The Harm of Existence

<u>1. Better to Never Exist:</u> Intuitively, when someone has an overall happy life, we say that LIFE IS GOOD. A happy life is better than non-existence. Benatar challenges this.

First, consider two uncontroversial claims:

(1) The presence of pain is bad.
(2) The presence of pleasure is good.

Thus, there is a **symmetry** concerning **value**. (Pleasure = GOOD. Pain = BAD.)

Interestingly, there is an **asymmetry** concerning **duty** concerning these two things. For example, it is WRONG for me to punch you in the face (causing the presence of pain), but NOT OBLIGATORY for me to refrain from giving you a face massage (causing the presence of pleasure). In other words, there is a duty NOT TO bring about pain; but no corresponding duty TO bring about pleasure. In the context of creating lives:

Expecting Mothers Two women are considering conceiving a child:
(a) **Ava:** Doctors tell Ava that, if she conceives, her child (call her Miserable Meg) will have a debilitating disease that will cause the child to be in unrelievable, excruciating pain for her entire short and miserable life.
(b) **Bea:** Doctors tell Bea that, if she conceives, her child (Happy Hans) will be strong and healthy, and will live a perfectly normal, (overall) happy life.

It seems like it would be WRONG for Ava to create Miserable Meg (causing the presence of pain). But it is NOT OBLIGATORY for Bea to create Hans (causing the presence of pleasure). Or, in terms of absences, it is OBLIGATORY for Ava to refrain from creating Meg, but NOT WRONG for Bea to refrain from creating Hans. Like this:

	Create Child	**Don't Create Child**
Miserable Meg (Miserable Meg)	Morally wrong	Morally obligatory
Happy Hans (Happy Hans)	Morally permissible (neither wrong nor obligatory)	Morally permissible (neither wrong nor obligatory)

If there were <u>symmetry</u> of duty, then it should turn out to be obligatory to create Hans, and wrong to refrain from doing so. But, that's not how it is. So what explains this <u>asymmetry of duty</u>? It's certainly not explained by claims (1) and (2)!

Since there is no asymmetry of value in the PRESENCE of pain and pleasure, Benatar thinks that the asymmetry of duty is best explained by an asymmetry of value in the ABSENCE of pleasure and pain. Namely:

(3) The absence of pain is good (even if no one experiences this good).
(4) The absence of pleasure is not bad.*

(* *Exception: Unless there is someone who exists and is being **deprived** of pleasure.*)

That is, it seems true that:

- It is a good thing if Meg is not created, because she would have suffered.
- But it's not a bad thing if Hans is never brought into existence..

...But wait. Most (all?) actual lives are a *mixture* of pain and pleasure. In that case, putting claims (1) – (4) together, the following would be true of each actual life:

	Existence	**Non-Existence**
Suffering	Bad (presence of pain)	Good (absence of pain)
Happiness	Good (presence of pleasure)	Neither good nor bad (absence of pleasure)

Notice: It is true of everyone that, when they exist, it is both good and bad. (Good because there is pleasure and happiness; bad because there is pain and suffering.)

But, when they do NOT exist, it is ONLY good! (Good because there is an absence of their pain; but neither good nor bad in virtue of the absence of their pleasure.)

But then, there is a surprising argument to be made. Roughly stated:

Existence = good + bad.
Non-Existence = only good.
Therefore, overall, non-existence is better than existence.

As Benatar puts it, "Because there is nothing bad about never coming into existence, but there is something bad about coming into existence, all things considered non-existence is preferable." (348-9)

(*Benatar actually says the following, when comparing existence with non-existence: (a)* ***Not Suffering is Better Than Suffering?*** *Yes! The absence of suffering is better than the presence of suffering, because something bad is WORSE than something good. Here, "non-existence is preferable to existence." (348) (b)* ***Being Happy is Better Than Not Being Happy?*** *No! You might think that the presence of something good is surely BETTER than a state that is neither good nor bad. But, you're wrong! "the pleasures of the existent, although good, are not a real advantage over non-existence, because the absence of pleasures is not bad." After all, "For the good to be a real advantage over non-existence, it would have to be the case that its absence were bad." uh… wtf?*)

The striking conclusion here is that it is always BAD to have children and always GOOD to NOT have them! It is always WORSE to be born than to never exist in the first place.

Benatar's Argument for Anti-Natalism

1. The presence of pain is bad.
2. The presence of pleasure is good.
3. The absence of pain is good.
4. The absence of pleasure is not bad.
5. Existence entails the presence of both pain and pleasure. Non-existence entails the absence of both pain and pleasure.
6. Therefore, since existence is both bad and good, while non-existence is only good, it follows that non-existence is better than existence.

2. Objections: There are some potential worries for Benatar's argument.

(a) When first confronted with Benatar's suggested asymmetry of value for absences – claims (3) and (4) – many feel that there's been some mistake, and they wish to reject this asymmetry. But how should we do so? Reject P4 and claim that **the absence of pleasure is BAD?** Like this:

The Absence of Pleasure is Bad!

	Existence	**Non-Existence**
Suffering	Bad (presence of pain)	Good (absence of pain)
Happiness	Good (presence of pleasure)	**Bad ?** **(absence of pleasure)**

Here, we've restored the symmetry. And would (at least partially) undermine the claim that non-existence is better/preferable to existence, because now both existence AND non-existence are both good AND bad, so it's not as clear that one of them is better.

Reply: Yet, most find this pretty counter-intuitive. If true, then it would follow that the non-existence of every unborn very happy child (e.g., Happy Hans) is overall a very bad thing. Does Bea do something very bad if she refuses to procreate? Is she morally OBLIGATED to bring Hans into existence? Surely not. This suggestion is implausible.

More likely, if you want to reject Benatar's asymmetry of value, your proposal will be to reject P3, and suggest that **the absence of pain is NOT good**. Like this:

The Absence of Pain is Neither Good Nor Bad!

	Existence	**Non-Existence**
Suffering	Bad (presence of pain)	**Neither good nor bad ?** **(absence of pain)**
Happiness	Good (presence of pleasure)	Neither good nor bad (absence of pleasure)

Here, we've rejected the asymmetry. And, while bringing a child into existence is both good and bad, existence will turn out to be better than non-existence in all of those cases where life is mostly good rather than mostly bad (as seems intuitive).

Reply: Surely, is Ava decides not to bring Miserable Meg (who will only experience excruciating pain) into existence, that is a GOOD thing! (and not merely a neutral thing)

Rebuttal: No, she does the RIGHT thing. The state of affairs that she brings about is neither good nor bad, however. It's an absence. It has no value. We mustn't confuse **value** (good and bad) with **duty** (right and wrong). If we say that she's done a "good" thing, this is only true in some improper, confused or informal sense.

Objection: Okay. But now you owe us a new explanation of the asymmetry of duty. When the choices are **-100 or 0** (for Meg), and **0 or +100** (for Hans), why is it only obligatory to choose the higher number in MEG'S case, and not Hans's?

Reply: Because our **negative** duty to DO NO HARM (e.g., not cause suffering) is MUCH STRONGER than our **positive** duty to DO BENEFIT (e.g., cause happiness). This entails a VERY STRONG duty not to bring Miserable Meg into existence, because doing would harm her (whereas creating Hans would be instead an instance of benefitting).

Rebuttal: First, that's circular! I've asked what explains the asymmetry of duty, and you've appealed to the asymmetry of duty!

But, fine, let's grant this asymmetry of duty as a basic fact which admits of no further explanation or analysis. Now I'd like to highlight our empirical claim: We have said that actual lives are NOT totally happy, but rather contain a thorough mixture of both happiness AND suffering. That said, the asymmetry of duty ITSELF seems to entail some version of the anti-natalist conclusion: For, even if your child will suffer only a moderate amount, and have a larger amount of happiness, you apparently have a very STRONG duty not to bring about the moderate amount of suffering, but only a very weak duty to bring about the great amount of happiness.

In this case, it seems to follow that procreation is immoral, since every act of procreating violates a VERY strong duty (not to be the cause of suffering), but fulfills only a very WEAK duty (to be the cause of happiness).

(And this conclusion is only made even STRONGER if we accept, as Benatar does, that *death – even the death of the very old – is always a tremendous harm.*)

Reply: Well, sheeeeit. [*What should we say now?? Something about how we're not really the cause of our child's harms? Like, it seems weird to say: "What was the cause of death?" Answer: "Birth!" Yet, if Ava doesn't cause Meg's suffering, why is it wrong to create her?*]

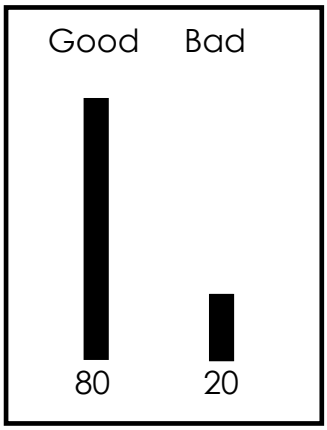
(b) **Existence and Non-Existence Cannot Be Compared:** When Benatar claims that it is better to never exist at all, he seems to be comparing existence with non-existence. But, can these two states even be compared?

Reply: Benatar clarifies that, when he says it is better to not exist, he is NOT claiming that it is better FOR the non-existing person. A non-existing thing cannot be in a "good" state. However, we CAN hypothetically compare a possible WORLD that contains you and a possible WORLD that does not. Benatar's claim is only that, in the hypothetical scenario where you don't exist, THINGS are better—not for YOU (since you don't exist), but in general; i.e., that WORLD is better (i.e., has more good in it).

(c) **I Prefer to Exist, And I Cannot Be Mistaken About This:** If I were to ask you, "Would you rather exist, or never have been born at all?", (hopefully) you will answer that you would prefer to exist. Implicit in this judgment is the claim that it is better to exist than not exist. How could you possibly be wrong about this? If I truthfully say, "I am in pain", it would be senseless for you to say, "No, you're not." I cannot possibly be wrong about whether or not I feel pain. Similarly, if I truthfully say, "I prefer to be alive; I deem it better for me to exist than not exist," it is senseless for you to say, "No you don't." I simply cannot be wrong about this preference.

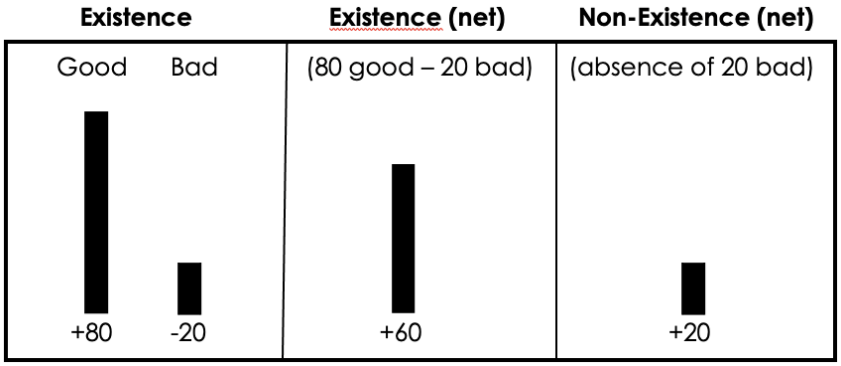
Reply: Benatar cautions us to not confuse the questions, "Do you **prefer** to exist now, or never have been born at all?" or "Do you **believe** it better to exist?" with "Is it *actually* **better** for you to exist, or never have been born at all?" These are not the same question. People can have preferences for things that are actually bad. (In effect, he is saying that people are irrational, and have a sort of Stockholm Syndrome toward life.)

(d) **Benatar's Conclusion Only Follows if the Harm of Existence is Great?** Consider your own life. Weigh out all of the goods and bads. I will propose the following conservative estimate of a typical life (assuming we can quantify goods and bads):

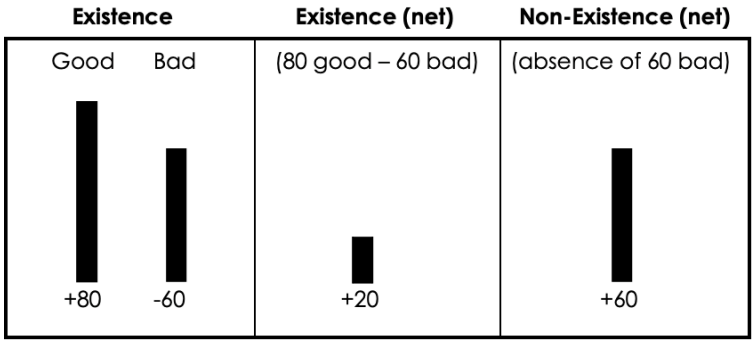


Assume that your life contains 80 units of happiness and 20 units of pain and suffering. This means that, on the balance, your life contains a net benefit of 60 units of happiness.

Now, if the disvalue of the presence of pain is symmetrical with the value of the absence of pain, then your non-existence contains a net benefit of 20 units of pain-absence. Like this:



Perhaps I'm confused and misinterpreting Benatar's view. But, is THIS what his view entails? If so, then this person's existence IS better than non-existence (and similarly for anyone whose happiness greatly outweighs their suffering). Non-existence would *only* be better in cases where existence entailed a LOT of suffering, as in the following:



Reply: Recall that Benatar believes that the harm of existence IS always very great. For starters, he thinks that death itself—even of someone very old—is a VERY great harm.

[*Also: Even if this objection succeeds, we've still conceded something quite surprising to Benatar. Typically, we think that, if a life is "on the whole" more good than bad, then it is better to exist than not exist. But, in our second example, above, the life IS "on the whole" good (it is, overall, +20 good), but it would still be better to never have lived it!*]

(e) **Better to Never Exist, Yet Death is Bad? Huh??** Wait, how can Benatar coherently say that death is very bad for you, when his whole deal is to say that existence is always better than non-existence!???

Reply: Benatar believes both that being brought into existence (birth) is a harm AND going out of existence (death) is a harm. It is always better to remain non-existent, so birth is a harm. BUT, once you are brought into existence, it is—assuming you have an overall happy life—better to remain in existence for as long as possible. Once you're born, living a long and happy life is the least bad of all the bad options, so to speak. But, ultimately, since death deprives you of eons and eons of good years no matter HOW long you manage to live, death is always an immense harm. And to die sooner just makes that harm even WORSE. So you should prefer to live as long a life as possible, once you are already born (and presuming that you are overall happy).

(f) **The World Is VERY Good?** If the non-existence of any possible individual is good, then this means that every single time anyone in history has failed to procreate when they could have procreated, they have made the world significantly better. Thus, it seems to follow that, in at least this one respect, the actual world is VERY, VERY good in light of all the non-existent people. [*Am I interpreting correctly, and isn't this absurd?*]

3. Conclusion: Benatar concludes that **it is better to never exist**. From here, he then tentatively concludes that it is therefore morally wrong to have children (at least, if bringing about the worse of two options is morally wrong), and that it would be better for human beings to cease to exist!

[*Note: He hesitates to go so far as to say that having children is WRONG. He suggests that it MIGHT be morally permissible. For, sometimes it is permissible to bring about bad states of affairs—particularly, when one has an overriding reason for doing so. (For instance, many believe that it is permissible to kill an animal in order to eat it, or release a few harmful greenhouse gases into the atmosphere in order to get to work, or discipline a child in order to shape them into a better person, and so on.) Perhaps some people have very good reasons for bringing a child into existence—and perhaps these reasons sometimes override the badness of that child's existence. But, Benatar is skeptical of this claim.*]