

Contemporary Anti-Natalism, Featuring Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been*

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1. Introduction

Anti-natalism is the view that procreation is invariably wrong to some degree and is often all things considered impermissible. The variant of anti-natalism that has interested philosophers in the past 15 years or so includes a claim about why it is morally problematic, namely, that potential procreators owe a duty to the individual who would have been created not to create her, as opposed to already existent people who would be wronged by her creation.¹ Contemporary anti-natalism is fascinating and important for requiring sophisticated reflection on the evaluative question of how to judge the worthwhileness of lives and on the normative one of what basic duties entail for the creation of new lives.²

Before the mid-1970s, English-speaking philosophers by and large accepted utilitarian answers to these questions, maintaining that a worthwhile life is one with a large net sum of (perhaps, higher) pleasures relative to pains, and that, roughly, one morally ought to promote such lives. Contemporary anti-natalists reject at least one of these utilitarian implications; their views should be seen as part of the flowering of anti-utilitarian value theory. First, contemporary anti-natalists often maintain that whether a life is worthwhile is not merely a function of a sufficiently high aggregate of positive and negative magnitudes. Some of them maintain that a single episode of badness, if it were large enough in absolute terms, would render life not worth living, regardless of the amount of goodness exhibited elsewhere in the life;³ others hold that the value of well-being is personal, rather than impersonal, in the sense that pleasure provides a reason for one who already exists to experience it, but does not provide a reason to create a 'container person', in John Rawls' influential phrase, who would then experience it. Second, contemporary anti-natalists tend to hold a deontological conception of morality, according to which agents, say, must observe the rights of individuals to control their own lives, or may not treat others' dignity merely as a means.

Notice that these kinds of principles transcend utilitarianism not merely in its positive variant, but also in its negative one. Negative utilitarianism is the view that one's sole basic duty is to minimize pain, where positive goods such as pleasure have no moral weight. Negative utilitarianism is well-known for entailing anti-natalism as well

1 For an instance of the latter view, see Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968).

2 Note that the latter question, of how to act, is not for all anti-natalists based on how one answers the former question, of how to evaluate a life.

3 Where the prospect of death might be such a bad!

as pro-mortalism,⁴ the view that it is often prudent for individuals to kill themselves and often right for them to kill others, even without their consent. It pretty clearly has these implications if one can kill oneself or others painlessly, but probably does so even if there would be terror beforehand; for there would be terror regardless of when death comes, and if death were to come sooner rather than later, then additional bads that would have been expected in the course of a life would be nipped in the bud. As counterintuitive as the doctrine of anti-natalism might itself be, contemporary anti-natalists typically seek to defend it without appealing to principles, such as negative utilitarianism, that have (otherwise) absurd implications such as pro-mortalism. They aim to show that although it is wrong to procreate, perhaps because it would be better never to create new lives, it does not follow that, once a person exists, it would be better for her to die, or that one may rightly end others' (perhaps undesirable) existence against their will.

In short, contemporary anti-natalists aim to show that the balance of what is currently deemed moral common-sense among professional philosophers goes in their favour. They claim to be teasing out the unexpected anti-natal implications of principles that are widely held by academic ethicists, who tend not to be utilitarian these days. Roughly, then, I view the challenge posed by contemporary anti-natalists this way: if you are not a utilitarian (or at least if you are a deontologist), then you must, on pain of unreasonableness, hold the view that it is nearly always all things considered impermissible to procreate.

In the rest of this essay, I discuss several salient and philosophically interesting respects in which anti-natalists, including several contributors to this issue of the South African Journal of Philosophy, have sought to execute this general argumentative strategy and ways they have been questioned. I aim to provide a bird's-eye view of the current debate and some of the directions in which it should go.

2. Benatar and His Critics

The most influential anti-natalist currently writing is David Benatar, a South African moral philosopher who published his first anti-natal statement in 1997,⁵ and then followed it up with a book-length defence in 2006.⁶ Many of the contributors to this symposium address Benatar's argumentation, to which Benatar replies at the end. As is becoming fairly well known, Benatar makes two distinct arguments for contemporary anti-natalism, an 'extreme' rationale according to which procreation would wrong the one created if and because she were expected to suffer as little as a pin-prick, regardless of the amount of good she would have in her life, and a more 'moderate' rationale according to which, given a more familiar aggregative approach to evaluating life, the expected amount of good is not sufficiently high when compared to the expected amount of bad. I discuss these in turn.

The extreme position is called the 'asymmetry argument' because it appeals to purported differences in the way we evaluate desirable and undesirable conditions, depending on whether we are dealing with someone who already exists or someone who merely could. If someone exists, then, uncontroversially, it is bad for her to experience

4 R. N. Smart, 'Negative Utilitarianism', *Mind* (1958) LXVII: 542-543. See also the first major part of Christopher Belshaw's essay in this special issue.

5 David Benatar, 'Why it is Better Never to Come into Existence', *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1997) 34: 345-355.

6 David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

pain, where the reference to pain is for Benatar a synecdoche, standing for anything undesirable with regard to a person's quality of life, e.g., frustrated desires and shameful ways of being. Similarly, it is uncontestedly good for an existent person to experience pleasure, similarly a placeholder for ways in which her life can go well. However, pains and pleasures (and the respective un/desirables that they signify) should be evaluated in a different manner in the case of one who does not and never will exist. According to Benatar, the absence of pain is good, i.e., better than its presence, with regard to one who could have existed but in fact never will. In addition, the absence of pleasure is not bad, in the sense of no worse than its presence, unless there is someone who exists and would have been deprived of it.

Now, given these particular judgments of goodness and badness, the verdict that life is bad on the whole appears to follow straightaway. With regard to pain, it is bad to exist and better not to exist. And with regard to pleasure, while that is good to have if and when one exists, not having pleasure is no worse if one does not exist; it simply does not count if there is no one to be deprived of it. Therefore, non-existence is better in relation to existence; indeed, existence is downright harmful by comparison. And since it would treat others merely as a means to harm them in order to benefit oneself in the form of being a biological parent, it is wrong to procreate.

Part of what motivates Benatar to believe the asymmetric premises about well-being that do the work of underwriting the anti-natalist conclusion is his belief that they best explain four other, uncontroversial judgments, including the key intuition that while it would be wrong for one to create someone whom one knows would suffer a torturous existence, it would not be wrong for one not to create someone whom one knows would enjoy a wonderful existence. The former would be wrong and the latter would not be wrong because, for Benatar, no pain in non-existence is better than pain in existence, and because no pleasure in non-existence is no worse than pleasure in existence.

Recently, critics have done the difficult, intricate work of evaluating this central line of reasoning from Benatar. For instance, in his contribution to this special issue, David Boonin contends that there is another promising and more attractive explanation of why it would be impermissible to create what he calls a 'Cursed Child' and why it would be permissible not to create a 'Blessed Child'. For Boonin, contra Benatar, a Blessed Child would be better off being created, but one would do no wrong in failing to create him, since, in the absence of creation, there would be no actual person harmed. Rivka Weinberg makes a similar move against Benatar, contending that duties apply only ever to those who do or will exist, which principle, she contends, explains the existence of a duty not to create a Cursed Child and the absence of a duty to create a Blessed Child. Readers wanting to get at the heart of Benatar's asymmetry argument should read Boonin's and Weinberg's articles in this special issue, as well as the deep replies to them Benatar makes here;⁷ these critical discussions advance the field's thinking about the logic of not only procreational duties, but also duties more generally.

Benatar can be read as appealing to another kind of premise in support of the crucial parts of his asymmetry argument, namely, an analogy. He considers two individuals, Sick, who is prone to illness but can recover quickly, and Healthy, who never gets sick but also lacks the ability to heal speedily. Of these two, Benatar claims that Sick has

⁷ For different attempts to question asymmetry, see Thaddeus Metz, 'Are Lives Worth Creating?', *Philosophical Papers* (2011) 40: 233-255 at 240-245, as well as aspects of Skott Brill's contribution to this special issue, both of which Benatar replies to here.

no 'real advantage' over Healthy, since the latter, by virtue of not getting sick in the first place, is not deprived by the absence of the ability to recuperate with ease. By analogy, Benatar suggests, the pleasures of those who exist are not a real advantage over the absent pleasures of those who do not exist, because the absence of those pleasures is not bad, i.e., not a deprivation, for those who do not exist.

In his contribution, Skott Brill principally questions whether Benatar may rightly invoke the Sick/Healthy analogy to defend key aspects of the asymmetry argument. In particular, Brill notes that the analogy appeals to the instrumental good of the ability to recover from illness, but that the asymmetry rationale involves a final good of pleasure. Brill provides *prima facie* reason to think that this difference makes the analogy weak; it is to be expected that an instrumental good lacks value, or has 'no real advantage', when not needed to bring about a certain state of affairs, whereas final goods are often expected to have a dissimilar structure, roughly, to be good regardless of the circumstances, as in the case of pleasure.

Recall that the asymmetry rationale for anti-natalism is only one of Benatar's major arguments, the one that is extreme for entailing that, no matter how much pleasure or other goods one has in a life, they count for nothing in comparison to non-existence, since there is no one to be deprived of them. His other major argument for anti-natalism is more moderate for claiming that, supposing for the sake of argument that the pleasures of existence do count in its favour relative to non-existence, there are not so many of them as to make existence attractive. The bads of life, including pain, ill-health and even death, typically outweigh its goods, and even when they do not, the amount of goodness overall is slight. According to Benatar, people routinely fail to apprehend just how bad life is because of 'Pollyannaism' that is deeply rooted in our species due to natural selection. Following Benatar's phrasing, let us call this the 'procreational Russian roulette' argument;⁸ although a given child might get lucky and face an empty chamber, most children will suffer the bullet of a cruddy existence, making it wrong to pull the trigger by creating them.

It is particularly (but not solely) in light of this argument that Rafe McGregor and Ema Sullivan-Bissett in their joint contribution question the coherence of Benatar's combination of accepting anti-natalism and rejecting pro-mortalism.⁹ They contend that if most people's quality of life is so poor, as per Benatar, then it must be prudent for them to commit suicide and morally praiseworthy for them to help others do so when they cannot on their own. However, Benatar denies that people typically have reason to be killed, at least at the present moment. One intriguing element of Benatar's reasoning is a distinction he draws between a life worth starting, on the one hand, and a life worth continuing, on the other. The standards for the former, for Benatar, are different from those for the latter. So, for example, it could be the case that knowing a person would face a severe harm would be enough to forbid creating that individual, but, once that individual exists, she ought to continue to live as long as possible if that harm has already occurred or up to the point at which it would occur. Ultimately, the dispute between Benatar and his critics on whether anti-natalism and non-pro-mortalism are consistent might turn on when it becomes unreasonable to continue staying alive, supposing, with Benatar, that most lives are very bad.

There are of course those who deny this last claim. In particular, Saul Smilansky and Brooke Alan Trisel, in their respective essays in this symposium, try to argue that life

⁸ Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, p. 92.

⁹ Christopher Belshaw expresses similar concerns in his contribution to this symposium.

is instead on the whole pretty good, at least for large segments of humanity. According to Smilansky, reports of happiness are on a par with reports of pain, viz., they are first-person accounts of one's mental states that are very difficult for others to refute. That purported epistemic fact, combined with Benatar's own acknowledgement that many people report being happy, provides strong reason to believe that people are indeed happy. In addition, Smilansky notes that reports of happiness tend to co-vary with the conditions that one would reasonably think produce happiness, such as economic security and political stability, suggesting, contra Benatar, that it is not the illu-soriness of Pollyannaism that is generating the reports, but rather the tracking of real features of people's lives. Finally, Smilansky contends that the relative infrequency of suicide is best explained by the fact that life is generally good, and, in large part, by virtue the fact that it is often meaningful, even if it also painful or even unhappy on occasion.

At one stage Smilansky furthermore suggests that what is apparently bad in life is often instrumentally quite good, a point that Trisel explores in some depth. Trisel appeals to scientific evidence indicating that pain, while admittedly finally disvaluable, is extremely useful for avoiding even worse conditions such as death, disfigurement and greater pain. Our quality of life would be much lower if we did not experience pain, and similar remarks would seem to apply to other day-to-day conditions that are bad in themselves, such as failure and loss.

In reply to Trisel, Benatar accepts the last point, but notes that it does not follow that life is typically on the whole good. Just because things could be worse does not mean that they are not very bad, Benatar suggests. Benatar's ultimate reply to Smilansky is similar: people can in fact be mistaken about whether their lives are good ones, and even if people's reports of happiness, and of meaningfulness, vary according to circumstances of their lives, their judgments could be, and in fact are, systematically overshooting the mark. Pollyannaism is one reason to think that is so, for Benatar, but another important reason is the standard he invokes to evaluate the quality of life, namely, perfection. Trisel argues that any standard for evaluating our lives other than what is nomologically possible for us is arbitrary (and Weinberg finds herself unable to find any standard at all that is not arbitrary), but Benatar replies here that perfection, 'the highest (logically) possible standard', is not. And given how far the quality of human life is from perfection, we ought to judge it to be lowly indeed.

Even if Benatar has shown that perfection is not arbitrary, in a narrow sense, readers should consider whether he has given enough reason to appraise human life in light of it. He points out in his work that just as an individual's life clearly should be not judged merely by her own standard, but from a more external one, so too should human life in general be evaluated from an objective perspective.¹⁰ Depending on what is meant by a 'human standpoint', one could plausibly accept this point while denying that perfection is the relevant standpoint to invoke.¹¹ In any event, there is much more debate to be had about the nature and relevance of 'external', 'objective' or 'perfect' standpoints for appraising the quality of human life, an important issue to which the disputes in these pages are some contribution.

¹⁰ Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, pp. 82-84.

¹¹ For instance, I have argued that the relevant perspective is the maximum value physically available to a being that was born human (even if it is no longer human), in Thaddeus Metz, 'Imperfection as Sufficient for a Meaningful Life: How Much is Enough?', in Yujin Nagasawa and Erik Wielenberg, eds., *New Waves in Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 192-214.

3. Fresh and Underexplored Versions of Anti-Natalism

The remaining discussions in this special issue focus less on Benatar's version of anti-natalism and more on articulating and defending other forms, including two that are utterly new to the field. Like Benatar's asymmetry argument, they start from fairly weak, non-utilitarian premises and end up with strong, anti-natal conclusions.

Gerald Harrison's argument for anti-natalism differs from Benatar's most strikingly in not being based on any judgments about whether life is worth living or not. Whereas Benatar argues that it is wrong to create a new person's life because it is never (or almost never) worth starting, Harrison grants that most people's lives might well be worth starting, but, despite that, denies that it is permissible to create them. According to Harrison, there are what he calls, in the deontological tradition of W. D. Ross, 'prima facie duties' to improve people's well-being and to prevent suffering, among other things. These are obligations that have some, not necessarily conclusive weight, and Harrison maintains that they entail anti-natalism when combined with a plausible principle about duties, namely, that a duty to perform a certain act truly exists only if there would be a victim were the act not done.¹² Creating a new life is not necessary to fulfil the duty to promote happiness, since if one refrained from procreation no victim would exist. However, refraining from creating a new life is necessary to fulfil the duty to prevent harm, since every new life can expect to incur some harm and hence to be victimized.

Notice that Harrison's rationale for anti-natalism apparently avoids pro-mortalism, and he contends that it does so with more ease than Benatar's. For one, Harrison's argument is not based on judgments about the generally poor quality of life human beings have. For another, the prima facie duty to improve people's quality of life forbids killing those who already exist and instead requires helping them, as failure to do the latter would mean that there would be a victim.

Fascinating questions arise such as: what exactly does the central prima facie duty to prevent suffering involve? for instance, might it be best understood as an obligation for one not to impose harm on others, an obligation that would allow one to expose others to (unforeseeable) harms that others might impose on them?¹³ what does it mean for there to be a 'victim' in the event a duty is not performed? are there duties that lack victims in the event of non-performance? should one think that instead of duties requiring victims, duties exist 'only if there is a beneficiary in the event that the purported duty is performed'? This is another place where anti-natalism requires sorting out fundamental issues in deontological moral thought.

Beyond invoking the prima facie duty not to cause suffering to support anti-natalism, Harrison also appeals to the prima facie duty not to seriously affect someone, particularly negatively, without her consent. Seana Shiffrin has written an important paper that develops the latter line of argument in some detail,¹⁴ on which argument Asheel Singh focuses in his contribution to this volume. According to Shiffrin and also Singh, it is wrong to some extent, because it is an infringement of another's right, to harm another without her consent, at least where such harm is not expected to pre-

12 Cf. Boonin's and Weinberg's critical discussions of Benatar, which invoke a similar principle to make a different point.

13 A line that David DeGrazia suggests in the fifth chapter of his *Creation Ethics: Reproduction, Genetics, and Quality of Life* (forthcoming Oxford: Oxford University Press).

14 Seana Shiffrin, 'Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm', *Legal Theory* (1999) 5: 117-148.

vent a greater harm to her, e.g., where one shoves another out of the way of an oncoming vehicle. Since one obviously can never obtain a person's consent to create her, since persons are invariably harmed by existence, and since procreation never serves the function of preventing a greater harm to the one created, procreation is always wrong, at least to some degree.

There is of course interesting debate to be had about whether, if this rights-based line of argument were true, procreation would be all things considered impermissible. Singh does not focus on that issue (though Harrison addresses it briefly), and instead considers an intuitive objection to the argument, namely, that its account of when one may impose harm on others is overly narrow. More specifically, Singh replies to the view that one may harm others in serious ways if one reasonably expects them afterward to endorse one's having done so. Such a view would appear to support pro-natalism, since most people are glad to be alive or otherwise appear to endorse their existence.

Singh distinguishes between different senses of 'endorse' and argues against what he takes to be the most defensible version, in two ways. First, he argues that it does not entail that procreation is justified, since people rarely 'endorse' their having been created in the relevant sense. Second, he contends that the appeal to endorsement is misplaced, in part because it is vulnerable to counterexamples, and in part because it lacks a philosophical mooring—neither standard consequentialist nor deontological moral theories, he contends, can make sense of why endorsement should make harm permissible to impose without a person's consent. Singh concludes that the friend of the consent-based rationale for anti-natalism can successfully rebut the objection from endorsement.

Whereas Harrison appeals to the *prima facie* duty not to cause suffering, and both Singh and Harrison invoke the right not to be harmed without one's consent, Christopher Belshaw suggests that anti-natalism follows from the principle that is wrong to exploit the misfortunes of others, specifically, human babies. The lives of babies, Belshaw argues, are not qualitatively different from those of animals such as rabbits and sheep, where these beings lack an awareness of themselves over time, or at least a very sophisticated one. Instead, they tend to be 'caught in the moment', meaning that, for them, a later pleasure cannot compensate for a present pain. Although we might want to keep an animal alive and hence be willing to let it suffer now in the expectation that it will be happy down the road, Belshaw maintains that, from the perspective of the animal's welfare, it would be better for it to die painlessly than to undergo the burden. And if it would be better for such an animal to die painlessly rather than face any harm, the same is true for babies, whose mental states are more or less the same and who are bound to suffer from hunger, colic, gastrointestinal discomfort, emotional distress, etc.

Now, for Belshaw, if the lives of babies are not worth continuing, then it would have been better had they never been born in the first place and it is wrong to create such lives. Those who intentionally make a baby are taking advantage of its weakness and suffering, so that they will eventually have a biologically related person, in the sense of a deliberative agent aware of itself over time, in their lives.

As with Harrison and Benatar, Belshaw is keen to demonstrate that his rationale for anti-natalism does not entail pro-mortalism. On this score, Belshaw points out that, although a future good cannot make up for a present bad for a being unaware of its future, it can do so for a being that is aware of its future, namely, a person. People's

lives are often worth living, as later benefits can make it rational from the standpoint of an individual's well-being to suffer current harms. Hence, the respect in which it would not be bad for babies to die, and even good for them to do so, does not apply to those who have emerged from babies, us. In contrast, Belshaw argues, it is difficult for Benatar to avoid pro-mortalism, on the face of it, since Benatar contends that the lives of persons are not worth starting and are very bad once begun.

Controversy abounds, but obvious falsity does not. Is it true that it would not be bad, and rather good for, say, a rabbit to die, supposing it had to suffer pain otherwise? If so, is the same true for human babies? And, if so, does it follow that we are wrong to create them? One might reasonably think that if one had to choose between saving the life of a person and allowing an animal to be tortured, one should do the former. However, does the logic of this position mean that it would be permissible to torture an animal, let alone a human baby, in order to create a person in the first place? Belshaw's new rationale for anti-natalism, like Harrison's, raises important questions for the field.

4. Conclusion

I have suggested that an anti-utilitarian value-theoretic perspective largely drives contemporary anti-natalism. The major advocates of the conclusion that procreation wrongs the one created tend to hold premises about what makes a life worthwhile and about our duties that are at variance with dominant versions of consequentialism. With respect to worthwhileness, readers have encountered the view that a life worth starting is one that would encounter no pain or other negative condition at all since any pleasure or positive condition does not count in comparison to non-existence, in which there is no one to be deprived of it (Benatar). They have also considered the view that for the life of a human baby to be worth starting it must also encounter no pain, since it lacks the psychological connectedness over time necessary for a later pleasure to compensate for it (Belshaw). In terms of our duties, readers have addressed the non-consequentialist principles that agents have a prima facie duty to prevent suffering (Harrison), that it would be immoral to some degree for them to violate another's right not to be harmed without having consented to it (Shiffrin/Singh), and that it is a serious moral wrong to exploit the weakness of a poorly off being in order to become a biological parent (Benatar and Belshaw).

Although anti-utilitarian value theory is at the ground of contemporary anti-natalism, there are reasons to doubt the hypothesis, proffered at the beginning of this article, that one can escape anti-natalism only if one is a utilitarian, or at least not a deontologist. In particular, there is a strand of deontology that is underexplored in its application to the anti-natalism debate, namely, that aspect of Kant's moral theory (and Catholic ethical thought) according to which rational nature (or human life) as such has a dignity. Even where anti-natalist arguments are not grounded on judgments that life is not worthwhile, as per Harrison and Shiffrin/Singh most clearly, they invoke moral principles in which the avoidance of pain is paramount. The duties not to cause suffering, not to harm without consent, and not to take advantage of another's misery all take welfare to be the 'focal point'. However, a dignity-based approach to ethics does not, or at least need not, and it might provide theoretical resources in the

deontological tradition to defend natalism.¹⁵ Kantians routinely emphasize that deeming persons to have a dignity, viz., a superlative final value in virtue of what they are, does not mean that one ought to procreate as much as possible; respecting a being is not the same as promoting it, they rightly note. However, it is worth considering what an ethic of respect for human dignity might entail for the extinction of the human race. Even if respect does not require maximizing the number of beings with dignity, it would arguably forbid letting them go out of existence altogether, and might, moreover, require ensuring they are populated to some sort of adequate degree. I submit that such an argumentative strategy would, among several others addressed in this overview, be worth exploring as the debate about anti-natalism continues.

15 This kind of angle has been suggested by David Spurrett, 'Hooray for Babies', *South African Journal of Philosophy* (2011) 30: 197-206, and by Skott Brill in his contribution here; Benatar replies to both in the current volume.

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