

ETHICS

Is human existence worth its consequent harm?

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Benatar argues that it is better never to have been born because of the harms always associated with human existence. Non-existence entails no harm, along with no experience of the absence of any benefits that existence might offer. Therefore, he maintains that procreation is morally irresponsible, along with the use of reproductive technology to have children. Women should seek termination if they become pregnant and it would be better for potential future generations if humans become extinct as soon as humanely possible. These views are challenged by the argument that while decisions not to procreate may be rational on the grounds of the harm that might occur, it may equally be rational to gamble under certain circumstances that future children would be better-off experiencing the harms and benefits of life rather than never having the opportunity of experiencing anything. To the degree that Benatar's arguments preclude the potential rationality of any such gamble, their moral relevance to concrete issues concerning human reproduction is weakened. However, he is right to emphasise the importance of foreseen harm when decisions are made to attempt to have children.

importance of linking the good of the absence of harm entailed by non-existence to existing persons. He does so through arguing that since only existers suffer harm, it is better—"preferable"—for possible persons not to become actual persons and thereby have to then also have to suffer it. This view is an interesting twist on the Epicurean argument against fear of death: once death brings non-existence, no further harm or absence of benefit can be experienced, so why worry? In developing his argument, Benatar applies the same logic to the creation of all human life, no matter how absurd he recognises that this may seem to others.

For example, he claims that if there is no absence of benefit associated with non-existence then no level of harm is sufficient to justify existence; not even a pinprick! To this degree, his argument does not depend upon the levels of harm already encountered in human life. However, he goes on to attempt to strengthen the plausibility of his logical argument through empirically documenting types and degrees of harms that even fortunate humans inevitably encounter—all of the common illnesses and anxieties associated with everyday life, as well as the often negative experience of dying. As for the unfortunate, the levels of harm that they must endure can be unending and monumental, grinding poverty and disease along with other forms of endemic insecurity. If this were not bad enough, there is a well-documented tendency of humans to underestimate the harm in their lives and to overestimate the benefits. Thus, Benatar dismisses declarations that the benefits of life still outweigh its harms. He argues that they are based on wishful thinking and, as such, are not creditable evidence of the value of the benefits of life when compared to the harm.

A popularisation of Schopenhauer at his most bleak is, "Life is a bitch and then you die". The challenging arguments in Benatar's¹ new book, *Better never to have been*, confirm the emergence of another intriguing philosopher of pessimism. Forget just the tragedy of death after a life of inevitable harm. Benatar claims that the harm experienced by all forms of conscious life is such that it is better that they had not been born in the first place. In developing his case, he focuses primarily on humans and the types of harm that existence unavoidably holds in store for them.

IS HUMAN EXISTENCE WORTH IT?

One of the merits of Benatar's analysis is its simplicity. Life is always a bitch to some extent; it always entails some degree of harm, including that of the experience of dying. Are the potential benefits of human existence ever worth the candle of such experience? According to Benatar, the answer is no. The reason is that for existers, harm is bad and benefit is good.²¹ However, non-existence entails no harm (which is good) and no absence of any benefits that existers may experience (which is not bad). Thus, non-existence guarantees no harm of any kind and harm of some kind is guaranteed by existence. Note that, in arguing as much, Benatar is aware of the

REPRODUCTIVE ETHICS AND LAW

Benatar goes on to draw some provocative conclusions from his arguments concerning procreative rights, reproductive technology and abortion. On all these fronts, he turns traditional arguments on their head. Given the harm always associated with existing, there is no moral right to have children; indeed there is a duty not to have them.³ However, the lack of such a moral right should not be translated into the abolition of legal procreative rights because of the harm to existers of enforcing such laws. Benatar expresses sympathy for lobbyists for disabled people who proclaim the prejudicial

¹Benatar also uses pain and pleasure to denote harm and benefit. For simplicity, I have stuck with the latter and hope that this does not distort his argument in some unforeseen manner.

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dangers of moral and judicial concepts of wrongful life. He suggests that there may be a threshold of foreseen harm that is so great that when crossed, it would be wrong to try to have children (eg, some forms of severe genetic illness). However, the able bodied should not exaggerate where this line should be drawn, rather than exploring and funding the means for minimising related handicap. Having offered disabled people this carrot, however, Benatar then immediately retracts it. He creates a level playing field by arguing that all lives are wrongful as “no lives are worth starting”.

The stage thus is set for his views on reproductive technology and abortion. For example, while the infertile should not be legally prevented from seeking fertility treatment, this negative freedom should not be translated into the positive freedom of state provided reproductive technology, which perpetuates procreative harm. As for debates about abortion, the key issue is not whether pregnant women should have a right to choose terminations; rather it is that they should have a moral duty to do so! Again, he argues that no legal duty to have termination follows from the existence of a moral duty to have them. This is because of the countervailing harm that forced abortion would cause for women who insist on having children. However, whatever problems exist about the practical feasibility of enforcing the moral duty not to procreate, Benatar has no doubt about his preferred eventual outcome: no people, anywhere.

FUTURE GENERATIONS

This conclusion is explored further in the penultimate chapter on the future of the human species. Here, Benatar continues to turn traditional arguments on their head. The orthodox question has been how many people should be brought into the world and how much variation in their quality of life is acceptable. Benatar maintains instead that the primary question is rather how best to bring about human extinction, causing the least harm in the process. In this context, he has a particularly interesting analysis of some of Derek Parfit's views.⁴ Parfit rejects the notion that a poor quality of life can be deemed worse for a person than non-existence. Prior to birth, this person does not exist and therefore there is no basis for comparison. Parfit, therefore, searches for an impersonal standard by which such judgements about quality of life can be made and in the process he examines different approaches to maximising the well-being of future generations.

For example, suppose that the goal is simply to maximise the well-being of the total population in the future. This could lead to the “repugnant outcome” that it would be better to have more people with a projected lower quality of life than a smaller number of people who were better-off. Conversely, we might try to solve this problem through the goal of maximising the projected average well-being of everyone. This would lead to a smaller population with greater total well-being. Yet, it would also lead to the unacceptable conclusion that it would be better to aim for a future population of two people in bliss rather than many more who have a much smaller but still reasonable quality of life. Benatar argues that problems like these (and others) are partly created by the failure to differentiate between the circumstances under which lives are worth continuing rather than worth starting. “If no lives are worth starting, it is not a defect in a theory that it precludes adding new lives that are not worth starting, even if those lives would be worth continuing. It would indeed have been better if no people had been added to the Edenic lives of Adam and Eve.”

Not surprisingly, Benatar goes on to argue that human extinction would be a good thing. However, he does not reject humanitarian values in the process. The global spread of his antinatalism is one blueprint for the future. Yet, the

phasing-out of humanity to which this would lead rather than quicker extinction through dramatic natural disaster also creates the prospect of enormous harm for the last remaining humans. Benatar confesses lack of clarity about how this could be managed humanely, especially since any intentional phasing would involve the instrumental creation and harming of some humans for the sake of the well-being of others. What is clear is the unavoidability of those who really are last being severely harmed by this knowledge and its practical consequences. Under such circumstances, they will probably thank no one for having been born. The implication is that if human existence could be ended by some cataclysm of monumental proportions, this would be the best outcome for current existers and those who otherwise potentially exist in the future.

COUNTERARGUMENT: HUMAN EXISTENCE MAY BE WORTH THE GAMBLE

Benatar paints a bleak but challenging philosophical and empirical picture of the advantages of non-existence over existence. No more than suggestive criticism is possible here, especially in the light of the detail of some of his arguments. Interestingly, however, he himself provides some analytical tools with which they may be questioned.

Benatar's conception of the harm associated with human existence seems so encompassing that his argument that non-existence is preferable has the feel of logical necessity: “better never to be born” becoming analytically true. To avoid this, he makes it clear that there are possible worlds in which his arguments are false. However, he will only admit the existence of one such world worth being born into, one where there is no harm at all—remember, not even a pinprick. Yet, in doing so, he at least opens the way for asking whether or not there are other possible worlds where his views might be false—worlds about which it could be rationally argued that, compared with Benatar's paradise of oblivion, the potential harms of existence might be accepted as being worth the potential benefits, including the harm of experiencing the absence of such benefits. How might this be done?

Benatar accepts the appropriateness of postulating a hypothetical Rawlsian original position where rational negotiators deliberate the merits of coming into existence or not.⁵ Parfit dismisses the coherence of such a strategy since the original position entails that those in it have the capacity (which non-existence prevents) to then exist in the world they have designed. Also, as has been indicated, Benatar well understands the metaphysical absurdities of suggesting that we can attribute harm or benefit to people who do not exist. He argues instead that Rawls' model makes sense as a hypothetical expository device to articulate the preferability of non-existence over existence, even though the “possible people” in it (call them original negotiators) will in fact never become actual.⁶ As is usual, original negotiators must design a possible world knowing that when they finish their deliberations, it would be the kind of world where they would like to become actual even if they do not know what their specific personal circumstances will be in advance. For the sake of argument, let us assume that Benatar is right about the feasibility of applying such an approach to the question of whether or not it is better never to be born.

Benatar suggests that original negotiators would accept his arguments that non-existence is preferable to existence in any other possible world than one of no harm whatever. But is this necessarily true? Presumably, such negotiators might wish to consider the potential falsity of his arguments in other possible worlds than one of no harm whatever. For example, they might argue that this world is simply too far removed from any world in which future existence might realistically be feasible.⁷

Indeed, when referring to his possible world of no harm, Benatar states that no lives are like this. Therefore, to avoid the potential irrelevance of their deliberations, original negotiators might instead focus on worlds more like our own, but much improved versions thereof. We can imagine original negotiators arguing that realistically, a little harm—certainly a pinprick—would be a small price to pay for enormous potential benefits in a possible world that was much closer to our own and where harm would always be limited as much as is practically possible. Indeed, they might argue that some harm enhances the capacity to appreciate benefit (eg, the contentment that can come from feeling physically and emotionally secure).

Original negotiators might design a world in which they would be willing to be born that might have the following characteristics: a dramatic excess of benefit over harm; a range of goods and services, which, when experienced, would make most harms seem secondary; a wide spectrum of effectively enforced positive and negative freedoms that are always exercised in the interests of the least well-off—both predicated on the satisfaction of a thick formulation of basic human needs; equal opportunity for all to participate in social and economic life; reproductive choice available on demand, subject to the restriction that no infants are kept alive who are so disabled that they cannot socially participate to develop and explore their individual human potential; and a physical environment that is rich, varied, unspoiled and fiercely protected.⁸ Readers are invited to add to the list! Although distant from our own; this world is still much closer to it than Benatar's, certainly as a set of feasible political and economic aspirations. Indeed, some version of it continues to characterise the aims of progressive political struggles throughout the world.

One thing is clear. Existents within this possible world would still face the risk of harm—certainly harm equivalent to more than a few pinpricks, and, especially the harm of dying. The issue that faces Benatar is whether or not his analysis is flexible enough for original negotiators rationally to decide in any circumstances approximating actual human existence that his view is false and that they rather would prefer to exist rather than never experience anything. After all, they may reason that they might experience harm but that circumstances could be organised so that they would always receive optimum care and support. Equally, they may think that this potential experience of harm should be understood in the context of the potential that existence would provide for enormous and varied benefit (eg, personal adventure, achievement, fulfilment, excitement, contentment, respect, love, a variety of intense short-term, and a variety of other short- and long-term pleasures). Readers are again invited to add to the list.

Of course, original negotiators might be convinced by Benatar's primary argument that these beneficial possibilities do not trump the fact that non-existence entails no experience of harm and the absence of any benefits that existence might offer. However, I do not believe that Benatar demonstrates that they would necessarily argue that entering into such existence is irrational. Why should it not be at least as likely that they would argue that in the world that they designed, the downside of human existence would be worth the gamble of actually experiencing many of its extraordinary benefits?⁹ And if rational original negotiators might argue in this way then why should we not do more or less the same? There is no logical reason not to do so: no contradiction in saying that under specific conditions, I value the vicissitudes of human existence more than I do the prospect of a non-existence entailing no experience of harm and absence of benefit. I might just as consistently argue that I believe the same about my future children—all future children—provided that these specific conditions are in place.

Equally, there is no empirical reason to prefer non-existence over existence unless one dismisses (as Benatar appears to do) all possible (not to mention actual!) human valuations of the positive value of life as the by-product of "Pollyannaism"—a tendency to cope psychologically with a bad situation through adaptation, accommodation or habituation that reinforces belief that things are better than they are.¹⁰ The fact that people may often accentuate the positive to eliminate the negative does not mean that this is inevitable. There is something extraordinarily paternalistic about suggesting as much. Yet, really, Benatar has no option but to be dismissive of all of us who believe that the adventure of being alive and of striving for our own individual stamp of meaning within it makes the perceived or non-perceived harms of existence worth the potential benefits. If even one of us—the "cheerful" as he calls his opponents—might be right on the basis of our experience to prefer existence over non-existence, it is hard to see how Benatar could then sustain his main argument.

CONCLUSION

Whatever problems his analytical arguments may face, Benatar's analysis comes into its own when it remains focussed on the many horrors of the world in which we live. Human existence can be hazardous and potential parents should seriously consider the potential harms that may bring suffering to any children whom they may succeed in having, especially when these harms are serious and predictable. When they do reproduce with such foresight, they must assume moral responsibility for the predicted harm that then occurs. If they lack such foresight then they should be helped to try to obtain it. Yet, often such harms are not predictable with any degree of certainty, even in circumstances where there is poverty, few negative freedoms and even fewer positive freedoms. In the adventure of life, many individuals remarkably persevere, make their mark, experience this opportunity as worth endured harms and help others to do the same. Like the original negotiators, parents who have had such positive experiences may gamble that with appropriate support, their children can also do so.¹¹ Provided that such parents do not reproduce children who foreseeably cannot participate in the adventure of life, I am not persuaded by Benatar's argument that all such gambles are irrational and cannot be informed by empirical evidence of selected human experience of benefit and harm that is assessed for accuracy.

Yet, Benatar is surely right about the degree to which the value of potential human life cannot be evaluated in a political and economic vacuum. Such life is valuable because of what can be done with it and not in its own right. Therefore, to be consistent, those who continue to believe in the inherent value of human life cannot have it both ways. They must always link this belief to the moral importance of the struggle for global social justice—to optimal basic need satisfaction—for everyone.¹² To the degree that it can be shown that this struggle cannot succeed and things can only continue to get worse throughout the world, then Benatar's pessimism about the future of humanity will become more plausible. One thing is clear. Whether you agree with his conclusions or not—and he accepts that few probably will—his arguments force one to examine deep seated presumptions about the value of life and the moral significance of human existence. I highly recommend it, noting that the beneficial soul searching that it can cause feels quite harmful at times. I am glad that I did not miss the experience!

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