

Better Never to Have Been?: The Unseen Implications

Joseph Packer

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Abstract This paper will directly tackle the question of Benatar’s asymmetry at the heart of his book *Better Never to have Been* and provide a critique based on some of the logical consequences that result from the proposition that every potential life can only be understood in terms of the pain that person would experience if she or he was born. The decision only to evaluate future pain avoided and not pleasure denied for potential people means that we should view each birth as an unmitigated tragedy. The result is that someone who seeks to maximize utility could easily justify immense suffering for current people in order to prevent the births of potential people. This paper offers an alternative framework for evaluating the creation of people that addresses Benatar’s asymmetry without overvaluing the potential suffering of potential people.

Keywords Benatar · Birth · Antinatalism · Utilitarianism

David Benatar predicts his controversial new arguments in *Better Never to Have Been* will result in hasty and “overconfident” responses (Benatar 2006, pp. VII–VIII). Although the reception proves Benatar’s prescience, it also reflects how critics unfairly caricature his arguments. In so doing, his well thought out position does not receive a complete investigation. In fairness to his critics the radical nature of Benatar’s book lends itself to caricature; he argues, “Each one of us was harmed by being brought into existence” (Benatar 2006, p. VII). This stance undergirds Benatar’s antinatalist belief that “we should not have children” (Benatar 2006, p. 8). To support his argument, Benatar identifies the many afflictions that cause human misery in conjunction with the psychological reasoning that humans use when they minimize these sufferings in their appraisals of existence. Most scholars that have

J. Packer (✉)

Department of Communication, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA
e-mail: jcp38@pitt.edu

responded to Benatar's book have focused their critiques on this pessimistic appraisal of human existence (Baum 2008; Belshaw 2007; Doyal 2007).¹ The central argument in Benatar's book, however, is not that the pain of life outweighs the pleasure, but rather that there is an asymmetry when evaluating pain and pleasure for potential people, which Benatar rightfully suggests his critics ignore (Benatar 2007a, b, 2009).

The asymmetry Benatar identifies means that the decision to create a new life cannot be evaluated in terms of whether that life would meet some acceptable ratio of good (pleasure) to bad (pain).² Instead, the potential life needs to be compared to never coming into existence, which Benatar claims is always preferable to a life with any pain. The reason that nonexistence is preferable to existence is because of an asymmetry between how one should evaluate the pain and pleasure of potential persons. Benatar argues that it is good when nonexistence avoids pain, but when nonexistence prevents pleasure it is not good or bad. Benatar uses this asymmetry to contend that it is not merely some people who are harmed by being brought into existence, but all people.³

This paper will directly tackle the question of Benatar's asymmetry and provide a critique based on some of the logical consequences that result from the proposition that every potential life can only be understood in terms of the pain that person would experience if she or he was born. The decision only to evaluate future pain avoided and not pleasure denied for potential people means that we should view each birth as an unmitigated tragedy. The result is that someone who seeks to maximize utility could easily justify immense suffering for current people in order to prevent the births of potential people. Although this paper often takes a utilitarian framework as a reference point, my concerns with Benatar's asymmetry manifest across various ethical standpoints. I offer an alternative approach to the question of birth that avoids my critique of Benatar's asymmetry, but which still acknowledges the soundness of much of Benatar's underlying logic. In order to make sense of this alternative, however, one must have a strong grasp of the specifics of Benatar's asymmetry.

¹ Doyal and Baum focus their criticisms on Benatar's use of the Rawlsian veil of ignorance and maximin. Although both pieces are well argued, they miss the central point of Benatar's argument. Rawlsian justice and maximin merit only a few pages in *Better Never to Have Been*; Benatar explains how his thesis operates in numerous other ethical frameworks including deontology and utilitarianism. Belshaw raises a number of objections to Benatar's argument without acknowledging that they have been addressed extensively in the book. Belshaw's central argument is that Benatar's philosophy runs counter to the way most people think about birth, something Benatar readily acknowledges.

The numerous responses on the web ranging from popular media to blog posts offer even more superficial analysis.

Smilansky provides an exception to these reviews and offers a much more thought out critique of Benatar's starting premises, but unfortunately is not able to develop his position given the page constraints of a book review.

(Smilansky 2008)

² Benatar does not use a set category to define what constitutes good and bad other than to suggest that pain is bad and pleasure is good. Benatar makes it clear that no matter what specifically constitutes "good" and "bad" most people would admit that both exist for every person alive, which is enough for him to make his claims.

³ Benatar rejects the strong person-affecting view, which argues that since one cannot compare the state of nonexistence to existence one cannot harm a child through its creation. He cites Feinberg to suggest that harm can occur even if it does not make a person worse off (Benatar 2006, p. 20–22).

Benatar's Asymmetry

Benatar argues that a fundamental difference exists in the way individuals evaluate the possibility of pain and pleasure for a nonexistent person. Benatar claims most people hold the belief that “the presence of pain is bad and that the presence of pleasure is good” (Benatar 2006, p. 30). The heart of Benatar's asymmetry is that this logic does not apply to pain and pleasure when it comes to potential persons that never exist. The reason for this is that “the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation” (Benatar 2006, p. 30). Given his explanation of the asymmetry it is desirable that a lot of miserable people do not exist, while it is not necessarily a bad thing that more really happy people do not exist. Benatar argues that the absence of potential happy people is simply neutral. He points out “it is not strange to cite a potential child's interests as a basis for avoiding bringing a child into existence” (Benatar 2006, p. 34). On the other hand, “we think that there is no duty to bring happy people into existence because while their pleasure would be good for them, its absence would not be bad for them” (Benatar 2006, p. 32). Taken together these relatively commonplace ideas form the foundation for Benatar's radical belief that no people should be brought into existence.⁴ If one accedes to the first premise (it can be wrong to create potential people that will have a painful life), then it means that the pain of a potential person should be taken into account in the decision to create them. If one also accepts the second premise (that one has no obligation to bring into being happy people, because potential people cannot be deprived of happiness), then no counterbalancing concern for potential people's happiness should be taken into account in the decision to create them. The combination of these premises leaves a decision calculus that only evaluates the pain and not the pleasure of any potential person.⁵

Benatar's asymmetry has consequences for any decision to create people. The asymmetry means that one should evaluate all of the potential pain that person will suffer, but none of the pleasure. However, Benatar still believes that it may be justifiable to create new people from a utilitarian standpoint; for example, if the new child brought an enormous amount of pleasure to the parents.⁶ In practice these situations would be rare. If one assesses all of the pain that the average person suffers over the course of her or his whole life without weighing it against the pleasures she or he experiences, then even an unusually happy life would appear full of pain. As Benatar argues, every life has its disappointments, failures, injuries, losses, and sicknesses. Benatar rightly believes that accepting his asymmetry means

⁴ Benatar provides several non procreative examples of his asymmetry, including the idea that the absence of life on Mars does cause most people to regret all the wasted potential for pleasure on the desolate planet (Benatar 2006, p. 35 note 28).

⁵ Benatar also claims that his asymmetry is able to solve major problems in population theory like Derik Parfit's “repugnant conclusion” (Benatar 2006, pp. 168–172). The repugnant conclusion is the argument that maximizing utility in regards to population could result in a huge population of individuals that have lives barely worth living. Even though each person is barely happier than having not being brought into existence, the total net happiness would be greater than a smaller population of individuals leading happy lives. Benatar's asymmetry undermines this argument, because future pain would be accounted for when one makes a decision to bring a new child into existence.

⁶ Although potentially acceptable from a utilitarian standpoint Benatar believes that a child is always harmed by coming into existence.

that humanity should stop having children and gradually face extinction; however, the logic of the asymmetry is such that accepting it opens up the door for drastic negligence, misappropriation of resources and violence on the level of specicide.

Specicide

Benatar's philosophy is so removed from the philosophical and cultural mainstream that its critics often focus on his philosophy's most obvious points of departure from the standard beliefs on childbirth and thus do not engage with all of its implications. For example, Seth Baum criticizes Benatar's asymmetry in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* because it, "[permits] existing people to go on a frivolous binge even to the point of destroying the world for all would-be people" (Baum 2008). Baum's characterization begs the question; he laments that the unborn would be denied existence, but Benatar's argument is precisely that the potential children would be *saved* from existence. Benatar openly admits that human extinction is desirable: "My arguments ... imply that it would be better if humans (and other species) became extinct" (Benatar 2006, p. 194). Despite his advocacy of human extinction, however, Benatar believes that the end of humanity should be achieved through a voluntary end to procreation. Baum's argument that Benatar's asymmetry allows for a "frivolous binge" which denies potential people existence misses the fact that the desirability of denying potential people existence is precisely Benatar's point. A more appropriate critique of Benatar's asymmetry is that it elevates extinction to the highest priority and thus justifies violence against people that currently exist in order to achieve it regardless of whether Benatar personally endorses involuntary extinction.

The reason Benatar's philosophy elevates extinction to the highest priority is that the potential pain of future generations is enormous. Benatar wants us to evaluate the pain involved in a potential life but not the pleasure that is missed by never being brought into existence. As a result, every life is net worse than nonexistence. Extinction would prevent a potentially infinite number of future humans, thus it prevents a potentially infinite amount of future suffering with no pleasure to offset it. The magnitude of infinite future suffering is so great that no amount of finite suffering to achieve extinction could be worse. This reverses Jonathan Schell's argument that avoiding extinction should be the highest priority because extinction denies the possibility of life to an infinite number of future humans (Schell 1982, pp. 3–6, 93–96). Schell, however, simply assumes that life is desirable or at least that the pleasure in the average human life outweighs the pain. Benatar's asymmetry makes the reverse of Schell's position much stronger; extinction prevents an infinite amount of future suffering, because it means one should only evaluate the pain of potential future people.⁷ With so much pain at stake Benatar's asymmetry opens the door to radical and violent means to achieve extinction, even though he personally believes extinction should be sought voluntarily.

In his book, Benatar examines, and then shies away from, coercive efforts to prevent childbirth and never seriously addresses the idea of involuntary human

⁷ It should be noted that the argument does not require infinity to be effective. If one examines only the harms of life and not the benefits, as Benatar asks, then it would require no more than preventing several future generations to outweigh even grievous suffering today.

extinction through mass murder. Taking his asymmetry at face value, however, coercive efforts to achieve extinction are justifiable and likely necessary, given the incredibly small probability of a successful movement for voluntary extinction. Under Benatar's asymmetry the best course of action for anyone who desires to maximize utility would be to seek human extinction, no matter the improbability of success and no matter the consequences to those alive now. The pain of future generations without being offset by future pleasure is simply too great in magnitude not to seek extinction by involuntary means.

Benatar has two short responses to the objection that his asymmetry justifies involuntary human extinction, what he refers to as "[Speciecide](#)" (Benatar 2006, p. 196). The first is that killing is wrong, because it cuts short the lives of those who are killed. One can accept that killing is wrong, however, but still believe that the future suffering of potential people is so overwhelmingly large that it would be better to murder the roughly 6.6 billion people currently alive than allow them to give birth to future generations. Furthermore, if what makes murder problematic is that the murdered person dies, it should be remembered that only extinction would ensure that no human ever has to die again. Benatar tries to draw a moral distinction between murder and dying of natural causes to preempt this argument. He makes the case that we should view extinction brought on by killing as fundamentally worse than, for example, death of old age, because "unlike dying (from natural causes), [murder] is a bad that could be avoided (until dying occurs)" (Benatar 2006, p. 196). This distinction, however, does not view the creation of a child as a result of contingent human action, which like murder, could also be avoided. When individuals create a human life they not only ensure that it will suffer, but that it will ultimately face death. From this perspective parents have already murdered their children simply by the act of birth.⁸ Benatar even alludes to this in the introduction of his book when he repeats the joke that "life is a sexually transmitted terminal disease" (Benatar 2006, p. 5). Even if one rejects the label of "murder" as too strong for the birth of a child, the "[Speciecide](#)" program offers the only hope of ending death, because death is the inevitable result of birth. This combined with the tremendous future suffering avoided by extinction justifies violence under a utilitarian calculus.

The other objection Benatar raises to the "[Speciecide](#)" argument directly challenges the use of a strictly utilitarian calculus. He says, "speciecide would be "plagued by moral problems" (Benatar 2006, p. 196). Presumably this passage references a deontological rejection of murder and whatever other unpleasanties that would be involved in involuntary extinction.⁹ This offers a potential solution to the

⁸ At first this argument may appear to be even more radical and disturbing than Benatar's initial claims. If one views life only in terms of its bad qualities, however, then it is easy to view death as simply another pain that could have been avoided by not being created, rather than an unpleasant but necessary component of a normal desirable life.

⁹ This ethical objection may be able to be forestalled if those implementing involuntary extinction only killed individuals seeking to have children. Any deontological prohibition on murder should logically apply to giving birth, because given Benatar's argument any given birth is likely to be worse than any given death (this will be detailed in the section "[Birth vs. Death.](#)") Society treats murder in self-defense as acceptable; it could be argued that murders in self-defense of potential people were also justified. Defending this connection goes beyond the scope of this paper, but hopefully points at the far reaching consequences of Benatar's logic.

justification for involuntary extinction for one who rejects murder on deontological grounds, but even if a rights approach forbade violence, it should still leave one eager for an involuntary world-ending event like a major asteroid collision. An asteroid collision could cause human extinction and thus reduce the total amount of suffering, without human actors having to violate a deontological prohibition against murder. Independent from the question of extinction, however, Benatar's underlying logic raises a series of problematic scenarios that call into question his asymmetry.

Death vs. Birth

The utilitarian logic that justifies involuntary extinction can be applied on a smaller scale to produce similarly disturbing results. Assume a car accident kills a young pregnant woman and her husband. Absent some bizarre circumstances most people would say that this was a tragedy. Given Benatar's logic, however, one may be compelled to view the accident as a blessing. The loss of the couple's lives (lives that would be filled with pain as well as pleasure) needs to be weighed against all of the pain that the unborn child would have suffered over her or his life. Remember also that if the young woman gave birth to the child it too would at some time die. I do not claim to be able to quantify the value of life precisely, but one could imagine many scenarios where given Benatar's asymmetry we should view the car crash as better than the birth of the child. The following crude example illustrates this point. Let us assume the average year of a human life has twice the pleasure as it does pain (an estimate that Benatar would find incredibly optimistic). If the parents that died in the crash would have lived for another 30 years each, then their death has deprived them of 120 units of happiness and spared them 60 units of unhappiness. Assuming happiness and unhappiness cancel each other out for the purposes of utilitarian calculus this leaves a net 60 happiness. In contrast, Benatar's asymmetry means that one should only evaluate units of unhappiness when one considers the fate of the child, this means that even if the average year has twice the pleasure as it does pain we should only evaluate the pain. This means that while each year a parent lives should be evaluated as plus one happiness, each year the potential child would live should be treated as negative one happiness. If the potential child would have lived to 61 years of age then the car crash saved her or him from 61 units of unhappiness. Subtracting these units of unhappiness from the parents' net happiness leaves one unit of unhappiness or negative one happiness. Given these premises the death of the parents would be preferable to the birth of the child from a utilitarian standpoint and thus we should view the car crash as better than the birth of the child.¹⁰

This becomes more decidedly the case when one accounts for the potential children of the unborn child. Benatar points out that if the average couple has three children then in ten generations each couple will have 88,572 descendents (Benatar 2006, pp. 6–7). The combined suffering of 88,572 people almost certainly outweighs the lives of even the happiest two progenitors on the planet today. Even if each child only had one child of her or his own, preventing the unhappiness of ten lives over

¹⁰ If one views death as an intrinsic harm then the scales tip even more decidedly against the parents, because they will die inevitably, whereas if the child is never born it will not die.

ten generations would likely outweigh the pleasure lost by the death of the parents' lives in a cost benefit analysis. The logic of Benatar's asymmetry creates a cascade effect where the harm of bringing any particular child into existence multiplies exponentially as that child goes on to have children of her or his own.

The logic of Benatar's asymmetry also allows the creation of examples centered on human agency (as opposed to accidents) that still view death as preferable to birth, while avoiding a deontological prohibition on murder. Suppose one was in a situation where they could either save a 20-year-old man from falling from a ledge to his certain death or convince a friend not to have a child. Benatar's asymmetry means a utility maximizer should talk her or his friend out of childbirth and leave the 20 year old to die. Even if a situation like this never occurs, the logic that justifies prevention of the birth over saving the life has important implications for resource allocation. If governments accept Benatar's asymmetry, it would justify them spending the vast majority of their resources on efforts to reduce the population at the expense of programs that could alleviate the suffering of those who already exist.

Benatar does not address the dramatic shift in how individuals and governments should allocate resources between the prevention of births and prevention of pain to people that exist, which logically results from his asymmetry. Benatar argues that rejection of his asymmetry leads to the unacceptable conclusion that those who currently exist must consider the potential happiness of non-existent people. Benatar's asymmetry overvalues potential people's unhappiness, which leads to equally absurd conclusions for those currently alive. The reception of Benatar's book suggests that most people have enough difficulty accepting his asymmetry when it dictates that an extremely happy person would be better off never having been born, when it justifies increased suffering for the already existent for the sake of preventing relatively happy potential people it becomes virtually impossible to endorse.

Alternatives

A two-part test to justify the creation of any particular child would address both Benatar's concern about an obligation to have happy children and my own concern about comparing the interests of people that currently exist and potential people. The first part of the test would be to ask if the creation of a child would increase the net utility in the world absent consideration of the child's own happiness. In other words, would the parents be happier with the child and would the child not negatively impact the lives of others. The second part of the test would be to ask if the child would be likely to lead a life with more happiness than unhappiness, a utilitarian version of Strong's "no net harm" argument (2005). If the answers to both of these questions are yes, then there is nothing morally problematic with the creation of a new person. On the other hand, if the answer to either one of these questions is no, then it would be better if the child never exists.

The two-part test operates on a milder and thus more palatable version of Benatar's asymmetry.¹¹ Benatar argues nonexistent people cannot be deprived of happiness by

¹¹ Benatar hints at the possibility of such an asymmetry early in his work, but does not develop the idea (Benatar 2006, pp. 36–37)

their nonexistence so their happiness should never be weighed in utilitarian calculations over whether to give birth to a child. Potential people made actual, can feel pain and thus their pain should count in a utilitarian calculus. At the heart of the two-part test lies a less restrictive edict. Existent people do not have a duty to maximize total utility by creating new people at the expense of their own happiness, because nonexistent people cannot be deprived of happiness. Existent people do have a duty to increase total utility when they bring new people into existence. This revision recognizes the distinction between pain and pleasure for potential people that Benatar so effectively argues for, without totally removing future positive utility from calculations over whether to have a child. My version of the asymmetry also means that one does not necessarily harm a child by creating her or him. Positive utility can count against the negative utility in calculations about a potential person's life, it just does not impose obligations to give birth to happy people.

The two-part test addresses Benatar's concern that a rejection of his asymmetry requires one to feel loss at the absence of potential people and would ultimately lead to the "repugnant solution," where utility is maximized by the creation of many lives barely worth living. One would not need to feel saddened over the absence of potential children unless those children would have increased her or his happiness. Similarly, there is no impulse to maximize utility by the creation of a huge number of lives barely worth living, because each new child must increase utility absent consideration of its own happiness.

The two-part test also addresses my concerns with a framework for decisions that favors potential persons over people who currently exist, which arises out of Benatar's asymmetry. The vast majority of children that are born would meet both parts of the test (increasing net utility absent their own happiness and leading a net happy life). This means that if an expectant mother died in a car crash, it would be appropriate to say that it was a tragedy. It also means that there is no justification for the massive transfer of resources from the welfare of people that exist to prevention of potential people. The two-part test also has the benefit of synchronizing much more closely with common sense views of when it is appropriate to have a child, which is something Benatar readily admits his argument cannot achieve.

One should prefer the two part-test over a simple utilitarian calculus of what will increase net happiness the most, because a pure utilitarian calculus fails to account for a fundamental difference between potential people and existent people. The nonexistence of potential people justifies not weighing a potential person's net happiness against any net unhappiness to potential people, since a potential person does not exist she or he cannot be harmed by not coming into existence. When one chooses not to create a potential person, no subject exists to deprive of the happiness that potential person did not experience. Naverson argues along similar lines to make the case that the creation of happy children does not increase utility, because any new person shifts, "the base upon which the average utility was calculated" (1967, p. 66). Given potential people's immunity to deprivation, it makes no sense to use an ethical framework that could allow a potential person's potential happiness to justify net unhappiness to existent people.

Maximizing utility for currently existing persons absent consideration of the child also proves problematic. Even though a potential person's unactualized happiness

should not concern the existent, once someone gives birth to a child that potential person becomes actual and his or her happiness does matter. Suppose, for example, a person had a child for the sole purpose of having a cute baby to dress up in order to impress her friends, even though she knew her child would have a genetic disease that would ensure the child lived a miserable life. Despite the fact that the parent benefits marginally, the pain of the child would be greater than both the child's happiness and the happiness provided to the mother by the child's service as a fashion accessory. A calculus that examines only the interests of the existent and not those of a potential child can lead to outcomes of seriously reduced total net utility and thus should be rejected.

The establishment of a utility calculation that preferences existing people (PEP) represents another alternative. If the creation of a child would increase the net utility in the world absent consideration of the child's own happiness and the child's net suffering does not outweigh the benefits brought to existent people, there is nothing morally problematic with the creation of a new person. PEP offers a far better solution than either total utility maximization or only maximizing utility for currently existent people. However, PEP has three problems that make it less desirable than the two-part test.

First, PEP leaves open the possibility that from a utilitarian perspective a child would be better off never being born, because the pain in her or his life would be greater than the pleasure. The life of net negative utility for a child could be justified under PEP if it brought more net happiness to existent people. One can imagine a scenario where a generation of parents gives birth to a generation of children, each of whom have net negative utility. If this process repeats itself, children would exist primarily as a benefit to the preceding generation, an intergenerational Ponzi scheme. After the first generation died off, the global net utility would be negative and thus human extinction would be preferable to the lives led by the existent humans. Even though the initial creation of children produced net utility, it results in a world of negative net utility and a way of life one could easily describe as a dystopian nightmare.

The two-part test ensures any procreation that occurs will always result in lives worth living, because every birth will be mutually advantageous to both the person born and people who already exist. The two-part test could lead to a situation where no birth would be mutually advantageous and thus human extinction would occur by default. Extinction through means of cessation of birth, while bad, would be preferable to a world of negative utility, because leading a life of negative net utility is worse than never being born.

The second reason to prefer the two-part test is that it moves in the direction of treating potential persons who become actual persons fairly. Utilitarians, like many moral philosophers, pride themselves on their philosophy's indiscriminate treatment of people. They believe the maximization of net happiness matters, not which specific individuals will benefit. Because potential persons do not exist, however, being denied existence cannot deprive them. This means, as I previously stated, that no amount of potential happiness for a potential person justifies a reduction in the net utility of people who currently exist. By allowing the inversion of this scenario, whereby the happiness a potential person brings to existent people can outweigh that potential person's net negative utility, the PEP method does not treat the categories of potential person made actual and existent person as equal.

The problem lies not in the fact that PEP's breach of fairness decreases utility, since it would benefit existent persons and nonexistent persons' utility cannot be effected one way or another. Nor does the breach in fairness translate into a violation of the rights of nonexistent people, which would likely contradict the idea that nonexistent people cannot be harmed by the nature of their nonexistent and runs into tension with utilitarianism more generally. Instead fairness represents a justification for using utilitarianism as an ethical system as opposed to its many competitors. In most cases, utilitarianism operates in an intrinsically fair manner, because maximization of utility requires one to maximize happiness and minimize pain without concern for who specifically wins and loses from these calculations. PEP favors the interests of the existent over the potential person made actual, because no duty exists to make potential people if their creation would increase net happiness, whereas potential people can be created to increase net happiness even if they personally will live a net negative utility life. While the inability to deprive potential people of happiness justifies not weighing their potential net utility against the net utility of existent people, this does not mean that PEP creates a fair utility calculus for when it is moral to create people. PEP sets up a standard where potential people made actual can lead net negative utility lives to benefit others, but not be benefited at the expense of others. This violates the assumption of fairness that exists at the heart of utilitarianism and the violation occurs even if no one (by virtue of their nonexistence) suffers because of it. The two-part test helps remedy this unfairness by ensuring that every child lives a life of net utility.

Finally the two-part test squares more readily with common sense morality than PEP. Proving a particular theory meets with common sense morality always represents a difficult task, but I believe most individuals frown on the creation of children who will live lives of net negative utility. The idea that an unhappy child should be created to increase total net utility appears to many as selfish. While some parents do create children that will live lives of net negative utility, one will find few if any of these parents who admit that their child exists in such a state.¹² Common sense morality may not represent a reason to accept a particular ethical stance in and of itself, but combined with concerns over fairness and the possibility of the creation of generations of net negative utility children, it provides another reason to prefer the two-part test to PEP.

Conclusion

Benatar's book presents a surprisingly well-defended case against the creation of new people. Benatar's book fails to fully address concerns about how his asymmetry between pleasure and pain for potential people interrelates with how people should

¹² This admittedly begs the questions of who determines the overall utility of a potential child's life and how they do so. The method of evaluation remains a weak point in all applications of utilitarian philosophy, but the two-part test still offers a useful guide on the ethics of child creation. The difficulty of utilitarian evaluation, while substantial, still proves less problematic than many other methods assessing the ethics of procreation, which fail to account for the pain or pleasure of a potential person. At the very least, most individuals will agree on cases of obvious harm and benefit, which provides a useful though imperfect tool.

make other important decisions, however. When one examines the pain and not the pleasure of a potential person it makes the birth of even a relatively happy person an unmitigated tragedy. This creates a serious problem for a utilitarian, because it means the prevention of births should be prioritized over the prevention of suffering for people who currently exist. My two-part test addresses Benatar's concerns about childbirth associated with his asymmetry, while it still allows that it is not always "better never to have been."

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