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In Denial

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David Benatar, *Better Never To Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

This is a book of sophisticated pessimism, in which David Benatar argues that there is “grim news”[1] in store for us if we think clear-headedly about the value of coming into existence, and the real value of our lives. This is not your typical Malthusian or environmental approach to population growth, nor one of the more quirky calls for voluntary human extinction in order to save the planet. It is a principled attack on what for many is a basic assumption, that all other things being equal, a new human life is a good thing.

Better Never To Have Been opens with a reminder that it can be hard to challenge orthodoxy: one is likely to be misunderstood, maligned, and unjustly ignored. The book’s headline conclusions are beyond controversial, they strike many as a chilling *reductio ad absurdum*. Benatar argues that coming into existence is always a serious harm, and that procreation is therefore morally reprehensible. He holds that it would be better if, through there being no new people, humanity became extinct – and further, that we ought to rue the day we were born and regret our own existence (p. 57ff). His (self-described) “typical pro-choice views” (p. 15) on the moral status of developing human beings mean that there is a duty to abort even “fetuses quite late in gestation” (p. 26), and while his arguments focus on the value of human existence, they are intended to apply to all sentient life (p. 223). Benatar prefers a universe without any creatures capable of feeling pleasure or pain.

This complex and engagingly written book can be read in two sections. The second and third chapters present arguments that support the claim that existence is always harmful, and that coming into existence is in fact very harmful. The remaining chapters consider the implications of these views for a number of areas of ethics and public policy: procreation, abortion, population problems, and human extinction. I will focus on chapters two and three, and offer some brief comments on Benatar’s challenge to religious “pro-natalists.”

Why should coming into existence be harmful? In Chapter 2, Benatar argues that there is an asymmetry between scenarios involving existence and non-existence, such that while existence involves both good and bad outcomes (in terms of pleasure and pain), non-existence involves the absence of pleasure (which is not bad because nobody is being deprived of the pleasure), but also the absence of pain, which is good, even if this good is not enjoyed by anyone. Since no lives in existence are entirely free from pain (including “trivial” pains), “existence has no advantage over, but does have disadvantages relative to, non-existence” (p. 30). “It is true of the person [who has a life of utter bliss adulterated by the pain of a single pin-prick]... that as pleasant as his life is, it has no advantages over never existing” (p. 48). While the non-existence of pleasure is not a harm, “coming into existence has the disadvantage

of the single pain” (p. 48) compared to non-existence, in which the lack of pain is good.

Benatar argues for this asymmetry in two ways: by an analogy and as the best explanation for some of our intuitions about potential people. We are asked to consider whether someone [S] who is sick and has an excellent capacity to recover has an advantage over someone [H] who does not have the capacity to get better, but who never gets sick. With some qualification, S and H are supposed to present a good analogy for existence and non-existence respectively. Benatar argues that the capacity to recover is an advantage for a sick person, but is not an advantage over the person who never becomes unwell, so that we are right to prefer H. This allows Benatar to claim that irrespective of the quantity or quality of goods associated with existence, they do not provide a reason to prefer existence. Some pressure can be applied to this analogy by making the conditions of H’s life (a little) more like non-existence, and the conditions of S’s life more like (typical) existence. Would one really prefer H’s life if health was one of that life’s only positive features, and sickness (and recovery) was merely part of S’s rich and active life experience?

The asymmetry between existence and non-existence is presented as the best explanation for four widely held intuitions (p. 33). Firstly, that there is no duty to create happy people, but only a duty to avoid creating suffering people. Secondly, in the reasons one gives for or against having a child: it is strange or incoherent to say that the child will be benefited, but not strange to cite the child’s interests as a reason for avoiding bringing a child into existence. Thirdly, that “having children for their own sakes [is] odd” (p. 34). Fourthly, that we have asymmetrical judgments concerning distant suffering in uninhabited parts of the universe. We are sad about distant suffering when we think of it, but not similarly “sad for the happy people who, had they existed, would have populated” (p. 35) a remote location. Any thorough rebuttal of Benatar’s anti-natalism will provide alternative explanations for such intuitions; for example, it may be possible to explain them by differences in now-or-later judgments, presence-or-remoteness judgments, or in relation to our folk conceptions of what counts as a good (or “odd”) reason to bring children into the world.

Benatar’s third chapter argues that in fact our lives are much worse than we think, and involve significant amounts of harm. He distinguishes between how good a life actually is and how good it is thought to be (p. 87), and provides sociological evidence for what he sees as our undue emphasis on and evaluation of the positive aspects of our lives. The “Pollyana Principle” (p. 64), which is described as a strong tendency towards optimism, is reinforced by our capacities for adaptation, accommodation, and habituation, and these in combination mean that we are particularly unreliable judges of our own actual wellbeing. Benatar acknowledges that thinking that life goes well can influence how good life actually is, but he does not think that “optimism,” no matter how widespread or profound, can significantly improve the quality of a human life.

One failing in Benatar’s account is the speed at which he moves from an account of the Pollyana principle and other sociological observations to the strength and significance of this optimism. The Pollyana Principle looks convincing, but it is a further stretch to think that it supplies a complete account of the psychological factors that color our observation and evaluations. As Shakespeare has it in *All’s Well That Ends Well* (Act 4, Scene 3): “How mightily sometimes we make us comforts of our losses! And how mightily some other times we drown our gain in tears!” If it turns out that our optimism is only mild, or sometimes counterbalanced by pessimism, then the widespread phenomenon of general contentedness with regard to the value of our own lives will undermine Benatar’s conclusion that our lives are in fact riven with unacknowledged harm.

The last few sections of the book represent a careful and wide ranging account of the implications of

the position established in Chapters 2 and 3, followed by an attempt to anticipate and answer objections. In one sense Benatar's account is moderated: he draws a careful distinction between the harms associated with coming into existence and the harms of continuing to exist, and is therefore able to avoid the conclusion that we all ought to commit suicide. The harms of coming into existence are always present and are significant, whereas the harms of continuing to exist are significant, but can be outweighed by an individual's interests.

Readers from certain religious traditions will find Benatar's arguments particularly challenging: in effect, he argues that God made a mistake on the fifth and sixth days of creation in creating sentient life. Benatar targets Jewish and Christian "pro-natalism" through epigraphs that include a Jewish saying and quotes from Jeremiah, Job, and Ecclesiastes. From the prominence of these quotes, one might expect to find some engagement with Jewish and Christian thinking on the benefits of existence, or our responsibilities towards future generations. Benatar considers religious objections in a short and dissatisfying section of his concluding chapter (p. 221ff). He argues that religious responses (in particular those that reference scripture) assume that God exists; that biblical commandments are in any case not binding, even for religious believers; and that one ought not to give a "monolithic" account of religious views, since within and across religions one can find differing views.

Perhaps one ought not to expect an engagement with theology from a philosophical text. For theologically minded readers, however, this work contains some important and interesting themes. Many will agree that there is some asymmetry between existence and non-existence: thus Catholics will agree that one does not have a duty or even a right to bring every possible child into existence. One need not "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 9:7) at every opportunity, and responsible parenthood may involve delaying pregnancy through morally appropriate means and for sufficiently good reasons.[2] Augustine and Thomas Aquinas both consider the possible extinction of the human race in the context of whether it is right to abstain from sexual intercourse. Aquinas writes that while priestly and religious virginity is preferable to marriage,[3] preservation of the species is a "duty of the multitude,"[4] which is "not binding on each one of the multitude." [5] This is consistent with what seems to be a qualified acceptance of the possibility of (near) human extinction from Augustine: "What, say they, if all men should abstain from all sexual intercourse, whence will the human race exist? Would that all would this, only in 'charity out of a pure heart, and good conscience, and faith unfeigned;' much more speedily would the City of God be filled, and the end of the world hastened." [6] Needless to say, these words on human extinction are a long way from an actual recommendation, given that virtuous decision-making and motives are needed to satisfy Augustine's conditions, and extinction does not appear to be valued for its own sake, or existence seen as a harm.

Benatar claims that his position is neither pessimistic nor misanthropic. Things could be worse for those who do exist, and even more people could exist (with lives filled with suffering): he is motivated by a concern to prevent suffering. These protestations in the end may not convince, as he focuses so much on correcting our optimistic tendencies, and claims that "superb misanthropic argument[s]" (p. 224) typically do not go far enough in specifying the problems with human existence. In spite of his thorough argumentation, this reader cannot help wondering whether Benatar believes in his own conclusions, or whether he feels forced into them by the lack of a satisfactory alternative account. Happily, this book has provoked and is likely to continue to provoke research on these vital themes.

[1] See David Benatar, "Grim News From the Original Position: A Reply to Professor Doyal," *Journal of Medical Ethics*, October 2007, 33: 577; and David Benatar, "Grim News For an Unoriginal Position: A Reply to Seth Baum," *Journal of Medical Ethics*, May 2009, 35: pp. 328-329.

[2] See, for example, *Humanae Vitae*, n. 10.4

[3] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II II, Q 152, Art 4.

[4] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II II, Q 152, Art 2.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Augustine, *De Bono Conjugali*, n.10 [<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1309.htm>].

