M) in most cases, instant death won't be preferable to continued life.

Unsurprisingly, both (E) and (a-N) have been vigorously criticized as not just counterintuitive, but also ungrounded. It is one thing to argue, as several critics (Harman 2009, DeGrazia 2010, Smuts 2013b, Metz 2011, Sušnik 2020b) have pointed out, that our lives are much worse on the whole than we think or that we'd be willing to concede, given that we appear to be biologically and/or culturally programmed towards optimism, and much harder to establish that our lives are bad on the whole and unavoidably so.

In this paper, however, I am more interested in why death is not a solution to the human predicament of an irreparably miserable and/or meaningless life, our common destiny. To facilitate the inquiry, I will simply acknowledge without questioning that coming into existence is always a harm, and that every one of us is being harmed merely by existing. Furthermore, I will also grant to Benatar that a life that is not worth starting may well be worth continuing. Just because it would have been better for each of us not to exist at all, it need not be better for each of us to cease to exist once we've already come into existence. In other words, anti-natalism need not entail pro-mortalism.<sup>4</sup> And yet, it is one thing to show the two unopposed and another to make a convincing case against pro-mortalism. I aim to show that in his attempt to block the inference from 'better-never-to-have-been' to 'better-no-longer-to-be', Benatar hugely overstates the badness of death. Within the confines of Benatar's universe (or B-universe, for short), i.e. on the assumption that coming into existence is always a harm and bringing into existence is always wrong, there is simply no way around the conclusion that death is a more certain bet than continued life.

### **From Human Predicament 1.0 to Human Predicament 2.0**

These, then, are the elements that jointly constitute, or amount to, the 2006 version of the human predicament, or HP 1.0:

- (i) Life is overall bad and not worth having, but so is death.
- (ii) Death is no less bad for ending a bad (miserable, awful) life. Or
- (iii) Death is always (prima facie) bad at least for one reason, namely because it annihilates one.

Hence,

- (iv) Death is no (simple, costless, rationally acceptable) solution to the human predicament.

---

<sup>4</sup> I am borrowing this term from McGregor & Sullivan-Bissett (2012). Pro-mortalism, as I will use the term, is the view that at most moments in life, death is more choice-worthy than continued life.

- (v) Once you are born, there is nothing you can do to pull yourself out of the misery – we, humans, are screwed.

A genuine predicament, rather than a hard choice or dilemma, arises from the fact that there is no easy or elegant, let alone cost-free, escape from the misery of an imposed, unchosen miserable and meaningless life:

Some might be inclined to respond that if life is so bad and so meaningless, then surely death should be welcome. However, that does not follow. First, *the fact that we die is part of the reason that it matters that life lacks meaning. It is one fact that gives rise to the yearning for meaning. If we were not temporally limited in this way, then meaning would be less important to us.* Our eternality would probably diminish, if not obviate, the need to leave a mark or serve some purpose. Second, the reason the human predicament really is a predicament is that we are caught between a rock and a hard place. Life is bad, but so is death. *Death is bad not only because of the future good of which it deprives one, but also because it annihilates one.* The upshot of this is that *even when death is not bad, all things considered—because it does not deprive one of any good, or at least not of enough good to outweigh the future bad— it is nonetheless very bad because of the annihilation factor. The only time that death is not bad at all is when one has been annihilated before (biological) death by, for example, being reduced to some advanced state of dementia or a vegetative condition. In such circumstances, the person is annihilated— or even dies in the psychological sense—before he dies in the biological sense* (Benatar 2017, 28, my emphasis)

How does Benatar's most recent book, *The Human Predicament. A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions* complement, or alter this initial picture? How does an already morbid account of the human condition change when we enter concerns about our life's lack of meaning into the existential equation?

The human predicament has a number of interlocking features. First, human life, as is the case with all life, has utterly no meaning from the cosmic perspective. It is not part of a grand design and serves no greater purpose but is instead a product of blind evolution. There are explanations of how our species arose, but there are no reasons for our existence. Humans evolved and, in time, the species will become extinct. The universe was indifferent to our coming, and it will be indifferent to our going. (Obviously, it will be indifferent not because it has attitudes and simply does not care about us, but because it has no attitudes at all.) All the great human achievements— the buildings, monuments, roads, machines, knowledge, arts— will crumble, erode, or vanish. Some remnants may remain, but only until the earth itself is destroyed. It will be as if we never were. This is true of the species and, a fortiori, of its individual members. (ibid., 200)

Cosmic meaning (understood as a lasting and far-ranging impact on the world), we are told, is off the menu. There is ample terrestrial meaning, however, but it comes cheap (since all it takes for my life to have this kind of meaning is for it to matter, i.e. make a positive difference to someone or something). More precisely, life can be meaningful (sub specie hominis) if it positively impacts someone else's life or if it serves one of my grand purposes or goals; it can be meaningful (sub specie communitatis) if I'm loved and cherished by my family, and it can be meaningful (sub specie humanitatis), though it much more rarely is, if like Alan Turing I help shorten or win the war or make an important scientific breakthrough (in the way Alexander Fleming did with his discovery of penicillin).

Here is one way of thinking that the meaning component might tip the existential scale to the side of continued life and away from instant death. With the opportunity to secure some terrestrial meaning in our lives, thereby relieving some of the heavy existential burden, an extra source of prudential value becomes salient to us. And since, on Benatar's account, at least two types of terrestrial meaning, individual and collective, can be generated with relatively little effort, it will be true of almost everyone that they could increase the prudential value of their lives in that future of which an instant death would have otherwise deprived them. For those chosen few, who can secure the third, humanity type of terrestrial meaning in their lives, the prospects for a better (or less bad) future – as well as an overall better – life are even brighter. Here, then, is how the evaluative landscape might change against the background of Human Predicament 2.0 – death now scores worse (because in addition to annihilating us and depriving our lives of any possible cosmic meaning, it also deprives us of some amount of terrestrial meaning in the rest of our lives); life, on the other hand, now scores better (because its prudential, or personal, value can be, and in fact most often will be, enhanced by bits and pieces of the everyday terrestrial meaning). As a result, the meaning component promises to change the existential scoreboard in favour of continued life and against premature death.

Here, then, is a somewhat strengthened case for Benatar's Human Predicament Thesis, its improved and updated HP 2.0 version:

- (i) Life is overall bad and mostly (though not entirely) meaningless.
- (ii) But death is also bad because it (a) annihilates one and (b) prevents one from attaining both cosmic meaning and a certain amount of terrestrial meaning in that very future of which it deprives one.

Hence,

- (iii) Death makes things worse for the one who dies, not better.
- (iv) Death is (still very much) part of the human predicament, not a solution for it.

### ***Is (cosmic) meaning inconsequential?***

On the face of it, the HP 2.0 version helps Benatar strengthen his case against pro-mortalism, the idea that quick and painless death might provide an elegant solution to the predicament of a miserable and meaningless human existence. But is this impression correct? Or is meaning instead orthogonal, or inconsequential, to the correct assessment of a choice between continued life and imminent death? So far, we have assumed, alongside Benatar, that death prevents our life from acquiring cosmic meaning and significance and that it is this meaning-preventing effect that renders all deaths bad (to a significant degree). But why assume this is the case? The argument Benatar offers for this claim is anything but sound. A careful reconstruction shows why and where his reasoning breaks down. Let me begin by reconstructing his argument in a more structured form.

- (1) Unlike some forms of terrestrial meaning, cosmic meaning is unattainable to human beings due to our temporal and spatial limitations.
- (2) Death sets temporal limits on all our pursuits.
- (3) To attain cosmic meaning, we would need to live forever. Or

- (3') Immortality is a necessary (but not also sufficient) condition for living a cosmically meaningful life.
- (4) Cosmic meaning is worth wanting and having. Or
- (4') It would be good to be able to secure this kind of significance (in addition to other kinds of significance that we can more realistically hope for) for our lives.
- (5) It is therefore rational to yearn for cosmic meaning and to regret (and despair and agonize over) the fact that it isn't, and will never be, present in, or instantiated by, our lives.
- (6) Every death is bad for the one who dies because it prevents one from attaining cosmic meaning and earlier deaths are worse for the deceased than later ones because they prevent them from attaining some additional terrestrial meaning.

Therefore,

- (7) Death is part of our human predicament, not a solution to it.

Let me start by saying that I find premises (4), (5) and (6) all problematic to some degree. For lack of space, I'll take a closer look just at the last one. But before I do, let me pre-empt my discussion with a caveat. My disagreements with Benatar – here as elsewhere – stem from deeper conceptual and methodological disagreements regarding appropriate standards of evaluation. Benatar insists that to evaluate human life as such, rather than determine how good, or exemplary, a life human beings can reasonably expect to have, we need to judge it by standards that are not relative to the human race. If we wanted to assess the quality of human life 'from a truly objective perspective', Benatar contends, we should move beyond human standards and take the 'point of view of the universe'. (Benatar 2006, 81) And considering human lives from that point of view, i.e. from the point of view of the most perfect life logically possible, we end up with a radically different picture: we come to realise how pathetically bad all human lives actually are. All one needs is a reminder that, given our cognitive limitations, there will always be many more things that we don't know or understand than those that we do know and understand. If we judge our epistemic performance by the standards that take our cognitive and storage limitations into account, we will do much better than if we judge it by some idealized standard, or in light of all the things that could, in principle, be known. The negative existential score for humans owes a lot to the use of such overly demanding standards of evaluation. For if lack of knowledge (even of knowledge that we are unaware of) is simply equated with ignorance and ignorance is in itself bad, then our lives will always contain way more epistemic bads than goods. This raises the following question about cosmic meaning – if, by definition, cosmic meaning is attainable only by immortal beings, and humans are by their very design mortal, then why assess their lives by the standards which only make sense when applied to very different kinds of beings or to a very different world?

Consider an analogy from sport. Eliud Kipchoge has just run the first full marathon ever in under two hours. Amid euphoria and congratulations, a sports reporter starts to belittle Kipchoge's ground-breaking achievement. Agreed, he writes in his popular and widely read newspaper column, Kipchoge has just run the fastest marathon time ever (recorded), i.e. he's run the marathon distance faster than any human being before. But to know the true significance of his achievement, we would need to compare it to what would be possible for beings with almost no

physical and mental limitations characteristic of human beings, a cheetah, a sled dog, a pronghorn antelope or a camel.<sup>5</sup> And judged by this standard, Kipchoge's achievement is mediocre at best. Would anyone take such a complaint seriously? Would anyone in the right mind suggest that Kipchoge better retire, since his accomplishments pale into insignificance when compared to those of the aforementioned animals? Kipchoge's 1:59:41 is a brilliant result and an admirable accomplishment even though it would take a camel only one hour, a sled dog an hour and nineteen minutes, and a pronghorn antelope a meagre forty-five minutes to put the same distance behind.<sup>6</sup>

Be that as it may, even if one grants Benatar a more general point about proper standards of evaluation, we should still resist the claim that cosmic meaning, so defined, is a reasonable goal to set and pursue for any kind of being, mortal or not. If cosmic meaning is a salient option for immortal creatures alone, it will be, in principle, unattainable to mortal human beings. Given this, it is neither something worth wanting for oneself nor something the absence of which from one's life is worth despairing over. After all, why care that the vast universe is indifferent not just to our spatially and temporally limited pursuits but also to whether we have ever existed or not, or that from the point of view of eternity, even the most formidable and lasting human achievements will sooner or later (re)turn to dust, leaving no trace behind?<sup>7</sup> There is no meaning *of* life (as a whole), there is only meaning(s) *in* life, and one's life is meaningful to the extent that it is spent planning and executing meaningful (that is, worthwhile) activities and forming and maintaining meaningful (that is, worthwhile) relationships, where an activity or relationship is meaningful if it is worth doing or having either for its own sake or for the sake of something else that is worth doing or having.<sup>8</sup>

Let's suppose, however, for the sake of argument, that death prevents our life from acquiring cosmic meaning and that this forms part of the explanation of why it is always (to some extent) bad to die. Would this help Benatar resist the inference from anti-natalism to pro-mortalism? Not necessarily. The problem is that while it may explain why death is always bad for the one who dies, all deaths will have this bad-making feature no matter their exact timing – an earlier death no more than a later one. But if that's the case, then a later death is no worse (at least not for that very reason) than an earlier one and there is no good reason (of that kind) to try to postpone it. It may be rational or not to complain over the fact that we are mortal(s) and that, as mortal creatures, cosmic meaning necessarily eludes us; it cannot, however, count against choosing to die earlier rather than later. In other words, it is the fact that we are mortal creatures that renders cosmic meaning unattainable to us; it is not, as Benatar mistakenly implies, dying at any

---

<sup>5</sup> These are apparently the fastest and the most enduring animals, if Google Search is to be trusted.

<sup>6</sup> An appeal to 'the highest logically possible standards' in the assessment of human lives is not just unwarranted, Benatar also employs it selectively, if not outright inconsistently. He is adamant that we cannot objectively assess the quality of human lives, and correctly answer the question of whether any human life is worth starting, unless we apply those standards. But when he comes to discuss whether any existent human lives are worth continuing, he silently replaces them with much less demanding, human-friendly standards. Why human life must qualify as good enough by the highest logically possible standards to be worth starting but will qualify as worth continuing as long as it is judged good enough by standards relative to, and adjusted for, our imperfect, fallible race, we are never told. Even if it makes sense to set those bars at different heights, why set them so far apart?

<sup>7</sup> One notable opposing voice is Weinberg (2021).

<sup>8</sup> This kind of account of the meaning *of* life as a function of the meaning *in* life is fairly popular. It is advanced and defended, in one form or another, in Wolf (2010), Metz (2013), and Smuts (2013a). I have defended my own version of it in Klampfer (2012).



particular time and place that ultimately prevents us from attaining it. The distinction may be subtle but is nevertheless important. For a preference for continued life over instant death to be rational against the background of HP 2.0, a later and an earlier death would have to differ concerning the impact they have on cosmic meaning. In that regard, however, the two are indistinguishable. It may be true that death at any time deprives us of cosmic meaning, provided there is such a thing, and it is worth having. But it is by no means true that an earlier death deprives us of more cosmic meaning than a later one or that, in the case of earlier deaths, this deprivation takes place earlier and is, therefore, somehow worse. Consequently, while death as such may be bad for that very reason, an earlier death cannot be worse for that reason than a later one. But if so, then cosmic meaning cannot tip the balance in favour of continued life and against instant death (or our indifference to it), and we can simply discard it from the existential equation for its normative irrelevance.<sup>9</sup>

Cosmic meaning, then, won't make the tiniest bit of a difference to the value, or choice-worthiness, of later as opposed to earlier deaths, or of staying alive versus dying now. For it to make a real difference to whether one will be better or worse off dead or alive, either a longer life would have to be more cosmically meaningful than a shorter one, or it would have to be true that by postponing death, one somehow keeps the potential for cosmic meaning alive, whereas the choice of death squanders that potential once and for all. However, it is neither true that a longer life is more cosmically meaningful than a shorter one, nor is it true that by choosing continued life over immediate death, one keeps the odds of, or the prospects for, cosmic meaning alive, since every such choice is eo ipso a choice between a longer and a shorter life (rather than between life and death) and the former is no better suited to secure cosmic meaning for our life than the latter.

Let's, then, set cosmic meaning aside and turn our attention to terrestrial meanings. Could a similarly powerful objection be raised against the relevance of terrestrial meaning to the existential equation?

### ***Difficult value and easy meaning***

Whether cosmic meaning or significance is worth wanting and having in our lives or not, death, by shortening those lives, also deprives them of some portion of terrestrial meaning that was, at least in principle, attainable to them. The earlier the death, the more opportunity to secure terrestrial meaning, and as a result, the more terrestrial meaning will be lost by dying. Whether we conceive of well-being and meaning as two independent sources of (prudential) value in, or

---

<sup>9</sup> That death is a bad thing because it prevents our lives from attaining cosmic meaning, may be a good reason for not starting a life (which one knows will inevitably end in death) or not. What I simply fail to see, however, is how, in light of the above, it can also be a good reason for continuing with it once it has started, given that the exact timing of death makes no difference to how much cosmic meaning we can secure for ourselves in it. So even if one were to grant to Benatar that after entering the meaning variable into the existential equation, the overall value of a typical human life will plummet, or even fall below the threshold that separates lives worth continuing from those that are not, it still won't help him avoid the pro-mortalist conclusion that the only rational response to the recognition of the truth of HP 2.0 is, if not suicide, then at least some sort of indifference to (the exact timing of) one's death. From the point of view of cosmic meaning, it may be rational to regret one's mortality, but it cannot be rational to prefer continued existence over instant death at any moment in life. Here, Benatar's error lies once more in contrasting mortal life with eternal life, when the only realistic comparison classes are relatively shorter and longer lives.

of, life, or just two sides of the same coin, well-being and meaning are clearly interconnected.<sup>10</sup> Lives that are both good and meaningful (or bad and meaningless) are more common than lives that are good but meaningless or bad and meaningful. Meaningless lives can nevertheless be valuable, either intrinsically or prudentially. Meaning is also connected, in a limited sense, to the quality of life. If by quality of life we mean how well life is going for one, then of the two lives, the one meaningful and the other meaningless, the former is clearly better and the latter worse, other things being equal. If, on the other hand, by quality of life we mean subjective, felt quality, then the connection becomes more intricate – an objectively meaningless life can be of good subjective quality, insofar as the subject does not care about (the lack of) meaning or mistakenly takes his life to be meaningful when in fact it is not. On the other hand, when people perceive their lives to be meaningless, whether they objectively are such or not, this typically adversely affects the felt quality of their lives.

Given all this, and most of it is uncontroversial, one would expect terrestrial meaning to typically enhance the personal (or prudential) value of one's life. And since death typically prevents one from securing at least some small portion of terrestrial meaning that lay in the future, which death now would deprive one of, death will typically be bad. How bad, though? There is reason to think not bad enough to raise concern. First, the fact that terrestrial meaning is abundant and easy to get makes one wonder how valuable it truly is. Most examples Benatar gives suggest a significant overlap between terrestrial meanings and instrumental valuables. If that's correct and what gives our lives terrestrial meaning is nothing over and above what helps us pursue our goals and realize our plans, then their value will typically be derivative, conditional and small. Furthermore, while there may be ample opportunity for terrestrial meaning in one's life, that meaning itself should be just as elusive and uncertain as (o)the(r) good things in life, provided the quality-of-life argument is sound. According to that argument, the positive value of, say, our friendships is easily offset by the negative value of their inevitable dissolutions, typically followed by long periods of negative sentiments.<sup>11</sup> There is no reason to assume, then, that the same fragile and short-lived friendships (not to mention other kinds of value and/or meaning-generating activities and relationships, group belongings and identities) will provide a stable and continuous source of terrestrial meaning.

---

<sup>10</sup> Benatar discusses their interconnections in chapter 4 of HP, entitled *The Quality of Life*. It is uncontroversial that for Benatar, meaning, at least of the lower kind, is rife and so filling one's life with meaning looks like a relatively easy task. What is less clear is whether well-being is entirely different in that respect in the sense that good things in life are hard to get and/or hard to keep once you've got them, or whether this is only true of the more valuable and lasting ones, whereas simple and fleeting pleasures, on the other hand, are plentiful and up for grabs, or whether he holds that there is in fact no shortage of good things in most people's lives, but rather what makes lives overall bad instead are the said asymmetries stemming from their different natures and/or patterns of distribution.

<sup>11</sup> Friendships can, and often do, dissolve naturally and without hard feelings, of course. But when they do, their contribution to the overall value and/or quality of life won't be negative. Furthermore, to properly assess whether the life we live is good or bad for us, we should avoid double counting – friendships will typically make our life better for us, i.e. enhance the value it has for us, but if they can accomplish this in two ways, by either directly adding their intrinsic value to the overall value of our life or by generating (terrestrial) meaning in our life, only one of those contributions should enter the existential equation. What is unlikely to happen, but should nevertheless be ruled out in principle, is for a particular friendship (or some other intrinsically valuable relationship or activity) to secure terrestrial meaning in life while at the same time reducing, for instance, due to the betrayal of trust that caused its break-up, the overall value and/or quality of that life. Whether it is the same or different kinds of things that make our lives better and more meaningful, it will be hard to motivate the view that the same thing can have opposite effects on one and the other, i.e. simultaneously generate both meaning and disvalue, or both value and meaninglessness.

Being a pessimist about the quality of human life, it appears, also commits the anti-natalist to similar pessimism about the availability and salience of terrestrial meaning.

Surprisingly, Benatar denies this. The quality of life, he insists, is an objective matter, largely unaffected by how one judges it. The same, however, is not true of the meaning of life. This issue is important to resolve, because if the meaning of life, unlike the quality of life, has a subjective component to it, what I consider my life to be, full of meaning or lacking meaning altogether, will at least partly determine whether my life is meaningful to me or not and to what degree. This, in turn, will directly impact the threshold for lives worth continuing – because while I can be mistaken both about whether my life as a whole is good or bad for me and about whether my survival, i.e. continued existence, is good or bad for me (or at least whether it rises above or falls below the threshold for lives worth continuing), I cannot equally be mistaken about whether my life is meaningful or not since my believing that it is renders it so. The meaning component, then, promises to turn the tables on the existential scoreboard in two ways – by adding another source of value to life, another reason for appreciating life, in the form of terrestrial meaning, which, we are being told, is abundant, and by incorporating people’s optimism about their life’s meaning, however unfounded it may be, as a positive force working towards a good life.

But this solution won’t work either. Notice that first of all, the positive impact of meaning on the personal value of life or well-being is only secured at the cost of reducing the scope of Benatar’s argument against pro-mortalism – only if some variant of subjectivism about meaning is correct and the belief in the meaning of life, true or false, is (partly) constitutive of the meaning of life itself, will the latter be easy to get and abundant throughout life of most humans, or at least the optimistic half. And only on those two assumptions will death be bad in virtue of preventing our lives from acquiring lots of terrestrial meaning. Whereas anti-natalism boasts, as one of its main virtues, universal scope, anti-pro-mortalism owes its plausibility to a substantive and, mildly put, controversial account of meaning. Furthermore, allowing for subjectivism about meaning while rejecting subjectivism about the quality of life strikes me as both arbitrary and at odds with the account that Benatar gives of why people systematically overestimate the quality of their lives. Optimism bias does not simply skew our assessment in favour of a positive judgment, it also *makes us feel much better about our lives*, i.e. enhances their *felt quality*. As a result, we are happier, more content, more positive about our present life, and more hopeful about the future. Why isn’t this constitutive of, or contributive to, the overall quality of life in the same way a belief in the meaningfulness of one’s life is constitutive of that life’s meaning? Sure, there is nothing self-evident about subjectivism regarding the quality of life, and so it calls for justification. But so does subjectivism about the meaning of, or in, life. What we should not do is *assume* the truth of the latter while at the same time *demanding proof* of the former.

Let me summarize. The meaning component from HP 2.0 did not significantly alter the score on Benatar’s existential scoreboard. Meaning in its many forms promises to enhance the value of human lives, but its most valuable form, cosmic meaning, is in principle unattainable to us, mortal beings, and its most proliferating form, terrestrial meaning, cannot but improve the value of our life in most insignificant ways and to a most insignificant degree, and even this bet is not safe to make.

## Rational response(s) to (the recognition of) HP 2.0

What would be a correct, or the only correct, response to (the recognition of) human predicament, HP 2.0? Upon recognition that one is caught in a real human predicament, it may seem reasonable to: (a) resent parents for bringing you into existence; (b) feel generalized anger at the situation (i.e. anger not directed against anyone in particular); (c) become indifferent to the prospect of one's death; (d) take your own life, i.e. commit suicide; (e) kill others to end their misery; (f) stop procreating; (g) be unduly optimistic, live in denial; (h) be a pragmatic, compartmentalized optimist; (i) be a pragmatic pessimist.

I have already mentioned, in passing, option (f), Benatar's (in)famous anti-natalist stance. Of the remaining eight options, Benatar's favourite choice is pragmatic pessimism, which he contrasts with a version of pragmatic optimism, another strong contender for a fitting strategy:

This strategy, which I call pragmatic pessimism, also enables one to cope. Like pragmatic optimism, it also attempts to mitigate rather than exacerbate the human predicament. However, it is preferable to pragmatic optimism because it retains an unequivocal recognition of the predicament by not compartmentalizing it to coexist along with optimism. It allows for *distractions* from reality, but not *denials* of it. It makes one's life less bad than it would be if one allowed the predicament to overwhelm one to the point where one was perpetually gloomy and dysfunctional, although it is also compatible with moments or periods of despair, protest, or rage about being forced to accept the unacceptable. (Benatar 2017, 211)

I have doubts about the internal coherence and psychological viability of 'pragmatic pessimism' as described above. But let me instead turn my attention to a different issue. What is suspiciously absent from Benatar's short list of options, is a new, updated, or revised attitude to one's death. After all, if our life is not simply more or less miserable, but both miserable *and* meaningless, and unavoidably so, how can we still justify our predominantly negative attitude to (our and other people's) death? If all human life without exception is both miserable and meaningless, why is death, which puts an end to all that misery and insignificance, not more welcome? To Benatar's credit, he does discuss option (d), rationality and morality of suicide in detail. But since it is reasonable to assume that moral considerations will typically interfere with an assessment of the suitability of suicide to save us from the Human Predicament 2.0, I will instead pose the challenge to Benatar in more morally neutral terms: Given that according to basic evaluative asymmetry and the bad quality of life argument no human life is good enough to be worth starting, how, if at all, can one avoid a further pro-mortalist conclusion that no human life is good enough to be worth continuing and hence that for most of us, if not all, immediate death will be more choice-worthy than continued life?<sup>12</sup> My aim, however, is to show that anti-natalism implies pro-mortalism, rather than defend any particular conception of pro-mortalist mindset. If I am right about the pro-mortal implications of anti-natalism, the minimal calibration of our attitudes to death that it will call for is the adoption of some kind of Epicurean equanimity or indifference to one's death.

---

<sup>12</sup> I am phrasing this in terms of 'choice-worthiness' because it conveniently covers both 'preferability' and 'reasonability'. The way I am using this notion, to say that in Benatar's universe death is more choice-worthy than continued life, is to say that death is preferable to continued life, or, if you prefer the reason-talk, that weightier reasons speak in favour of dying now than in favour of staying alive for a bit longer. Admittedly, this is an oversimplification, but nothing should hang on it.

## **The ineradicable, impossible-to-compensate badness of death**<sup>13</sup>

Benatar feels the pulling force of anti-natalism towards pro-mortalism, but does his best to resist it: ‘Some might wonder how that (namely death being part of the human predicament rather than a solution to it, FK) could be so if, as I have argued, the human predicament includes the poor quality of human life and our cosmic insignificance. If living a life of that kind is a predicament, why is the end of that life not deliverance from the predicament?’ (ibid.,94)

He refuses to side with Epicurus who famously counselled people to adopt an attitude of indifference towards their death, since death can never be bad for the one who dies. Or, as he famously put it: ‘Death is nothing to us.’ On the contrary, he builds his case against pro-mortalism around the idea that death is seriously bad for the one who dies and, as such, (almost) never choice-worthy. While Benatar does express sympathies for deprivation accounts of the badness of death, and even acknowledges that ‘it is possible for the quality of life, irrespective of which view of wellbeing one has, to be (or to become) so bad that death is better than continued life’ (Benatar 2017, 102), and that ‘in some circumstances, it is less bad to die than to continue living’ (ibid., 103) he is quick to add that ‘we should not assume that there has to be only one reason why death is bad for the being who dies. It is entirely possible that death is bad for more than one reason. It could be that the badness of death is, at least sometimes, overdetermined.’ (ibid.) What else, then, makes death bad for the one who dies besides the fact that it deprives him or her of future goods (which won’t often be the case in B-universe)?

### ***The Annihilation Account of the badness of death***

To the above question, Benatar offers the following answer:

*death is bad at least in part because it involves the annihilation of the being who dies. Thus, even when continued life would not have deprived the person who dies of any other goods, it would still be bad because it involved the annihilation of the being who dies. That is to say, death would still be an evil, albeit the lesser of two evils. My view is that death is an evil and thus part of the human predicament. It really makes no difference to that view whether we see the loss of one’s life as the deprivation of an additional good or as a further loss over and above any deprivations it may cause. That further loss is the loss of the being who dies. (ibid., 110, my emphasis)*

Here, then, is Benatar’s reply to a pro-mortalist challenge in a nutshell: The human predicament is a real predicament in the sense that there is no easy or cost-free solution to it; death involves the annihilation of the self and this makes it an extremely costly ‘solution’, one that only deepens rather than meliorates the predicament, i.e. not a real solution at all. Plus, with death, we cease to be, but we do not thereby cease to be cosmically insignificant. Rather than being a cure for the malaise that is one’s miserable and insignificant life, death makes things worse. Whatever other reasons there may be for looking forward to one’s death, hefty reasons pull in the other direction, making death only slightly better than continued life, if at all.

What are we to make of all this? I’ll start with a lesser concern and then move on to a more unsettling worry. Here is my minor complaint: even if due to its annihilating and meaning-preventing effect all deaths are bad for the ones who die, as Benatar suggests, the

---

<sup>13</sup> The bad(ness) of death is first discussed, alongside suicide, in chapter 7 of *Better Never to Have Been*. It is taken up again, in light of a new set of considerations, in chapter 5 of *Human Predicament*.

intrinsic badness of death could easily be, and in Benatar's universe most likely will be, overridden, or outweighed, both by the overall badness of present life that it terminates and the overall badness of future life that it thereby prevents.<sup>14</sup> A more serious worry concerns the evidential value of the annihilation account. Death is not seriously bad in B-universe unless we can plausibly conceive of the annihilation of the self as something over and above the termination of the subject's life – yet every such non-reductive account will be ontologically suspect.

What considerations could possibly support the claim that annihilation of one's self is an independent bad-making feature of death, over and above other bad-making features of death, such as deprivation of future goods and prevention of meaning? Here are some candidates.

- (a) Death brings a complete and irreversible end to the being from whose prudential perspective we are considering whether there is a deprivation. Annihilation of a being may not be the *worst* of fates for that being, but it certainly seems to involve a very significant loss — namely, loss of the self;
- (b) A lot of people find the prospect of annihilation, their ceasing to exist, equally if not more disturbing and unsettling as being deprived of future goods;
- (c) Under the right circumstances, many people would (share Limbo Man's) prefer(ence) to delay annihilation by entering the state of coma. Insofar as they do share the preference, this seems to be because they think that annihilation is a bad that one does best to delay (since in terms of secured future goods, the two options, an uninterrupted and an interrupted life, are equivalent);
- (d) the view that death is bad partly because of the annihilation it brings about is also supported by its implications. It implies, for instance, that even when one's future contains *no* good, death is nonetheless bad in an important way for the person who dies, even if perhaps not bad all things considered. In such circumstances, death is the lesser of two evils rather than actually being no bad at all;
- (e) The annihilation account better explains our intuitions in cases of overdetermination of someone's death than the rival accounts, namely the deprivation account and McMahan's time-relative interest account;
- (f) Not every death will be bad for this reason – some deaths don't annihilate a person, because something else did it already, like in cases of dementia or irreversible coma.

Let me start my critique by noticing that (c) lends little, if any, support to the independence claim. Some people may prefer to delay their annihilation, but that by itself shows neither that their preference is rational nor that it is always prudentially rational to delay or postpone one's death out of fear of annihilation. Whether it is better for one to stay in existence or go out of it, should not depend on what attitude one happens to adopt towards her own obliteration, a positive or a negative one, but rather on whether the added period of life would fall above or below of

---

<sup>14</sup> I owe this insight to Raz (2001) who makes the same point about the intrinsic value of life – even if life as such, in itself were good, the prevalence of bad things over good things *in* life could still make life overall bad for the subject of life.

what John Broome (2004) calls ‘the neutral level of temporal wellbeing’, the line demarcating lives that are worth continuing and those that aren’t. This, admittedly, is a relatively minor point.

A more significant worry concerns certain problematic features and implications of the annihilation account of the badness of death, foremost its timing, as laid out in point (e) above. Benatar seems to suggest that in cases where one’s death is overdetermined, such as Jeff McMahan’s Cavalry officer case (McMahan 2013), only the annihilation account of the badness of death gets things right; what makes the Cavalry officer’s death by Ivan’s bullet bad and tragic even though it deprives him of very little if anything at all (since he would have died anyway by the second bullet fired a few seconds later from Boris’ gun) is the fact that it has annihilated him. Admittedly, death by Boris’ bullet fired a few seconds later would have annihilated him instead had he not already been annihilated by Ivan’s deadly shot, but it is not *the timing of annihilation* which makes his death by Ivan’s bullet bad, but rather *the fact* that he was killed and thereby annihilated. If, however, the timing of annihilation doesn’t really matter, since even though being annihilated at an earlier stage in life can be worse for one than being annihilated at a later stage (and not just because the early death would deprive one of more existence than the later one), annihilation is always a seriously bad-making feature of one’s death *no matter its timing*, then given that death is unavoidable anyway, why not simply discount this feature for practical purposes? After all, the choice we ultimately face is never between living and dying, but rather between dying now and dying later – but if there is no difference in this respect between any pair of deaths, why not simply remove the annihilating effect from the equation? If my death at  $t$  and death at  $t+1$  are bad for me for the same reason, namely because they annihilate me, then death at  $t+1$  cannot be worse than death at  $t$  in that respect. The annihilation account, or so it seems, can account well for why death is always bad for the one who dies, but not also for why, *ceteris paribus*, an earlier death is so much worse than a later one. To answer this question, one would need to explain what makes ceasing to exist earlier worse than ceasing to exist later. The only explanation I can think of for why the later one ceases to exist, the better for her is that the longer one exists, the better (for her). This, in turn, presupposes that existence as such, in itself is good (for the existent) and that more of it is always better (for her) than less of it. Note, however, that not only is this assumption implausible (existence, rather than being intrinsically good, is only good as a precondition for good things, that is to say, instrumentally and not intrinsically), but it is also not available to Benatar, as it directly contradicts core premises of his anti-natalism.

Let’s summarize. Even if we grant Benatar the points he makes about annihilation being an independent bad-making feature, they still fail to support the conclusion that death is just another bad thing in one’s already miserable life and, hence, no solution to the said human predicament. For, as Benatar himself admits, it only establishes that death is always, even in those rare cases when it doesn’t deprive one of any future goods, bad in at least one respect, namely in that it annihilates or obliterates the self. And yet, given that it will always protect us against (experiencing) the predominance of bad things in our future, and given that annihilation is just one bad-making feature among many that the prudential assessment of death must take into account, what matters, in the end, is the all-things-considered judgment and such judgment should clearly come out in favour of death over continuing with a miserable life. Benatar himself seems to implicitly acknowledge this much when he talks about annihilation being a ‘bad feature of death even when death is the lesser of two evils’ (2017, 109) but then fails to draw the only logical conclusion from it.

This brings us to my next objection. If death is (at least sometimes) the lesser of two evils, if it is (sometimes) better for one to cease to exist than to continue existing, how come it is not (at least there and then) the more rational choice for her? And if, in those circumstances, death is indeed the more rational choice, and hence more choice-worthy than continued life, how come it is then not a solution to the problem of a miserable and meaningless life? Furthermore, how come those circumstances are not more common in B-universe? After all, there is little hope that one's future life will significantly improve and that the preponderance of bad things over good things will be magically reversed. On the contrary, the older we get the more likely that we will never see such a turn of fortune. If this is all there is to Benatar's argument for why it doesn't follow from the fact that life is miserable and meaningless, that we should welcome quick and painless death, then we must conclude that he had failed to make a convincing case for regret of both our birth and our death. For it seems that while death is always bad, even intrinsically bad, in at least one respect, namely in that it annihilates the subject of life, causes us to cease to exist, it might still be an acceptable solution for human predicament either because ceasing to exist is not bad for the deceased at all or because it is most choice-worthy for her *all things considered*.

### ***Whence an interest in continuing to exist?***

The game isn't over yet, though. The main reason why the inhabitants of a B-universe would want to choose continued life over immediate death, i.e. preferred to stay alive, is that death is always bad – and seriously so – for the one who dies and, as such, inevitably makes one's life worse, not better. I have already discussed and rejected the suggestion that death is seriously bad because it annihilates one, i.e. causes her to cease to exist. After all, one could argue that non-existence cannot be bad, and certainly cannot be worse than existence, as it is a crucial premise in Benatar's argument for anti-natalism that it is better not to exist than to exist. This, however, overlooks an important difference between non-existence before birth and non-existence after death and the possibility that while life may not be worth starting, it may nevertheless be worth continuing. The reason is that we may develop an interest in continued life even though life was never in our interest to start, just as we may develop an interest in the plot of a movie despite it being so bad that it would have been better for us never to start watching. Death could be bad because, and whenever, it thwarts our interest in continued life.

The problem with this analogy is that while we may want to see the rest of the film, this desire will not amount to, or constitute, a justifying reason for action.<sup>15</sup> I may want to see it played out, and start placing bets on possible outcomes, in which case I will become invested in the movie, but whether watching it to the end *is in my interest or not*, will not depend on my actual desires, but rather on whether watching this movie to the end is good for me or not, on whether I will be better off watching it to the end or leaving the theatre halfway through. The same goes for the wish to continue with a life that it would have been better for me not to start. I may become invested in my life, and as a result, start forming future-oriented desires and planning my future. But once again, what ultimately determines whether continued living is in my interest or not, will

---

<sup>15</sup> Here I assume, uncontroversially, as far as I can tell, that even on a Humean, purely instrumentalist account of practical rationality, a desire to want to watch a very bad movie to the bitter end is not itself a reason for watching that movie to the bitter end unless it is also true that getting what I want for myself is good for me irrespective of whether I want it or not. (More precisely, it is at best a motivating reason, but clearly not a justifying one.) And it is far from clear that watching a very bad movie to the end is good for me, whether I want to watch it to the end or not. Locus classicus for the distinction between motivating and justifying reasons for action is Smith (1994).



not depend on what I want, but rather on whether staying alive is good for me or not, i.e. whether I will be better off staying alive or dying.

We can reach the same conclusion about other candidates for the evidence in support of the anti-mortalist ‘it is better for me to stay alive than die’: my fear of death, my love of life, my conditional goals,<sup>16</sup> my future-oriented desires, my enjoyment of life, my hopes (to do better in the future), and so on. None of them alone nor in conjunction with others amount to either an objective interest in staying alive or to continued life being more choice-worthy than death. Unless, of course, they can be independently shown to be a, if not the most, rational attitude – that death is indeed fearsome, that life is indeed worthy of love, that fulfilling my future-oriented desires is indeed good for me, and so on.

So far, I have deliberately set aside two promising candidates for the ground of an interest in staying alive. They are a) intrinsic personal value of life and b) good things in life that don’t necessarily enhance the value of life for me. Let me first probe the idea of life/existence having intrinsic personal value. Many will no doubt find this idea not only familiar, but also attractive – there are things in life and about life that make life valuable, but apart from that, life as such is also valuable, irrespective of its contents. In other words, the value of life/existence as such is not neutral, but positive. One implication of this view is that the longer your life the better both for (the value of) your life and yourself. The said connection between the length and the value of life provides everyone with a good prudential reason to want to stay alive – the longer you stay alive, the longer your life; the longer your life, the better it is/will be (for you); and the better your life (for you), the better off you are/will be.

The first, minor problem with this intuitively plausible suggestion is that it confuses well-being with good life. The thought that whatever makes my life good (for me) is also good for me, and that whatever makes it bad (for me) is also bad for me, comes naturally to one’s mind. It is, nevertheless, wrong. The two are indeed closely related, but not co-extensional. For instance, both death and those bad things that occur after my death can adversely affect the overall value of my life, but not also my well-being. At least according to some interpretations of what Epicurus was after, death can devalue life by shortening it, but it cannot thereby make us worse off for the simple reason that we no longer are and that one has to be before one can be (made) worse off. And if it is rational to worry only about things that make us worse off, but not necessarily also about those things that make our life as a whole worse (because it is not rational to be concerned with one’s life as a whole), it may be rational to simply ignore death. Or become indifferent to it.<sup>17</sup>

The second problem with the suggestion that we could ground an interest in continued life in the intrinsic personal value of life, is even more intricate. Benatar can’t use this as a premise in his argument since the argument from basic evaluative asymmetry commits him to the exact opposite, namely the badness of existence as such. Benatar is quite explicit about the connection

---

<sup>16</sup> By conditional goals I mean goals the accomplishment of which at some future time *t* is conditional on me being alive at *t*. Familiar examples include seeing my kids grow up, marry, and have kids, living to see Putin dethroned and tried for war crimes, living to see Palestinians and Israelis cohabit peacefully, and the like, as opposed to wishing the best possible life for my kids, wanting the war in Ukraine to end with the defeat and withdrawal of Russian troops, or wishing for a peaceful cohabitation of Palestinians and Israelis in the Middle East.

<sup>17</sup> I’ll return to the question of whether indifference to one’s own death can be implemented in practice and how in the last section.

between the length and the value of life – the longer the sentient life, he says, the worse it will, in all likelihood, be. What about the default, intrinsic value of existence? Doesn't basic evaluative asymmetry leave room for the idea that existence as such is valuable? Not really – what makes non-existence better than existence by default is the fact that only the former, but not also the latter contains no bads. At least that much is true, given Benatar's assumptions, of pre-birth non-existence where no one is deprived of the likely goods of existence, and consequently, the absence of those goods is not considered bad. The picture changes, however, when we assess non-existence after death, since now someone, namely the deceased, would appear to be deprived of those likely future goods that won't materialize if she dies, and so their absence will no longer be value-neutral. In other words, only the pre-birth non-existence contains no bads, but not also the post-mortem one.

What we get, then, is an almost perfect parallel with the opposition between life worth living (in the sense of starting) and life worth living (in the sense of continuing) – existence is intrinsically worse than non-existence (before birth), but not also necessarily worse than non-existence after death. As a consequence, in a one-on-one comparison, non-existence no longer wins over existence by default. However, all that this means is that we must look at other good- and bad-making features of every single life, foremost its content and duration (plus, possibly, shape) before we can make that call, since from the point of view of their intrinsic value, existence and non-existence (after death) don't differ at all. That's a Pyrrhic victory for Benatar, however, because we are back to page one, asking how in Benatar's universe where ultimately all life is utterly miserable and meaningless, continued life could ever be in anyone's interest, and he hasn't provided an illuminating answer to this question beyond a vague suggestion that some, but not all lives will be worth continuing.<sup>18</sup>

To wrap up. Most people prefer a longer life to a shorter life. And they prefer their life to be extended, made longer in the future, by postponing the moment of death, rather than in the past, by moving their date of birth forward (the so-called 'temporal location preference'). Yet it doesn't follow from this that they necessarily believe a longer life to be per se better than a shorter one (if they had, they wouldn't have been prepared to trade a longer life that ends tomorrow for a shorter one that will go on for two more years). They may instead want a future life for themselves either because they expect many good things to happen to them in that future or because they like the life they now live with an eye to that future, which, however, would be degraded or robbed of its meaning if it turned out that they have no future. Does all this speak in my favour or Benatar's? What it suggests, at the minimum, is that there may be other reasons for wanting to continue living besides the positive value of bare existence or the belief that a longer life is, per se, better than a shorter one. I may want to see my grandchildren being born and growing up, and this may trump the reasons, however hefty, for wanting my life terminated asap, namely that my life (and everyone else's) sucks. On the other hand, this kind of reasoning is not salient on Benatar's terms, since, in B-universe, it is not rational to want to see your grandchildren being born. What if they are already born, though? Would it not be rational for you to look forward to seeing them grow up and prosper, and would that not provide you with sufficient reason for wanting to stay alive to go on with your life despite it being utterly miserable and meaningless? Again, and at the risk of repeating myself – it may, but only on the assumption

---

<sup>18</sup> This vagueness is one of few, but nevertheless disappointing features of Benatar's account. We never get anything but a hint of where he would draw the line demarcating lives worth continuing and lives not worth continuing and what percentage of lives would fall in each category.

that something like the desire-fulfilment theory of well-being is correct and having your desires fulfilled is unconditionally good for you.<sup>19</sup> But is this assumption plausible? Intuitively, it isn't since it is committed to treating all desires alike – in B-universe, however, where desires are more often frustrated than fulfilled, it would be more rational for me to want my grandkids to grow up and prosper than to want to *see* that happen, where only the latter, but not the former entails the desire for staying alive. We may grant Benatar that just as one may have selfish reasons to continue with a life that was not worth starting (as long as it is worth continuing), one may also have good – both self- and other-regarding – reasons for wanting to see the lives of their close ones continue despite one's firm conviction that they were not worth starting – but, again, only on the condition that they are worth continuing, which in B-universe they are unlikely to be.

### *The value of life and well-being*

The annihilation account of the (intrinsic) badness of death relied on another suspicious distinction, namely one between living a life and existing. So let's consider next whether it is consistent to maintain that even though a typical human life will be a heavy burden and a serious harm to its subject, mere existence could still benefit us, or at least benefit us to a sufficient degree to make it rational to hold onto it and try to preserve it. Initially, the distinction between life and existence looks anything but promising. It feels artificial and ad hoc. It sounds odd to say that my death, besides ending my life, also annihilates me. And it feels arbitrary because ever since his first formulation and defence of anti-natalism in a paper, Benatar has always used 'existence' as a synonym for 'life' – it is existence, not life, which is bad, it is coming into existence, not creating life, which is (always) a harm, and it is bringing into existence, not giving one a life, which is (always) wrong.

Although, a similar view, sometimes called the Termination Thesis (TT), is fairly<sup>20</sup> popular (Feldman 2000):

(TT) When we die, we cease to exist. Or

(TT\*) To die is to cease to exist.<sup>21</sup>

So perhaps I have misinterpreted Benatar. The annihilation account does not rely on an odd-bod metaphysics, where existence is something over and above life, irreducible to it, or even valuable for completely different reasons. Rather, the account offers another reason for staying alive, for continuing to exist, one that is independent of what the future might hold for one. As such, it promises to explain what makes death always and unconditionally bad, something that the deprivation account cannot do. But since death can be (intrinsically) bad for more than one reason, or in virtue of more than one feature, we can treat the two accounts as complementary, not rival.

Death, we are now being told, is bad because it annihilates, and obliterates one. The main reason why it is bad to die is that when we die, we cease to exist. This, as we have seen cannot be the whole story, however. What we would need to know is why it is so bad for me to cease to exist

---

<sup>19</sup> Which means giving up the universal scope of anti-natalism to block the pro-mortalist inference.

<sup>20</sup> For a dissenting voice, however, see Scheffler (2013).

<sup>21</sup> Before death, we are, and after death, we are not. Death is that event, or point in time, before which we existed and after which we no longer do.

that it makes continuing to exist choice-worthy for me in B-universe even if coming into existence was not. There are two possible answers to this question – that by living longer I will live (a) better (life) or that living/existing longer will make me better off. Benatar, I conjecture, will struggle to accommodate both.

It might look as if the two, my life and me, can be easily brought together – if by living longer, i.e. staying alive, or continuing to exist, I won't live (a) better (life), then it will not be better for me to stay alive, i.e. I will not be better off living longer, staying alive, or continuing to exist. This impression is mistaken, however, since as we have seen, not everything that affects my life also affects me, and not everything that affects the value of my life also affects my well-being (and vice versa).

Here, then, is an argument that builds on the distinction between me and my life, or between what is good for me and what is good for my life (as a whole), that may present something of a challenge for Benatar's opposition against pro-mortalism:

- (1) Well-being is not to be mistaken for, or confused with, the value of life.
- (2) Well-being is determined by events, whereas the value of life is determined by facts.
- (3) Things that affect one's well-being are not necessarily the same as things that affect the value of one's life.<sup>22</sup>
- (4) For a thing (to be able) to affect one's well-being, it must (be able to) change one's bodily or mental states (for better or worse).
- (5) Death typically shortens one's life and thereby affects its overall value.
- (6) Death, however, cannot change one's bodily or mental states (for better or worse).

Therefore,

- (7) Death is one of those things that typically affect the overall value of one's life, but not also one's well-being, i.e. it cannot harm one.
- (8) It is rational to care only for things (events) that affect your well-being, but not also for things that affect the overall value (or shape or duration) of your life. (Caring for life as a whole is optional, not required.)

Hence,

- (9) it is not rational to care about one's death.
- (10) Indifference to death, unlike indifference to (other) events (during our lifetime) that make us worse off, either directly or indirectly, by affecting the felt quality of our life, is a perfectly rational, albeit impractical attitude.

Can Benatar block this Epicurean challenge and if so, how?<sup>23</sup> Let's start with the good news. Commitment to a distinction between well-being and life, between how well *I* am doing and how well *my life* is going, would allow him to hold that *even when my life is going terribly bad, I could be doing relatively well*. And as long as *I* am doing relatively well, I have no reason to welcome death, even if death would put an end to *my miserable life*. On the other hand, at least

---

<sup>22</sup> Some things do both, but not all of them do. Lung cancer, for example, both reduces the quality and the length of one's life and makes one worse off, whereas death only affects the length and thereby the overall value of life.

<sup>23</sup> The Epicurean challenge was inspired by Raz (2001), Broome (2004) and Sušnik (2020a).

one of Benatar's two arguments for why death is no solution to human predicament seems to lose most of its appeal once the distinction between one's well-being and the value of one's life is drawn. According to the meaning-preventing account of the intrinsic badness of death, what death prevents from attaining cosmic meaning is our life, not ourselves. So, in line with (8), why care about the fact that death will render our lives meaningless? The following explanation comes to mind – if what renders life meaningless is not death as a one-time event, but rather mortality, i.e. the fact that our life will inevitably end in death, or death as a standing, immutable fact about human life, then life would be meaningless and hence of lesser prudential value throughout its entire course and not just when, or after, death occurs – and when it can no longer affect our well-being. Benatar, as we have seen, is quite explicit about this – it is *the fact that we die* that makes our lives cosmically meaningless, and not death as a temporally located, one-time event. But this reply creates a problem for Benatar that should be familiar by now – the meaning-preventing account of the badness of death cannot explain why a later death would be less bad than, and hence preferable to, an earlier one. Furthermore, unless we care about cosmic meaning – and I argued that we shouldn't – and are distraught at the thought that it is, in principle, unattainable to us, this will not be one of those facts of life which, in addition to making life less attractive, also make us worse off.

Will a rational constraint on caring under (8) similarly rule out caring about one's annihilation? That depends on what one's annihilation primarily affects – the value of one's life, one's well-being or both? Given that death annihilates *me*, rather than my life, the annihilation account of the badness of death might seem well-positioned to construe death as an event that, whatever else it may do, makes one worse off. This, however, is in direct contradiction with premise (7) and it won't convince the Epicureans who would want to insist that to *be worse off*, you first must *be*, and death ensures that you no longer are. Hence just as you can be indifferent to the fact that death will reduce the overall value of your life, because you need not care about the overall value of your life (or for that matter its shape or size), you can also be indifferent to the fact that death will obliterate you, since you need not care about things that cannot make you worse off and death is one of those things.

But why am I not worse off when death obliterates me or deprives me of a large chunk of future good life? As opposed to, say, contracting a terminal disease that I will never find out about, and which will kill me in my sleep? Why is it that being deprived of future life and the goods it contains does not make me worse off while contracting a terminal illness does? More precisely, given that we are primarily interested in the personal or prudential value of one's life, i.e. in how good that life is *for the one who lives it*, how come death can *reduce the value of my life for me*, but not at the same time *make me worse off*? If something I have or possess loses its value due to some event, would we not agree that this event has made me worse off by depreciating my possessions? Do I really have to first value and cherish this thing and be distraught at the realization that it is less valuable than before, or that what was valuable before no longer is, for this loss of value to affect my well-being? This looks awful like a bad version of subjectivism about wellbeing. Take, as an example, the dissolution of a marriage. Suppose one of the good things about my life, one of those things that made my life good for me, was my long and stable marriage. But now, suppose it turns out that, in fact, my wife has been unhappy in this relationship for a while and finally decided to leave me. The Epicurean seems to be committed to the view that while the dissolution of marriage would be directly bad for my life, i.e. would make *my life as a whole* worse, it would only be bad *for me* indirectly, and on the condition that the

dissolution made me sad, angry, depressed or whatever. So where exactly does that extra room come from, the distance between what affects *the value of my life for me* and what affects *my well-being*? Intuitively, at least, if, due to the dissolution of my marriage, my life made a turn *for the worse*, then *my life is now worse for me* and consequently, *I am worse off than before*. And so perhaps the distinction we drew between one's life and oneself will not help us solve the puzzle of death after all, as it begins to look more and more like a distinction without a difference.

### **The impracticality of 'indifference to death'**

If the above analysis is correct and our reasoning sound, then embracing anti-natalism also commits one to pro-mortalism, or at least to some kind of Epicurean equanimity towards one's death. Benatar must admit that death cannot harm us, not because we are no longer there when it arrives, but because, by annihilating us and/or depriving us of some portion of future life, it cannot make us worse off – neither is existence intrinsically good for me nor is a longer life better for me than a shorter one (but rather the other way round). As a result, we should become indifferent to whether and when we die, and placid about the death of other people. But what would that mean? Is that even possible? And if conceivable, is it psychologically sustainable? How can it possibly be practiced, given the predominantly future-oriented nature of our pursuits? And if the attitude of indifference to death is impossible to convert to practice, if it cannot possibly govern our daily pursuits, isn't then pragmatic pessimism, Benatar's favourite, clearly superior to it?

On the other hand, if equanimity to death and, indirectly, to life as we know it, is highly impractical, doesn't that make our human predicament even worse than it would have been if we let ourselves be guided by the principles of pragmatic pessimism? To answer these questions, we would first need to become clear on what life would be like for an Epicurean with a taste of her own medicine.<sup>24</sup> Suppose anything and only that which thwarts our desires is bad for us, i.e. assume the truth of something like a desire-fulfilment account of personal good or well-being. Death is then typically bad for the one who dies because, and only when, it thwarts her desires. Given that for Epicureans death is nothing to the one who dies, i.e. can neither harm nor benefit one, they would need to limit the catalogue of desires to those that cannot be thwarted by death. Those desires are of three main kinds: escape desires, independent desires, and conditional desires. The Epicureans, thus, can still have and act on desires that give them reasons to do things in life. The problem is that this solution comes at a high price – to maintain their unconcern about dying, they must avoid any reason whatsoever for not dying. In other words, they are capable of maintaining indifference to death only insofar as they have now become indifferent to life. For in avoiding all aspirations that can be thwarted by death, Epicureans, but also anti-natalists-turned-pro-mortalists, must avoid all desires that can give them a reason for living. Such a life is conceivable but fairly unattractive. So perhaps they should go back to their existential scoreboard after all and rewrite it from scratch.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> In this rather brief sketch, I rely heavily on Luper-Foy (1987).

<sup>25</sup> Here is another idea from Joseph Raz (2001) that I didn't have time to develop. There are certain goods in life, such as having an ice cream, taking a walk, finding out who the fictional murderer in a crime novel is, and so on, that don't necessarily make our life better nor do they make us better off. Accordingly, I could prefer to stay alive (over dying now) to secure, enjoy or experience those goods, even if it is true that by staying alive and living longer I won't live a better life or be better off and so strictly speaking it would not be irrational for me to end it as soon as possible.

## Conclusion

In the paper, I have argued that in his zeal to construe a genuine, i.e. inescapable human predicament, Benatar has himself fallen prey to a sort of theoretical predicament of its own. He wants to assert all of the following: (i) Taking into account both the good and the bad aspects of a person's life, most lives are overall very bad and insofar not worth having, plus cosmically insignificant. (ii) Given (i), we ought to stop procreating. And yet, to everyone's surprise, (iii) the truth of (i) doesn't compel us to stop caring about whether we live or die and/or doing our best to avoid death. I tried to show that Benatar hasn't made a convincing case for (iii). Nor has he, by failing to show how it can be rational to (want to) stay alive even though life is utterly miserable and meaningless, resolved the Woody Allen Paradox. We cannot subscribe to his blend of existential pessimism and cosmic nihilism and simply continue meandering through life, steering as far away from death, as before.

## References

- Benatar, D. (2006): *Better Never to Have Been. The Harm of Coming into Existence*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Benatar, D. (2012): Every conceivable harm: a further defence of anti-natalism, *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 31(1), 128–164.
- Benatar, D. (2017): *The Human Predicament. A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Benatar, D. (2013): Still better never to have been: a reply to (more) of my critics, *Journal of Ethics*, 17, 121–151.
- Benatar, D. & Wasserman, D. (2015): *Debating Procreation: Is It Wrong to Reproduce?*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bradley, B. (2015a): Existential terror. *The Journal of Ethics*, 19, 409–418.
- Bradley, B. (2015b): How Should We Feel About Death?, *Philosophical Papers*, 44(1), 1–14.
- Broome, J. (2004): *Weighing Lives*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Draper, K. (2012): Death and Rational Emotion, in Bradley B. – Feldman F. – Johansson J. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 297–316.
- Feldman, F. (2000): The termination thesis, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 24(1), 98–115.
- DeGrazia, D. (2010): Is it wrong to impose the harms of human life? A reply to Benatar, *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 31(4), 317–331.
- Harman, E. (2009): Critical study: David Benatar: Better Never to Have Been, *Nous*, 43(4), 776–785.
- Klampfer, F. (2012). Eksistencialni obup in smisel življenja (engl. Existential Despair and the Meaning of Life), *Analiza: časopis za kritično misel*, 16(4), 5–53.

Luper, S. (2017): Never existing, *Mortality*, 23(2), 1–11. DOI: 10.1080/13576275.2017.1332581.

Luper-Foy, S. (1987): Annihilation, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 37(148), 233–252. Reprinted in Fischer J. M. (ed.) (1993) *The Metaphysics of Death*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 269–290.

McGregor, R. & Sullivan-Bissett, E. (2012): Better no longer to be, *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 31(1); 55–68.

McMahan, J. (2013): Causing people to exist and saving people’s lives, *Journal of Ethics*, 17(1–2), 5–35.

Metz, T. (2013): *Meaning in Life*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Metz, T. (2011): Are Lives Worth Creating?, *Philosophical Papers*, 40(2), 233–255.

Raz, J. (2001): The value of staying alive, in: *Value, Respect, and Attachment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 77–123.

Scheffler, S. (2013): *Death and the Afterlife*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Smith, M. A. (1994): *The Moral Problem*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Smuts, A. (2013a): The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 51(4), 536–562.

Smuts, A. (2013b): To Be or Never to Have Been: Anti-Natalism and a Life Worth Living, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 17(4); 711–729.

Sušnik, M. (2020a): Death as a fact of life: a perspective on the badness of death, *Mortality*, 27(3), 322–335. DOI: 10.1080/13576275.2020.1865293

Sušnik, M. (2020b): Why would very bad lives be worth continuing?, *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 39(3), 285–295. DOI: 10.1080/02580136.2020.1809122

Weinberg, R. (2021): Ultimate Meaning: We Don’t Have It, We Can’t Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad, *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 1(1), 1–22. DOI:10.35995/jci01010004.

Wolf, S. (2010): *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

---