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Is it wrong to impose the harms of human life? A reply to Benatar

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Abstract Might it be morally wrong to procreate? David Benatar answers affirmatively in *Better Never to Have Been*, arguing that coming into existence is always a great harm. I counter this view in several ways. First, I argue against Benatar's asserted asymmetry between harm and benefit—which would support the claim that any amount of harm in a human life would make it not worth starting—while questioning the significance of his distinction between a life worth starting and one worth continuing. I further contend that his understanding of hedonism and desire-fulfillment theories distorts their implications for the quality of human life; as for objective-list theories, I rebut his critique of their human-centered basis of evaluation. Notwithstanding this multi-tiered challenge to Benatar's reasoning, I conclude with praise for his work and the intellectual virtues it embodies.

Keywords Procreation · Wrongful life · Harm · Benefit · Quality of life · Existence

All human lives include harms. So the choice to bring someone into existence guarantees that the individual will experience harms—to which she did not consent. Among those harms, most likely, will be the trauma of facing her own mortality; she will also experience pain, disappointment, no doubt at least minor injuries, and other commonly incurred sorts of harm. While most human lives include substantial benefits along with harms, we generally disapprove of harming someone, without her consent, in order to benefit her (as opposed to harming her

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in order to prevent a greater harm).[1] Squarely faced, facts such as these may cause us moral discomfort about human procreation even where the person to be seems likely to have a relatively good, healthy life. In cases in which it seems likely that the person to be will have a thoroughly miserable life, many of us believe that it is wrong to procreate—as suggested by the term "wrongful life cases."

Could it be that all choices to procreate are wrongful life cases—that the harms imposed in procreation on the person to be cannot be justified by attendant benefits, procreative liberty, or any other consideration? This is exactly what David Benatar argues in his lucid, original, and very challenging book, *Better Never to Have Been* [2].[2] Because his discussion is the most developed case against the commonly presumed prerogative to have children, because it raises a host of important issues concerning identity, moral status, and the value of human life, and because his thesis is about as distressing as any thesis could possibly be, I will focus exclusively on this work in the present discussion.

A quick overview of his position may be helpful. Benatar's thesis is that "coming into existence is always a serious harm" (p. 1). How can that be, in view of the various goods human life makes possible? His reply, in brief, is this: "Although the good things in one's life make it go better than it otherwise would have gone, one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed. … However, by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms…" (p. 1). Benatar does not claim that those who never exist are literally better off than those who do exist, which would be a claim of questionable coherence inasmuch as nonexistence is not a state of an individual; he claims, rather, that coming to be is always bad for those who do (p. 4). The practical implications of his view prominently include "anti-natalism"—the view that we should not procreate[3]—and a "pro-death" view of abortion. Benatar claims that his position solves the non-identity problem and various puzzles in population ethics raised by Derek Parfit [3, pt. IV]. Providing some measure of consolation, he suggests that his distinction between a life worth starting and a life worth continuing (as explained below) blocks any implication that we should all be suicidal. In responding to his view, I will concentrate on his arguments for the thesis that coming into existence is always bad for the one who comes to be.

Is coming into existence always a harm?

Can it ever be a harm to come into being?

Before we entertain the radical thesis that coming into existence is always a harm, we must consider whether coming into existence is *ever* a harm. An affirmative

[1] This theme is developed and its implications for reproduction explored in Shiffrin [1].

[2] All page references in parentheses in the text will refer to this work.

[3] In Chapter 4, he argues that we have a *moral* duty not to procreate and that the value of procreative liberty is best understood as supporting at most a *legal* right to have children.

answer may seem obvious to those of us who believe that there are cases of wrongful life, but matters are not so straightforward. That is due to what Parfit termed *the non-identity problem* [3, chap. 16]. In the context of reproduction, the problem can be explained with the help of an example.

Suppose a couple gets pregnant and brings to term a child who predictably has a substantial disadvantage that could not have been avoided except by delaying pregnancy; the disadvantage might be a genetically determined disability or it might be a social disadvantage such as having teenage parents. In such cases, it cannot be claimed that the individual who is born is worse off than she would have been had the parents decided to delay procreation—a choice that is likely to seem morally preferable—because that choice would have entailed the union of different gametes from those that did, in fact, unite in conception, and therefore the coming to be of a numerically distinct individual, that is, someone else.[4] Thus, the person who was in fact born could *not* have come into the world free of the disadvantage in question. That means the only alternative to her not having the disadvantage was *her never existing*. Now, since never existing is not a state of an individual and therefore not a state that can be compared to existing with the disadvantage, the procreative decision leading to her existence did not make her *worse off*. But the concept of being worse off is central to our ordinary concept of harm: A harms B if and only if A causes B to be worse off (1) than she was beforehand (in the diachronic conception of harm) or (2) than she would have been otherwise (in the counterfactual conception of harm).[5] The individual in nonidentity cases is not made worse off than she was before because she *was not* before; nor is she made worse off than she otherwise would have been because otherwise she would *not* have been. It follows, according to this reasoning, that no one is harmed by being brought into existence, no matter how bad his condition or circumstances, so long as avoiding the disadvantage in question was incompatible with that individual's coming into existence at all.

Several commentators have challenged this line of reasoning. Some recommend the substitution of a noncomparative conception of harm for the comparative notion of being worse off in some way.[6] Others suggest that the standard comparative conception can be meaningfully applied to states of affairs in which one does not exist.[7] Benatar assumes that some such strategy will succeed so that one can be harmed by coming into existence (p. 28). For the purposes of this discussion, I grant the assumption. There remains this question: In what sorts of circumstances is one harmed by being brought into existence?

[4] Numerical identity is the relation a thing has to itself over time in being one and the same thing despite change. Numerical difference, then, implies the existence of distinct individuals.

[5] For a good discussion of these and other conceptions of harm, see Meyer [4, Sects. 3.1 and 3.2].

[6] See, e.g., Harman [5].

[7] See, e.g., Feinberg [6].

When is it a harm to come into being?

It seems sensible to say that one is harmed by being brought into being only in those cases in which the life one is brought into is not worth living.[8] These cases are called *wrongful life cases* and it is generally assumed that, because most human lives are worth living, relatively few cases fall under this rubric. And why are most human lives worth living? A natural reply is that most human lives, although containing harms, also contain sufficient benefits to offset the harms. This reply, Benatar argues, will not do.

For one thing, he contends, the argument fails to distinguish between two senses of "a life worth living": (1) a life worth *starting* and (2) a life worth *continuing* (pp. 22–23). A person may judge that the benefits of her life compensate for the harms and that her life is therefore (now) worth continuing. That a life includes benefits sufficient to compensate for the harms may constitute an appropriate standard for judging that a life is worth continuing. The problem with the optimistic thesis that most cases of coming into existence are not cases of wrongful life is the assumption that an appropriate standard for a life worth continuing is also an appropriate standard for a life worth starting. Benatar denies this assumption. "For instance," he argues, "while most people think that living life without a limb does not make life so bad that it is worth ending, most (of the same) people also think that it is better not to bring into existence somebody who will lack a limb. We require stronger justification for ending a life than for not starting one" (p. 22).

If Benatar's argument is sound, then the distinction between the two senses of "a life worth living" will merit careful attention and may provide critical support for some of his pessimistic theses. But I am uncertain about the distinction. Why should it matter whether one is already in existence when the question is raised as to whether one's life is worth living? What is the basis for there being two different standards? One possible answer is that a person who exists *has some say* in whether his own life is worth living, and, since most of us value our own lives, this fact would tend to increase the value of lives already underway (once their subjects can engage in prudential evaluation). If so, then the justification for ending a person's life would have to be stronger than the justification for not starting a human life. I find this answer promising. As we will see, however, Benatar rejects prudential self-evaluation as a substantial factor in determining how well one's life is going. So while he may be right about the distinction, it is unclear that he can adequately account for it in a way that coheres with his overall view. Thus it is unclear that he has a cogent reply to one who contends that a life good enough to be worth continuing must have been good enough to be worth starting.

If one rejects the distinction he proposes, how can one account for the point that "while most people think that living life without a limb does not make life so bad that it is worth ending, most (of the same) people also think that it is better not to bring

[8] A variant of this claim that may be attractive to those who deny that being brought into existence can harm one is that one is *wronged*, without being harmed, in precisely those cases in which the life one begins is not worth living. The life, on this view, is thought to be *noncomparatively bad*, that is, inherently bad for the subject—because the good things in the life don't compensate for the bad things—not bad by comparison to some other state one could have been in. See McMahan [7, p. 215]. I will neglect this view because I am granting the assumption that coming into being can harm one.

into existence somebody who will lack a limb"? The answer might invoke a distinction that Benatar neglects in this context. This is the distinction between (1) the *prudential* evaluation of whether a life is worth living (starting, continuing) from the standpoint of the interests of the individual in question and (2) the *ethical* evaluation of whether it would be right to decide not to start a particular life or to end a life in progress. One may hold that a life involving the absence of a limb is usually worth living while maintaining without inconsistency that it is best, or at least permissible, "not to bring into existence somebody who will lack a limb." The latter judgment is ethical, not prudential, and it may be justified in various ways without contradicting the assumption that the life in question would be worth living.[9] Doubt that there is an important distinction between a life worth starting and one worth continuing is therefore not silenced by the above-mentioned pair of judgments.

Let's return to Benatar's main argument. In his view, all cases of coming to be are cases of harm. That is because, in the real world, all lives contain at least some bad or harm (p. 29). About hypothetical lives that contain all good and no bad, Benatar maintains that such an existence "is neither a harm nor a benefit and we should be indifferent between such an existence and never existing. But no lives are like this" (p. 29). But why, one is likely to ask in amazement, is the presence of *some* harm in life sufficient to make the starting of that life a harm? It seems natural to believe that the relevant question is whether coming to be is a *net harm* (harmful on balance even in view of anticipated benefits) or a *net benefit* (beneficial on balance even in view of anticipated harms). So why can't sufficient benefits in a life compensate for the harms?

The reason, answers Benetar in a pivotal move, is that there is a fundamental *asymmetry* between benefit and harm: *The absence of harm is good, even if there is no subject of that good, yet the absence of benefit is not bad unless there is a subject for whom the absence is a deprivation* (p. 30).[10] Benetar specifies that the absence of harm is good "when judged in terms of the interests of the person who would otherwise have existed" (p. 31). About this claim, too, I am skeptical. It seems to me most sensible to deny that merely possible persons have interests since there is no subject to have those interests; only actual beings have interests.[11]

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[9] One complicating factor in the discussion is that Benatar regards abortions, or at least relatively early abortions, as instances of not bringing someone into existence rather than instances of terminating a life already begun (see, e.g., pp. 24–25). In my judgment, he tends to conflate the ontological issue of when we originate and the ethical question of when we have moral status. For my effort to address these questions, see DeGrazia [8, chaps. 2, 7]. See also Shoemaker [9, chap. 4].

[10] Benatar states his thesis with reference to pain and pleasure, taking these to be uncontroversial exemplars of harm and benefit, respectively. Although I agree with his assumption, I have encountered many philosophers who express doubts that pain, as opposed to suffering, is necessarily bad and that pleasure, as opposed to enjoyment, is necessarily good. For this reason, and because the categories of harm and benefit are more comprehensive, I find it more felicitous to speak of harm and benefit.

[11] One might question the plausibility of my claim on the grounds that future persons seem to have interests, providing the basis for our obligations to future generations not to be negligent with the environment and important resources. I disagree, however, that future persons *now* have interests. Rather, they will later have interests, and rights, a fact that can explain our obligations to particular individuals of the future. Doing so, however, will leave much to explain in connection with the non-identity regarding future generations. I make a preliminary effort to address both issues—obligations to particular future individuals and the non-identity problem in relation to future generations—in DeGrazia [10, pp. 1222–1235].

But maybe Benetar is suggesting not that merely possible persons have interests but, rather, that absence of harm is *impersonally* good—as determined by what the possible subject's interests *would have been*—while absence of benefit is not impersonally bad. But why should we believe this? After all, we can specify an impersonal bad, specifically the absence of benefit, by reference to what a possible subject's interests would have been, just as we can specify an impersonal good by reference to what a possible subject's interests would have been. Instead of pursuing this issue further, let us proceed to Benatar's case for the putative fundamental asymmetry.

Benatar defends the asymmetry between harm and benefit by contending that it best explains four other widely accepted asymmetries. I consider these in turn.

(1) *There is a duty not to bring people who will predictably have terrible lives filled with suffering (in what are commonly considered wrongful life cases) into existence, but no duty to bring people who are likely to have good, happy lives into existence* (p. 32). I agree with this asymmetry regarding procreative duties. But perhaps McMahan's account of it is more plausible than Benatar's. McMahan asserts that this asymmetry about procreative duties is basic or fundamental, rather than resting on some more fundamental asymmetry such as the one defended by Benatar (the general asymmetry between harm and benefit, identified in italics three paragraphs above).[12] If McMahan is correct, one can accept the asymmetry about procreative duties without accepting the more general asymmetry between harm and benefit. Another possibility, which may be more attractive to those who find McMahan's thesis ad hoc, is that, generally speaking, we have much stronger duties not to harm than to benefit and that this difference makes all the difference when we add the value of reproductive liberty. If so, the asymmetry about procreative duties does not favor the fundamental asymmetry between benefit and harm championed by Benatar.

(2) "*Whereas it is strange (if not incoherent) to give as a reason for having a child that the child one has will thereby be benefited, it is not strange to cite a potential child's interests as a basis for avoiding bringing a child into existence*" (p. 34, italics mine). I disagree. Let's assume that the real issue is not whether a given claim is strange but whether it makes good sense.

I suggest, first, that it may very well make sense to say that coming into existence benefits the individual who comes to be, in which case one could intelligibly have a child for the child's sake. Certainly, one might doubt the intelligibility of saying that coming into existence can benefit one: prior to someone's coming into existence, there is no individual who can be benefited by coming to be. Earlier, we saw that on a standard understanding of harm, one is harmed only if one is made worse off than one was beforehand or would have been otherwise. One who agreed with this would presumably say the same about benefit, which would seem to require a previously existing subject who could be benefited. Since there is no such subject in the sorts of cases in question, then, according to this reasoning, one cannot benefit by coming to be. But this is not the only reasonable view. For even if we deny, as I think good sense requires, that nonexistence is a harm (there being no determinate, actual

[12] See McMahan [11, pp. 353–354].

subject who is harmed), we might reasonably hold that coming into existence with good prospects is a benefit (there being an actual subject who benefits once she comes into existence).[13] If this is correct, then one can have a child for the child's sake.

In addition to claiming that it makes sense to speak of having a child for that child's sake, I doubt that one can avoid having a child for that child's sake. If no child is brought into existence, there is no actual individual who can benefit from one's restraint. Only actual beings have interests. Now, if one does bring a child into existence when one should not have done so because the child's prospects were so poor, then there is a victim of one's wrongful choice: the actually existing child. But it does not follow from this, nor does it make much sense in my judgment, to claim that some indeterminate, merely possible child benefits from a decision not to bring him into being.

But perhaps Benatar does not mean to claim this. Perhaps by saying "it is not strange to cite a potential child's interests as a basis for avoiding bringing a child into existence," he simply means that were a child to be brought into being, this would be contrary to his interests—a claim I have effectively granted (for wrongful life cases) by allowing that coming into being can be a harm. The same idea might be cashed out in terms of impersonal good: it is impersonally good not to have such a child. But, if that is correct, it remains unclear why we cannot say with equal justification that it is impersonally bad not to have a child with good prospects or impersonally good to have such a child. In any case, I disagree with the present asserted asymmetry for *at least* the reason that I deny its first conjunct, the claim that it does not make good sense to say that one can benefit a child by bringing her into existence.

(3) *Bringing someone into existence can be regretted for her sake; not bringing someone into existence cannot be regretted for the possible person's sake* (p. 34). In accordance with what I have already argued, I am inclined to agree. But rather than explaining this conjunction of claims in terms of a fundamental asymmetry between harm and benefit, I explain it by reference to the fact that in the former case there is a subject who can be harmed, whereas in the latter case there is no subject to be harmed. On the other hand, if the conjunction of claims is best understood in impersonal terms, then I see no reason to accept the present asymmetry. For, if it is impersonally bad for someone with a predictably bad life to come into being, it seems that it would be impersonally good for someone with a predictably good life to come into being.

(4) *We can rightly be sad about distant people who are known to suffer, but not about possible people who would have been happy had they existed* (p. 35). Fair enough, but, again, I think that this asymmetry is easily explained by the existence of actual victims in the first instance and the lack of any such victims in the second.

I therefore reject Benatar's case for a fundamental asymmetry between benefit and harm that purports to justify the striking thesis that existence has no advantage over, yet has disadvantages in comparison with, non-existence. Nor is the asserted

[13] Derek Parfit tentatively defends this thesis in [3, appendix G]. Naturally, if coming into existence can be a benefit, it can also be a harm, an assumption I earlier granted to Benatar.

asymmetry especially compelling on its face. In place of a picture incorporating this asymmetry, I recommend a picture that asserts the following: *Regarding those who exist, the presence of benefit is good and the presence of harm is bad; regarding those who never exist, the absence of benefit and the absence of harm are neither good nor bad*. Only those who exist have interests and can be benefited or harmed. Moreover, *from the standpoint of impersonal value, the absence of benefit is just as bad as the absence of harm is good*, even if our obligations to benefit are generally weaker than our obligations not to harm.

On the basis of the asserted asymmetry between benefit and harm, Benatar advances his remarkably strong thesis: "The harm of any pain [or any other harm] cannot be compensated for by even great amounts of pleasure [or any other benefit]—due to the asymmetry" (p. 48). That most of us would regard as worthwhile the tradeoff of some harm for much more benefit does not matter on Benatar's view. He acknowledges that many people are happy to have come into being, but contends that their optimistic appraisals are misguided for failing to take into account the decisive asymmetry between harm and benefit (p. 58). As one who denies this asymmetry, I am in a position to claim that what is misguided is Benetar's willingness to override so many people's judgments about the prudential value of their own lives. Further reasons to reject such "value theory paternalism" will become apparent in the next section.

Is human life always so bad?

We have examined Benatar's asymmetry-based case, developed in Chapter 2 of his book, for the thesis that any life with even the smallest quantity of bad constitutes a harm. In Chapter 3, Benatar provides an argument that is independent of the asymmetry for the same thesis while addressing the magnitude of the alleged harm of human life. We now address the central arguments of Chapter 3.

Benatar claims that even the best human lives are very bad and much worse than people generally appreciate, even if these lives are usually worth continuing (p. 61). One must admit that this conjunction of claims—that human lives are terrible yet usually worth continuing—is very odd on its face. But Benatar endeavors to explain how this and related odd-sounding claims can be true. (Part, but only part, of his argument appeals to the distinction between a life worth starting and a life worth continuing.) As we examine Benetar's present argument, it is important to bear in mind that it does not rely on the draconian standard that any harm at all in a life would make it not worth starting. The present argument relies instead on (1) an account of how people can consistently misjudge the prudential value of their lives and (2) an assessment of what human life is really like.

People's unreliability in assessing their own well-being

How can people consistently overestimate the quality of their lives? Benatar's explanation appeals to (1) the Pollyanna principle, which posits a pervasive bias

towards prudential optimism, (2) the phenomenon of psychological adaptation to bad circumstances, and (3) a pervasive human tendency to compare oneself to others when making self-assessments—a comparison that generally makes one's own situation seem better than it would seem if compared with a more objective standard of well-being (pp. 64-69). All three of these factors, he argues, have been selected for by evolutionary forces because they militate against suicide and promote reproduction (p. 69). I believe there is much more truth to this account of prudential grade inflation than is commonly appreciated, yet I do not believe that this account provides much support for Benatar's pessimistic conclusions.

An allegedly more trustworthy assessment of people's well-being

Having furnished substantial reasons to believe that people are not fully trustworthy in assessing their own well-being, Benetar argues that a more objective assessment would portray human life as very bleak. His strategy for motivating a more objective assessment is to invoke what are often regarded as the three leading accounts of prudential value theory and to argue that, on each of them, human life proves to be very bad. I will raise concerns about his deployment of all three of these accounts.

According to one account, hedonism, an individual's well-being is a function of the balance between pleasures, enjoyment, satisfactions, or other positive experiences on the one hand and pains, suffering, frustration, or other negative experiences on the other. Benatar makes the good point that when thinking about the quality of our lives, we tend to ignore how much of our lives are characterized by unpleasant experiences such as hunger, thirst, mild pains, various types of discomfort, and the like (p. 70). "How often," he rhetorically asks, "does one feel neither too hot nor too cold, but exactly right?" (p. 72) Speaking only for myself, I am not sure how to answer because most of the time I am not attending to how I feel physically. Maybe, if I checked frequently, I would find that I usually did not feel just right in terms of warmth or cold. But, even if that is true, and even if we assume that hedonism is the best account of well-being, I am not sure that the observation about sub-optimality in felt temperature—or sensation more generally—would matter very much.

Hedonism, by definition, construes well-being as a function of our mental states, but it need not focus so much on bare sensations. In my own case, which I assume to be similar to that of many people whose basic needs are usually met, I feel fine much, and perhaps most, of the time. But feeling fine is a more global experiential self-reading than simply noting and evaluating the quality of sensations. One can feel fine despite some mildly disagreeable sensations precisely because one might not care very much about mildly disagreeable sensations, especially if one feels that one's life is generally going well enough in the ways that most matter to one. Even if a person does focus on sensations, he might interpret disagreeable ones such as mild hunger pangs in a positive light such as the thought that he is admirably adhering to his diet. I suggest that the most plausible forms of hedonism will not focus on sensations *except to the extent that they matter to the subject*. In other words, at least in consideration of persons as opposed to sentient nonpersons, the

focus will shift away from sensations and towards the subject's attitudes. Developing one view of this type, Fred Feldman regards the key question regarding a person's well-being to be, "Does the one living the life take intrinsic *attitudinal* pleasure in the things he is doing, the life he is living?" [12, p. 203; italics added]. On a view of this sort, one might conceptualize happiness, or personal well-being, as a function of *overall life-satisfaction*.[14] Since fairly many people are more or less satisfied with their lives, embracing this version of hedonism would support an assessment of human life that is far more optimistic than Benatar's. On this view, many people have lives that are, on balance, rather good.

A second leading account of well-being is the desire-fulfillment view, according to which our well-being is a function of the extent to which our desires are fulfilled or satisfied. I agree with much of what Benatar argues about human life as seen through the lens of desire-fulfillment, but I disagree on two important points. First, I disagree in part with Benatar's claim that "[r]ather little of our lives is characterized by satisfied desires and rather a lot is marked by unsatisfied desires" (p. 74). I concur that even those of us who have comparatively good lives have many unsatisfied desires, but I disagree insofar as I believe that we also have many satisfied desires. Trusting that the reader will agree with me here, I suggest that Benatar presents no compelling argument to the contrary. Moreover, desires need not be summed up one by one, with each counting equally, just as sensations need not be the focus in hedonism. One can understand prudential evaluation in terms of desire-satisfaction as taking a global structure, with some of a person's aims, plans, and desires being deeply important to her life, others being moderately so, and still others (e.g., to be slightly warmer) being of relatively little importance [cf. Griffin 14, pp. 35–36, 159–162]. If so, then the fact, if it is a fact, that most of the time we experience suboptimal states such as mild discomfort, and the fact, if it is a fact, that these unpleasant states generally produce desires—currently unsatisfied—for hedonic improvement, the point that one's desires form a hierarchy of prudential importance would deflate the significance of these facts. Even if one has lots of lesser desires that are unsatisfied, one may have several global desires (e.g., to raise a family, to have a decent career, to stay healthy into old age) that are satisfied and that count substantially in the hierarchy of desires that largely determines what it means for one to be doing well.

The promise of such a desire-satisfaction account fits well with another thesis, which I find to be plausible, crucial to an understanding of human well-being and very much at odds with Benatar's view. This is the thesis that *my valuing my life and its endeavors makes them valuable for me*. That is to say, it is, to a significant extent, up to a mature human being to determine how well her life is going, just as it is up to her to decide what her central desires are and what weighs most heavily in her lifeplan. If this thesis is correct, then there are limits to how wrong people can be about their own well-being. Certainly one is susceptible to distortions in prudential self-evaluation; this is what is right in Benatar's probing discussion about Pollyannaism, adaptation, and the implicit comparison of oneself to other people. But to think that people can be as wrong about their well-being as Benatar

[14] This thesis is developed in Sumner [13], although he qualifies the account by equating well-being with *autonomous* life-satisfaction.

suggests—nearly all of us, after all, are glad to have come into being—seems excessively paternalistic with respect to people's prudential self-evaluation. Such value theory paternalism could be justified only by a compelling error theory. What I am arguing is that despite much merit in Benatar's case that people are quite capable of overestimating their well-being, a sophisticated examination of the value theory options does not vindicate the thesis that people do, in fact, systematically and profoundly deceive themselves about the quality of their lives.

There remains, however, the third leading account of well-being: the objective-list theory. On this view, one's well-being is a function of the extent to which one's life is characterized by certain conditions or states of affairs, independently of whether these conditions make one happier or satisfy one's desires. Although different theorists in this camp defend somewhat different lists, plausible candidates for the conditions that make one better off include deep personal relationships, autonomous living, accomplishment, esthetic enrichment, understanding, and health; any plausible objective-list account will also make some concessions to the subjectivism developed in hedonism and desire-fulfillment theories by including enjoyment on the list and by emphasizing the role of autonomy.[15]

Benatar challenges objective-list theories with this claim: because they evaluate our well-being from a human-centered point of view, these theories fail to provide a sufficiently objective standard.

> [J]ust as our desires adapt to our circumstances and are formulated by comparing ourselves with others, so objective lists of life's goods are constructed in such a way that makes it possible for at least some people to be said to flourish. … Unlike desires, which can vary from individual to individual, objective lists tend to apply to all people.… 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* (pp. 81–82).

In short, the problem with constructing an objective list from a human standpoint is that its content will be influenced by our Pollyanna-ish tendencies, setting too low a standard for what counts as a good life. Just as the objective-list theorist rightly distrusts or limits an individual's authority about what makes her well-off—think of someone whose primary desire, constantly fulfilled, is to count blades of grass—we should distrust our collective human sense of what makes us well-off.[16]

[15] The list just presented bears the significant influence of Griffin [14]. Ironically, while Griffin classifies his view as a sophisticated desire-fulfillment theory (chap. 2), he is often taken as a leading representative of the objective-list approach. For a version of the objective-list approach that construes these values in terms of capabilities, see Nussbaum [15].

[16] As a secondary argument for rejecting a human-centered objective-list approach, Benatar argues that a proper understanding of why modesty is a virtue supports a *sub specie aeternitatis* view of the good: "The best solution to the problem of modesty is to say that although the modest person has an accurate perception of his strengths, he also recognizes that there is a higher standard by which he falls short" (p. 86). I do not believe this vindicates super-human standards for construing human good. First, the standards a modest person falls short of may be difficult yet achievable by real human beings. Second, a plausible alternative account of the virtue of modesty is that its value is primarily social: interactions and relations among people go better when people refrain from being very assertive about their own strengths.

This is a powerful argument. It is certainly fallacious to believe that X makes a human life go well just because most people think that it does—an inference that might be encouraged by adoption of a human-centered list of prudential values. At the same time, any objective-list approach must adopt some perspective from which to determine what is good in a human life. I submit, contra Benatar, that the perspective must take into account what sort of creature human beings are. In my judgment, a list that includes autonomy, accomplishment, deep personal relationships, esthetic enrichment, health, and enjoyment takes proper account of human beings as potentially autonomous and healthy, goal-pursuing, social, beauty-appreciating, and fun-loving beings. Because we are such creatures, our good bears a significant relationship to those aspects of our human nature.[17] And that we generally find lives characterized by those conditions to be satisfying tends to confirm their appropriateness as standards of prudential value for us. The possibility, stressed by Benatar, of collective human underestimation of what is required for a good life does not strike me as a compelling ground for overturning our human-centered prudential value judgments on the basis of something more perfectionistic and super-humanly impartial. It is not obvious that we are even capable of understanding value *sub specie aeternitatis*. Even if we are capable of this, given the sorts of creatures we are, I doubt that such a radically impartial standard would be apt for evaluating the quality of our lives. If my reasoning here is on the right track, then once again, Benatar's pessimistic judgments are unwarranted because some, I dare say many, people have lives characterized by such goods as those just enumerated. We should judge their lives good—not only worth continuing, but also worth starting.

In addition to engaging the three prudential value theories in contending that human lives are very bad, Benatar canvasses a litany of reminders of the myriad forms of unequivocal suffering that take place in our world (pp. 88–92). Thus, he brings to the forefront of our attention the occurrence of natural disasters, death by starvation of 20,000 people per day, the ravages of disease, the horrors of intentionally caused suffering in the form of murder, rape, assault, child abuse, intimidation, humiliation, political imprisonment, enslavement, and on and on. No morally serious person can fail to be touched by these reminders and, in my opinion, only a fool who was reminded of the human-caused suffering would feel very proud of humanity. Much of our world is a mess, if not a disaster, of our own making; to become well-informed about what people do to each other around the world is to put oneself at risk of deep demoralization if not outright depression. Benatar's unflinching willingness to face such facts is one of the great merits of his book. As my critique indicates, however, I believe he extends his pessimism much too far—I don't mean too far for comfort, since effects on comfort are irrelevant to truth, but

[17] I do not suggest that all aspects of our human nature need to be fulfilled in order for human beings to flourish. Human nature, after all, includes such traits as a tendency towards laziness, a capacity for cruelty, and a propensity to discriminate against those perceived as social outsiders. I do not have a developed account explaining which aspects of human nature are significantly connected to human flourishing, but I suspect that an adequate account will embrace those aspects of human nature that tend to promote, or at least do not undermine, harmonious social living.

farther than is warranted by a well-developed value theory that is engaged with the facts. Many people have good lives.

Towards the end of Chapter 3, Benatar presents a further challenge to those who, like me, still maintain that at least some people have good lives. He argues that in view of the undeniable fact that many people have terrible lives—lives not worth starting—and the impossibility of knowing who will come to enjoy good lives (assuming some will), we should not procreate. For it is surely wrong to play Russian roulette when the gun is pointed at someone else's head. My response is two-fold. First, it is not just a few people, but many people, who have good lives, so the initial odds of having a good life are a lot better than Benatar estimates (when he concedes, contrary to his actual view, that some human lives are good). Second, I suggest for the reader's consideration—that is, without a supporting argument—that those who consider having children are often in a position to make reasonably confident predictions about whether their prospective children will have good lives.

Concluding reflections

Benatar contends that, morally speaking, all choices to procreate are cases of wrongful life because coming into existence is always a great harm. I have countered this thesis by challenging Benatar's reasoning at several key argumentative stages. I have argued against Benatar's asserted asymmetry between harm and benefit—which would support the radical thesis that any amount of harm in a human life would make it not worth starting—while questioning the significance of his distinction between a life worth starting and a life worth continuing. I have also contended that his understanding of hedonism and desire-fulfillment theories significantly distorts their implications for the quality of human life; as for objective-list theories, I have rebutted his critique of their human-centered basis of evaluation. Moreover, from time to time, I have disputed Benatar's factual claims. In view of my multi-leveled challenge to Benatar's reasoning, a reader might gather that I completely disagree with him and do not regard his discussion as particularly valuable.

This inference would be mistaken. For one thing, although I have raised doubts about the importance of his distinction between a life worth starting and one worth continuing, I have done no more than raise doubts. If Benetar is right about its importance, this is already a significant contribution to moral theory and reproductive ethics. Moreover, I believe that Benatar's discussion is exceptionally valuable in at least two further ways.

First, his discussion demonstrates a willingness to stare uncomfortable truths in the eye and accept them as reality. It is, I think, part of philosophers' shared self-image that we are pretty good at this—that we are good bullshit detectors—and that we care enough about the truth to accept it and speak honestly about it even in the face of significant unpleasantness. But my experience has not confirmed this collective self-image. In my experience, philosophers are not especially honest about arguments that support unwelcome conclusions. Rather, like most people, they tend to protect their comfortable prejudices. For example, philosophers tend to

hold strong political views regarding abortion and pretty consistently underestimate their opponents' best arguments. And, although most philosophers presumably believe that cruelty to animals is wrong and understand that vegetarian diets can be perfectly healthful, they maintain the same mainstream, factory-farm-supporting lifestyle as most people. Tenured philosophers mostly support the tenure system and oppose mandatory retirement despite the dual assault on efficiency and fairness that these policies entail. And so on. *Mutatis mutandis*, a remarkable number of philosophers are willing to dismiss Benatar's claims without bothering to become familiar with his supporting arguments. One merit of Benatar's discussion is that it displays the virtues of intellectual honesty and courage.

A second great merit of Benatar's discussion is that it forcefully reminds us that procreative choices are very serious moral decisions. The decision to bring someone into the world not only has a great impact on already existing people such as family members, on the environment, and on future generations but also, as Benatar emphasizes, has a huge (what could be huger?) impact on the person who comes to be. Although I cannot adequately defend my judgment here, I believe that many procreative decisions, perhaps a majority of them, are morally irresponsible. With our biologically rooted bias in favor of having children as well as our cultural embrace of procreative liberty and, in some cultures, the presumed imperative of increasing their population, we often have children although we should not. Frequently, we lack the maturity, the commitment, and/or the resources to be in a position to say with confidence that our children are likely to have good lives and have their basic needs met. Unlike Benatar, I believe that many human lives are good—worth starting as well as later continuing. But I entirely agree with him that we need to take very seriously our prospective children's prospects and not feel entitled to have children just because we want them.

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