Scientific Contribution

The Harm of Being Brought into Existence

A Critical Examination of David Benatar's Anti-Natalist Argument

Kei UDONO

Ritsumeikan University (JSPS Postdoctoral Fellow)
Email: udonokei@gmail.com

Abstract

Through a critical examination of David Benatar's anti-natalist argument, I consider whether being brought into existence is inherently a harm as he claims. Benatar's negative view of procreation stems from the notion that suffering is intrinsically harmful and that harm permeates life. This paper asserts that the obscurity and ambiguity of the concepts employed in Benatar's central argument lead him to make some fundamental mistakes. First, his concepts of 'good' and 'bad' are not clearly defined, particularly in his discussion on the desirability of human extinction. Consequently, there is some ambiguity as to whether such concepts are synonyms for pleasure and pain or for benefit and detriment, respectively. Additionally, Benatar's contention that "[the] absence of a pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation" merits critical scrutiny. In the context of this critical examination, the possibility of applying the concept of deprivation to the unborn (not-yet-conceived) is also explored. Further, Benatar's view on the badness of life can be counterargued from an anti-hedonist perspective. Finally, Benatar's view on the badness of death does not sit well with his negative view of life.

Keywords: procreation, anti-natalism, harm, the unborn, deprivation, non-existence

Introduction

In *Better Never to Have Been* (2006), South African philosopher David Benatar argues that "[b]eing brought into existence is not a benefit but always a harm" (p. 28). For Benatar, procreation is fundamentally irresponsible and never morally justifiable. His anti-natalist argument rests on the basic assumption that suffering is intrinsically bad and that badness permeates life. In this paper, through a critical analysis of Benatar's argument, I consider whether coming into existence is indeed always a harm. Benatar provides a general framework for understanding the ethical issues involved in procreation. His argument demonstrates that the issue of procreation (whether or not to have a child) can be discussed through a philosophical lens, while typically being considered to be a purely personal decision. This paper draws particular attention to the fundamental tenets upon which Benatar bases his ethics of procreation, such as concepts of good and bad, deprivation, the unborn child, the non-existent being, life not worth starting and life not worth living, the undesirability of death, and quality of life. In my view, the obscurity and ambiguity of these concepts lead him to make some fundamental mistakes. Nevertheless, Benatar's proposal remains extraordinarily thoughtful and ingenious: it is therefore philosophically important to ascertain which incorrect assumptions underpin his provocative defence of anti-natalism. His argument provides a new framework for understanding the nature and the moral status of non-existent beings.[1] This, I believe, is his prominent contribution to both metaphysics and ethics of birth.

The following concerns arise in relation to Benatar's argument. First, his concepts of 'good' and 'bad' are not clearly defined; thus there is some ambiguity as to whether they are synonyms for pleasure and pain or for benefit and detriment, respectively (Section 1). Second, the absence of a benefit can be bad for a non-existent person who

never experiences loss and deprivation (Sections 2, 3 and 4). Third, his description of life as inherently harmful can be counterargued from an anti-hedonist perspective (Section 5). Fourth, his description of death as intrinsically harmful implicitly presupposes the 'preciousness' of life, which he openly denies (Section 6).

1. The obscurity and ambiguity of the concepts of good and bad

This section considers the plausibility of Benatar's controversial *asymmetry argument,* by focusing on the basic concepts of 'good' and 'bad' and their use in his central argument. Benatar (2006) famously argues that it is bad for people to be brought into existence because of the harm life inflicts on them. Therefore, he maintains that we should abstain from procreation, to avoid creating new people who will inevitably suffer. His main argument is that there is a crucial asymmetry between harms and benefits (e.g. pain and pleasure) that renders hollow the advantage of existence over non-existence. The asymmetry, he contends, is described in the following manner: the absence of harm is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, and the absence of a benefit is *not bad* unless it is a deprivation for someone. Only those who exist suffer harms; therefore, this vulnerability is a real disadvantage for living people compared to a harm caused to those who never exist (Benatar, 2006, pp. 30-31).

Benatar claims that the absence of pain is "good, even if there is nobody to enjoy that good" (2006, p. 14). However, unlike the goodness of the absence of pain, the absence of pleasure for the non-existent is neither good nor bad. The exact meaning of 'good' in this context requires more clarification, since his proposition is not straightforward. Benatar argues that it is better for those who will potentially be born in the future not to be born, and that it would have been better for those who already exist – all human beings – to have never existed (2006, p. 18). He characterises the existence of all human beings as not worthy of having. When he regards the existence of human beings as bad, he does so from a *detached perspective*, without fully attending to the subjective perspective of each individual. Each person may or may not regard his or her existence as inherently bad; however, Benatar is referring to human life from the perspective of a detached observer, from a genuinely objective standpoint.

In Benatar's view, all women are morally required to choose to artificially terminate a pregnancy because doing so would decrease the amount of suffering in the world. Benatar states, "One implication of my view is that it would be preferable for our species to die out" (2004, p. 169). He also claims "although extinction may be bad for those who precede it, particularly those who immediately precede it, the state of human extinction itself is not bad" (2006, p. 15).[2] Once again, in arguing that human extinction would be preferable, he refuses to adopt the subjective perspective of individuals who precede human extinction, namely those who would be affected by the possibility of total human extinction.

Benatar's adoption of a detached, impersonal standpoint, rather than taking the perspectives of real people living their lives, will invite the criticism of self-refutation. He argues, from an extremely detached perspective that human extinction would be a good outcome. However, this would not only constitute the end of the human species; the termination of human reactions, judgments, evaluative responses, and feelings of pleasure and pain would also mean the end of the languages and cultural conversations that frame an account for the goodness and badness of something. Contemplating the permanent loss of these and other elements of human attitudes and socially shared practices poses a significant problem for Benatar's theory. This is because it was originally developed within the framework of a hedonist utilitarian tradition that, based on people's shared evaluative practice, sees pleasure and pain as ultimate measures of good and bad (Bradley, 2016).[3] If no agent experiencing pain or pleasure exists, it becomes meaningless, from a hedonist utilitarian perspective, to discuss goodness or badness: if there are no possible values and no evaluation, the original contexts in which the concepts of 'good' and 'bad' were developed become lost. It is questionable whether the hedonistically defined concepts of good and bad have any use in a situation where no one experiences pain and pleasure, and where there is no receiver and evaluator of benefits and deficits.

2. The applicability of the concept of 'deprivation' to the non-existent

This section continues the examination of Benatar's asymmetry argument by focusing on his claim for the inapplicability of the concept of deprivation to the non-existent. Benatar argues the following: "For an existing person, the presence of bad things is bad and the presence of good things is good...But compare that with a scenario in which that person never existed—then, the absence of the bad would be good, but the absence of the good wouldn't be bad, because there'd be nobody to be deprived of those good things" (2006, p. 346). His contention that "the absence of a benefit is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation" merits critical scrutiny.

In opposition to Benatar's view, let us consider the possibility that one who does not exist can be deprived. Imagine the following situation. A scientist was the prime candidate for the Nobel Prize. Sadly, he died as a result of an unexpected accident shortly before the votes were cast for the prize, and the Nobel Prize is given only to a living person. We can conclude that he was unfortunate and that his early death was 'bad', even though he did not know he was the prime candidate and thus could not feel deprived of the award. Thomas Nagel's (1979) famous account of the harm death causes relates to such examples. According to Nagel, death is bad because it deprives an individual of future goods they would have received, had they not died.

The deprivation account of death's badness lends credence to the claim that it is possible for the absence of benefits to be bad, even if no one exists to experience the deprivation. One can develop an account for the deprivation for those who never exist: just as the taking away of opportunities for goods is what makes death bad, taking away of opportunities for goods is what makes preventing one's coming into existence bad. Benatar would object to this in the following way: in the case presented above, there is a person for whom the absence is a deprivation, namely the scientist. For Benatar, the absence of good is not bad for a person who never exists – he is not referring to a person who exists and then dies. Benatar sees the dead as unfortunate in having endured the deprivation of non-existence, but he does not see the unborn as unfortunate in the same sense because they cannot be deprived of anything.

This raises the following question: Is the concept of deprivation unintelligible when applied to the unborn? It makes sense to claim that an individual who would be one in a million yet does not come into existence is a significant social loss. However, does it also make sense to claim that his or her non-existence is a loss for that specific person? In the following section, let us consider a situation in which we can regard the non-existence of the unborn as an instance of deprivation.

3. The Applicability of the concept of 'deprivation' to the unborn

This section applies the concept of deprivation to the unborn (not-yet-conceived). Benatar's anti-natalist argument is based on his recognition of the immense suffering of life, which is in no way reduced by any pleasure, benefit, or any other positive aspects. Any suffering, according to Benatar, no matter how small, provides a reason for not bringing future life into existence (Coates, 2014). In his view, the unborn, or 'people' who never existed in the first place, can never be deprived of any pleasure, whereas bringing actual people into existence is to inflict tremendous harm upon them. This asymmetry between the values of pleasure and pain for people who exist and those who have never existed provides the rationale for Benatar's anti-natalist argument. Clearly, Benatar is more concerned with *preventing suffering* than *increasing pleasure*; the absence of pleasure, benefit, or any other positive aspects is not a problem when no one exists to be deprived of it.

Benatar's argument assumes that the unborn baby does not exist and indeed has never existed. Even if we admit that this is the case, we might well wonder whether denial of a possible opportunity to live is bad for the unborn child. For instance, we can perceive the loss of the unborn baby in terms of unrealised life potentialities. In response, Benatar would reply that there is no life which is less harmful than non-existence. Benatar insists that when we regret not having a child, it will not be

for the sake of the child: "One might grieve about not having had children, but not because the children one could have had have been deprived of existence. Remorse about not having children is remorse for ourselves - sorrow about having missed child-bearing and child-rearing experiences" (Benatar, 2006, pp. 34-5). Benatar argues that grief and regret regarding the non-existence of children is nothing but selfishness on the part of those who seek to bear and rear a child: it implies that only the interests of the parent, not those of the child, are considered.

Benatar's intuition about the asymmetric reactions faces a challenge. Consider the following scenario: A woman faces the possibility of having twins, as there are two embryos in her womb. However, a doctor advises that birthing twins could pose a risk to her and recommends destroying one of the two embryos. She obeys the doctor's recommendation. After having her child, she feels some remorse because she thinks that the birth of only one child was unfair to the other embryo. Let us put aside the question of whether the unborn baby was *killed* during the embryonic stage and suppose it simply lost the chance to exist. In other words, the unborn baby will not exist and has never existed before. Even if this is the case, denial of a possible opportunity to live can be regarded as deprivation when we see that the twin who was birthed becomes an adult and leads a successful and happy life. We can perceive the loss of the unborn baby by comparing his/her possible life to his/her twin sibling's actual life.

The implication of the above scenario is that Benatar's argument fails in demolishing the idea that the unborn can be deprived, such as when he explains the asymmetry between (a) our feeling of remorse in bearing an unhappy child and (b) our inability to have such remorse when failing to bring a happy child into this world. My scenario, which could occur in real life, makes us realise that the supposed contrast between (a) and (b) is not easily perceived in some cases. It is far from evident that a mother's remorse is for herself and that her sorrow stems from having missed child-bearing and child-rearing experiences: It is more natural to construe that her regret is due to the unborn child and his or her inability to start a life. The presence of the living twin sibling, who is genetically identical to the unborn child, leads us to imagine what the life of the unborn would have been like if he or she were alive. Such a scenario evokes a feeling of remorse in the mother's mind. Part of the reason for normal people's difficulty with experiencing remorse because of not having a happy child is not necessarily because the unborn are entities that can never be deprived. Instead, it is mainly due to a parent's lack of imagination related to the negated pre-natal life, as imagination is necessary for invoking a sympathetic reaction.

It could be the case that a person deprives others of their goods even when the person, namely the depriver is incapable of feeling remorse for what he or she has done. For instance, though many people feel no remorse or guilt about consuming meat or animal products, it does not mean animals are not deprived. *Deprivers' ability or inability to feel remorse does not affect the existence of deprivation.* It is also true that our inability to feel remorse in particular cases is merely a contingent (i.e. changeable and temporal) matter. When a piece of meat is in front of consumers, it will not cause them to imagine how animals are killed in factories and the tremendous fear they surely experience. However, concrete visual images, such as fairly accurate and graphic cinematic representations of animal slaughter, enable them to have some sense of remorse, though it might not persuade them to discontinue eating meat.

One might object that our feeling of remorse for the unborn child is neither natural nor authentic: This objection assumes that our natural sense of remorse can serve as a reliable indicator of the fact of deprivation. However, how can we know that such a natural sense of remorse is not subject to any psychological biases, given that visual and auditory stimuli often evoke our emotions? Neal Feigenson (2016, p. 137) argues that the arousal of emotional reactions, particularly our sympathetic reactions towards others, is subject to *salience bias*. Even if someone is deprived, this fact will not evoke our emotions if the fact of deprivation is not noticeable. People often feel no remorse about eating meat because they do not know or cannot visualise in detail how animals are killed. It is merely a matter of our lack of knowledge and imagination.

It could also be argued: We feel no remorse

for the unborn because the unborn, who can experience neither pleasure nor pain, cannot ensure possible deprivation. Moreover, there is no objective ground to feel remorse for them. In this case, it is important to clarify the meanings of 'deprivation' or 'loss' as well as who can endure such deprivation.

Notably, the lack of conscious experiences does not imply an inability to be deprived. For instance, imagine someone rapes a woman who is in a coma. This humiliation and the deprivation of her dignity and body sovereignty are not experienced by her conscious mind. However, one's inability to have a conscious experience does not imply that one cannot be deprived. Thus, I view deprivation as an objective phenomenon rather than as a subjective phenomenon, or as something dependent on consciousness (i.e. how we feel about it).

One might argue that since the unborn are, by definition, non-existent (i.e. they do not exist as visible and concrete beings), they cannot be deprived. A further ontological argument is required in the discussion of whether non-existence can be deprived of anything. Palle Yourgrau (1987) contends that the unborn, as well the dead, can be described as unfortunate due to having endured "the deprivation of non-existence"(p. 149). Yourgrau criticises the error of confusing 'non-existence' with 'nothingness'. He implies that the unborn, like the dead, are "beings" and "suffer from the evil of non-existence" (p. 148). As some researchers put it, we can employ the argument from counterfactuals to account for the concept of deprivation applicable to non-existent beings (e.g. Yoshizawa, 2013, pp. 47-51). The unborn are deprived of goods that would be available in their counterfactual existence. Assessing whether one's not coming into existence is a deprivation is a matter of comparing the actual situation (his non-existence) and the counterfactual situation (his existence). The deprivation of not coming into existence involves neither pleasure nor pain. A counterfactual comparison determines the state of being deprived.

Deprivation takes many forms, some of which are beyond our imagination. Many factors tend to distort our perceptions of deprivation, such as salience, similarity, proximity, our current interests, pleasure, laziness, and inattentiveness, to name a few. The presence of a deprived subject facilitates our sensitivity to the deprivation they suffer. Deprivation, however, does not require the actual presence of the deprived subject. To develop a concept of deprivation that can be endured by non-existent beings, we must also consider counterfactual elements.

Those who support the deprivation theory of the harm of death, by appealing to counterfactual considerations, are still resistant to supporting the idea that the unborn are deprived in the same ways the dead are deprived. In fact, Nagel explains, "The fact that Beethoven had no children may have been a cause of regret to him or a sad thing for the world, but it cannot be described as a misfortune for the children that he never had" (Nagel, 1970, p. 78). Nagel expresses the same view as Benatar: Beethoven's regret about not having a child is not for the unborn child, thus implying that the concept of deprivation is not applicable to the unborn. However, as Yoshizawa (2013), endorsing Yourgrau's view, argues that counterfactual possibility can account for the harm of not coming into existence: A potential child who is deprived of a possible life is similar to a potential pianist who is deprived of a possible career, due to her parents' opposition.

As previously mentioned, our identification of others' deprivation is subject to bias. It is easier for us to imagine the life a dead person could have led because we can utilise our memory or record of him as a resource for imagination. In contrast, the life an unborn person could have led is not easy to imagine because we do not typically possess the necessary resources to do so. As suggested earlier, imagining a concrete situation can be the source of emotional feeling. Having remorse for the unborn child requires us to imagine the life he or she could have lived in a more concrete manner.

I have discussed some implications of the scenario in which a woman was advised by her doctor to destroy one of the twin embryos. One might wonder whether her regret relates to the deprived future potential of the unborn or to the killing of a living organism. Biologically, there is continuity between the embryo and the newly born baby. Benatar describes unborn entities as non-existent beings that require no benefits. He believes that an unborn child's possible future

existence is not a condition for permitting the interests and rights that child would have if he or she came into existence.

The following scenario relates to Benatar's views: Suppose a couple are deciding whether to have a child and are considering the benefits and deficits for their child if he or she is born. The child is not yet born, but the couple creates a hypothetical scenario when discussing their possible future child. A child's future existence is merely assumed at this stage. When the couple agree to procreate, the child's future existence is strongly expected. After the couple have sexual intercourse, an egg is fertilised by sperm, the woman becomes pregnant, and a new embryonic life begins to grow and transform into a foetus.[4] At this stage, the couple is faced with the decision to bring the child into existence or to abort the foetus. No fiction is applied when talking about the possible future child in this circumstance: although the child is not yet born, there is a high probability of the child's existence. I have found that Benatar does not take into account the different situations that require decision-making on giving birth. We do not need to apply the same ethical principle as a basis for ethical decision-making when the existence of a future child is merely assumed, strongly expected, or highly probable in an objective sense.

Benatar never specifies the critical time at which the unborn merit moral consideration. Depriving an actual human of life is, in Benatar's view, ethically impermissible. His claim that rights and interests are attributed to the existent, rather than to the non-existent, can be challenged, especially when we consider the varying contexts in which we talk about the unborn. Benatar (2006, p. 15) believes that in later-term abortions, we are inflicting pain on foetuses who have the capacity to experience it. On the other hand, in early-term abortions, he does not think that we inflict pain on foetuses or embryos because they lack the capacity to experience it.

In my view, deciding to have an early-term abortion by destroying an embryo is, from an ethical perspective, not the same as choosing to avoid having a child by safely preventing a pregnancy. Life begins at fertilisation, and a fertilised embryo is not *non-existent* in an ethically relevant sense, although it does not possess personhood or consciousness. The early embryo, however, is an *autonomous living being*. By destroying the embryo, one is depriving it of its future autonomous activity because the embryo's autonomous (not self-conscious) activity (i.e. operation) requires the continuation of life. The deprivation, in this sense, requires no counterfactual consideration.

4. The applicability of the concept of 'deprivation' to living organisms in general

This section applies the concept of deprivation to living organisms more generally. Irrespective of whether an embryo or foetus has humanity, it is not provocative to argue that it is an autonomous living being distinct from non-living inanimate entities. Even if we concede that the concept of personhood is not applicable to the early foetus/embryo, the concept of 'deprivation' is certainly applicable. Just as human beings require food and water for their subsistence, so foetuses and embryos need water, energy, and nutrition for theirs. Although Benatar believes that an unborn baby does not exist, has no claim on us, and can never be deprived of anything, he does not pay sufficient attention to the moral status of such organisms as autonomous living entities that in fact do exist. It should also be noted that, besides sentient beings, there are many non-sentient beings that go through periods of growth, strive for self-conservation, and perish. Their autonomous activity reflects their wish to continue living. A fertilised embryo is not a person who is self-conscious, yet it still *persists* in living. Persons cannot claim the monopoly of interest in continued existence. In this case, the term 'interest' is used to describe what is beneficial (or positive) for someone or something.

It is worth considering whether Benatar's anti-death claim ('Death is bad.') contradicts his anti-life claim ('Life is bad.'). For instance, Ken Coates (2014) draws attention to Benatar's distinction between not starting new lives and ending already existing lives through killing or suicide: Benatar's anti-life claim, which contends that it would be better if our lives had never been, does not imply that we would be better off killing ourselves. However, if his anti-death claim is extended to living organisms in general, the following concern arises. A foetus and an embryo

are living organisms and have an implicit interest in continued existence. The moral status of these living organisms must therefore be considered, not just because they are potential human beings, but because living beings that already exist have an implicit interest in their continued existence.

Benatar's argument can be understood in the following way (See McGregor & Sullivan-Bissett, 2012). One who exists has an interest in continuing to exist, whereas non-existent beings do not and cannot have any interest in coming into existence. Thus, many potential lives should not be started, but once they have been, they strive to remain in existence. The following inference can be drawn from Benatar's anti-death claim: the extraction of the embryo in abortion is bad because this deprives it of life. Because the embryo persists in continuing its existence and the realisation of its fuller potential, destroying it and putting an end to its existence amounts to deprivation. One might argue that it is only after an embryo grows into a late-term foetus that it comes to have an interest in continued existence. Note, however, that Benatar argues that "[t]here is a serious intrinsic tragedy in any death" (2004, p. 164). If this statement about the tragedy of death is extended to all living species, he has to admit that it is bad to kill an embryo by pricking it with a needle. Benatar regards death as bad because it involves failing to continue life or ceasing to exist. This is not only true of human beings: it should also be true of other living creatures, including less mentally sophisticated creatures such as fish and insects. The claim on death's badness should also apply to early term human fetuses and human embryos which, according to Benatar, are not human beings.

The following paradox can be extracted from Benatar's argument: coming into existence is bad for the unborn baby, but death is bad for the foetus and the embryo. Nevertheless, Benatar argues that "At least zygotes, embryos, and foetuses until quite late in gestation have not begun existing in a morally relevant sense and that coming to exist in a morally relevant sense is a gradual process" (Benatar, 2006, p. 25). As Benatar develops his discussion, he talks about the "morally relevant sense of coming into existence", which is distinct from merely coming into existence. However, such an account is *ad hoc*, because his original discussion begins with no such reservations, stating simply that "Although the good things in one's life make it go better than it would otherwise have gone, one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed. Those who never exist cannot be deprived" (Benatar 2006, p. 1). He initially explains that one's existence is a morally relevant characteristic because only those who exist can be deprived, implying that no moral consideration is required for the non-existent. However, by precluding organisms such as the embryo and foetus from those towards whom we have a moral duty, he simply assumes they do not exist in a way that deserves moral consideration. He evades criticism by placing limitations on his use of the phrase "coming into existence".

Admittedly, Benatar would defend himself that his ethical concern has mainly to do with reproducing sentient, feeling creatures who suffer. However, by saying this, he fails to pay sufficient attention to the fact there are many non-sentient lives for whom the concept of deprivation is applicable. The following question therefore arises: Why should moral consideration be given to sentient beings rather than living beings overall, given that the concept of deprivation is applicable to both? This question is explored by Lawrence E. Johnson (2011) who advocates "a life-centred approach to bioethics" and claims that non-sentient beings, as with sentient beings, should be morally considered. In defence of his central argument for anti-natalism, Benatar must explain why we should give more priority to sentient beings than other living beings.

5. The badness of life: hedonism versus anti-hedonism

This section examines Benatar's view on the badness of life and considers a counterargument derived from an *anti-hedonist* perspective. Given both the positive and negative aspects of an individual's life, Benatar concludes that most people's lives are extremely bad and not worth living. He argues that "While people go to great lengths to spare their children from suffering, few of them seem to notice that the one (and only) guaranteed way to prevent all the suffering of their children is not to bring those children into existence in the first place" (Benatar, 2006, p. 7).

However, his claim regarding the 'harmfulness of living' invites the criticism that he discounts the fact that each person has his or her own view of the value of living. In response to this criticism, he contends that life can be genuinely harmful, even if a person thinks it is good. The life of the 'happy slave' is perhaps the best example of this.[5] Citing a variety of sociological and psychological studies, Benatar maintains that we are overly optimistic in believing that our lives are worthwhile and in feeling that we are mostly happy (Benatar, 2006, p. 69). He argues that we have evolved to be optimistic so as not to commit suicide easily: "... If people were prone to see this true quality of their lives for what it is, they might be much more inclined to kill themselves" (Benatar, 2006, p. 69). Benatar thus argues that people tend to overrate the pleasure in their lives, due to dispositional optimism which provides an important protective factor against suicidal behaviour.

Although he argues that our self-assessment of well-being can be mistaken and our experience of pleasure is likely to be illusory, Benatar never clarifies his own standard of a good life or happiness. The following questions therefore arise: Is it sufficient to conclude that, as the number of painful events increases, a person's life can be deemed bad? Is there some method that can be used to quantitatively determine the extent to which people are happy? Benatar would argue that even one harmful experience makes life bad because, in non-existence, there is no harm whatsoever. The following analogy will help. For instance, some people abstain from whiskey altogether, just to avoid drinking bad-tasting whiskey, even though they know there are a few excellent bottles among many. Benatar would likely opt for the same, as he thinks life is full of harm and therefore one is better off never coming into existence to avoid such harms.

There are many contexts in which to evaluate one's life. As such, the goodness of life cannot be evaluated simply according to the amount of pain and suffering that an individual experiences. Merely reducing suffering does not make life better because people wish to live in a way that is congruent with their values. Nelson Mandela, for example, dedicated his life to the struggle for freedom, equality, and justice. Although he encountered an immense amount of racism, violence, injustice, humiliation, and inhumanity, The amount of suffering he underwent does not lead one to think Mandela's life was a bad one. He led a virtuous life, which was manifested in his struggle to preserve and uphold human dignity. One can seek a good life, even amid grave circumstances involving suffering and pain.

Mike W. Martin (2012, p. 87) argues that the view of suffering as intrinsically bad is typically associated with philosophical hedonism, according to which pleasure is the intrinsic good and suffering is the intrinsic bad. Certainly, there are arguments against philosophical hedonism. Martin describes Friedrich Nietzsche as advocating an anti-hedonist view, according to which all suffering is good insofar as it becomes part of personal flourishing. Nietzsche regards suffering as a key ingredient to flourishing and excellence in the sense that it is integral to creativity; thus, true life's goodness is made possible by creativity. The idea that every person would have been better off not existing merely because the amount of suffering is greater than the amount of pleasure is unacceptable to anti-hedonists such as Nietzsche. The same belief is expressed by Christine Overall (2012), who states that "We often undergo certain kinds of pain because of the great happiness (good) that we will thereby gain..." (p. 112).

The question of whether all lives are in a pitiable state is not determined by the amount of pain and suffering people experience. People are quite often willing to undergo suffering to achieve worthwhile goals or do what they believe to be right. For instance, since I like to conduct philosophical research, I will put up with discomfort in order to do so, although I could easily choose to avoid the suffering involved in writing philosophy papers. There are many things individuals are willing or feel obliged to suffer for, and these have greater value than the mere avoidance of suffering. From the perspective of Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, Mary Shanahan (2014, p. 110) contends that it is *strong goods* such as the fulfilment of desire rather than *weak goods,* such as the avoidance of pain or suffering, that make life worthwhile and gratifying, even when much suffering occurs. She maintains that Benatar is mistaken in describing the world as filled only with suffering and pain: In doing so,

he fails to notice that the world is also filled with value and meaning.

Benatar would reject any argument that struggling and suffering can give meaning to life. He thinks that people attempt to find meaning in suffering because the suffering is so unbearable. However, people do not necessarily look for meaning related to suffering *ex post facto* as conciliation for their unbearable situation. In cases where people pursue worthwhile goals, people most likely do not think that suffering is without meaning and that it is best to avoid it. Yet, Benatar describes human life as 'a world of suffering' and claims that "even the best lives are not only much worse than people think but also very bad" (Benatar, 2006, p. 14). This negative perspective is highly contestable, and more discussion is needed regarding the standard by which the badness of life is judged.

6. The tension between the harm of death and the preciousness of life

This section examines Benatar's view on the harmfulness of death. Benatar argues that individuals' success or relative happiness in their lives do not counteract their bad experiences, because death is a serious harm that is inevitable for everyone. He states, "My view is that all deaths are serious harms, *ceteris paribus*. How great the harm is relative to others or to the current norm can vary, but there is a serious intrinsic tragedy in any death. That we are born destined to die is a serious harm" (Benatar 2004, p. 164).

Admittedly, life is full of harm, and death is often referred to as the most serious harm of all. However, *the intrinsic harmfulness* of death is open to discussion. One possible argument is that the extent to which people see death as harmful is dependent on social context: In other words, the harmfulness of death is not a universal view. While there are cultures and religions that regard death as a sad circumstance, there are also cultures and faiths that see death as a joyous occasion. For instance, Mexicans celebrate 'Día de los Muertos' (Day of the Dead) to commemorate the dead (Brandes, 1998).

In response to this objection, Benatar would comment that it is not a matter of what people think, but rather of the reality of the harm. Although it is difficult to see how it is possible, suppose that the harm of death was not culturally relative. The idea of the intrinsic harmfulness of death has importance in Benatar's argument because it partly explains why human existence is inherently harmful. Benatar's view is that death is a factor that characterises the bad nature of life. He argues that "[c]oming into existence is bad in part because it invariably leads to the harm of ceasing to exist" (Benatar, 2006, p. 213).

Nevertheless, this question arises: What makes death, which Benatar equates with cessation of existence, inherently harmful? Benatar's main point is not that the process of dying is harmful, but rather that the fact of death is harmful. He insists that new lives should not be brought into existence; however, if they *are* brought into existence, they should be cherished and protected. Interestingly, his attitude toward life before and after birth is quite different: Preventing birth or, more literally, contraception, cannot possibly harm beings who never come into existence. Conversely, the cessation of life creates harm. Whereas his main reason for endorsing contraception is that the non-existent cannot be harmed, his primary reason for endorsing a cherishing attitude toward life remains unclear.

While insisting upon the badness associated with starting a new life, he also adheres to the view that the cessation of life is bad. When Benatar maintains that life deserves continuation once it is properly underway, he seems to accept the idea of the preciousness of life, which prompts the question as to whether it is permissible for people to prevent the process of giving birth, because the preciousness of life seems to give *some* justification for giving birth, the act of producing life, which is precious. In ordinary discourse, people typically regard the production of something precious as positive. Benatar would suggest that even if life is precious, we are still guilty of bringing a new life into existence. From Benatar's perspective, *life is too costly for the value,* given that suffering is a natural and inevitable part of life, and such negative experiences provide justification for refraining from bringing new life into existence.

Benatar thinks that life causes suffering, loss, or disadvantage. However, as we discussed in the previous section, the idea that the amount of suffering a person encounters makes her or

his life so bad in quality that it is better not to bring such a life into existence is questionable. While suffering is a natural and inevitable part of life, such bad experiences do not lead us to conclude that our existence is necessarily bad. The goodness or badness of our *existence* is not a *state* we experience or undergo. Benatar employs faulty logic in attributing the badness to human existence in general, based on his assessment of people's quality of experience. The goodness of existence can manifest itself in various ways, such as pursuing worthwhile goals, being free, being empowered, overcoming evil, acting virtuously and being in good stead with others. Having unpleasant experiences is just one manifestation of the badness of existence. While Benatar is committed to a certain value ontology in his assessment of the badness of life or the goodness of existence, his discussion lacks a detailed account of 'what' badness is and of 'why' something is bad. A precise and rigorous conceptualisation of value is needed in order to determine the soundness of Benatar's value argument.

Conclusion

David Benatar's anti-natalist argument gives us an opportunity to rethink our common assumption that being brought into existence is beneficial. Benatar asserts that procreation is irresponsible and can never be morally acceptable. His anti-natalist viewpoint stems from the notion that suffering is intrinsically harmful and that harm permeates life. The fact that reproduction is an elementary aspect of human life means that judgements regarding this viewpoint need to be considered carefully. As a result of our inquiry, this paper concludes that some of Benatar's viewpoints are questionable, such as his lack of definitions prescribed to 'good' and 'bad'. Additionally, one can take issue with the applicability of the notion of deprivation. Furthermore, his perspective that life is harmful overall is debatable.

Aside from the task of examining the soundness of Benatar's central argument, further studies are needed regarding the public policy implications of Benatar's claim. Even if non-existence is preferable to existence as he claims, it is arguably impossible to prevent the multiplication of all living things. Though zoologists can separate male and female animals and perform sterilisation operations, it would be ludicrous to suggest for humans to be treated in the same way. Forced anti-conception birth control would be an extreme action, as we are not docile animals. If preventing birth is normatively required, it is also necessary to consider the extenuating circumstances that would exist when failing to prevent a birth. Humans have conscious minds that have an influence on their behavior, but such conscious efforts are sometimes thwarted by the strong influence of instinct. In such circumstances, the extent to which the failure to resist the power of instinct could serve as the extenuating condition has to be examined.

Endnotes

1 Who or what has moral status is a fundamental moral issue. Who or what exists, and how they exist as beings, is a fundamental metaphysical issue.

2 He denies the idea that "any lives are worth starting" and argues that "it would be better if humans (and other species) became extinct." (Benatar, 2006, p. 194)

3 Benatar applies a utilitarian argument in accounting for the value of the existence or non-existence of humans. In so doing, he also considers the relative benefits and deficits experienced by other sentient life forms. One might wonder whether the end of the human species could benefit the very large and diverse group of non-human creatures. However, this would not be a relevant consideration because Benatar's fundamental question is whether life is bad for all sentient beings, human and non-human. His answer is that life is so bad that it would be better if all sentient creatures ceased to reproduce and became extinct.

4 The biological continuity and similarity between an early-term foetus and a new-born baby is undeniable. Even if we concede that the actual personhood or humanity of the unborn baby can be called into question, we can still discuss its moral status because it will gradually develop into a human being. This idea is expressed by R. M. Hare in the following way: "If it would be wrong to kill an adult human being because he has a certain property, it is wrong to kill an organism which will

come to have that property if it develops normally" (Hare, 1975, p. 209).

5 Benatar writes, "Even if one cannot be mistaken about whether one *currently* is glad to have been born, it does not follow that one cannot be mistaken about whether it is better that one came into existence. We can imagine somebody being glad, at one stage in his life, that he came to be, and then (or earlier), perhaps in the midst of extreme agony, regretting his having come into existence." (Benatar, 2006, p. 58)

References

[1] Belshaw, Christopher. "Review of David Benatar, Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence." *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 9 Jun, 2007: https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/better-never-to-have-been-the-harm-of-coming-into-existence/.

[2] Benatar, David. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford UP, 2006.

[3] Benatar, David. "Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence." *Life, Death, and Meaning - Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*. Ed. David Benatar. Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, pp. 155-168.

[4] Bradley, Ben. "Benatar and the Logic of Betterness." *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, vol. 4, no. 2, July 2017, pp. 1-6.

[5] Brandes, Stanley. "Iconography in Mexico's Day of the Dead: Origins and Meaning." *Ethnohistory*, vol. 45, no. 2, 1998, pp. 181-218.

[6] Burgess, J. A. "Potential and Foetal Value." *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2010, pp. 140-153.

[7] Coates, Ken. *Anti-Natalism: Rejectionist Philosophy from Buddhism to Benatar*. First Edition Design Pub, 2016.

[8] Condic, Samuel B., and Maureen Condic. *Human Embryos, Human Beings: A Scientific & Philosophical Approach*. Catholic University of America Press, 2018.

[9] Feigenson, Neal. *Experiencing Other Minds in the Courtroom*. The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

[10] Gruen, Lori. *Ethics and Animals: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

[11] Hare, Richard Marvin. "Abortion and the Golden Rule." *Philosophy and Public Affairs,* vol. 4, no.3, 1975, pp. 201-222.

[12] Johnson, Lawrence E. *A Life-Centered Approach to Bioethics: Biocentric Ethics*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

[13] McGregor, Rafe, and Ema Sullivan-Bissett. "Better No Longer to Be: The Harm of Continued Existence." *South African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2012, pp. 55-68.

[14] Martin, Mike W. *Happiness and the Good Life*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

[15] Morgan, Lynn M. "The Potentiality Principle from Aristotle to Abortion." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 54, no. S7, 2013, pp. S15-S25.

[16] Nagel, Thomas. "Death." *Noûs*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1970, pp. 73-80.

[17] Nagel, Thomas. *Mortal Questions*. Canto, 1979.

[18] Overall, Christine, and Sandro Mussa-Ivaldi. *Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate*. MIT Press, 2014.

[19] Singer, Peter, et al. *Embryo Experimentation*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.

[20] Shanahan, Mary. *An Ethics of/for the Future?* Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014.

[21] Uhrig, Meike K., et al. "Emotion Elicitation: A Comparison of Pictures and Films." *Frontiers in Psychology*, 17 Feb, 2016: http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00180.

[22] Yoshizawa, Takefumi. "Umarete Kuru Koto No Nai Mono To Shisha: Hi Sonzaisha Ni Kansuru Rinri Teki Mondai To Keijijogaku (The Unborn and the Dead: the Ethics and the Metaphysics about the Non-Existent)." *Rinri Niokeru Shutai No Mondai (Sosho-Areteia 16)*. Ed. Masaki Nakamura. Ochanomizu Shobou, 2013, pp. 39-68.

[23] Yourgrau, Palle. "The Dead." *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 84, no. 2, 1987, pp. 84-101.