

The Value of Birth and Life as a whole : A Criticism of Benatar's Anti-Natalism

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Is coming into existence always a harm?

- David Benatar 2006,
Better Never to Have Been
: *The Harm of Coming into Existence*

- Benatar 1997, "Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence"

➤ The purpose of this talk: Through a criticism of Benatar's anti-natalistic argument, I clarify a plausible way to evaluate the value of birth.

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Outline

1. I summarize Benatar's "asymmetry argument" that explains the asymmetry of our procreational duties.
2. I make a counter proposal invoking "the value of lives as a whole."
3. I defend my proposal and also suggest a feature of the appropriate evaluation of the value of birth and values for a person in general.

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1. Benatar's asymmetry argument

Benatar's argument

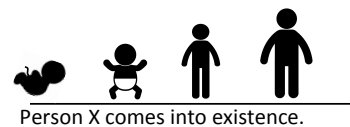
Benatar's two independent anti-natalistic arguments

- ➡ Asymmetry argument (Benatar 2006, Chap. 2)
- Quality-of-life argument (Benatar 2006, Chap. 3)

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Procreational situation

Scenario A



Scenario B


Person X never comes into existence.

- "Coming into existence" means literally "the start of existence." I do *not* discuss the ethical problems of abortion.
- I assume that the idea of "the value of nonexistence for a person" makes sense. I avoid in-depth discussion about it.

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Better never to have been

Scenario A



When Scenario A is actualized, "Nonexistence is better for a person" means: The value of nonexistence for her is higher than the value of existence.

Scenario B

When Scenario B is actualized, "Nonexistence is better for a person" means: **If she had existed**, the value of nonexistence for her **would** be higher than the value of existence.

(cf. Feinberg 1986) 7

(A) The asymmetry between benefits and harms

- (1) The presence of pain is bad; and
- (2) The presence of pleasure is good.
- (3) The absence of pain is good *even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone*; but
- (4) The absence of pleasure is not bad *unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation*.

Benatar (2006), p. 30.
* Pleasure & pain are exemplars of benefits & harms. 8

(B) The basic asymmetry

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of Pain (Bad)	(3) Absence of Pain (Good)
(2) Presence of Pleasure (Good)	(4) Absence of Pleasure (Not Bad)

Benatar 2006, p. 38. 9

(B) The basic asymmetry


Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of Pain (Bad) Disadvantage	(3) Absence of Pain (Good) Advantage
(2) Presence of Pleasure (Good) No Advantage	(4) Absence of Pleasure (Not Bad) No Disadvantage

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Coming into existence is always a harm.

Scenario A
(X exists)

(1) Presence of Pain (Bad) <u>Disadvantage</u>
(2) Presence of Pleasure (Good) <u>No Advantage</u>



Disadvantageous pain

Non-advantageous Pleasure

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Coming into existence is always a harm.

No Advantage

No Advantage

Disadvantage

No Advantage

Dis-advantage

- Only disadvantageous pains are considered.
- Most lives are disadvantageous (harmful) as a whole.

No Advantage

No Advantage

No Advantage

No Advantage

No Advantage

- Best life with no pain is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage as a whole.
- Such a life is never realized in the actual world.

Therefore, coming into existence is not necessarily but always a harm—i.e., a disadvantage over (worse than) never coming existence.

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Main rationale for (B)

- Benatar argues that (C) is best explained by (B).

(C) *The asymmetry of procreational duties*

While we have a **duty to avoid** bringing into existence people who would lead **miserable** lives, we have **no duty** to bring into existence those who would lead **happy** lives.

Benatar 2006, pp. 32–3.

* Benatar claims that four asymmetries in all are explained by (B) (Benatar 2006, pp. 31–36).

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(C) is explained by (B) ?

[T]he reason why we think that there is a duty not to bring **suffering people** into existence is that the presence of this suffering would be bad (for the sufferers) and the absence of the suffering is good. . . .

In contrast to this, we think that there is no duty to bring **happy people** into existence because while their pleasure would be good for them, its absence would not be bad for them. . . .

Benatar 2006, p. 32

- There are two ways to understand this argument.

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(C) is explained by (B) : Interpretation 1

(B) the basic asymmetry

Scenario A

Duty

(1) Presence of Pain (Bad) <u>Disadvantage</u> [negative]	Duty to avoid [negative] bringing about suffering lives
(2) Presence of Pleasure (Good) <u>No Advantage</u> [neutral]	Morally Optional [neutral] to bring about happy lives

Experiences ? Lives

- **However**, bringing a people into existence is *not* just cause an *experience* but bring into existence a *life*.

Cf. Bayne 2010, Benatar 2013

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(C) is explained by (B) : Interpretation 2

Negative duty



No duty



- Based on (B), there are only disadvantageous (harmful) lives.
- We cannot create happy people.

- No one has a duty to do what one cannot do.
- Thus, there is **no duty** to bring happy people into existence.
- Therefore, (C) is trivially satisfied.

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Framework of the asymmetry argument

(A) *the asymmetry between benefits and harms*

applying to the procreational choice

in regard to experiences

(B) *the basic asymmetry*

explanatory power

(C) *the asymmetry of procreational duties*

conclusion

Coming into existence is always a harm.

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2. A Counter Proposal

Invoking “the value of lives as a whole”

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)	Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of Pain (Bad) Disadvantage	(3) Absence of Pain (Good) Advantage	(1) Presence of Miserable Life as a whole (Bad) Disadvantage	(3) Absence of Miserable Life as a whole (Good) Advantage
(2) Presence of Pleasure (Good) No Advantage	(4) Absence of Pleasure (Not Bad) No Disadvantage	(2) Presence of Happy Life as a whole (Good) No Advantage	(4) Absence of Happy Life as a whole (Not Bad) No Disadvantage

➤ Applying (A) to the procreational situation in regard not to **experiences**, but to **lives**.

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My explanation of (C)

Scenario A	Duty
(1) Presence of Miserable life as a whole (Bad) <u>Disadvantage [negative]</u>	(C) The asymmetry of procreational duties <u>Duty to avoid [negative]</u> bringing about suffering lives
(2) Presence of Happy life as a whole (Good) <u>No Advantage [neutral]</u>	<u>Morally Optional [neutral]</u> to bring about happy lives
Lives	Lives

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1st Interpretation of Benatar’s explanation

(B) the basic asymmetry

Scenario A	Duty
(1) Presence of Pain (Bad) <u>Disadvantage [negative]</u>	<u>Duty to avoid [negative]</u> bringing about suffering lives
(2) Presence of Pleasure (Good) <u>No Advantage [neutral]</u>	<u>Morally Optional [neutral]</u> to bring about happy lives
Experiences	Lives

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My explanation of (C)

Scenario A	Value of lives as a whole
(1) Presence of Miserable life as a whole (Bad) <u>Disadvantage</u>	Miserable life as a whole has a disadvantage over never coming into existence
(2) Presence of Happy life as a whole (Good) <u>No Advantage</u>	Happy life as a whole has no advantage over never coming into existence

➤ “Coming into existence is always a harm (miserable)” does *not* hold.

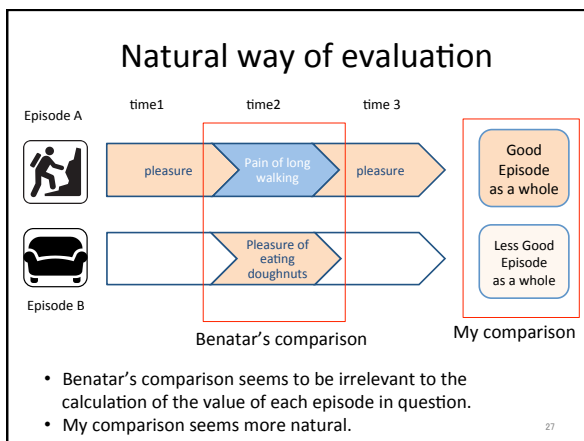
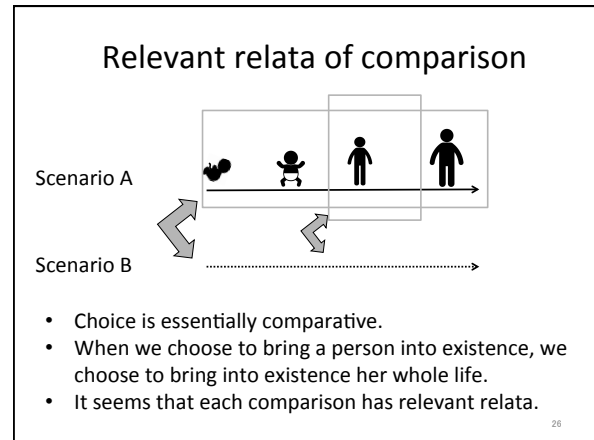
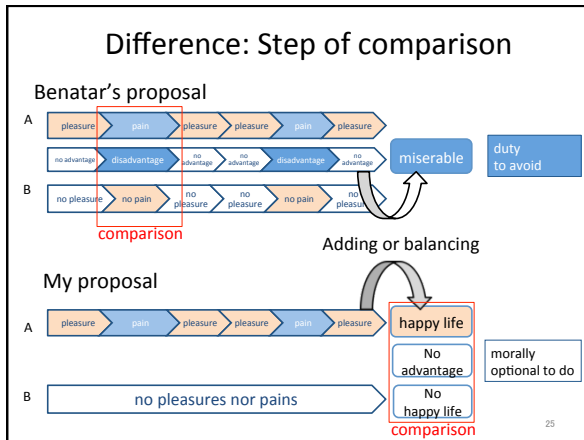
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3. The Order of Evaluation : A Defense & General Implications

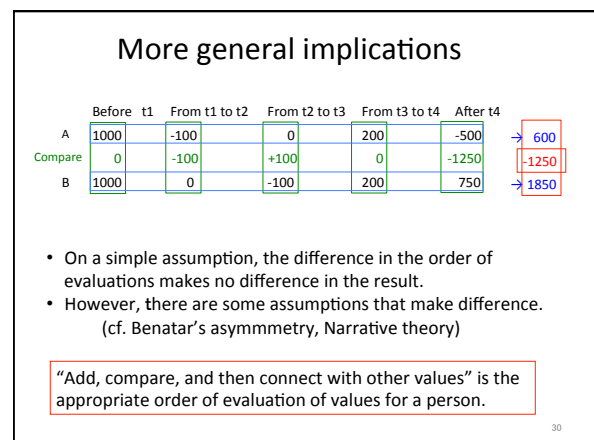
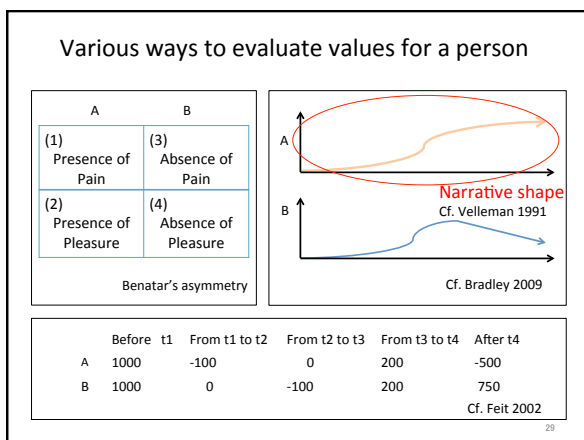
Invoking “the value of lives as a whole”

- “global wellbeing,” “lifetime wellbeing,” “worth living,”
:e.g., Lewis 1955, Bigelow, Campbell & Partridge 1990, Velleman 1991, Broome 2006.
- “Coming into existence is always a harm.”
: Benatar 2006

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More General Implications



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