Fundamental problems of the natalism vs. anti-natalism controversy

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1. Introduction

In 2006, South African philosopher David Benatar published a book called Better Never to Have Been\(^1\). In this book, he claims that coming into existence is always a serious harm, and it leads to a controversial conclusion that all humankind should not have been brought into existence, and thus, it is morally wrong to bring any future children from now on. Not surprisingly, he also predicates that humankind should be extinct sooner than later.

This claim might remind us of pessimistic anti-natalism, such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Emil Cioran, and so on. Benatar’s argument is, however, technically different from them because he demonstrates that all humankind should not have been brought into existence in the way of analytical philosophy. Due to the analytical method, most criticisms focus on his framework or demonstration; however, we face serious obstacles when we refute his argument, and I call them the “Judging Subject” and “Unrecognisable Object” problems. This paper will aim to clarify these problems and propose that another approach is necessary to consider Benatar’s central idea: whether or not we should bring children into this world.

Before I start my argument, I will give a brief sketch of Benatar’s argument and confirm how he extended his proposal in applying the asymmetry of pleasure and pain. This framework will help us think of “Judging Subject” and “Unrecognisable Object.” Then, we will first discuss the term pain and pleasure and argue that we are not able to avoid the “Judging Subject” problem. Then, the latter concept will be considered in analyzing Benatar’s two possible worlds comparison, and I will argue that the comparability of two possible worlds does not necessarily conclude that one should not be brought into existence. Given that these two problems are not avoidable for both natalism and anti-natalism side, I shall claim that the controversy should remain at the level of preference, and I will offer a different approach at the end.

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\(^1\) Benatar, David, 2006, Better Never to Have Been, Oxford University Press.
2. The asymmetry of pleasure and pain

In this chapter, we will briefly look at the Benatar’s fundamental argument with the asymmetry of pleasure and pain, and I will show that even this framework cannot avoid from facing with the “Judging Subject” and “Unrecognisable Object” problems. The following is the simple conclusions of Benatar’s argument.

(a) Coming into existence is always a serious harm.
(b) It is always morally wrong to reproduce children.
(c) We should abort every future child in the earlier stages.
(d) Humankind should be phased out sooner than later.

In order to support the above conclusions, Benatar applied the following asymmetry of pleasure and pain as a premise to his demonstration. He first claims that it is uncontroversial to say that

(1) the presence of pain is bad,
and that
(2) the presence of pleasure is good.

However, Benatar finds that this symmetrical evaluation does not seem to be applicable to the absence of pleasure and pain, so that he advocates the asymmetrical evaluation that

(3) the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone,
whereas
(4) the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.

Then, Benatar applies them to the following scenario A and B—one in which a person X exists and one in which a person X does not exist. At this stage, he starts discussing why

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3 Ibid., p.30.
coming into existence is always a serious harm. Benatar provided a concise figure, so that let us take a look at it and follow his argument below.

Scenario A (X exists)        Scenario B (X never exists)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1) Presence of pain (Bad)</th>
<th>(3) Absence of pain (Good)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(2) Presence of pleasure (Good)</td>
<td>(4) Absence of pleasure (Not bad)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Figure 2.1

As shown above, figure 2.1 is the very basis of the asymmetry of pleasure and pain. This is, of course, not the only figure that Benatar offered in his book; however, this figure should be enough to grasp the central idea of this asymmetry. That is to say, (3) is always better than (1), but (2) is not always better than (4), or (4) is not always worse than (2). If I am correct, the former one is the fundamental premise, and it tightly connects to the conclusion that scenario B is preferable to scenario A.

Apart from the above understanding, we also have several ways to read this figure. In any way, however, we need to explain how we can technically compare existing X with non-existing X in using this figure. Otherwise, no matter how it seems plausible, we are not able to conclude that scenario B is always preferable to scenario A. This difficulty should be connected to the “Unrecognisable Object” problem. This point will be considered in the following chapter so that I will point out other questions to this asymmetry here.

Given that Benatar concludes that coming into existence is always a serious harm, the presence of pain has a significant influence upon our decision whether or not one should be brought into existence; however, it is unlikely that the presence of any pleasure can never outweigh the presence of pain.

Also, I am uncertain of the conclusion as well. If we could overcome the above problem, there will be a chance to say that existing X will experience more pain than non-existing X will, however, it is doubtful that whether this claim can instantly conclude that

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4 Ibid., p. 38.
5 Ibid., p. 43.
existing X should not have been brought into existence. These two questions should be related to the judgment, in other words, the “Judging Subject” problem.

In order to clear these questions, we will focus on “Judging Subject” in the next chapter and develop my argument that we have no flawless criteria for decision at present. Also, I will point out another problem will arise at this point.

3. The “Judging Subject” Problem

This chapter mainly aims to argue that it is hardly expectable that we already have flawless criteria to judge whether someone’s life is worth starting or not. In order to clear this problem, the concept of pain and pleasure should be well considered, so that we will analyze them in the following section. Also, we need to concern about the subject who engages in judgment because we still have a question that who should be entitled to judge whether or not one should be brought into existence.

3.1 The analysis of pain and pleasure in terms of universality and narrativity

The concepts of pain and pleasure are the central ideas in Benatar’s argument, and the following will analyze and discuss them regarding two aspects: universality and narrativity. Since the concept of pain and pleasure in Benatar’s argument lack both perspectives, it is hardly plausible that these concepts can be applicable to all humankind without any condition.

First, let us take a look at the former aspect: universality. As I have mentioned above, it is hardly expectable to envisage a universal pain or pleasure which can be applied to all humankind, in Benatar’s word, all other sentient beings⁶.

As for pain, of course, it is unsatisfactory to conclude that pain cannot be applied to any sentient beings because we can still imagine that there is such cruel pain which forces us to think as if it should have been better not to come into existence. At the same time, however, we can assume that there is pain which encourages us to step forward, such as a pain caused by hard training in any field. Therefore, it is at least necessary to specify the meaning of pain before we apply it to a certain person, or all sentient beings.

As for pleasure, it is also unrealistic to conclude that pleasure is always good because we can imagine a pleasure which derives from drug abuse for example, and I believe this example is enough to claim that pleasure can not necessarily be a good reason to bring someone into existence. In this respect, we also need to narrow the meaning of pleasure down to a point.

The above aspects have shown the importance of further research on these concepts so as to determine the universal definitions of pain and pleasure. As long as both concepts remain ambiguous, we ought not to apply them freely in order to judge whether one should be (should have been) brought into existence.

Now we will move onto the second aspect: narrativity. This perspective will propose that subsequent situations should also be considered to get the concepts of pain and pleasure. Let us look some examples below.

As for pain, on the one hand, pain should have duration; such as a headache, muscle pain, lost love and so on, as we can imagine, some pains might be going for a long period. On the other hand, this is what I aim to illustrate in this aspect that pain has possibilities to open up a new stage of life⁷. It means that even though we face a severe situation or pain, we still have a chance to retrieve. Also, this aspect can be supportive to the situation which we dare to take on pain for a better future. It is true that some instant pain can ruin one’s life straightaway; however, this fact does not limit other possibilities.

As for pleasure, we usually believe that it is a good thing. However, we all know that a temporal intensive pleasure can be a good reason to abuse drugs even though drugtakers will suffer from withdrawal symptoms later on. It implies that we may take an instant pleasure instead of a better future, in other words, pleasure may turn into pain at some point. Therefore, it is also problematic to believe that pleasure is always good.

All things considered, in order to apply pain or pleasure as a definitive reason for judgment, we at least need to incorporate the above two aspects into the current understandings of pain and pleasure. Then, what will happen if we apply any value to judge whether one should be bought into existence? Next section will focus on this problem.

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⁷ Morioka, Masahiro also mentioned this point and said that “we are not able to affirm that the existence of pain is always bad for us.” Morioka, 2013, “「生まれてくること」は望ましいのか Is it desirable to be born?”, The Review of Life Studies, Vol.3, p. 8. Quote translated by the author.
3.2 Can we judge whether one should be (should have been) brought into existence?

In this section, we will look into a moral problem which occurs when we apply pain or pleasure to determine whether one should be (should have been) brought into existence. As we have confirmed above, it is still necessary to examine the definition of pain and pleasure. Then, is it morally acceptable to use such ambiguous criteria to judge whether someone’s life is worth starting? We also have another problem, that is to say, the who-should-be-a-judge problem in the first place.

Let us take the case of unborn children first. In this respect, we have two stages of unborn children. On the one hand, there are unborn children who are in the stage of pregnancy. They have not come out yet, but they exist in some sense⁸. Let us call them “factual unborn children.” On the other hand, there are unborn children who are not yet existing in this world in any sense. In the following, we will call them “counterfactual unborn children.” The former definition of unborn children should be controversial than the latter one because it must be necessary to concern about multiple stages of gestation, and it seems important to examine each stage one by one. In this paper, however, we are not able to look into each case, unfortunately. Instead, this section will argue that whether we are able to use pain or pleasure as a definitive reason to judge for the sake of unborn children.

First, I would like to note that Benatar did not force abortion on each pregnant woman. Instead, he offers recommendations about how to make use of their freedom to choose whether or not to abort⁹, however, the point here is that no one can finally avoid being a judge after all. In this case, each pregnant woman has to be a judge, and she has to decide whether or not to abort on her responsibility because factual unborn children cannot request to abort themselves in any way. Therefore, at this point, it is doubtful that whether we can judge for the sake of factual unborn children even if we can apply pain to them, and more importantly, it is also unlikely that we can decide to give birth for the sake of factual unborn children by applying pleasure¹⁰. Either way, someone has to be a judge on behalf of factual unborn children, and it implies that factual unborn children cannot

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⁹ Benatar, 2006, p. 162.
¹⁰ What I am trying to do here is to cultivate the neutral route to receive children. In other words, I am trying to open the way to withhold judgment.
participate in making a judgment even though the topic is inevitably linked to themselves. From this perspective, it is doubtful that whether we are able to conclude that one should not be brought into existence by using pain as a definitive reason not to. At the same time, it is also doubtful that whether we are able to conclude that one should be brought into existence by using pleasure as a definitive reason. Hence, in this respect, it is morally recommended not to apply these values to factual unborn children to decide whether or not one should be brought into existence in professing the decision is for the sake of them.

For the time being, since we do not have precise definitions of pain and pleasure, it is implausible that we can decide whether to abort or give birth for the sake of factual unborn children. This difficulty is called the “Judging Subject” problem. As long as we concern about factual unborn children, this problem will follow us, and since factual unborn children are technically not able to participate in making a judgment, at present, the controversy of choosing pain or pleasure remains at the level of preference. Either way, it is doubtful that whether we are able to decide for the sake of factual unborn children\(^\text{11}\); therefore, another approach should be necessary to consider this problem. I will argue it in the final chapter.

Also, Benatar concludes that “it should be clear that I do not think that there is any such reason [Nakagawa: excellent reason not to abort]\(^\text{12}\), however, as long as on the theoretical level, the uncertainty of factual unborn children’s will should be enough to withhold judgment\(^\text{13}\). It is, of course, also essential to consider this case on the practical level, but it will be addressed in the future.

Now, let us shortly confirm the next case, that is to say, judging whether actual people should have been brought into existence. In this respect, it is true that pain or pleasure can be applied to actual people, and they have a chance to participate in making judgment; however, it does not instantly lead to a particular conclusion because we also need to consider that the conclusion will undoubtedly be active for that person for the rest of

\(^{11}\) I would not claim that factual unborn children should decide on their own. I have pointed out the fact that they cannot participate in making a judgment, and in this respect, we should at least withhold judgment which claims to be done for the sake of them.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 162.

\(^{13}\) Further studies are required because it is true that we are exposed to be judged in everyday life. It is, however, also true that there are irretrievable judgments. It may be necessary to focus on the irretrievability of a decision in future. At present, either way, I have argued that it is morally recommended not to judge this irretrievable question on behalf of and for the sake of unborn children.
his/her life\textsuperscript{14}. As far as I confirmed, however, Benatar does not aggressively intend to judge actual people\textsuperscript{15}. It seems at least true that we are not able to quickly determine someone’s life in using any values, and since this problem is tightly linked to the argument in \textit{meaning of/in life}, I will not handle this topic in this paper.

Before we move onto the next chapter, I would like to mention counterfactual unborn children briefly because they are closely connected to the “Unrecognizable Object” problem. As we have confirmed earlier, counterfactual unborn children do not exist in any sense so that it may possibly be true that we can avoid the “Judging Subject” problem because there is literally no one who suffers or enjoys our decision. However, another problem arises here, that is to say, what object we concern about then, and for what reason we are able to judge. This is what we are going to look at in the next chapter.

4. The “Unrecognizable Object” Problem

In this chapter, I will argue the second obstacles, namely, the “Unrecognizable Object” problem. As we have discussed above, it is doubtful that whether we can judge and conclude the question on behalf of and \textit{for the sake of} factual unborn children. There is, however, another aspect of unborn children, and in this respect, it may be possible to avoid the “Judging Subject” problem; however, as I have pointed out, we have several problems at this point. Then, what is the “Unrecognizable Object” problem? In order to answer this question, we will confirm the concept of “Unrecognizable Object” first, then, let us move onto the central argument; whether “Unrecognizable Object” are comparable.

4.1 In what sense are unborn children unrecognizable?

As we have confirmed in the previous chapter, there are two aspects of unborn children. In this section, we will look at counterfactual unborn children, in other words, unborn children who do not exist in any sense. Since they do not exist in any sense, it seems technically impossible to grasp their entities. On the other hand, we are able to reference them in using language. On the linguistic level, therefore, we are able to reference

\textsuperscript{14} This point will also be argued in the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{15} Benatar admits that “life may be sufficiently bad that it is better not to come into existence, but not so bad that it is better to cease existing.” Benatar, 2006, p. 212.
counterfactual unborn children; like the way I have just referenced them “counterfactual unborn children.” It is also true that because of this function, our language has crucial importance on the evolution of humankind.\footnote{Yuval Noah Harari stressed the importance of fictive language on the human evolution. cf. Harari, Yuval Noah, 2011, *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*, Vintage.}

It seems that, however, the fact that we can reference any objects in using language does not necessarily ensure the existence of such objects. At this point, I would not claim that we should work on ontological or metaphysical analysis; instead, I would pose a question that is it surely effective to introduce the concept of counterfactual unborn children to discuss the problem. It is, of course, technically possible to alter their ontological characters by introducing counterfactuals; however, in that case, it is still doubtful that whether we can consider the problem *for the sake of* counterfactual unborn children because it is also true that no one benefits or suffers in the first place.

After considering these questions, we should be able to grasp the outline of “Unrecognizable Object.” What I am supposed to propose is that we are not able to recognize counterfactual unborn children on the existential level. In other words, it is true that we are able to reference them in using our language; however, we are technically not able to point at them.\footnote{Of course, we are not able to point at people living on the other side of the earth. However, what I meant here is that the possibility of pointing, and in this sense, they still have possibilities to be pointed at by others. On the other hand, counterfactual unborn children have no possibility to be pointed at.} In this respect, counterfactual unborn children are not recognizable; they have no possibility to be pointed at except in the form of letters, and it should indicate that they are not comparable on the existential level. However, Benatar advocates that we can still claim that it is better *for* them by comparing two possible worlds. Let us confirm his argument in the next section.

### 4.2 About the two possible worlds comparison——can we judge *for that person*?

In this section, we are going to look at the two possible worlds comparison. Before we start a discussion, I would like to share my brief conclusion first; two possible worlds are comparable, but it does not directly connect to the conclusion that all humankind should not be or should not have been brought into existence.
Let us sort out the problem more clearly. First, it is technically possible to discuss whether counterfactual unborn children should be brought into existence on the linguistic level. At this point, however, another problem arises. That is to say, whether or not this comparison can provide an answer for the sake of counterfactual unborn children. In other words, what type of evaluation will be provided here.

To this question, Benatar proposed as follows; “I am not making an impersonal evaluation. I am concerned instead with whether coming into existence is in the interests of the person who comes into existence or whether it would have been better for that person if he had never been.” Regarding this remark, however, we might have several questions because there is no such person who has interests when we discuss counterfactual unborn children; there is no actual person so that there is no one who benefits or suffers. However, Benatar suggests that we can still claim that it is better for a non-existing person by introducing the two possible worlds comparison. It is quite a long quote but let us follow his argument below.

We are comparing two possible worlds—one in which a person exists and one in which he does not. One way in which we can judge which of these possible worlds is better, is with reference to the interests of the person who exists in one (and only one) of these possible worlds. Obviously those interests only exist in the possible world in which the person exists, but this does not preclude our making judgements about the value of an alternative possible world, and doing so with reference to the interests of the person in the possible world in which he does exist [see Benatar 2006, p.31 (and p.4)]. Thus, we can claim of somebody who exists that it would have been better for him if he had never existed. If somebody does not exist, we can state of him that had he existed, it would have been better for him if he had never existed. In each case we are claiming something about somebody who exists in one of two alternative possible worlds.

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20 Ibid., p.125.
As for the quote, we need to divide his proposal into two aspects because Benatar mixed up both cases—one in which X exists and one in which X does not exist. Each X relates to factual (unborn) children and counterfactual unborn children respectively. We will mainly focus on the latter aspect in this section so that we can grasp the “Unrecognizable Object” problem more clearly. Incidentally, please keep in mind that the “Judging Subject” and “Unrecognizable Object” problems are not strictly separable so that I will reference both problems as needed in the following.

Now, let us look at the counterfactual unborn children case. On the one hand, some might say that two possible worlds are still not comparable; however, strictly speaking, this denial may imply that we are not able to introduce counterfactuals to any situation. Therefore, those who opposed to the comparison may claim mistakenly, or simply take objection to the premise itself.

Then, let us think of the case when we accept his proposal, that is to say, two possible worlds are comparable. As we have confirmed above, it is technically possible to discuss counterfactual unborn children on the linguistic level. Similarly, two possible worlds should be comparable. The framework itself is valid in this respect so that we can compare two worlds—one in which X had existed and one in which X had never existed. However, the fact that we can compare them does not instantly indicate that any unborn children should not be brought into existence. We can state several reasons to support this claim.

First, as we have confirmed earlier, it is doubtful that whether we can conclude either possible world is good for that person. It seems implausible that we can judge whether one should be brought into existence on behalf of and for the sake of that person in using pain or pleasure as a definitive reason because even though the topic is inevitably linked to him/her, he/she cannot participate in making a judgment (the “Judging Subject” problem).

Second, it is also doubtful that whether we can genuinely make a definitive judgment for that person. In order to claim that it is definitely good for that person, it seems at least necessary to compare not only two possible worlds (synchronic evaluation) but also before and after a judgment (diachronic evaluation). It is, however, technically impossible to compare non-existing X’s life diachronically.
To clarify this suggestion, let us follow the steps of the two possible worlds comparison below. In this case, we postulate that X exists or X had existed, and suppose that if X had never existed, X had never suffered from “pain”; therefore, it would have been better for X not to come into existence.

Then, what will happen next? In the former aspect, if X exists, even though we concluded, his/her life must go on. It implies that in this comparison, we can get the same conclusion from any point in one’s life stages. As I have quoted earlier, however, life may not be so bad to cease existing. Then, why can we claim that this momentary conclusion can shadow over all one’s life? In other words, why can we claim that one should not be brought into existence even though life may not be so bad once one has come out? After considering these questions, I believe that we at least need to follow one’s whole life to make a conclusion for that person.

Now, let us think of the other aspect: the case if X had existed. As I have mentioned earlier, it seems at least necessary to evaluate one’s life both synchronically and diachronically. It is, however, technically not able to follow non-existing X’s whole life in any way, so that it indicates that we are not able to confirm whether our decision was good for non-existing X afterward. In this case, therefore, we can apply any value to this evaluation after all because there will be no one who actually benefits or suffers, and we do not have to follow how non-existing X’s life is going to be. Either way, we can say that due to pain or pleasure, it would have been better for X (not) to come into existence. It is, however, hardly plausible that this judgment was essentially made for that X.

After considering the above cases, I would claim that the comparability of two possible worlds does not instantly conclude that one should not be brought into existence. On the one hand, if X exists, even though it seems at least necessary to conduct a diachronic evaluation to get a definitive conclusion for that X, this comparison does not offer such a perspective. On the other hand, in the case if X had existed, since there is no actual person, it seems technically impossible to follow non-existing X’s whole life so that there is no

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21 Reference a footnote 17.

22 For one reason, we can say that leaving the world can also be a “pain.” In this sense, it is understandable because if there is no other way out to escape from one’s life once one came into existence, the only way to avoid this “pain” is not coming into existence in the first place. As far as I confirmed, however, Benatar did not think in this way. cf. Benatar, 2006, pp.211-221. This problem should be addressed in the future.

23 Of course, it is still doubtful that whether such an evaluation can genuinely be made for that person.
chance to guarantee that our decision is unquestionably good for that X, no matter what values we apply. This is what I call the “Unrecognizable Object” problem.

5. Conclusion——with a tentative suggestion to consider the Benatar’s central idea

We have looked through the two major problems with the help of Benatar’s argument. I would like to note that, however, I did not argue and discuss his central idea at all. Therefore, I admit that my argument cannot be a critical answer to the question that whether or not we should bring children into this world. It means that even if my argument is valid, it does not conclude that we can bring any children thoughtlessly. What I have pointed out in this paper is that on the one hand, we need to overcome the “Judging Subject” and “Unrecognizable Object” problems to judge whether or not one should be (should have been) brought into existence. Since we have no decisive criteria and effective evaluation form, for the time being, it is hardly plausible that we can stand on either side to get the definitive conclusion. Therefore, I shall claim that the controversy remains at the level of preference at present.

On the other hand, I have claimed that we need to take another approach to consider the central idea. My current standing point is that we are not able to decide whether unborn children should be brought into existence on behalf of and for the sake of them in applying any values according to our preference so that we should withhold judgment which claims to be done for the sake of them. Then, what approach should we take?

In order to avoid the “Unrecognizable Object” problem, on the one hand, we have a way to only focus on factual unborn children or actual people. Then, we can at least secure the possibility to evaluate their lives diachronically. This aspect is, however, tightly connected to the new argument: meaning of/in life, and it is unlikely that we can avoid the “Judging Subject” problem. It is because that the who-should-be-a-judge problem is the very central conflictive point in the above argument, and we cannot readily conclude that what standpoint can truly offer a decisive conclusion for that person. Therefore, this attempt should not necessarily be ideal to consider our problem.

Then, what approach can be suitable? I would first suggest separating the definition of “coming into existence” into two aspects——biological birth and existential birth.

24 At present, we have mainly three positions: Subjectivism, Objectivism, and Solipsism.
While biological birth is only described in the singular, existential birth can be described in the first-person plural. By introducing this distinction, I suppose that we can create a room to take someone’s birth as our birth.

In this paper, we have mainly looked into the case whether one should be brought into existence, in my understanding, the question of whether we should give biological birth to our future children. As we have confirmed so far, however, it seems difficult to avoid the two problems if we only focus on this aspect. Instead, the concept of existential birth can be helpful to consider another approach.

I have not thoroughly examined; however, I am in doubt whether one surely problematizes one’s biological birth when one believes that it is better never come into existence. Rather, it seems that one has several problems in one’s life, but since it is too hard to solve each one of them, one problematizes the fact that one was brought into existence instead. If I am correct, then, the problem is not based on one’s biological birth, but on the circumstances in which one gets involved. Also, Benatar proposed that it is wrong to inflict the harm on any sentient beings. From this remark, we should be able to suppose that he thinks there is pain or harm on the side of the world. If it is so, then, I shall claim that it should be our problem to solve, and we need to reconsider the form of the question that whether or not we should bring children into this world. To begin with, the following questions should first be considered, that is to say, in what world we are receiving children and how we should receive their existence.


References

Benatar, D, 2006, Better Never to Have Been, Oxford University Press.