The Harm of Coming into Existence

1. Better to Never Exist: We all assume that, at least in most cases, bringing a human being into existence is morally permissible. Having children is generally seen as a GOOD thing. What justifies this assumption?

Benatar identifies the underlying justification: For most human beings, their life is on the whole GOOD. Anyone who exists experiences pleasures (or other good things). And anyone who exists experiences pains (or other bad things). In fact, existence is a necessary condition for both of these things—that is, one MUST exist in order to experience either pleasures or pains. Furthermore, for most of us, there is far more pleasure than there is pain. In short, if we weighed out all of the goods and bads in our lives, for most of us, the overall balance would be that our lives are on the whole good.

But, Benatar challenges this way of thinking. Should we really say that it is permissible to bring a child into this world just because her life will be “on the whole” good?

Benatar begins by pointing out two uncontroversial claims:

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

Thus, there is a symmetry concerning value. More pleasure=better. More pain=WORSE. But, pleasure and pain are asymmetrical in the following way:

• We generally recognize a strong moral duty not to HARM others.
• We do NOT generally recognize a strong moral duty to BENEFIT others.

For instance, it is morally wrong to punch you in the shoulder. But, it is NOT morally wrong to fail to give you a shoulder massage. In short, I DO have a moral duty not to give you pain, but I do NOT have a moral duty to give you pleasure. Thus, there is an asymmetry concerning duty.

Or consider the following:

Expecting Mothers  (a) Peggy is considering having a child. Doctors tell her that, if she conceives, her child will have a debilitating disease that will cause it to be in unrelievable, excruciating pain for its entire life. (b) Sue is considering having a child. Doctors tell her that, if she conceives, her child will be strong and healthy, and will live a perfectly normal, (overall) happy life.
What do you think these would-be mothers ought, morally, to do? Probably, you think that Peggy should NOT have a child. In fact, if she DOES decide to have a child, we would probably think that she has done something morally wrong. However, it seems that Sue has NO obligations. If she has the child, fine. If not, also fine. She is neither morally obligated to have a child, or refrain from having one. There is an asymmetry here, depicted in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Have Child</th>
<th>Not Have Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suffering Child</strong></td>
<td>Morally wrong</td>
<td>Morally obligatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Happy Child</strong></td>
<td>Morally permissible (neither wrong nor obligatory)</td>
<td>Morally permissible (neither wrong nor obligatory)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Benatar believes that these considerations support two more claims:

3) The absence of pain is good (even if no one experiences this good).
4) The absence of pleasure is not bad, unless there is someone who exists and is being deprived of pleasure.

Consider Peggy and Sue again. It would make sense to say:

- It is a good thing that Peggy never had a child, because it would have suffered.
- Sue chose to never have (happy) children, but this is not a bad thing.

So, in terms of good and bad, we evaluate those states as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Have Child</th>
<th>Not Have Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suffering Child</strong></td>
<td>Bad (presence of pain)</td>
<td>Good (absence of pain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Happy Child</strong></td>
<td>Good (presence of pleasure)</td>
<td>Neither good nor bad (absence of pleasure)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Benatar admits that claims (3) and (4) are much more controversial than (1) and (2). But, what would we have put in the chart above, if not Benatar’s suggestions? Benatar suggests that, if we want to avoid the asymmetry he has identified, then there are only two plausible alternatives:

**Alternative #1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Have Child</th>
<th>Not Have Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suffering Child</strong></td>
<td>Bad (presence of pain)</td>
<td>Good (absence of pain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Happy Child</strong></td>
<td>Good (presence of pleasure)</td>
<td><strong>Bad</strong> (absence of pleasure)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can restore symmetry by claiming that, just as the absence of pain is good, so too the absence of pleasure is bad. But, Benatar claims, this claim seems far too strong. Should we really conclude that the non-existence of every happy child who was never born is a bad thing? Is it really true that, every single time you have failed to procreate so far during your reproductive years, you have brought about something bad? If so, then it seems as if we have some prima facie moral duty to procreate. But, do we? Are we morally OBLIGATED to bring children into existence? Surely not. Benatar believes that we will agree with him in thinking that Alternative #1 is implausible.

**Alternative #2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Have Child</th>
<th>Not Have Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suffering Child</strong></td>
<td>Bad (presence of pain)</td>
<td><strong>Neither good nor bad</strong> (absence of pain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Happy Child</strong></td>
<td>Good (presence of pleasure)</td>
<td>Neither good nor bad (absence of pleasure)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can also restore symmetry by claiming that, just as the absence of pleasure is neither good nor bad, so too is the absence of pain neither good nor bad. Benatar claims that this is too weak. Should we really say, when Peggy decides not to bring a child into the
world who will only experience excruciating pain, that the result is not bad, but also not good? Benatar insists, surely the non-existence of Peggy’s suffering child is a GOOD thing! [He says little more than this. Is this judgment too quick? What do you think?]

**Conclusion:** If everything Benatar has said so far is correct, then we can evaluate whether it is better to exist or not exist as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Existing</th>
<th>Not Existing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suffering</strong></td>
<td>Bad (presence of pain)</td>
<td>Good (absence of pain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Happiness</strong></td>
<td>Good (presence of pleasure)</td>
<td>Neither good nor bad (absence of pleasure)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If one exists, then things are both good and bad. Existence is good insofar as one experiences pleasure, and bad insofar as one experiences pain.

But, if one does NOT exist, then things are only good! Non-existence is good insofar as there is an absence of pain. But, insofar as there is also an absence of pleasure, non-existence is neither good nor bad.

**Short version:** **Existing is good + bad. Not existing is only good. Therefore, it is better to not exist at all.** The striking conclusion here is that, in every case, it is WORSE to have a child (even a generally happy one!), than it is to not have one! By having a child, one brings into existence the sort of thing that can be harmed (including skinning one's knee as a child, getting one's heart broken in high school, and ultimately death—which Benatar insists is also a harm, though we will challenge this claim in a later lesson). And this is very bad. Benatar's argument has been as follows:

1) The presence of pain is bad.
2) The presence of pleasure is good.
3) The absence of pain is good (even if no one experiences this good).
4) The absence of pleasure is not bad, unless there is someone who exists and is being deprived of pleasure.
5) Existence entails the presence of both pain and pleasure. Non-existence entails the absence of both pain and pleasure.
6) Therefore, existence is both bad and good, while non-existence is only good. So, it is better to not exist.
2. Objections: There are several issues with Benatar’s argument.

(a) 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.

(b) We Prefer to Exist: If I were to ask you, “Would you rather exist, or never have been born at all?”, surely you will answer that you would prefer to exist (I hope). Implicit in this judgment is the claim that it is better to exist than not exist. How can it possibly be the case that we are 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 be wrong about whether or not I feel pain. Similarly, if I truthfully say, “I prefer to be alive,” 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, “Would you prefer to exist now, or never have been born at all?” with “Is it 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.

(c) 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):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Bad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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:
Existence | Existence (net) | Non-Existence (net)
---|---|---
Good | Bad | (80 good – 20 bad) | (absence of 20 bad)
80 | -20 | 60 | 20

Here, we can see that, even if we accept that—even if Benatar is correct in claiming that existence is both bad and good, while non-existence is only good—existence is still BETTER. Non-existence would only be better if existence entailed a LOT of harm, or pain and suffering, as in the following:

Existence | Existence (net) | Non-Existence (net)
---|---|---
Good | Bad | (80 good – 60 bad) | (absence of 60 bad)
80 | -60 | 20 | 60

Here, non-existence would be better than existence—but only when the harms one experiences are VERY GREAT. Though Benatar claims that EVERYONE experiences harms that are very great, we might take issue with this claim.

Benatar COULD avoid this objection by (instead of merely claiming that the absence of pain is good, and the absence of pleasure is neither good nor bad) claiming that we are morally OBLIGATED NOT to bring pain into existence, but NOT obligated to bring pleasure into existence. Then, each person would be obligated not to have children (since those children will experience pain). But, he does not make this claim.
Note that, even if this objection succeeds, we would still have to admit that Benatar has proven something very interesting. 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, here we have an example where a life IS “on the whole” good (it is +20 good), but it is NOT better to exist. So, note that this objection does not refute Benatar’s most interesting claim.

3. Conclusion: Benatar tentatively concludes with the shocking claims that it is 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.

Side Note: He suggests that it MIGHT be morally permissible to have children. 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.