

To Be or Never to Have Been: Anti-Natalism and a Life Worth Living

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Abstract David Benatar argues that being brought into existence is always a net harm and never a benefit. I disagree. I argue that if you bring someone into existence who lives *a life worth living* (LWL), then you have not all things considered wronged her. Lives are worth living if they are high in various objective goods and low in objective bads. These lives constitute a net benefit. In contrast, *lives worth avoiding* (LWA) constitute a net harm. Lives worth avoiding are net high in objective bads and low in objective goods. It is the prospect of a LWA that gives us good reason to not bring someone into existence. Happily, many lives are not worth avoiding. Contra Benatar, many are indeed worth living. Even if we grant Benatar his controversial asymmetry thesis, we have no reason to think that coming into existence is always a net harm.

Keywords Anti-natalism · Pessimism · Welfare · Worth of a life · Meaning of life · David Benatar

1 Introduction

In *Better Never to Have Been*, David Benatar defends *anti-natalism*—the view that it is wrong to reproduce.¹ By bringing a child into the world, we cause it serious harm. Given the way the world is, every child will inevitably suffer a great deal. According to the most plausible accounts of what makes a life worth living, life is typically on balance bad.² Most important, suffering is entirely preventable; we merely need to abstain from procreation. The anti-natalist says that we should do just that. But, one worries, the anti-natalist prevents suffering at the cost of the goods of life. Surely we must weigh the goods against the bads. How could it be wrong to bring a reasonably happy person into existence?

¹Benatar (2006).

²Benatar (2006, ch.2).

Benatar presents two independent arguments for anti-natalism.³ The first argument attempts to show that it is always prudentially bad to be brought into existence. This argument depends on a controversial asymmetry between goods and bads: The absence of pain is good, whereas the absence of pleasure is neither prudentially good nor bad for the non-existent. The prudential asymmetry grounds the anti-natalist moral claim. Accordingly, I will refer to this as the *asymmetry argument*.⁴ The second argument does not depend on the asymmetry. Instead, it defends a wholesale pessimism about the human condition. We can call this the *argument from pessimism*.⁵ I argue that neither argument is successful. Both arguments mistakenly assume that less good is bad. And an important underlying problem troubles both: Benatar does not provide an acceptable way to determine whether a life is worth living. I defend a novel, better way that avoids the anti-natalist conclusion.

My argument proceeds in a few steps. I begin with a presentation of Benatar's asymmetry argument. Although I do not accept the asymmetry, I show that Benatar's argument is unsuccessful either way. We do not wrong the one we bring into existence if she lives a *life worth living* (LWL)—a life that is high in various objective goods.⁶ However, we should not bring anyone into existence who will live a *life worth avoiding* (LWA).⁷ These are lives replete with objective bads and poor in objective goods. Happily, not all lives are like this. Benatar anticipates this style of objection and develops a reply in the argument from pessimism. I argue that his reply to objective list modes of evaluating lives is unsuccessful. To be worth living a life need not be the best that we can conceive; it merely needs to be preferable to non-existence.

2 Benatar's Asymmetry Argument

Benatar argues that it is wrong to bring someone into existence if they will suffer. He thinks that if someone will suffer even the tiniest pinprick, it is prudentially bad for them to be brought into existence, no matter if the rest of their life was spent in ecstasy.⁸ Hence, given the facts of human life, it is always prudentially bad to be brought into existence.⁹

Benatar arrives at this counter-intuitive conclusion through a short series of controversial premises. The most controversial is the good and bad asymmetry claim. It seems clear that pleasure is good and pain is bad. And, on first blush, we might think that the absence of pain and pleasure are both neutral. If you lack both, then you are in a neutral state. Benatar disagrees. He argues that the absence of pain is good. It is good for someone to avoid a painful toothache. But unlike the goodness of the absence of pain, the absence of pleasure is neither good nor bad, at least for the non-existent; hence, the asymmetry.

³ In fact, Benatar provides three arguments. The third is not well developed. Benatar (2006, p.92) argues that given the risk of significant suffering, we should not gamble with the lives of our offspring. DeGrazia (2010, p.329) raises objections. Benatar (2012, pp.141–148) replies.

⁴ Not to be confused with Lucretius' symmetry argument against the badness of non-existence. Lucretius (2007, p.101; III, ln.965–976)

⁵ Metz (2011, p.239) calls it "the argument from the point of view of the universe."

⁶ There might be an exception: If we could have brought the same person into existence in such a way that they would have lived a better life, but instead bring them into existence into a less good life, then we can plausibly be said to wrong that person.

⁷ Yeates (2012, p.1) introduces the helpful label "a life worth avoiding."

⁸ Benatar (2006, p.48) acknowledges this implication.

⁹ I think the implausibility of the conclusion is likely a reductio, despite Benatar's (2006, pp.202–7) protest to the contrary. Nevertheless, I agree with Smilansky (2008, p.571) that "this is a daring and highly original philosophical book."

It is important to be precise about the kind of good and bad at issue. One might think that preventing bad is morally more important than the mere promotion of good, that there is a moral asymmetry. The moral asymmetry is plausible.¹⁰ In fact Benatar thinks that it is probably true.¹¹ But the moral asymmetry does not capture the kind of badness at issue. Instead of a moral asymmetry, he thinks that the absence of pain is good for the one who does not feel the pain: “this absence is good when judged in terms of the interests of the person who would have otherwise existed,” whereas the absence of pleasure (for the non-existent) is simply not bad.¹² That is, he seems to think of the asymmetry in terms of the welfare impact of the absence of pleasure and pain. Hence, the kind of good and bad at issue is prudential.¹³ The prudential asymmetry grounds the anti-natalist moral claim.

Benatar thinks that the anti-natalist conclusion follows quickly from the asymmetry if we understand another important detail. He claims that the “absence of good things, such as pleasure, is bad only if there is somebody who is deprived of these good things.”¹⁴ For instance, although it might be bad for someone to fall into a coma for 5 years, it is not bad for someone who is never born to miss out on the joys of life.¹⁵ It is not bad precisely because there is no one to be deprived. The absence of good for the non-existent is neither bad nor good, but the absence of bad is good.¹⁶ The person who would have existed is benefited by the absence of the bads of life and is unaffected by the absence of the goods.¹⁷

To summarize, the asymmetry involves two independent claims: (1) the absence of bad is prudentially good for the non-existent person who would have lived, and (2) the absence of good is neither prudentially good nor bad for the non-existent person who would have lived.¹⁸ It appears that the first claim also applies to those who exist. The second does not.

Putting the two parts of the asymmetry together, Benatar concludes that it is always prudentially bad to be brought into existence: “coming into existence, far from constituting a net benefit, always constitutes a net harm.”¹⁹ If the choice is between bringing someone into existence and not bringing her into existence, we should always choose the latter. No human

¹⁰ One might cast a related claim in terms of negative and positive duties. The distinction also tracks the difference between malfeasance and beneficence.

¹¹ Benatar (2006, p.32). Benatar (2012, p.127) is skeptical.

¹² Benatar (2006, p.31).

¹³ As is common in the axiological literature, I use the terms “well-being”, “welfare”, and “prudential value” interchangeably.

¹⁴ Benatar (2006, p.14). Here it isn't clear if he means morally bad or prudentially bad for the deprived. Harman (2009, p.785, n.3) says that Benatar told her that he is talking about prudential value. Benatar (2012, p.125) makes this explicit.

¹⁵ Benatar seems to accept the standard deprivation account of the badness of death. For a coma case, see Luper (2009, p.104).

¹⁶ Benatar (2006, p.41) says that the state of the absence of pleasure is not like a neutral state for a person, since no one exists. He treats the absence of pain differently. Brown (2011, p.51) argues that the putative incommensurability should also apply to the bads. If non-existence is the issue, this would seem to apply to the absence of pain as well. Benatar (2013, pp.138–140) replies to Brown. Harman (2009) and Bradley (2009) argue that any alternate version of the argument assuming the remarks on page 41 is unmotivated if not incoherent: it “wreaks havoc with the logic of” betterness. Benatar (2013, pp.135–138) replies to Bradley.

¹⁷ Put this boldly, Harman (2009, p.782) argues that the asymmetry is unmotivated. Bradley (2010, p.4) makes a stronger complaint. They are both attuned to the problems of page 41.

¹⁸ I will ignore the strangeness in talking about things being good or bad for those who would have existed. DeGrazia (2010, p.321–2) finds it odd to speak of the interest of the non-existent. Bradley (2010, p.1) develops a version of the argument that avoids this awkwardness. He (2010, p.1, n.1) frames the argument in terms of value simpliciter rather than in terms of welfare.

¹⁹ Benatar (2006, p.1). I assume that Benatar is working with a notion of harm much like that defended by Feinberg—a culpable setback of interests.

lives are worth starting. Benatar argues that the asymmetry shows why. Compare existence with non-existence²⁰:

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of pain (Bad)	(3) Absence of pain (Good)
(2) Presence of pleasure (Good)	(4) Absence of pleasure (Not bad)

Benatar thinks that the asymmetry tells us that when evaluating scenario A, we should consider both the good and the bad (quadrants 1 and 2). But when evaluating scenario B, we should only count the prudential good that is the absence of pain (quadrant 3). We should ignore the absence of pleasure (quadrant 4).²¹ Benatar thinks that the calculation will always prefer scenario B as long as there is the tiniest bit of pain to be had from existing.²² Hence, anti-natalism follows from the asymmetry.

There is much to take issue with here. I think that both parts of the asymmetry are wrong, but I will not pursue this line of objection.²³ In the next section, I argue that Benatar draws the wrong conclusion from the asymmetry. His calculation is mistaken. The asymmetry does not support anti-natalism.

3 Comparing Lives

Even if we grant Benatar his most controversial premise—the asymmetry between the absence of good and bad—his anti-natalist conclusion lacks support. Benatar miscalculates according to the most plausible version of his own schema. If we assume that the absence of bad is good for those who would have existed, it still might be far better to exist.

It will help to get a bit more precise. To be concrete, I will assume that we can talk about commensurable units of prudential bad and good.²⁴ Consider the life of X. It has 10 units of bad and 30 units of good. If you think that the order in which the goods arrive in the narrative of a life is important, make any necessary adjustments: arrange more of the goods near the end.²⁵ The net good of X's life is 20. Now, we should ask, would it be better for X

²⁰ Benatar (2006, p.38) presents this chart.

²¹ Troublesome remarks suggest that we should compare 1 to 3, but not 2 to 4. I find this apiece with the problematic remarks on page 41.

²² I think this presentation of the argument is more straightforward and closer to the text than that offered by Harman (2009, pp.778–80), who skillfully teases out some possible ambiguities.

²³ Metz (2011, pp.240–5) develops several objections to Benatar's argument for the asymmetry claim. DeGrazia (2010, pp. 322–4) raises objections to all four sources of support for the asymmetry. Benatar (2012, pp.128–141) replies to several other criticisms of the asymmetry claim.

²⁴ This is a theoretical device, not a claim about our ability to produce such numbers for any actual lives. This kind of talk has precedent. See: Feldman (2006), Bradley (2009), and McMahan (2002).

²⁵ Nozick (1989) defends the relevance of the narrative to the value of a life for the one who lives it. As does Velleman (1993).

never to have been, as Benatar suggests? Does “coming into existence, far from constituting a net benefit, always constitute a net harm”?

In order to perform the calculation, we need to know how good the absence of bad is. For the sake of argument, assume that it is of equal positive value. Accordingly, the absence of 10 units of bad would be worth 10 units of good. Hence, the scenarios look like this:

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of 10 units of pain (-10)	(3) Absence of 10 units of pain (+10)
(2) Presence of 30 units of pleasure (+30)	(4) Absence of 30 units of pleasure (0)

Scenario B is worth a mere 10 units of prudential good, whereas Scenario A is worth a net 20. According to the prudential calculation that Benatar suggests—a calculation performed while assuming the good and bad asymmetry—Scenario A is better for X. It is twice as prudentially valuable. Hence, it is fair to say that there is no (net) harm done in bringing X into existence. Benatar draws the wrong conclusion. Although never being born might always constitute a net benefit, it is not the case that coming into existence is always a net harm.

A formalization of Benatar's argument will help expose the error. Here is the core argument:

- (1) The absence of bad is prudentially good for the non-existent person who would have lived.
- (2) The absence of good is neither prudentially good nor bad for the non-existent person who would have lived.
- (3) Hence, “coming into existence, far from constituting a net benefit, always constitutes a net harm.”

The flaw should be apparent. The conclusion does not follow. Rather than (3), Benatar should have concluded:

- (3') Hence, not coming into existence always constitutes a net benefit for the non-existent person who would have lived.

But this conclusion does not get us anti-natalism, not even close. It does not tell us that coming into existence is always better than not existing. It simply tells us that not coming into existence is always a net good. This does not mean that coming into existence could not be better, that the net good could not be greater. To the contrary, it most certainly can.

Benatar anticipates something much like this objection:²⁶

Now some people might accept the asymmetry represented [. . .], agree that we need to compare Scenario A with Scenario B, but deny that this leads to the conclusion that B is always a harm. The argument is that we must assign positive or negative (or neutral) values to each of the quadrants, and that if we assign them in what those advancing this view take to be the most reasonable way, we find that coming into existence is

²⁶ Benatar (2006, pp.44–8).

sometimes preferable. [. . .] Doing this, we find that A is preferable to B where (2) is more than twice the value of (1).²⁷

In reply, he says that there are numerous problems with the objection, but he only refers to two quick issues.²⁸ Neither adequately addresses the problem. I will start with the second, an analogy.

3.1 The Analogical Reply

Benatar argues that favoring existence over non-existence, as I did above, is much like saying that it is better to be sick and have the capacity for quick recovery than it is to never to get sick.²⁹ But, of course, it is better not to get sick. It does not matter if the person who never gets sick lacks the capacity for quick recovery. It is still better to never get sick.

Scenario A (Sickly)	Scenario B (Healthy)
(1) Sickness	(3) Health
(2) Capacity to recover quickly	(4) No capacity to recover quickly

In this analogy, never existing is compared to never getting sick (Scenario B). Conversely, existing with a net good life is supposed to be akin to getting sick and having a capacity to recover quickly (Scenario A). Benatar argues that the kind of reasoning that led to the conclusion that it is better to exist, would also suggest that it is better to get sick if one would have the capacity to recover quickly. Clearly this is not the case. So, the reply concludes, we should reject this mode of reasoning.

But what other mode do we have? How should we do the comparison? And, as Benatar notes, it is a comparison that we are after: “We are comparing possible worlds—one in which a person exists and one in which he does not.”³⁰ The problem is that no other candidate for how to run the comparison on the table. Surely we should not ignore the goods of life when assessing whether it would be better to be than not be. Surely the good matters when trying to determine whether a life is worth starting.

The problem is not in the reasoning behind my objection, but in Benatar’s analogy. Having the capacity to recover quickly is not analogous to the goods of life. The capacity to recover quickly is merely instrumentally prudentially good. It is good merely because it allows us to regain health and enjoy life, both of which are intrinsically good.³¹ Hence, the sickness example does not contain any intrinsic prudential good in the equivalent of quadrant 2—the quadrant where the goods of life appear in the objection. There is nothing in quadrant 2 worth having that makes up for the bads of quadrant 1. This is not the case

²⁷ Benatar (2006, pp.45–6).

²⁸ If the first two replies fail, as I think they do, the asymmetry based argument stands or falls on Benatar’s second argument—the argument from pessimism.

²⁹ Benatar (2006, p.47).

³⁰ Benatar (2013, p.125).

³¹ Metz (2011, p.248) notes that the capacity would simply not be good for the person who never gets sick.

with existence. Therefore, the analogy is inapt. Benatar's reply does not meet the objection.

Benatar recognizes this problem and defends the analogy in an obscure paragraph. He argues that if the analogy had used an intrinsic good, then one might think its absence in quadrant #4 would be a deprivation. This would bias the analogy. So, he is forced to use an instrumental good—the capacity to recover quickly. Remember, he is trying to come up with a case where there is no bad in quadrant #4. The asymmetry tells us that the absence of pleasure is not bad for the non-existent. However, a deprivation would be bad. So, quadrant #4 cannot include a deprivation. Instead, the analogy needs the mere absence of a deprivation. He argues that there is no way to indicate an absence of a deprivation for a living person except by using instrumental goods. Again, the worry is that absence of an intrinsic good for an existing person is a deprivation. But the absence of a deprivation is not. The lack of the capacity to recover works because it is a mere absence of a deprivation. That is why he uses it in the analogy. Since this avoids the potential problem of using an intrinsic good, he thinks that the analogy is fair.³²

Benatar's defense of the analogy is not convincing. The chief problem is that the absence of a defect does not make an analogy apt. The analogy is most certainly inapt. There is no way around that. Just because it does not have additional flaws does not mean that it does not have others. Further, the motivation for the use of instrumental goods is questionable. The absence of a good is not always, perhaps not even typically, a deprivation, if by "deprivation" we mean bad. The absence of a good is not always bad; sometimes it is just less good.

Consider an analogy: Lucky has a mild headache, but finds a good deal of cash on the way home. Not-So-Lucky does not have a headache, but he does not find a pile of cash on the way home. Who is better off? It is not entirely clear. If the pile of cash is big enough, then it sure seems that Lucky is better off, despite the headache. If not, then Not-So-Lucky looks to be better off. This does not provide support for Benatar's claim, but it is not for the reasons he mentions. There is no worry here that the absence of the cash is bad for Not-So-Lucky. No, it is just not as good. It is akin to the absence of pleasure for the non-existent. It is "not bad, but not good either."³³ Hence, the analogy tracks the asymmetry and avoids the problems Benatar was trying to side-step, but it does not support anti-natalism. It takes a false analogy to do that.

The problems with Benatar's analogy are not confined to worries about intrinsic and instrumental goods. There is a more significant defect. The value of the capacity to recover quickly is exhausted by the amount of health that it saves. Someone who never gets sick will have more health than someone who does, other things being equal. Hence, in lives of equal length, column A could never have more goods than B. The problem is that when we compare existence with non-existence, there is no reason to think that the situation is the same as it is between Sickly and Healthy. Sickly can never have more of the relevant good than can Healthy. But there can be more net good on the existence side than the non-existence side of the original chart. Since the Sickly vs. Healthy analogy does not allow for this, the analogy is false. It fails to properly model the comparison between existence and non-existence. This gives us an additional reason to reject Benatar's reply.

³² Benatar (2006, p.43).

³³ Benatar (2006, p.40).

3.2 The Underlying Problem

We can put aside the analogy. In reply to Skott Brill's criticisms of the Sick vs. Healthy analogy, Benatar argues that the failure of the analogy would not show that the asymmetry is a failure.³⁴ But that's not what's at issue. What's at issue is how we should assign values to the diagram given the asymmetry. Benatar seems to suggest that the asymmetry requires that we black out the pleasure in quadrant 2 and just compare the boxes in the top row—the pain and the absence of pain: “One does not need the analogy to show that absent pleasures in the never existing [quadrant 4] should not be assigned the value of zero.”³⁵ If we followed his lead, this would indeed get Benatar an anti-natalist result, but the asymmetry does not support such a move.

Benatar thinks that the asymmetry has the implication that quadrant 4 could never be less good than quadrant 3. This is because he thinks that existence is not a “real advantage.”³⁶ He thinks that a “real advantage” is an advantage that it would be bad to lack. The line reasoning seems to be as follows:

- (1) According to the asymmetry thesis, it is not bad for the non-existent to lack the goods of life.
- (2) For good G to be a real advantage for subject S, S's lack of G must be bad for S.
- (3) If it is not bad for the non-existent to lack the goods of life, then the goods of life do not constitute a real advantage for the existent.
- (4) Hence, the goods of life do not constitute a real advantage for the existent.

If what it is for something to be better is for it to constitute a real advantage, then the goods of life would not be better than their absence for the non-existent. It would follow that the goods of quadrant 3 are not relatively better than their absence in quadrant 4.³⁷ Hence, it wouldn't ever be better to have been.

The above formalization reveals that anti-natalism is not supported by the asymmetry alone; Benatar also requires a dubious notion of what constitutes an advantage. But I see no reason to adopt this notion of real, or genuine, advantages. There are real advantages that it would just be less good to lack. It is not bad for me that I didn't find Aladdin's lamp on the way home from the grocery store today; no, it is just less good. Nor is it bad for me that I was born without the powers of Superman, though it would surely be an advantage to be able to fly like a bird and leap over tall buildings in a single bound.³⁸ My life would be better for me with super-powers, but it is not bad for me that I am not Superman. Hence, if we reject Benatar's claim about what constitutes a real advantage, then we have no reason to think that existence isn't sometimes better than—a real advantage over—non-existence.

³⁴ Brill (2012). Benatar (2012, p.142).

³⁵ Benatar (2012, p.142, n.46). Why value neutrality is not best represented as a 0 is unclear. Although this is the central problem for the asymmetry argument, Benatar has never offered a clear statement of his reply. Too much of it is buried in dense notes, such as the one cited here. Benatar (2006, p.41–49, 2012, p.142–144, and 2013, p.137) all grapple with the issue, but it is difficult to see the solution. In what follows, I do my best.

³⁶ Benatar (2006, p.14). The “real” adjective is far more prominent in the early article length version of the argument. It has been removed from key passages that are otherwise verbatim.

³⁷ Benatar (2012, p.144) holds that the absence of pleasure has neutral intrinsic value in quadrant 4, “but it is also not worse than the pleasure in (2).” It might appear worse, but worse than is a relative assessment. Relatively, given that there is no one deprived, it is not worse. Hence, the good in quadrant 2 is not better than the neutral value in quadrant 4. Putting aside Bradley's (2010) troubling concerns about the odd logic of betterness on display here, I don't see any argument for Benatar's claim here other than that stemming from the notion of real advantages. Otherwise, his claim is unsupported. As I argue, it is not an implication of the asymmetry thesis alone. The fact that quadrant 4 is not bad, does not mean that quadrant 2 is not better.

³⁸ Draper (1999) uses a similar set of examples in developing a theory of misfortunes.

Here is another way to think about the problem: The absence of pleasure might not be bad for the non-existent. Sure. This is what the asymmetry says. But this does not mean that the presence of pleasure is not good for the existent. Of course the goods of life are good. Benatar argues that “for the good to be an advantage over non-existence, it would have to have been the case that its absence were bad.”³⁹ But, again, this is simply not so. Benatar is wrong. This is key: A good can be better than something that is not bad. Lots of a good is better than just a little. And a little good is better than no good at all. But less good is not bad. Confusing the two leads Benatar to incorrectly conclude that the asymmetry has larger implications than it actually does.

There are two issues here: (1) Is it bad for the non-existent to not get the goods of life? And, (2) is it better to get some goods rather than no goods? I agree that we might want to say that the absence of pleasure is not bad for the non-existent.⁴⁰ Perhaps, as Benatar suggests it has no intrinsic value—“it is intrinsically value neutral.”⁴¹ But something that is not bad can still be less good than an alternative.⁴² In the case of a life of pronounced net good, it is less good to not exist, but it is not bad.⁴³ That’s all the asymmetry implies. Hence, even if we accept the asymmetry, the anti-natalist conclusion does not follow. Consider a life of pronounced net good: “When we compare two possible worlds and we judge the matter in terms of the interests of the person who exists in one but not in the other of these worlds, we judge the world in which he does [. . .] exist to be better.”⁴⁴

It might be that it is never bad to not be brought into existence. It might always be a net good for the non-existent. It also might be the case that it is sometimes bad to be brought into existence. But none of this implies that that it is never better to have been. The asymmetry gives us no reason to think otherwise.

In the next section, I will provide additional defense of this mode of comparison. But it will help to respond to his first reply as well. His first reply to my objection raises an important insight about lives worth living. Although some lives might enjoy a net balance of pleasure, they still might not be worth living. At certain levels, pains can be so intense as to make a life not worth living.⁴⁵ If so, simply subtracting the prudential good from the bad will not tell us whether a life is worth starting. Indeed, I think this is probably the case, but it does not provide much defense for the asymmetry argument. It only shows that this style of calculation can go wrong, not that it does in nearly all cases. For that, Benatar would have to show that nearly all human lives exceed the pain threshold. As we will see, the argument from pessimism does not get us nearly that pessimistic of a conclusion.⁴⁶ But it does present

³⁹ Benatar (2006, p.41).

⁴⁰ Benatar (2006, p.40) notes that it is most accurate to say that the absence of pleasure is “not bad” for the non-existent.

⁴¹ Benatar (2012, p.144).

⁴² Draper (1999) and Smuts (2012) argue against comparative notions of bad. Benatar (2013, p.128) quickly claims that it is “axiologically” good to avoid pain. By this he means that it is prudentially better. That the avoidance of pain is good for me. It makes my life better. Here, he adopts a comparative notion of good. His theory of what constitutes an advantage is a symmetrical view about the bad: the absence of a good is bad. I think both claims are wrong, but I am only taking issue with the claim about the bad. I deny that less good is (axiologically) bad; it’s just less good.

⁴³ Clearly Benatar thinks that we can compare existence and non-existence, he does so. As mentioned earlier, he says so explicitly in Benatar (2013, pp.125 and 126).

⁴⁴ Benatar (2013, p.126).

⁴⁵ Adams (2003) makes a similar point regarding horrendous evils.

⁴⁶ Metz (2011, p.238) also argues that the asymmetry argument is dependent on the argument from pessimism.

a serious reply to my objection. To see why, I first need to a bit more about what I think makes a life worth living.

In the next section I paint a general theory for evaluating the worth of a life.

4 A Life Worth Living

The question, “Would it be better never to have been?” is ambiguous. The ambiguity concerns the kind of better at issue. There are many kinds. For instance, we might ask the question in terms of prudential value: Is it better for the one who will live to be born or not? The phrase “good for” identifies this as a question about welfare. But this is not the only question we can ask. In fact, I think that it is not the most important question.⁴⁷

Alternatively, we might ask whether it is all things considered better for a person to have been born. Here we are not so much concerned with whether the life was good for the one who lives it, but whether it was valuable in the wider scheme of things: Was the life causally responsible for more good than bad? We might say that this is a question about the significance of the life. More controversially, we might even say that this is a question about the meaningfulness of the life.⁴⁸

Once again, I am not sure this is exactly the question we should be asking. I think Benatar is right to suggest that what we want to know is whether a life is worth starting. That is, we want to know if the life is worthwhile, if it is worth living. Although related, this is not the same question as whether the life is meaningful.⁴⁹ Nor is it the same question as whether it is sufficiently high in welfare. Here is where I differ with Benatar.⁵⁰ Perhaps the two questions will have the same answer, but most likely worth is not strictly a matter of welfare.

Just as some things that do not promote our self-interest are nevertheless worth doing, some lives low in welfare appear to be worth living. When we wonder whether some activity is worth

⁴⁷ If my distinction ultimately turns out to be untenable, the rest of my argument survives: Simply read my account of what makes a life worth lives as an objective list theory of welfare. Since Benatar intends for his arguments to apply to objective list theories of welfare, my objections hit the mark. We are not talking past each other.

⁴⁸ For a current survey of the literature, see Metz (2007).

⁴⁹ Only a few have drawn a distinction between what makes a life worth living and what makes a life meaningful. As far as I can tell, Baier (1988) provides the only sustained discussion of the distinction. Baier (1997, pp.67–69) also makes a few passing remarks on worth. Apart from this, only Trisel (2007) argues for the distinction, though he offers what appears to be a welfarist notion of worth. Metz (2007, p.213) makes a clear statement of the difference, but provides little defense. Metz (2002, p.788, n.10) also briefly notes the distinction. Blumenfeld (2009, p.8, n.2) seconds Metz’s proposal. Haack (2002) proposes that we ditch the concept of meaning for worth. She does not explain the conceptual difference. Wollheim (1984, pp.444–8) proposes a distinction between a life worth living and a worthwhile life. I decline adopting this terminology, since there is better, more familiar conceptual machinery: his distinction closely tracks that between welfare and meaning. Other commentators, such as Wolf (2010), understandably interchange concepts such as “the good life,” (pp.12, 52, and 118) a life that would seem a benefit (pp.21, 23, and 27), the “fully successful life” (p.32), the “fully flourishing life” (p.12), and the life good for the one who lives it (p.32). Since, she thinks that the notion is different from self-interest (pp.56, 63, and 116) and happiness (p.109), it appears that we might have in mind a similar notion. By “the good life” Hurka (2011) seems to have in mind a life worth living. He too defends an objective list account. Haybron (2010, p.38) refers to “the good life” as “a choiceworthy life on the whole.” This closely tracks the notion I defend. Here I will avoid the vexed term “the good life,” since some, such as Feldman (2006), use it to refer to a life high in individual welfare, though this usage is somewhat aberrant. Baier (1997, pp.67–9) makes a few passing remarks on worth. McDermott (1991) and Harries (1991) putatively discuss worth, and both are cited as making a contribution to the literature, but neither directly addresses the topic.

⁵⁰ The limited appeals to the notion in the animal rights and population ethics literature seem to use the notion as indicating a minimum threshold of positive welfare.

doing, our only thought isn't "What's in it for me?" Intuitively, the same should hold for lives. Conversely, some lives high in welfare are not worth living. Most plausibly, a supremely happy Hitler does not live a life worth living. It would be highly counter-intuitive to suggest otherwise. More needs to be said, but these considerations suggest that worth and welfare are distinct.

One can live a life of great hardship and suffering—one low on most theories of welfare—that might nevertheless be worth living. Conversely, one can live a life high in prudential value that is not worth living. The same goes for a meaningful life. What we are after is a concept larger than either welfare or meaning.⁵¹ We want to know what makes a life worth living.⁵²

It is out of scope to defend a fully fleshed out theory here. I can only provide a sketch. As a tool to theory development, I suggest a rough test to help track the general extension of the concept of a life worth living. As we shall see, the test cannot serve as an analysis, but it narrows in on the notion.

Here's the test: a *life worth living* (LWL) is a life that a benevolent caretaker, given a synoptic preview, would allow someone to live rather than to never have been.⁵³ Imagine that the caretaker is a sympathetic judge who wants everyone to live a life they should not resent given all the facts. This suggestion comes from Bernard Williams: "I see no way of denying that one who resents his own existence prefers that he should not have existed; and no way of interpreting that preference except in terms of thinking that one's life is not worth living."⁵⁴

This is a pre-existence test (PET) for the worth of a life.⁵⁵ This is not the same question as whether one would choose to live one's life over again.⁵⁶ One can coherently decide not to live a life over again that one should choose to start. At the end of life we have excellent reasons not to repeat ourselves, reasons that we do not have prior to existing.

I offer this test for inclusion in the history of other failed, but instructive tests for related concepts. Feldman proposes a "crib test" for isolating the concept of welfare: Imagine looking down at your infant child in its crib.⁵⁷ Think of all the things that you want for the child: close friends, a good education, an interesting career, etc. These are things that contribute to the child's welfare.⁵⁸ The crib test is designed to hone in on welfare considerations. But it does not do so cleanly. An insane parent might have strange desires for her child. She might want him to become the first person to consume an entire helicopter by grinding it up and eating it bit by bit.⁵⁹ Or a religious fanatic might want her child to become a martyr for the faith. But these desires are not for the welfare of the child.

⁵¹ Kagan (1992 and 1994) makes an important distinction between me and my life. He defends a narrow theory of wellbeing, of what is good for me. As for what improves the value of my life, he says very little. I think that the welfare / worth distinction captures what is important in Kagan's proposal.

⁵² In her critical study, Harman (2009, pp.777 and 783) phrases the issue in terms of what makes a life worth living. But she does not offer a theory. Nor does she make a distinction between worth and welfare.

⁵³ Please put aside worries about foreknowledge and free will. Such concerns can be avoided, or obscured, by re-phrasing the test into an end of life counter-factual evaluation of this general form: Would a benevolent caretaker with knowledge of your life as you lived it have allowed you to have been born, if it had been up to her?

⁵⁴ Williams (1995, p.228). This is illuminating, but the condition is not necessary, since someone such as Hitler, who lived a worthless life, might not resent his existence.

⁵⁵ Smuts (forthcoming) critically evaluates four other tests to the same end.

⁵⁶ Blumenfeld (2009, p.386, n.36). The recurrence test is not a good test for whether a life is worth living. Blumenfeld (2009, p.378) concurs.

⁵⁷ Feldman (2006, pp.9–10) and Bradley (2009, pp.2–3) discuss the test. Adams (1999, p.97) proposes a similar test. Feldman (2011, pp.164–170) backs off the crib test in favor of triangulation.

⁵⁸ Darwall (2002, pp.4–8) offers a related suggestion: What is in someone's welfare is what someone who cares about her would want for her. It's what we want for her sake. Bradley (2009, pp.3) finds the notion of a "sake" unilluminating, as does Heathwood (2008, pp.53 and 54 n.11).

⁵⁹ Bradley (2009, pp.3)

The problems for the crib test are not confined to the desires of insane and fanatical parents. Most people, apart from gangsters and other psychopaths, prefer that their children be decent people, even if virtue does not always make them better off prudentially.⁶⁰ Hence, it appears that the crib test does a better job at tracking the sane, moral parent's conception of what makes a life all-things-considered good than it does at tracking what is merely good for their child.

The pre-crib test is designed to explicitly incorporate broader considerations, such as concerns about meaning. Many think that meaning is best evaluated from a synoptic first-person perspective—the deathbed.⁶¹ Imagine lying on your deathbed thinking about all the things you wish you had done. Such thoughts likely concern meaning. For instance, you might wish that you had taken a rare chance to do something big, rather than chosen the safe, comfortable option. The deathbed test is a useful tool for tracking concerns about meaning, but it, too, suffers from over-inclusiveness. In the moments before death, just as one might regret a dearth of accomplishments, one might also regret not having had enough fun. Perhaps, once again, the deathbed test better tracks what makes a life all-things-considered good than it does at tracking meaning alone.

I suspect that the crib test and the deathbed test both help us identify what we think makes a life worth living. But neither is wholly adequate to the task. The pre-existence test fares better. PET is designed to incorporate concerns about both welfare and significance. It differs from the others in who makes the evaluation. PET is superior to the crib test and the deathbed test because it avoids the troublesome relativity of both. A selfish parent wants the wrong things for her child. And an evil person on his deathbed might regret not causing enough pointless suffering. In contrast, the ideal evaluator in the pre-crib test suffers no such defects.

It is important to note that, unlike Saul Smilansky, I am not speaking of subjective preferences, but of whether the life is objectively worth living.⁶² This does not mean that the pre-existence test excludes the subjective experience or the felt satisfaction of the one living the life. Most plausibly, these are factored into the overall welfare value. And certainly the welfare value of a life is an important factor to consider when determining whether it is worth living. Once again, the question is not whether given your preferences would you choose to be born, but rather, would, perhaps, a benevolent caretaker who knows all the facts of your future existence allow you to be born.⁶³

As a criterion for what makes a life worth living, the pre-existence test has come under some criticism.⁶⁴ Smilansky argues that one might think that one's life is worthwhile, but also think that it would have been better not to have been born, or vice versa. One might think this for a variety of reasons. For instance, severe self-loathing might make one wish to have never been born, but one might still live a life worth living. Alternatively, an intense episode of pain might make one's life not worth starting, but not make it not worth living.

⁶⁰ I assume that morality and self-interest can conflict. This is the default view. The burden is on anyone who suggests otherwise. I will return to this later in the paper.

⁶¹ It is fairly common to motivate the concern this way. See: Frankl (1959, p.117), Metz (2001, p.147), Wolf (2010, p.8), and Weilenberg (2005). In contrast, Sumner (1999, pp.22 and 24) uses a deathbed test to raise thoughts about welfare.

⁶² Smilansky (1997, p.241). Yeates (2012, p.2) presents a subjective theory as well: these are lives that “from the animal's point of view [are] ‘worth having’ or ‘worth avoiding’”. He thinks it is a matter of “overall welfare” (forthcoming, p.3).

⁶³ Blumenfeld (2009, p.383) suggests that idea of a caretaker for determining whether it would be good to live again.

⁶⁴ Smilansky (1997).

I cannot deal with all of Smilansky's objections here, but I do not think any of them are compelling. Consider a self-loathing person, the otherwise happy child-molester: Why should we think that the happy-child molester lives a life worth living? Is it because he is happy? Why would that be sufficient? Most plausibly, a life that significantly advances horrendous evil is not worth living. Hitler, Pol Pot, and Stalin lived worthless lives. It does not matter if they were all blissfully happy. Moral repugnance is sufficient to sap a life of positive worth.⁶⁵ And the happy child-molester lives a morally repugnant life, at least in one regard.

Or, consider Smilansky's other example, that of the cancer survivor who finds her life worth living, but thinks that an intense bout of suffering in the past makes it such that it would have been better if she were never born. This objection fails as well. It confuses two distinct questions. The confusion is between: (1) a life worth starting and (2) a life worth continuing. Benatar helpfully suggests that the term "a life worth living" is ambiguous. It might mean either. What we are concerned with is whether life is worth starting, not whether it is worth continuing.

I propose that the best way to understand the difference is to see it as one of duration. A life worth continuing is one where the period ahead is worth living.⁶⁶ A life worth starting is one where the entire life is worth living. When I refer to "a life worth living," I have in mind the entire life. Smilansky's cancer survivor's life is worth continuing, since the period ahead is worth living, nevertheless, the life might not be worth starting. Given the choice, if the suffering were as bad as we are asked to imagine, then perhaps the life as a whole is not worth living. There is no problem for the pre-existence test here.

A more pressing problem for the pre-existence test is that it has trouble with border-line cases. Putting Benatar's worries aside for the moment, there are clear cases of lives worth living. They are high in various objective goods, such as friendship, love, knowledge, pleasure, meaning, and moral worth. Informed of all the facts of such a life, a benevolent caretaker would surely allow someone to live such a life. Conversely, some lives are clearly not worth living.⁶⁷ A life that significantly advances horrendous evil is not worth living. Again, it is not controversial to say that Hitler, Pol Pot, and Stalin lived worthless lives. Likewise, lives spent in persistent, incapacitating agony are not worth living. As these examples indicate, there are clear cases of lives not worth living, and there are clear cases of lives worth living.

The problem is that there are not so clear cases. Worth comes in degrees. Lives entirely consumed by meaningless activities, such as collecting rubber bands or making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*, appear to be less worth living than those spent in pursuit of valuable ends.⁶⁸ They appear to be wasted.⁶⁹ But are they not worth living? It is hard to say. In addition to the problems that one encounters when trying to weigh various kinds of goods and bads, there appears to be a grey zone. Yeates proposes that between the thresholds of lives worth living (LWL) and lives worth avoiding (LWA), there are lives worth nothing (LWN).⁷⁰ Although I am not sure that this is the best term for the category, since these lives might have some worth, his suggestion that there is a middle category seems plausible. We can refer to these as "lives worth neither" (LWN).

Assuming that there is a middle category, the question is this: Should a benevolent caretaker prevent one from living a LWN? It is not clear. But the test forces a decision. If the caretaker does not consent, then we are certainly not in life worth living territory.

⁶⁵ Here I echo a point Adams (2003) makes about meaning.

⁶⁶ Benatar thinks that the two require very different standards. I disagree. DeGrazia (2010, p.320) also questions the need for different standards.

⁶⁷ Kavka (1981, p.105) calls lives deficient in such goods "restricted lives." These, he argues, are less worth living.

⁶⁸ Wolf (1997 and 2010).

⁶⁹ Kamm (2003).

⁷⁰ Yeates (2012).

However, we also might not be faced with a full fledged life worth avoiding. But then why should the caretaker prevent it? The problem is that the test is binary, but threshold concepts are not. This problem is not insurmountable. A plausible solution is to say that LWN's are simply those where the balance of reasons favors neither.

There is no need to explore this issue further here. Since the pre-existence test is not an analysis of the concept of a life-worth living, the objection does not cast doubt on its usefulness in helping us track the general extension of the term. For present purposes, what matters is what makes a life worth living. The question is: What should ground the decision of the benevolent caretakers?

I have already put a suggestion on the table. Although flawed, the pre-existence test is useful for showing the virtues of my suggestion. I propose that lives worth living are those high in various objective goods and low in objective bads. A life worth avoiding is the opposite: it is one high in bads and low in goods.⁷¹ I claim no originality in the list of goods, but for the sake of simplicity, we can think of them as involving two main categories, those of welfare and meaning.⁷² The theory I offer is an *objective list theory* (OLT) of what makes a life worth living.⁷³ Its principle virtue is that it helps capture the importance of a wide swath of concerns that do not clearly impact one's welfare. For instance, it seems that I can self-sacrificially pursue ends that do not make me better off prudentially, but nevertheless enhance the worth of my life.

So far, I have painted only a hazy picture of what makes a life worth living. I have left much unspecified. Other than reply to a few concerns about the pre-existence test, I have not offered much in the way of argument for this view, nor do I intend to here. It would take at least another paper to develop the view in detail. Here, I simply propose that the theory; the distinctions between LWL, LWA, and LWN; and the pre-existence test are useful conceptual machinery to be defended in more detail elsewhere. If you do not accept the proposed distinction between welfare and worth, simply see my theory as an objective list theory of prudential value. The implications for Benatar's position are roughly the same.

Regardless of whether we should distinguish between welfare and worth as I suggest, in order to determine whether we have wronged someone by bringing them into existence according to objective list style of assessment, we should look to the objective goods of that life. Consider a LWL: If you have brought someone into existence who lives a life worth living, it defies credibility to suggest that you have wronged that person.⁷⁴ How could it be wrong to bring someone into existence who lives a life high in net objective good?⁷⁵ However, if you bring someone into existence who lives a life worth avoiding, then matters are far different. These are the lives that we should avoid causing. Happily, many lives are not LWA's. Accordingly, anti-natalism is implausible.

⁷¹ The calculation will have to account for the intensity as well as overall quantity. An extremely painful episode might make the entire life worth avoiding. Also, an extremely long life that is barely positive in goods might not just be a LWN, it might be a LWA. It is out of scope to sort out these kinds of details. See: Parfit (1984).

⁷² Metz (2011, p.249) argues that more than welfare is relevant to whether a life is worth living. I agree.

⁷³ Some of the more influential defenses of the OLT of well-being (not worth) include: Brink (1989, pp.221–36), Hooker (1996), Nozick (1989), and Scanlon (1993).

⁷⁴ If harm is purely a matter of welfare, and worth is not, you could sometimes harm someone by bringing them into a life worth living. For instance, the welfare level could be negative but the meaning level high. Sure. But that does not mean that you have done something wrong, not unless welfarism about morality is true. I do not accept welfarism, but a defense of anti-welfarism is out of scope. See Keller (2008) and Sumner (1999) for overviews of the issue. Note that Benatar's argument is not confined to these odd edge cases. He claims that it is *always* a net harm to be brought into existence.

⁷⁵ Bradley (2010, p.5) argues that if the good outweighs the bad, then a life is worth starting. Metz (2011, p.241) and DeGrazia (2010, p.323–4) arrive at a similar conclusion. Due to limitations of scope, I must put aside concerns arising from the non-identity problem. For a foundational exchange on the issue see: Kavka (1981) and Parfit (1981).

5 Benatar's Argument from Pessimism

Benatar anticipates this style of objection. His second argument for anti-natalism—the argument from pessimism—concludes that all human lives are LWA's. Even if we do not accept the argument from asymmetry, he argues that we have good reason to think that everyone is overall wronged by being brought into existence. Benatar's second argument has two main parts. The first part is intended to explain away our general optimism about the value of our lives. I will not consider this part of the argument.

The second part is where the real work is done. Benatar argues that according to the most plausible theories of what makes a life good for the one who lives it—hedonism, preferentism, and objective list accounts—human life is bad, very bad. I will only consider in depth Benatar's arguments against objective list style evaluations. Although hedonism and preferentism are plausible theories of what makes a life good for the one who lives it (i.e. welfare), they are not plausible theories of what makes a life worth living. Both imply that a happy Hitler (or a Hitler who had more desires satisfied than frustrated) lives a life worth living. This disqualifies both as theories of worth.

Since the hedonic value of a life is one of the objective goods that count according to the OLT, it will pay to raise a brief worry for his hedonic pessimism. Following Schopenhauer, the putative undesirableness of desiring plays a central role in Benatar's pessimism. It seems that we are more often than not in a state of desiring. Our lives are on balance bad in this regard, since desiring is bad state to be in. But there is good reason to think that this argument rests on a false generalization about the undesirableness of desiring.⁷⁶ If the pain of desire were so bad, we should be willing to eat a meal that would forever satiate our hunger, drink a libation that would forever quench our thirst, or take a pill that would do away with our libido. But we refuse. These are curses, not cures.⁷⁷ It appears that desiring is not as undesirable as Benatar and Schopenhauer make out.

I will put the issue aside. Although the hedonic value of a life is a likely component of the objective worth of the life, it is not decisive. We can concede Benatar's pessimistic hedonic calculus and still deny his rejection of objective list optimism.

As I noted in the previous section, I see no reason to deny that many human lives are high in the objective goods that make a life worth living. However, Benatar argues that our lives are poor on an objective list theory. If Benatar is right, this would be a significant problem for my optimistic conclusion. Benatar begins by looking at the criteria by which items get to be included on the objective list. He thinks that the items on the list are not necessarily good from the perspective of eternity, but merely good compared to other human lives:

They are taken to be objective only in the sense that they do not vary from person to person. They are not taken to be objective in the sense of judging what a good life is *sub specie aeternitatis*. Constructing lists *sub specie humanitatis* would be reasonable if one wanted to determine how well a particular life goes in comparison with other (human) lives. But knowing how well a particular life goes in comparison with other lives tells us very little about the baseline—how good human life is.⁷⁸

The complaint seems to be that the objective list style assessment includes goods that are only valuable in comparison to other human lives. But if we thought about what was

⁷⁶ Edwards (1979, p.94) argues that desiring is often pleasant: "This is the whole point of standing on the corner and watching all the girls go by."

⁷⁷ Smuts (2008) defends this view. Soll (1998) develops this argument.

⁷⁸ Benatar (2006, p.81–2).

genuinely, non-comparatively good, we would see that these lowly human goods are not worth having. We should set our sights higher.

It is more appropriate to assess human lives *sub specie aeternitatis*. That is just the case when we wish to determine how good human life in general is. The quality of human life is then found wanting.⁷⁹

Benatar offers some evidence in support of the claim that we are indeed evaluating human lives from the perspective of humanity. We find it tragic if someone dies at 40, but we do not think it is a misfortune that we do not live a few hundred years. He notes that “we do not take that which is beyond our reach as something that would be a crucial good.”⁸⁰ This suggests that we are using the normal human life span as the basis of comparison. But if we really want to know how good human life is, if we want to know whether human lives are worth living, we need to consider them from the perspective of the universe.

Considered from the perspective of the universe, we find that the core goods on the objective list are meager at best. Consider meaning: Benatar echoes Richard Taylor, saying:

Conscious life, although but a blip on the radar of cosmic time, is laden with suffering—suffering that is directed to no end other than its own perpetuation. [. . .] From the perspective of the universe, the lives of both the philanthropist and the grass-counter are meaningless.⁸¹

When we assess human life from the outside, we will find that our lives are meaningless. Curing cancer is no more objectively meaningful than eating excrement, since the ultimate outcome of both is the same: The ultimate outcome is a cold, lifeless entropic universe. Bertrand Russell puts it succinctly:

all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and [. . .] the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.⁸²

The argument against meaning appears to be this: The final outcome of all human actions is worthless. And nothing can be meaningful if the ultimate outcome is worthless. Hence, no human activities are any more meaningful than any others.

There is much to take issue with here. Each move in Benatar’s argument from pessimism contains errors in reasoning. I will move backwards, beginning with his skepticism about the possibility of meaningful human lives. Benatar rejects subjectivist theories of the meaning of life. Subjectivist theories hold that the meaning one’s life is constituted by one’s reactions. Typically, subjectivists hold that meaning is strictly a matter of fulfillment. Benatar thinks that the available alternatives to subjectivism all imply that life is objectively meaningless. It is objectively meaningless because it leads to nothing. This is a familiar argument. Wielenberg calls it the “Final Outcome Argument.”⁸³ The problem is that the final outcome argument is not sound.

Benatar, Taylor, and Russell give us good reason to think that the meaning of life cannot come from enduring accomplishments, since nothing we do will endure for long at all. But

⁷⁹ Benatar (2006, p.86).

⁸⁰ Benatar (2006, p.82).

⁸¹ Benatar (2006, p.83). Taylor (2008) beautifully expresses a similar view.

⁸² Russell (2008, p.56)

⁸³ Weilenberg (2005, p.16).

this does not give us any reason to think that all projects are of equal worth. Why would it? The argument contains a false premise. There is no reason to think that the value of an activity is entirely determined by its ultimate outcome. Certainly there is value in making someone laugh, even if they do not laugh forever. Surely there is value in providing a hot meal for the hungry, even if they are not satiated for all eternity. And surely it is good to cure cancer, even if humanity does not endure until the end of time. Something need not be permanent in order to be valuable while it exists. As Paul Edwards notes, to think otherwise is to exhibit an irrational, arbitrary preference for the distant future.⁸⁴ If we recognize that there is value in doing good, certainly we should think that this enhances the meaning of one's life. Hence, I see no reason to accept Benatar's claim that human lives are meaningless from the perspective of the universe.

Moving step back further in the argument, I think that we have good reason to doubt Benatar's claim that the OLT optimist must adopt the perspective of humanity. His example is that of a tragic death at a relatively early age. Perhaps this is best described as a misfortune. It might be that we evaluate some kinds of misfortunes via such comparisons. We do not think it a misfortune that we cannot fly through the air or leap tall buildings in a single bound.⁸⁵ But this does not show that according to an OLT assessment, a life of only 40 years is not worth living. Isn't that what we are concerned with? If so, we should stick to the subject. Would a life of a mere 40 years be worth starting? If such a life is filled with objective goods, it sure seems to be a LWL. Benatar gives no reason to think otherwise.

About our cognitive capacities, he argues that they make our lives richer than those of primates, but "we must concede that it would still be better if we were better equipped cognitively."⁸⁶ But what is this concession supposed to imply? It does not imply that our lives are bad. It does not give us reason to think that our lives are not worth living. No, it merely tells us what we already know: things could be better. We could be smarter. We could live richer lives. Indeed. But this does not provide any support for pessimism.

Benatar argues that from the perspective of the universe "the quality of human life is [. . .] found wanting." This statement is ambiguous. By "wanting" he might mean "could be better." Alternatively, he might mean "bad," or "not good."⁸⁷ Surely, compared with the lives of gods, human life could be better.⁸⁸ There is no denying that. But this does not mean that human life is bad. If happiness is good, it is good. If helping others is good, it is good. If making something of beauty is good, it is good. If falling in love is good, it is good. Who cares if we can conceive of an even greater state of happiness, better forms of care, more fantastically beautiful creations, or richer forms of love? The fact that things could be better does not make them bad. This is not a case of seeing the glass half empty, but of calling a half full glass completely empty. That is wrong, not just pessimistic. To be worth living a life need not be the best conceivable life. No, it merely needs to be better than never to have been.

Once again Benatar fails to see that the opposite of better is not always bad; sometimes it is just less good. This mistake is fatal to his argument against OLT optimism, just as it undermines the asymmetry argument.

⁸⁴ Edwards (2008, p.121). Weilenberg (2005, p.29) and Wolf (2010) make this point. Nagel (2004) seems to raise a similar objection.

⁸⁵ Draper (1999).

⁸⁶ Benatar (2006, p.84). Benatar (2012, p.151) raises similar considerations.

⁸⁷ DeGrazia (2010, p.328) disagrees.

⁸⁸ But not in every way. I cannot explore the issue here, but it is worth noting a heresy ala Pico della Mirandola: humans can realize values not available to god-like creatures or angels. Unlike angels, we have to get our knowledge the old fashion way: we earn it.

6 Conclusion

Benatar offers two arguments for the claim that one is always seriously wronged by being brought into existence. I argue that both arguments fail.

The first argument is the asymmetry argument. Its major premise is the asymmetry between the absence of goods and bads for the non-existent. Although I think that the asymmetry is untenable, I show that the argument fails either way. Even if we accept the asymmetry, we have no reason to think that coming into existence is always a net harm. The goods of life can, and often do, outweigh the bads. Many lives are worth living. Further, even if we accept the asymmetry, we have no reason to think that not coming into existence is always better than coming into existence. If we follow Benatar's suggestion and apply a positive value to the absence of pain, many lives still have more positive value than non-existence. Although it might not be bad never to have been, it might sometimes be less good. Hence, the asymmetry argument fails.

The second argument is the argument from pessimism. It attempts to show that most, if not all, actual human lives are on balance bad for the those who live them. Accordingly, they are not worth starting. I argue that this is not always the case. Some lives are very good. They are high in objective goods. They might not be the best possible lives, but they are nevertheless worth living.

I briefly develop an objective list theory of what makes a life worth living. Lives worth living are those high in various objective goods such as knowledge, loving relationships, appreciation of beauty, achievement, moral worth, meaning, and happiness. Most plausibly, in standard cases we only wrong those we bring into existence who live lives worth avoiding. Happily, many lives are not like this. Those of us fortunate enough to have read Benatar's book are likely living lives worth living. For us, it is better to have been. Benatar gives us no reason to think otherwise.⁸⁹

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