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Review by: Elizabeth Harman

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Critical Study

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

ELIZABETH HARMAN
Princeton University

In this book, David Benatar argues that every person is severely harmed by being brought into existence, and that in bringing any person into existence one impermissibly harms that person.

His conclusion is not merely that by bringing a person into existence, one harms him. *That claim* is compatible with the claim that by bringing a person into existence, one also greatly benefits him, and even with the claim that one never *impermissibly* harms someone by bringing him into existence. His conclusion is much more radical:

Conclusion: In all actual cases of procreation or failure to procreate when one could, procreation is or would be wrong.

Benatar has two independent lines of argument for his conclusion; he is explicit that they are independent, and that the second does not rely on the first. The first is an argument for this view:

First View: By bringing someone into existence, one harms her by causing all the bad aspects of her life. By bringing someone into existence, one does not benefit her at all by causing the good aspects of her life.

The second line of argument involves arguing for this view:

Second View: Taking into account both the good and the bad aspects of a person's life, most lives are overall very bad and not worth having.

In section I of this critical study, I explain what is attractive about the First View. However, in section II, I argue that one argument Benatar makes for the First View—the one on which I think he places the most weight—fails. In section III, I argue that Benatar’s arguments for his Second View do a good job of raising the worry that our lives may be worse than we think, but I argue that he doesn’t succeed in establishing the claim that our lives are actually overall bad. In section IV, I discuss some further implications of his Conclusion.

I. Benatar’s First View

The First View is that we harm people terribly when we create them but we do not benefit them at all. This would explain a fact that is otherwise hard to explain, namely, that it is sometimes wrong to procreate, for the sake of the person created, although the person would have a life worth living. The relevant class of cases are often discussed in connection with the “non-identity problem.”¹ Suppose a woman has a temporary condition such that if she conceives now, she will have a child who will have a congenital disease that will cause some suffering and death around the age of forty. Suppose that if she waits and conceives later, she will have an ordinary healthy child. It is generally agreed that she should wait, but there is a problem in explaining why. Even someone who dies at forty is likely to have a life well worth living. The puzzle is typically stated as follows. One may harm someone by giving him a life of agony. But how can one harm someone by giving him a life worth living? How can one be required, for the person’s sake, to act in such a way that he never exists at all rather than exists with this congenital disease? However, we might state the puzzle a slightly different way. We might say this. We ordinarily believe these three things:

- (i) Ordinary procreation is permissible.
- (ii) Procreation in the temporary condition case above is not permissible.
- (iii) Creating a person whose life would be utter misery is not permissible.

In ordinary cases, procreation is permissible although we bring someone into a life that involves both good and bad aspects. The natural thing to say about why (i) is true is that the good aspects more than outweigh the bad aspects: people ordinarily have lives well worth living. But then it’s hard to explain why (ii) is true. The person who dies at forty still has a life worth living. The puzzle is typically taken to be a puzzle about justifying (ii). Some take the puzzle to show that (ii) is simply not true. Benatar’s view resolves the puzzle in a very different way. He argues that (i) is not true. And we can see the following argument in his discussion: if we are to take seriously that it is wrong to procreate in the temporary condition case, because of the badness of suffering from the disease, then we must conclude that the First View is

true. That is, we harm people by causing the bad aspects of their lives, but we do not benefit them by causing the good aspects of their lives. But then it follows that it is in general wrong to procreate, because of all the bad things ordinary people experience.

Benatar's book also contains the following argument for the First View.² He points out that we typically think it is wrong to procreate if the person who would be created would have a life that is sufficiently worse than a *typical human life*, and observes that it is not clear why this is the relevant cut-off. He points out that we can imagine lives that would be much better than ours, involving many fewer hardships. If such lives were commonly lived, then it seems we would think it impermissible to create people who live lives that ordinary people actually live. But why is *what is normal* relevant to what lives it is permissible to create in this way? This kind of objection has been used to defend the permissibility of procreating if, e.g. the person created will be disabled: if what is normal for the species is not a reasonable cut-off, then it's not wrong to procreate and create someone less well-off than the norm. Benatar flips this argument on its head. Rather than saying that what is normal for the species sets too high a bar for permissible procreation, he claims that it sets too low a bar. Assuming the common view that it *is* wrong to procreate if we'll be creating a person with a less good life than most people have, he argues that this should lead us to realize it's also wrong to procreate in ordinary cases.

The First View does seem to imply Benatar's Conclusion. Any life in fact involves considerable pains along the way. If in procreating we are *harming* by causing all of these pains, but we are not *benefiting* by causing the good aspects of the created person's life, then procreation is impermissible harming.

II. Benatar's Main Argument for his First View

Benatar's main argument for his First View occurs in chapter two of the book.

He begins the argument with an appeal to intuition. He claims that the following asymmetry holds:

Asymmetry:

- (a) The presence of pain is bad, and the absence of pain (in the absence of anyone who would have experienced the pain) is good.
- (b) The presence of pleasure is good, *but* the absence of pleasure (in the absence of anyone who would have experienced the pleasure) is not bad (nor, of course, is it good).

(This is my wording of the claim.)

Thus, Benatar claims that whenever we fail to create an ordinary person, this is in one way good—due to the absence of all the suffering that person would have experienced. But this is not in any way bad—because the absence of all the pleasure the person would have experienced is not bad.

He then argues that the Asymmetry implies that when we procreate, we harm the created person but we do not benefit her. I will first present the argument as he states it, and then try to explain what I think is going on.

He argues that we need to compare the situation in which we do procreate with the situation in which we do not. If we do procreate, then there are two relevant things: “(1) the presence of pain” (which is “bad”), and “(2) the presence of pleasure” (which is “good”). If we do not procreate, there are two relevant things: “(3) the absence of pain” (which is “good”) and “(4) the absence of pleasure” (which is “not bad”). (Those quotes are from a chart on p. 38.) He says:

“To determine the relative advantages and disadvantages of coming into existence and never coming to be, we need to compare (1) with (3) and (2) with (4). In the first comparison we see that non-existence is preferable to existence. Non-existence has an advantage over existence. In the second comparison, however, the pleasures of the existent, although good, are not an advantage over non-existence, because the absence of pleasure is not bad. For the good to be an advantage over non-existence, it would have to have been the case that its absence were bad.” (pp. 40–41)

This passage is puzzling; but I think it contains the argument for Benatar’s First View on which he intends to rest the most weight, so it is worth careful examination.

Here is my reconstruction of the argument. It begins by assuming the Asymmetry is true. Then it relies on something like the following claim:

- (*) An action harms a person by causing some effects only if experiencing those effects is *worse for her* than the alternative—namely, not experiencing those effects in the scenario in which the action is not performed. An action benefits a person by causing some effects only if experiencing those effects is *better for her* than the alternative—namely, not experiencing those effects in the scenario in which the action is not performed.

I attribute (*) to Benatar because it is a way to make sense of two of his claims: (i) that we should compare a created person’s pain with its absence and his pleasure with its absence, rather than comparing the combination of his pain and his pleasure with their absence, and (ii) that comparison of a created person’s pain with its absence (which he says is good) shows the absence to have an advantage, while comparison of a created person’s pleasure with its absence (which he says is neither good nor bad) does not show the pleasure to have an advantage.

(*) is compatible with the claim that in ordinary non-procreative situations, causing someone pain harms her and causing someone pleasure benefits her. Ordinarily, in the relevant alternative in which the action is not performed, the person exists and simply doesn't experience the effect. Experiencing pain is worse than existing and not experiencing pain; experiencing pleasure is better than existing and not experiencing pleasure.

Relying on (*), Benatar claims that we do harm someone we bring into existence, in virtue of all the pain in her life, because if she does exist then she experiences the pain and that is bad, but if she doesn't exist then the pain doesn't exist and that is *good* (by appeal to the Asymmetry). Thus, because what is bad is worse than what is good, by causing the pain in her life we harm her. However, Benatar claims, a parallel claim cannot be made about the good aspects of a person's life. It is not the case that we benefit someone by causing the pleasure and good aspects of her life. Benatar says that the good things in a person's life are not *better* than their absence, because their absence is not bad—indeed it has no value at all. Nor, Benatar points out, is the alternative *that the person is in a neutral state*; rather, in the alternative, she doesn't exist at all. He concedes that it is better to have pleasure than to be in a neutral state. However, he says, if what we are comparing is something good with something that lacks any value at all (I think he means it does not even have a neutral value), then it's not true that the good thing is better than the other. So having the good things in their lives is not better for those who are brought into existence than the alternative. So they are not benefited.

I have three objections to this argument. I will proceed backwards, first granting much of the argument and objecting to a late step in it and then objecting to an earlier part of the argument. So, let's grant that the Asymmetry is true. And let's grant that (*) is true. My first objection is that it does not seem to me to follow that we harm a person by bringing her into existence and causing the pain in her life. Rather, I think that this step in the argument equivocates between impersonal goodness and goodness for a person. The plausible reading of part (a) of the Asymmetry is this:

- (a1) The presence of pain is bad (both for the one who experiences it, and also impersonally), and the absence of pain (in the absence of anyone who would have experienced the pain) is *impersonally good*.

But what Benatar needs is this claim:

- (a2) The presence of pain is bad (for the one who experiences it), and the absence of pain (in the absence of anyone who would have experienced the pain) is *good for the person who would have experienced the pain and does not actually exist*.

If Benatar is to rely on (*) to yield the conclusion that we harm someone by bringing her into existence, he needs it to be the case that the pain she experiences if she exists is *bad for her*—which is clearly true—and the absence of that pain in the alternative in which she is not brought into existence is *better for her*, not impersonally better.

This suggests that perhaps Benatar intends to establish that we harm people but do not benefit them by bringing them into existence, without appeal to a claim like (*). In that case, I am not sure how his argument is supposed to go, or why he emphasizes the comparison between the badness of the existence of pain and the goodness of its absence and the purported lack of comparability between the goodness of the existence of pleasure and the non-badness of the absence of pleasure.

Perhaps what Benatar has in mind relies mainly on claim (a1). If pain exists, that is impersonally bad, while (from a1) the absence of pain is impersonally good. So, by bringing someone into existence, we bring about a bad thing rather than a good thing. Whereas, as regards pleasure, while the existence of pleasure is good, the absence of pleasure is (from the Asymmetry) neither bad nor good. But then it's hard to see how we get the result that it's bad to bring someone into existence (and even if we do get that result, it's hard to see how we get the conclusion that we *harm* the person, as opposed to merely getting the conclusion that we do something *impersonally worse*). Rather, it seems we get the result that if we bring someone into existence, there are some bad things and some good things; whereas if we don't, there are some good things (the absence of the pain). This doesn't show what's better without a comparison between the sum of the good things and the bad things of existence, on the one hand, and the good things of nonexistence, on the other hand. But Benatar denies (in the argument for his First View) that we need to consider *how good* the good things in a person's life are. So I infer he is not relying on (a1) in this way.

My second objection to Benatar's argument is to the Asymmetry. I think that what's intuitively attractive about the Asymmetry can be explained in other ways. In particular, we clearly have strong reasons to avoid causing people to suffer, including to avoid doing what will bring someone into existence who will suffer horribly. Our positive reasons to cause people to have good experiences are much weaker. When we fail to bring someone into existence who would have suffered horribly, then we have failed to do *something we should not have done*. We have acted rightly, and we have avoided causing a bad state of affairs. None of that implies that there is anything *good* about the current situation; but it might be mistakenly thought to imply that. So I think part (a) of the Asymmetry is false but intuitively appealing.

An independent objection to the Asymmetry goes as follows. It seems that whatever can be said in favor of (a) can be said in favor of the denial of (b). If we are reading (a) as (a1), then it seems that what *makes it* impersonally good that some suffering is not occurring is that it *would have been bad* if

that suffering had occurred. But then it seems it should be impersonally bad that something is not happening that *would have been good*. At least, I don't see why that wouldn't also be true. Or, if we are reading (a) as (a2), then it seems that what makes it good, for the non-existent person we might have created, that his suffering not occur, is that his suffering would have been bad for him. But then it seems it should be bad, for the non-existent person we might have created, that his pleasure not occur, because it would have been good for him if it had occurred.³

III. Benatar's Second View

Benatar's argument for his Second View does not rely on his claim that we do not benefit people when we bring them into existence. Rather, the argument proceeds by claiming that if we look carefully at both the good and bad aspects of persons' lives, we will see that all lives are very bad, and not worth having.

Benatar acknowledges that most people tend to think that their own lives, and most people's lives, are overall good, and well worth living. So he argues along two fronts. He argues that these judgments can be explained away, and he argues that our lives are worse than we realize.

Benatar points out that people have certain psychological tendencies which would make us less aware of how bad our lives really are. There is a phenomenon of "Pollyannaism," in which people tend to see whatever happens as for the best. And there is a phenomenon of adjustment, in which people go back to their old attitudes about their lives after a sufficient amount of time has passed after a change in the quality of their lives, even if their lives have in fact gotten worse (for example, people adjust to having to use a wheelchair).

Benatar also points out that when people evaluate how good their lives are, they do not pay attention to the bad features of their lives that are features of *all* human lives. That is, we typically address ourselves to the question: "How good is my life, for a human life—or, compared to other human lives?" But, Benatar points out, if all human lives are very bad, and not worth having, we won't discover that fact, or be sensitive to it, by asking this question.

Benatar claims that every day people undergo discomforts that make our lives worse, but that we do not factor into the evaluations of how good our lives are: every day we spend some time hungry, some time tired, and some time thirsty, for example. We also undergo ordinary aches and pains as part of normal life. I want to raise two objections to this point. First, it's not clear to me that we do each have experiences on a regular basis that can be described as "being hungry," "being tired," and "being thirsty" that are actually *bad experiences*. I think these experiences are often neutral or even good. (Benatar counsels against thinking that these experiences are good

merely because it feels good to alleviate them; I agree that does not make them good experiences themselves.)

A more serious objection appeals to the Millian notion of “higher quality pleasures.” Suppose we grant to Benatar that ordinary lives contain many minor distresses that we do not normally pay attention to in considering how good our lives are. Nevertheless, we might claim, there are certain positive features of our lives that are *much more valuable* than these negative features are bad. Having loving relationships, doing work that we find rewarding—these experiences can be so valuable that they render the ordinary discomforts Benatar describes comparatively insignificant. We need not go so far as Mill in saying that there are higher quality pleasures that are more valuable, regardless of amount, than lower quality pleasures. But we can say that some features of a life are very valuable, and can easily outweigh many mundane discomforts.

Benatar does go on to point out that besides minor everyday discomforts, most lives contain some significant bad experiences. People often die from painful illnesses. Many people die young. Many people live in parts of the world where disease or warfare shape daily life.

Yet the view that there are higher quality pleasures is a powerful tool against these worries that Benatar raises. It may be that even a life beset by cancer at a young age is well worth living because of the good experiences it contains. Indeed, that is what is ordinarily believed. But Benatar doesn’t directly address the thought that some pleasures are of a different *kind* and thereby have *much more value* than any pains have disvalue.

This does raise the question whether there are “higher quality pains.” If there are some experiences that have *very strong disvalue*, then the mere fact that many lives have considerable higher quality pleasures in them does not show that these lives are, all things considered, worth living. I am not sure whether there are “higher quality pains.” It seems to me that there are not, although a possible case might be: knowing that one’s children are suffering horribly.

Benatar’s Second View implies his Conclusion as follows. First, most lives are very bad to have. So, by causing someone to live such a life, one is causing something very bad for someone. This is plausibly impermissible harming. Second, even if one causes a person to live a very unusual life that is actually worth having, one couldn’t have known in advance that the life would be worth having; because most lives are bad, it is impermissible to take the risk involved in procreation, he claims.

IV. Other Issues

Benatar considers a number of implications of his conclusion, of which I will discuss only two.

He points out that because he claims we seriously and impermissibly harm people whenever we procreate, his conclusion potentially provides a rationale for laws against procreation. Some may argue that whether one procreates is a personal decision which one might have a *prima facie* right to make oneself; but if real *harm* is at stake then the right to decide for oneself whether one becomes a parent is not going to hold up. In general, the right to make basic decisions in our own lives does not entitle us to harm others.

Nevertheless, Benatar says that it does not follow from his conclusion that there should be laws against procreation. He draws an analogy to the debate about abortion law. Some people think that abortion is the morally wrong killing of a living thing. If those people are right, then there is an excellent rationale for laws that prohibit abortion. But some people argue that the fact that there is *reasonable disagreement* about whether abortion is morally impermissible killing makes it illegitimate to make laws that prohibit abortion. If those people are right, then similarly, if there is *reasonable disagreement* about whether procreation is always a great harm, then it is illegitimate to prohibit procreation. The analogy seems right to me.

Second, Benatar claims that his conclusion does not imply that we should all commit suicide. It is easy to see why his First View does not yield this result. His First View is that when we are procreating it is *irrelevant* what good experiences the person will have, because there is nothing bad about those good experiences failing to occur. This view about procreation does not imply that it is irrelevant what good experiences one would have in the future, when one is deciding whether to commit suicide.

Benatar points out that his Second View does not, strictly speaking, imply that we should commit suicide. On his view, a life may be so bad that it is not worth *starting* but it may be good enough to be worth *continuing*—because someone who exists may have an interest in continuing to exist. But I think his arguments for the Second View, if successful, do imply that we should commit suicide. He does not claim that our lives are in general just bad enough to be not worth starting, but not so bad that they are not worth continuing; rather, he argues that our lives are *awful*. If, in taking into account both the good and bad aspects of our lives, it turns out that our lives are overall *very bad*, then it seems we would each be better off to commit suicide. It seems that the kinds of arguments Benatar makes would work as well, for most of us, if they are just focused on *the future*. It's no part of his view that the good parts of a life tend to be later in the life and the bad parts earlier, so that by killing ourselves we would be losing out on the better parts. Perhaps we have other-directed obligations not to commit suicide. But at least when considering what is best for ourselves, it seems to me that if Benatar's arguments for his Second View succeed, then we would be better off to kill ourselves.⁴

Notes

¹ The problem is extensively discussed in part IV of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984). I believe it was introduced in Gregory S. Kavka's "The Paradox of Future Individuals" (*Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1982, 11: 2: 93–112) and in Derek Parfit's "Future Generations: Further Problems" (*Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1982, 11: 2: 113–172). My own view of the problem is given in "Can We Harm and Benefit in Creating?" (*Philosophical Perspectives* 2004) and "Harming As Causing Harm" (in *Harming Future Persons*, Melinda Roberts and David Wasserman, eds., Springer, 2009).

² While I do see this argument for the First View in the book, it is not in the section of the book devoted to the First View; the argument is suggested by passages from the part of the book aimed at supporting the Second View.

³ David Benatar tells me he intends that the Asymmetry be read as entirely about *goodness* (and *badness*) for the person who would have been created, and not at all as about *impersonal goodness and badness*. My central objection is then the one I have just stated in the main text. If we are willing to grant that the absence of something that would have been bad for someone, is good for him (that is, good relative to his interests, even in a world where he doesn't exist), then it seems that the absence of something that would have been good for him, is bad for him (that is, bad relative to his interests, even in a world where he doesn't exist). It seems that Benatar needs a more general asymmetry of *goodness* and *badness* to underlie his asymmetry of *pleasure* and *pain*, but that more general asymmetry is not discussed by him, and is implausible.

⁴ Thanks to David Benatar, Peter Graham, Alex Guerrero, Sarah McGrath, and Michael Rescorla for helpful comments on this critical study.