

# A text dump on Pro-Mortalism

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# Introduction

**Title:** Palm Springs Bombing Suspect Apparently Promoted Human Extinction

**Subtitle:** Guy Edward Bartkus, a 25-year-old killed in the blast Saturday, may have shared a plan online to end his life on a pro-suicide web forum

**Author:** Miles Klee

**Date:** May 20, 2025

**Source:** <rollingstone.com>

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Guy Edward Bartkus, the 25-year-old man suspected of bombing a fertility clinic in Palm Springs, California on Saturday in a suicide attack that injured four others, left behind what the FBI described as “anti-pro-life” writings full of “nihilistic ideations.” His apparent opposition to human procreation would seem to explain the choice of American Reproductive Centers as a target for a vehicle-born improvised explosive device — though no embryos were lost — and the bureau is treating the blast as “an intentional act of terrorism.”

While authorities have not confirmed any specific online material as authored by Bartkus, the FBI has said it is reviewing a manifesto and social media posts they believe reflect the bombing suspect’s motives. The content they are examining includes a text formerly hosted on the website promortalism.com, which no longer loads but is available in archived form, which linked to an audio file of the author speaking about his reasons for wanting to bomb a fertility clinic. Further legitimizing the manifesto as authentic is the fact that Bartkus’ father, Richard Bartkus, told *The New York Times* he believes the voice in that recording was his son’s. (He did not return a *Rolling Stone* request for further comment.)

The associated document likewise laid out a plan to suicide-bomb an IVF clinic, with the author writing that he is in favor of “sterilizing this planet of the disease of life.” The manifesto author went on to explain that “your death is already a guarantee, and you can thank your parents for that one,” expressing frustration at ever having been born, but stresses that he is not a “psycho killer.”

“All a promortalist is saying is let’s make it happen sooner rather than later (and preferably peaceful rather than some disease or accident), to prevent your future suffering, and, more importantly, the suffering your existence will cause to all the other sentient beings,” the author wrote.

The manifesto writer noted that he was motivated to act in part by the recent death of an acquaintance named Sophie who shared his worldview, alleging that she convinced a man she lived with to shoot her while she was sleeping. This narrative suggests a connection between the author and a 27-year-old woman named Sophie Tinney, who was allegedly killed by her boyfriend in Washington state on April 20, with prosecutors suggesting that the homicide “may have been planned in advance and Tinney possibly convinced Nelson to shoot her as she slept,” according to a report in Tacoma, Washington’s *The News Tribune*. The manifesto additionally links to the TikTok, Reddit, and Tumblr accounts of the woman it names only as “Sophie.” While the TikTok account had been inactive for months, the last posts on the other accounts directly preceded Tinney’s death. The final Tumblr post appeared on the night of April 19.

## Obscure philosophies

The manifesto’s author pulled together various references to obscure philosophies in order to flesh out his ideas, indicating a mindset shaped by a confused amalgamation of toxic and despairing internet subcultures. One of these was “negative utilitarianism,” a theory which advocates for the reduction of suffering — this is in contrast to the far better known utilitarian tradition of thinkers including John Stuart Mill, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher who argued for the practical benefits of maximizing human happiness. The manifesto elsewhere alludes to “abolitionist veganism,” a call not just to discontinue the eating or use of animals but for the total elimination of animal-based agriculture.

And the author was especially keen on “Efilism,” linking to a YouTuber he said “explains what this is quite well.” The name Efilism derives from “efil,” or “life” spelled backwards, and promotes the anti-natalist tenet that people who have children are cruelly subjecting them to unnecessary misery. Efilism has been the subject of multiple web forums, and a group for its adherents has been banned from Reddit.

The manifesto page even offered links to groups such as The Right to Not Exist, “a global collective fighting for the unconditional right to die” — that is, “universal legal voluntary euthanasia” — and grim, nihilistic YouTube channels, along with transcripts from videos allegedly recorded by Adam Lanza, the mass shooter who perpetrated the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre.

## A social media web

There are hints that Bartkus not only left behind this document but may have left his fingerprints elsewhere online. Two days before the Palm Springs bombing, a member of a pro-suicide web forum that is currently under investigation by the U.K.’s internet regulator posted a detailed description of how they planned to ignite an improvised

explosive device in their car in the near future, receiving encouragement from other suicidal users. Law enforcement officials have said this post is part of their investigation, and the user's profile advertised that they were a "VegAntinatalist," signaling a specific interest in anti-natalism, the ideology the FBI has attributed to Bartkus.

In the suicide forum post, the user — who went by the handle "IndictEvolution" — predicted that they would be "passed out very quick" when taking their own life, adding, "I'll be on opiates," with a smiley face emoticon. Previously, on May 5, the IndictEvolution account had described how they planned to kill themselves with "a timed high explosive device that will be strapped to my head" and "detonate at 8,000 meters per second." In a separate post that day, they wrote that they had attempted suicide with this device "last night in the middle of the desert," but were unable to force themselves to sleep with a drug cocktail as they had hoped to after setting the timer.

The screen name "IndictEvolution" matches that of a YouTube account, which was deleted shortly after the bombing, and previously had close to 300 subscribers. That account, as an archived screenshot of the page reveals, featured videos of experiments with explosives in remote desert areas, which Bartkus would have had easy access to from his home in Twentynine Palms, California. Bartkus' father told the media that from a young age, his son enjoyed model rockets as well as making "stink bombs" and "smoke bombs" — and once accidentally burned down the family home. This account, too, is part of law enforcement's investigation into the Palm Springs bombing.

The same screen name and profile image, of a DNA strand behind prison bars, appear on accounts on Tumblr, X, Lemmy, Steam, and Bluesky. On the latter platform, the author responded to a post about saving an endangered wolf species by rhetorically asking, "Save them from what? Nonexistence hurts nothing. Know life, know pain. No life, no pain." On Lemmy, a web forum alternative to Reddit, the "IndictEvolution" account has a history of comments characterizing reproduction "a form of rape" and endorsing infanticide "as long as it is done humanely, and assuming both parents do not want the child."

An archive of Reddit comments made using the same "InvoluntaryInception" display name — the account has been suspended — points to Bartkus as the likely author, as the account was often used to post in subreddits for anti-natalism and Efilism. One telling post described life as a "NEET," or someone "Not in Employment, Education, or Training," with the user mentioning that they used to work as a school bus attendant for special needs students. In interviews, Bartkus' father has recalled him previously holding such a job. "I am 25 now and have done a few gigs here and there, but for the most part have been a NEET for a while now and it just does not bother me," the redditor wrote. "It especially doesn't bother me now seeing how insanely toxic society is, I don't owe society a damn thing, and I certainly don't care what they think of me."

A YouTube account created under the name "InvoluntaryInception" is no longer available, but an archived screenshot shows thumbnails of livestream clips with a man whose appearance matches photos of Bartkus. The most recent is titled "Losing decent

people hard to cope with, but no other option.” It was posted three weeks before the bombing, and several days after Sophie Tinney’s death. Other videos address Bartkus’ usual issues of veganism and anti-natalism, with titles including “The world is clearly overpopulated” and “What is the best way to communicate efilism?”

All together, the accounts and writings linked to Bartkus paint the portrait of a despairing and isolated young man combining niche philosophies that ultimately drove him to an act of incoherent violence. “Life can only continue as long as people hold the delusional belief that it is not a zero sum game causing senseless torture, and messes it can never, or only partially, clean up,” argues the manifesto being investigated by the FBI. As is frequently the case in America these days, those looking for ways to blame an act of terror on distinctly right-wing or leftist extremism will find that the truth lies in a baffling and murky middle where contrary strains of radicalism converge. If there’s one consistent factor in these cases, it’s that the suspect almost always picks up their dark ideas online — and, just as commonly, uses the internet to spread them further.

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*Dial 988 in the U.S. to reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Find other international suicide helplines at Befrienders Worldwide ([befrienders.org](http://befrienders.org)).*

# Primary Source Material



# promortalism.com

Source: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250519001947/https://promortalism.com>

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**Welcome! Here, you can download the recorded stream of my suicide & bombing of an IVF clinic! Please do redistribute/upload wherever you can, this website won't stay up for long.**

Download

## **Possible FAQs:**

### **Why have you done this?**

In the download directory, you should be able to find an mp3 file where I explain, but basically, I'm a promortalist. Efil blaise explains what this is quite well. Also, here is a backup I made of his channel in case it ever gets taken down. Please download it just in case. The video I'm referring to is called "[2022-11-02] Promortalism #promortalism" in the archive.

### **PRO MORTALIST?! So you're just pro psycho killers?!**

No, understand your death is already a guarantee, and you can thank your parents for that one. All a promortalist is saying is let's make it happen sooner rather than later (and preferably peaceful rather than some disease or accident), to prevent your future suffering, and, more importantly, the suffering your existence will cause to all the other sentient beings.

### **So what is the end goal?**

The end goal is for the truth (Efilism) to win, and once it does, we can finally begin the process of sterilizing this planet of the disease of life. Life can only continue as long as people hold the delusional belief that it is not a zero sum game causing senseless torture, and messes it can never, or only partially, clean up. I think we need a war against pro-lifers. It is clear at this point that these people aren't only stupid, they simply do not care about the harm they are perpetuating by being willing agents for a DNA molecule. This should not be seen as tolerable to any intelligent and caring person. Don't be fooled by the ones who play stupid and pretend they don't understand these simple truths. It's just their way of playing with you and saying "fuck you, we don't care". A lot of psychos are attracted to philosophy because they love to play mind games with people. Their intent is not to find any kind of truth, it is to have fun fucking with you. Most online debates I've seen are clearly not really debates, it's one person fooling another into thinking it's a debate, when in reality, the one doing the fooling has no intent of changing their mind on anything (and sometimes it's both parties haha).

### **What group of philisophies does this all relate to?**

Negative Utilitarianism, Efilism, Abolitionist Veganism, basically, philosophies that have realized religion is retarded, but that there is objective value in the universe, and

it lies in the harm being experienced by sentient beings. So, although it all may seem "dark", it's the polar opposite of nonsense like nihilism.

**You're going to burn in hell for this!**

I know, not a question. But I just wanted to say, your god definitely doesn't exist, but if he did, I'd choose satan over your evil god. Did you ever think that maybe the bible is just slander against satan, and that satan just realized what a fucking creep your god is?

**What finally put you over the edge?**

I've known for a few years now I wasn't going to allow myself to make it past my 20s. Recently my best friend Sophie killed herself (she got the guy she was living with to shoot her while she was sleeping, her preferred method), and I don't think I really knew how much it was going to affect me. I've never related to someone so much, and can't imagine I ever would again. We were both antisex (don't mistake for asexual, I'm talking like r/antisex) misandrists, VegAntinatalist, negative utilitarians. Both also had borderline personality "disorder". Anyways, we got along quite well and it was very nice, especially when you feel like you are in an apocalypse and nobody else seems to get anything. IIRC we had agreed that if one of us died, the other would probably soon follow. It's just too much of a loss when there's nobody else you really relate to significantly. Since she's dead, I'll link her reddit and tiktok where she made a few videos. She also had a tumblr account that she was very active on. She used to have more videos on her YouTube account but I guess she hid them before.

**Good Stuff:**

The Right To No Longer Exist

graytaich0

Inmendham

Efilism

Life Sucks

Efil blaise

Seraphobe

Adam Lanza's Video Transcripts

The Aponist Manifesto

r/circlesnip

r/Vystopia

**pre.mp3**

**Source:** <[web.archive.org/web/20250519002044/https://promortalism.com/rec/pre.mp3](https://web.archive.org/web/20250519002044/https://promortalism.com/rec/pre.mp3)>

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Okay. So I figured I would just make a recording explaining, why I've decided to bomb an IVF building or a clinic. Basically, it just comes down to I'm angry that I

exist, and that's, you know, nobody got my consent to bring me here. And I know what you're gonna say. How could we have got your consent because you didn't exist? Blah blah blah.

Exactly the point. You you there's no way you can get consent to bring someone here, so don't fucking do it. Right? And if you're gonna try to say something really fucking retarded, like, well, since you don't exist, you don't have a consent status, and therefore we don't have to get consent. This really isn't any different from saying, oh, well, the girl's unconscious, so, I can't get per you know, I can't get her consent to have sex with her, so therefore, it's okay because I can't. There's no way to even ask for the consent. Right? So, I mean, if you actually think that's a good argument against what I've said, right, you're absolutely retarded.

Your brain you're it's very childish and retarded. Right? And before you say, oh, that's ad hominem. I said the word retard. No. I made an argument, and then I called you a retard, fucker. So it's not ad hominem.

Ad hominem is when someone just, you know, just name calls and that's it. That's what ad hominem is, fuckhead. You people some of you motherfuckers are just too fucking stupid. Okay. Anyways, so, yes, the point is obviously you can't get people's consent to bring them here, so don't do it.

It's that fucking simple. Alright? This is not complicated logic. This is not complicated ethics. Okay? So anyways, alright. So I have written some things down here.

I tried to kind of order them in a way that makes sense just because I have a lot of things to say, and, yeah. So hopefully hopefully it's there's some order to my little recording here. But anyways, so, yeah. So the reason I'm, you know, wanting to get the fuck out of this whole life game, is basically I guess it comes down to I'm not interested in being a life addict. Right? So, I really never wanted to do this life drug. And I remember, like, when I was a kid, people just trying to I mean, my whole life, really, people have always been trying to push this life drug onto me.

You know, they've been people try to push experiences onto me, like, hey, let's, you know, go to a concert or some bullshit. It's always something, you know. And I'm always saying, no, no, not interested, not interested, and, you know, people are, for some reason, like, people just can't fucking take no for an answer, you know, when it comes to this shit. It really isn't any different from, like, you know, kids pushing pushing drugs or smoking on some other kid or whatever. It's it's not really any different from this, you know. Except in this case, it's more like fucking heroin. You know, it's a much worse drug.

So, and, also, yes. Life is a drug. It really is very analogous to a drug. I know some of you assholes are gonna get all triggered at me saying that being negative, you know, about life.

But I mean, think about this. You know, you if you sit around and do absolutely nothing, like, literally nothing. Right? You're gonna become very miserable pretty quickly right and the reason for this is that you're the default state for you is deprivation right and this is how life gets you to chase things right And, yeah, that includes

literally even drinking water, what we would call basic needs. Right? Your brain gets you to chase things.

That's really what's going on. Right? And the shit that, you know, we're chasing really is stupid. Right? This whole evolution thing, life thing is not an intelligent design. You know? I mean, when you see innocent creatures, getting completely fucked by life, you know, I'm not just talking humans, but even animals. Right? How the hell can you sit there and call that an intelligent design?

It clearly isn't. It's totally it's a completely absurd thing to call life an intelligent design. It's clearly not. Right? It clearly is just something that something that happened because it could. Right? The circumstances were just right, to where it could happen and it did happen.

It's not evolution isn't really, doing anything on purpose. Right? It's just it's just evolving. It's just happening. That's it. Right? So it's not intelligent and that's why I use the word stupid a lot, in reference to the shit people are chasing, the shit people are doing, and what life is doing. You know? It's stupid.

I'm not saying that just because I'm upset about it. I'm saying that because I thought about it and I think the word stupid really does apply. Okay? I tend not to use language too loosely. So okay. So, you know, yeah, all this just to say, you know, yeah, life itself really is just it's it's a big drug addiction. Right? It's just chasing absolute nonsense.

And I've pretty much seen this since I was a kid. I've pretty much known it since I was a kid. As a kid, I wasn't able to put words to it, but some part of my brain kind of understood it. Right? Because I really wasn't very interested in anything. I really didn't want much. You know?

And as I've gotten older and older, you know, more aware, I started to realize, like, oh, this is a really nasty game. This life on earth game is really nasty. You know? It's causing tons and tons of harm. It is a a zero sum, game. So I would have called zero sum game. Did I say that right?

Hopefully, I said that right. The the basically, what I'm trying to say is, you know, since the default state is deprivation, basically, you're being whipped constantly. Okay? And the best you can achieve is not being whipped. Right? Satisfying your, needs and your desires. Right? And which, again, really is just the whip being taken away. Right? So as in Mendham, Gary would say, there is no carrot.

There's only the whip. Okay? It doesn't intuitively make sense when you think about it. Like, when I first heard him say shit like that, I totally didn't believe it. I was like, no. No. No. Like, there's certain things that are just, like, pleasurable on their own.

And, but as I thought about, you know, over the the week after like, the week after I heard him say that, I just started thinking about things, and I started to realize, like, no. It's, it really the there really is no, like, fundamental, like, good. You know? It really is all made of fixing bad things, fixing deprived states and whatnot, you know? It's, it's really interesting, and it's really, you know, unfortunate, but that's that's just

the way it is. So anyway, so yeah, zero sum game because like I said, you you the the best you can do is clean up messes, and we can't even really do that well. You know, I mean, you look around, we're we're not doing that, you know. So you know, we again, another thing Gary would say is, like, you spill the milk and then you clean up a small portion of it, and then you pat yourself on the back.

It's it's really I mean, life really truly is completely fucking absurd. Right? And to anyone who's, like, aware of these facts, you know, intelligent, whatever, it's the more and more you become aware of this shit, the more miserable life becomes. It's just like, oh, fuck.

This is really bad. You know? You start to see all the harm, and it's just so nasty. Anyways, so, and then, you know, I basically most people just really aren't in any position in life to do much about it, you know? And so, basically, you're just gonna live life as a slave, really. I mean, people don't like it when I use this word, but that's just the way I see it. I don't know what to say.

Like, I really I really do just see existence as a kind of slavery to a DNA molecule, basically. That's really all it is. And, so I'm just saying it's, you know, maybe you're not miserable. Okay. Fine. Whatever. But a lot of people are. Okay. And, you know, it's it's wasted suffering.

There there there's so many people. There's so many creatures, really, I should say, because not just humans that are important. It's, you know, all the other sentient beings on this planet are also just as important. Okay? So much wasted suffering. Right? So much suffering that occurs and for no, you know, benefit. You know?

It's just a complete waste, and it's it's sickening. It really is sickening. You know? So, yeah okay so just I'm doing I'm doing all this explaining just you know for the people who don't get this shit like this is all really important shit Okay. What else did I have written down here? I wrote down suicide prevention is people trying to push life on you, and is analogous appears pressuring you to try drugs. Okay. I kind of already said this, but, I didn't I didn't say the suicide prevention part.

But, yeah, suicide prevention really is just that. So people try to prevent others from killing themselves, especially if the person has, like, a peaceful way of doing it. Right? And you try to prevent them from doing it. You're just pushing life on them, which, again, is a drug. So you're just pushing drugs on people. So fuck that. Absolute nonsense.

Another little thing I wrote down, really interesting point that I've not heard anyone else make, it's in regards to mass shooters and, you know, mass killings and whatnot. And, I was thinking to myself, you know, there's a, an organization called the violence project. I believe that's what they're called. They have a lot of interesting data on mass shooters. And, something interesting they found really common in mass shooters is that they have a suicidal crisis before they become, a mass or before they start thinking about killing people. Right? They have some kind of suicidal crisis.

This is fairly common. Right? Not all of them, but pretty common. And I was thinking to myself, you know, you really probably would solve you you will really

would prevent a lot of mass shootings if you gave them the right to a graceful exit, the right to die. Right? And I'm not talking about the fake right to die that we have now, okay, which isn't even really a right because other people have to decide for you.

So it's not even really a right. And even and then people that do get it, obviously, they have to be, like, very terminally ill and all this bullshit. It's it's not a right.

It's it's nonsense. Right? They've passed they've passed it in a very, very, very restricted and minimal way so so that they can bullshit people and say, oh, look. We have the right to die when, no, we absolutely fucking don't. Okay? And I could get into this whole topic, but I will in a minute. But the main point back to the mass shooter thing. Right? I really do think if people had an if we had an actual right to die in The US, right, right to a graceful exit, whatever the fuck you wanna call it, you probably would prevent a good chunk of mass shooters.

So, yeah, interesting little fact, or idea, theory, I should say. Whatever. Very likely true, though. Okay. Yeah. Back to the right to die thing, because that's a really important topic. Yeah. So what we have now is a fake right to die.

It's not at all some kind of human right to die. Absolute nonsense. There's the slippery slope argument where people say, like, oh, if we gave everyone the right to a graceful exit, you know, what about the peep what about, like, people getting coerced into it or whatever? And it's like, look, I could apply this shit to, like, free speech too. I could say, like, what if people say things that hurt my feelings or say bad things or whatever the fuck. Right? I'm I'm just saying you could apply the slippery slope slope argument to, other types of human rights, and you can kinda quickly understand that, yeah, the the price is kind of worth it. Right? And then you think about, well, what is the price? Right? In the case of right to die, what is the price being paid In these instances where it's abused and misused. Right? The price, think about it, is somebody who maybe didn't want to die falls asleep and doesn't wake up. Right? That's the the big price, quote, unquote, price being paid. Right? Bullshit. I mean, such nonsense. Right? So we're not there's so the it's not even really a harm. Right? I mean, even if you think it's a harm, fine. Okay. But at least understand, you're being way too perfectionistic. Right? You're being, absurdly perfectionistic.

Nothing nothing in this world is perfect. Right? So you're basically you're basically saying we can't have the right to die until, it's literally perfect, which is not pragmatic at all. Right? You're not being pragmatic at all.

It's it's a nonargument. It's an absolute fucking nonargument. So complete bullshit that we don't have a right to die, especially considering the fact that you're brought here without your consent in the first fucking place. The least this fucking goddamn society could do is give people a right to a a graceful way out, you know, not force them to jump off a goddamn building or shoot themselves in the fucking head or, strangle themselves, you know, pretty common method.

Whatever the fuck. Drink sodium nitrite, you know. I know people think getting shot in the head and drinking sodium nitrite, these methods are considered, like, nice or better methods or whatever, but, yeah, they're really not. I mean, getting shot in

the head, pretty messy. Also, like, yes, it's easy to put the gun to your head, but, like, actually pulling the trigger, little scary, I must say. And the sodium nitrite thing, you know, that's, that's become a popular method, obviously. It's not like totally it's not completely peaceful.

It does make your stomach feel pretty shitty and, you know, and I'm just, you know, I'm just saying it causes some pretty, you know, kinda gross symptoms. So, yeah, fuck these assholes that would say like, oh, you can just shoot yourself. You do have a right to die. I've heard people say shit like this. It's such a myopic fucking view. It's so shitty. So insensitive. Fuck you. Fuck you. God. Okay. What else? Yeah. So I guess maybe I should talk a bit about IVF.

I mean, obviously, I'm very against it. It's extremely wrong. I mean, these are people who are having kids after they've sat there and thought about it.

How much more stupid can it get? I don't know. I guess you can make the argument like, well, at least they're thinking about it, and at least they're planning it and all that. It's like, yeah, that is something I guess, but, at the same time again, you still can't get their goddamn consent. So it's you're you're not getting around that argument, you know, not rationally. So basically, I'm I'm anti life. Right? And IVF is, like, kind of the epitome of pro life ideology. Right? So see, I fuck IVF, fuck IVF clinics, and fuck the people that work for them, quite frankly.

Ignorance is not really an excuse. I know because I you know, I know people are gonna say, like, oh, they're you know, they have they haven't even thought about what they're doing or whatever.

And it's like, yes. That's sad and all, but, like, again, if, like, if if a guy is going around raping people and is, like, actually retarded and doesn't understand what he's doing, right, does that mean you don't punish him still? You don't, like, lock him up still or something? No. It doesn't mean that. You still you still have to take action. Right? You still have to do something about it.

So it's just, unfortunately, intent like, I do care about intent, but, unfortunately, in reality, it doesn't mean a whole lot. You know? I want it to mean a lot. I used to believe it was everything, but, in the last few years, I kinda started to realize, like, no. Unfortunately, intent just it means so little. And so, even if you if you're causing harm and you don't get that you're causing you don't know that you're causing harm, you still have to be dealt with. You know what I mean? So just an unfortunate, you know, reality.

Anyways, let's see what the hell else did I write down. Yeah. I wrote down, like, you know, these people, like, when they push life on you, like, if when you're in it, especially when you're, like, a suicidal person, you know, and they start pushing life on you. It's like, the games these fucking people are trying to push on you, these life games you're trying to push aren't even good games. Right? It's just like, oh, consume be a fucking consumer. Right? Pay for the factory farms to rape the fucking animals. You know?

These are the these are the fucking games you're playing as humans. It's sickening. Fuck fuck these games. Why the fuck do I wanna play these fucking games?

It's absolutely absurd. Nobody intelligent would want to play these stupid fucking games. You know, I feel like I'm surrounded by fucking ghouls. Okay. What else? I wrote down I mean, I already said this, but I kinda wrote it in a kind of a nice way. So I'm gonna I'm gonna read it even though I've already said this.

I said, children cannot consent to being born, therefore, you do not have consent. The act of bringing someone into this world is a nonconsensual act and is reminiscent of rape. Now in my mind, I really strongly consider it rape. I know some people are gonna have an issue with me calling it that. So the way I word it is very precise. I said it's reminiscent of rape, meaning I see a similar mindset, okay, in the people that are doing it. Okay. That's what I'm saying.

To be very specific. So let's see.

I wrote down these topics are too important for me to accept people ignoring them and I said I don't actually believe people are ignoring them I think people who have control over the internet are censoring these topics by shadow banning people who talk about them and then of course also you know, all the algorithms that are in control now, that are used to kind of manipulate, what people see, what you know you know kind of what they think. I think it's it's pretty effective. I won't say it's, like, crazy effective. I think I don't think people are, like, completely retarded and, like, incapable of knowing when they're being kind of manipulated and fucked with. People kinda have an idea of when they're being fucked with, you know, and they kinda resist it. And so but but I'm just saying clearly the it does work to some extent. You know?

There's clearly a a lot of, like, coercion going on, trying to get people to make babies and have more kids and shit. There's a lot of that going on and, you know, a decent chunk of people are their brains do it it it works for them, basically.

It works on them, you know. But, there's still a lot of people I think that are that are saying, like, nah. No. Fuck this. I'm not having kids.

This is stupid. You know?

Even with even with, you know, in the last few years, all this, manipulation going on on the Internet and all the censorship going on, you know, in the last few years, it's become so fucking extreme. I mean, like YouTube comments, for example, you can't say fucking anything now in YouTube comments.

It's so goddamn bad. If it isn't in line with their narrative, you know, it just gets they aren't even shadow banning. Like, they just straight up fucking remove comments.

Like, it's so wild. I mean, they they they do shadow ban. I'm just saying, they also often just straight up remove your comment, and they don't even try to hide it from you. Like, it's wild. Anyways, so the censorship all this stuff really has got me quite upset. I really must say that. How the how badly they fuck the Internet is it's really upsetting because it, you know, the Internet really is important for people to communicate and whatnot, you know, get to get together, you know, form.



Just saying, like, people who have similar beliefs, obviously, we're gonna use are gonna use the Internet to try to come together, you know, and they're fucking with that. And that's really upsetting to me.

So, anyways, yeah. I know those assholes are gonna be like, oh, stop being online so much.

It's like, dude, fuck you. The Internet is really important. Quit pretending it's not. You know, quit pretending like it's nothing. It's, you know, such bullshit. Let's see. Okay. That's about all I wrote down. So, yeah.

Fuck pro lifers. Fuck pro life ideology.

There's absolutely no rational reason to be pro life it's a zero sum game it only causes harm it's all it's capable of producing is harm it can't produce anything objectively good it's never going to do that fuck transhumanism crazy shit absolute nonsense and yeah so I guess I would be considered a pro mortalist I don't like the way I don't like that word, that name, I guess, pro mortalist, because, for people that don't think too deeply about it, they're gonna get the impression that, like, that means I'm pro dying, and that's not exactly the case. Like I understand obviously there's many ways to die that are very bad and painful, so that that's pretty negative and shitty obviously.

I'm pro non existence is what I am. Right? So that is what pro mortalism is, but obviously I'm just saying pro mortalism can make people think that, like, you're, like, some kind of sadist or something who wants to, like, cause death, destruction, and whatnot. And it's like, no. That's not the case. I know what you're gonna think. How ironic because I'm causing destruction and probably possibly death. And it's like, I'm only doing this because I feel like it's what I have to do to get people's fucking attention and to let the world know, like, yes.

I'm fucking serious about this shit. You have to take this seriously. You know, because I can't go on the Internet and talk about this shit anymore. I can't find people anymore on the fucking Internet because they completely goddamn censored it. So I really feel like I'm being severely fucked with personally, you know, in so many fucking ways, by, you know, not having the right to a graceful exit and then, again, by being completely censored and manipulated by the Internet. I mean, the manipulation doesn't really work on me, but the censoring obviously does. There's it's actually pretty hard to get around, especially with all the fucking AI shit now being used to, censor people. Right? So, like, now you can't even it's so you can't even, like, sneakily make comments anymore because AI understands context. You know?

So, like, it's, yeah, it's really fucking bad now. The censorship is really bad in the last few years, so it's very, very upsetting to me. It really fucks with me.

It's I hate it. So, you know, I think even, like, I think Elon Musk banned the words like, antinatalism on Twitter and what else? Well, that's the main one, I guess. Right? Antinatalism. So yeah. Fuck. I mean, fuck, you know, fuck Twitter.

It's a shithole now, I guess, but I never really used it in the first place. But, anyways, yeah. So that that that's basically it. I I genuinely feel like it takes, like, basically, these these topics are just they're way too fucking important, for it to be censored and

ignored and, like, they need to be put on blast. Like, people need to be thinking and talking about these issues because they really are big issues. And, before you say, oh, it's just your life that's shitty. You know?

That's why you care so much. No. I've I've just spent this entire recording explaining to you, like, objectively why life is bad, and it's causing harm, and so it's not just about me. I'm it's pretty clear that I care about, all sentient life. Right? All the feelings going on on earth. So yeah, just complete bullshit.

I mean, that's, like, the main reason why I feel like shit all the time is because I'm aware of all the harm occurring to other fucking sentient beings, you know, all the animals being raped in farms and even, you know, by nature itself, obviously. Nature isn't nice.

What it's doing isn't nice, obviously. And, and obviously and also I'll make this clear, like, yes. I'm a vegan, but, I understand that the harm being caused by nature is way, way larger than anything humans are doing. Right? I just I'm upset about the the the factory farm shit just because I feel like we should really know better. You know? Like, we have the ability to recognize harm, and we're just completely squandering it. You know?

And and then we consume it in such disgusting quantities and and in such disgusting ways. I mean, it's just so, you know, it's just so sickening in in every way. Everything about meat eating and and, you know, not just meat, but really, you know, all the animal products too. You know? Anyways, what was I saying? Okay. So okay.

I think this explains it pretty well. I think anyone who listens to this has a pretty good idea now, of why I've done this and why I do believe it's justified, and I'm not getting off on it. I won't even be alive to witness it. So this isn't like me getting off on anything. You can't you can't sit there and be like, oh, he's getting off on this. He wants attention or whatever. I mean, yes.

I want attention, but it's not for me personally. Okay. It's for objectively important fucking causes. Okay. So I think it'll be pretty clear to anyone listening that, like, I'm doing this because I care and because I can see how important these issues are and and the fact that they're being censored by this ghoulish society that we live in, you know, that just wants to keep this system running. And so, obviously, it has to obviously, people can't be operating in some kind of honest mode. Their brain can't be operating in truth or honest mode because if it were, they would see how pointless at all is, and they wouldn't continue this stupid system. Right? So the system itself, the only way it can continue running is to get people to not see the truth, to hide the truth from them, basically. Right? To manipulate them, to be consumers and all this shit. Right? That that's literally what it has to do to to continue existing. Right? It has to lie to you and push lies onto you and, push addictions onto you and whatnot.

So, anyways okay. So I think this is good.

I know it's very rambling. I'm sorry. I'm just, I guess I don't know. Whatever. It is what it is. I think it's it's a decent explanation. It's all very rational.

And one more thing I wanna add, because I know there's gonna be, like, these assholes that, like, are like, oh, well, he clearly it's all about his feelings and whatnot. Like, yes.

Obviously, this is strong. I I feel strongly about these things. Yes. Just because someone has feelings about something does not make it irrational. Right? Obviously, the the feelings are just your brain's way of making you aware of some computation it's done. Right? So your brain does some computation, and then it, based on the result, you see the outcome, the result as a feeling. Right? And, now then, yes, obviously, it's also important to then apply logic.

So sit there and actively think about why you're feeling the way you're feeling. Right? To make sure that it makes sense. Right? And I've clearly done that. Right? I've clearly sat here and thought a lot about my feelings and why I feel the way I do and whatnot.

And, so you really can't say, like, oh, will he you know? Hey. I'm just saying these assholes that say, like they don't I guess people don't say this, but I can tell, like, a lot of people think this way. Like, they don't like people who who feel strongly about things, and it's just fuck you. Fuck you.

Such bullshit, you know. Yeah. Okay. Anyways, I think that's good. I think that's that's enough. A little add on bit here, regarding pro mortalism. Just, you know, something I think is a really important argument, I guess, to make in regards to pro mortalism, for all the assholes that try to make it out to be evil or some bullshit like that, is that, we're not the ones making death happen at all. Right? All a pro mortalist is saying is like, hey.

Let's make it let's make the death thing happen sooner rather than later in life. Right? We're just changing the date at which it happened. That's all we're trying to do. Right? But recognize that, you know, once you exist, death is a guarantee. Right? It's gonna happen.

So the pro mortalist isn't making a death happen. That's that's a bullshit way to think about it. That's a dishonest and untruthful way to think about it. Right? The truth is the parents are the ones making the death happen. Right? They're the ones making you exist in the first place, which then guarantees a death. Okay? So parents are the real killers here. Okay? They're the real ones imposing harm and suffering and some kind of death process onto people.

All a is saying is, hey. Let's make it happen sooner rather than later so that way you experience less of life's bullshit. Right? Less of this silly fucking zero sum game. Right? So, yeah. Important argument, you know, to make to people who, again try to make, promoralism out to be evil or some bullshit like that.

It's, these people are just, if they hear this argument and they still disagree, they're being dishonest, basically. Because, again, all this shit is really simple to to understand.

# Promortalism #promortalism

**Source:** youtube.com/watch?v=9ZSj5gWZmhA

**Channel:** Efil blaise

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“Sleep is good, death is better but of course the best thing would to have never been born at all.” Heinrich Heine. Ceasing to exist sooner is always better than ceasing to exist inevitably later. The longer sentience persists the more the suffering will be experienced by sentient beings. Starting life and continuing life will always be an imposition. Imposition of harm just by being alive. It’s a no win game. Sentience runs a deficit. There’s no profit as it’s just a pointless struggle of survival accomplishing nothing. This applies to not just sentience as a whole but also for an individual sentient being. Why is a later inevitable cessation better than a sooner one? Response to :

- The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast #69 - E...

## Transcript

Yeah. So I’m gonna talk about promortalism and will be respond like doing some responding to this. Dogs outside responding to some of this, the exploring Anti Natalism podcast. It’s with Emma Sullivan and special guest host daily negativity and wonderful Amanda. So. Yeah, it’s. I watched it and you know it’s not. My conversation with Amanda, it made me think about like people have like for. I thought it was really. I, like, I argue it’s really simple. The position is very simple and if you are an antinatalist then it’s. There’s just no way to. Evade the the argument, but like I’ve watched, like like more than half of it. And like the difference between like this, this version and what I argue for. Like the one key point is the infliction of harm. That’s why, like, that’s why I think if you have to take the fullest pill first, the like, you know, you have to take all these black. Pills. And then you know, you’ll see, like, aphorism is the dissection I say of reality. And Primordialism is the conclusion I can even say antinatalism blue button that sterilizes the whole planet. That’s slow pro modalism, so we don’t even need the word antinatalism. Right? So I mean it, it’s. Let’s just watch some, you know, listen to some of this and let’s see what thoughts do that. But yeah, I’ll make the position very clear and this video.

To this right, because I think that you get pro mortalism from antinatalism. So in those moments where I’m compelled to believe.

So she is. I mean, it just took me off at first because, you know. Like she, she’s had a child and they’re like. It’s just that that’s why I think the the academia thing is just really, you know. It it becomes really redundant because you know there is this just talking about. You know, they’re they’re just doing word games and all. And I I like

to. I like to talk about reality. Right. You know, so. I think that's what what's more important. But whatever.

Believe compassionate Antinatalism is the right for you. Then I think I'm a pro. More to this as well, but actually and and maybe I'll. I'll think more today. I've never thought sort of seriously about Pro Mortalism as an independent position rather than one that follows from Antinatalism. And as an independent physician, I don't.

I'll give you the independent position. The argument being made. By by me is. Existence has a price, has a cost, and the cost is. Paid by pain and suffering in the currency is pain and suffering. The negative you just put that as a negative. The discomfort, the the bad feelings, right? So. And we know 1 main fact now that everybody can agree with it, it's very simple. We are alive and we are going to die, right. That that now to be logically consistent, you have to apply it to all sentient beings because, yeah, they're their brains too, and they're going to die as well. So the question becomes, why prolong it? Now I argue that there's no necessity for life. So it's. Necessary. Pain and suffering, you know, unnecessary negatives being experienced by sentient beings. So. Why prolong? The unnecessary negatives. Why? Why do they need to be prolonged, right. So. Now. The thing with the how how I'm looking at it is that you know that. Is. Is not a bad thing or the being who is now dead. Which daily negativity like if you watch his videos, he's saying the same thing. But my addition to that is. And earlier death. Is better than the later one, later inevitable 1. Right. Because the more you are alive, the more sentience is alive. The more negatives are. The fall on on it. So. The sooner it ends, the sooner cessation. Like of cessation, is the answer, right? Even if you're an anti natalist, you're for cessation. Slow its cessation so I can just say, you know you don't need antinatalism. You know, it's cessation is the wind, right? Cessation of sentient life on the planet is the wind. And yeah, that's the main that, that's where I come to the red button. Right. I think that's the most important part of the promoter. This philosophical view is that if you can press the button, which. Ends it instantaneously or even an hour, or even it takes a year.

Yeah.

I'll say, yeah, it's you. You should be obligated to press that button.

So.

It's like, you know, like that is not bad for the being who's dead, right? Because there's no like, you know, there's no. Some hell or anything. There's no. There's no you. When once the brain is not. Conscious. So yeah, there's nothing bad about it. Just like there wasn't any you when you weren't born. Now, now The thing is that the other thing is that is inevitable, right? You're not. We're not immortal. Any sentient being is not immortal. So. It's gonna even if somebody thinks it's bad or whatever. Like, when your life, when your life gets worse, then you, you know, then you can say, OK, let's let's talk about assisted suicide. But I think that's just stupid. Like, you know, you're

just the pointlessness of existence. Meaningless is iness of existence. Should make one say yeah, let's just end this stupidity for good.

Recoil from it seems to me it could well be true. I guess I just need to think about the arguments in its favor in order to tell you whether I find it an attractive kind of stand alone with you. So the question of whether I'm a pronatalist is kind of parasite upon the answer of the question of whether I'm so if yes antinatalism, then yes. Mortalism but kind of not really thought about. It as an independent.

OK. Fascinating. Well connected to that. I'm just curious. Have you ever actually spoken to an anti natalist pro moralist or for Pro Mortalism is as a stand alone so so daily negativity here is a pro moralist, I don't know daily you have to tell us, would you consider yourself a pro moralist independent of your antinatalism? Or how do you feel they they are connected, right?

I think they're both. Both views are sort of based on. My pessimistic view of life so. The anti.

I would say like the. The negative utility now, now again, this is just philosophical jargon and all just at the end of their reality is what's important. So it's like negative utilitarianism well. Will will, if you're being consistent with your view that negative utilitarianism is the. Is the right answer then yeah, it will lead you to promote this. There's just because the principle is the there's nothing. It justifies the pain. You know it. It has to be prevented. All the pain has to be prevented. So and yeah. Once all sentient beings are dead. Cessation then.

Yeah.

All the pain ends and it it gets prevented.

Natalism is based on that and also the Pro Mortalism and. Maybe I'll say more about this later, but. Essentially, I just the way that I derive my promoter's view is just by really just combining, you know, deprivation, ISM, which is a view about death with a pessimistic view of life and that's.

And and again like like you read in June's paper, it's you don't necessarily have to be against death, right? You can recognize the fact that an earlier death is death is going to happen. It's gonna happen. You can't escape it. It's gonna come. So an earlier 1 is better than a later one, even if you think that it's bad. You can recognize you know the that continued existence is is. Negative. Though, and that is inevitable there, you just can't evade this. This truth will trap you. That death is inevitable. It's going to happen. It's no matter how much you would want to live. And that's like one of the reasons I'm a pro model is because there's no counter argument to it there. The only counter arguments. Oh, I want to live and I can same for veganism for mediators. Same for, you know, nativists. I can and I want to. I can live and I want to. Live. You know. That's why don't press the red button or you know, don't end my existence. And they they don't go into the deep, the imposition of death, that there are deeper, harder questions. And I've talked about this before.

Kind of. All it is for me. So the connection is just that they're both based on. This pessimistic view.

Yeah. Excellent. Thank you for sharing that daily. How did you originally get interested in writing about the subjects of both antinatalism and Portal?

This is a really boring answer. I read them all right and I was like, well. And so I was an undergraduate at the University of York, and the very first paper set in my ethics module was Benatar's wife getting about to come into existence. When I was 18 at the time. I read that. And I was really taken by it. I found it really exciting and actually and compelling. And I guess it just stayed with me. So I progressed through my studies. I went to South Africa for a postgraduate conference when I was doing my PhD and I met Benatar at another event that I was attending then.

I don't understand why you had a kid.

And I had a quick chat with him and I was quite excited to meet him because I remembered this paper five years ago and I really loved it. And then he told me that he had this book. So I went home, read the book, thought it was excellent, and then the opportunity came on to write about it. So I I just sort of took that opportunity because I I found it also interesting. As for pro mortalism. I don't remember exactly how we settled on that on the 1st paper, but I can guess thinking about my own psychology. I can guess it went something like this and I'm quite attracted to Epicureanism about death, which is the view that death doesn't harm. She who dies. And I was on sale.

Yes, it does that. That's that's true. Uh. Like you could say, dying harms the one, but again, you have to do the calculations. The calculations are what matters. Is the harm that will be imposed on you for dying? Is it, you know, same in weight as the harm will be experienced by other sentient beings if you're alive. So it gets it gets trickier. It get harder.

Satisfied with benatar's treatment of it in the 2006 book, so it seemed to me that if benatar's asymmetry and Epicureanism were true, we'd arrive fairly straightforwardly at Chrome mortalism, and so my papers have been.

Yeah, the asymmetry argument, like, you know the asymmetry argument is like for a being who who wasn't born right. And you can just read June's paper. And he he just makes another. Column. If he sees this to exist sooner than later, why is that better too? So you know for like individual for ascent like Amanda and we've talked about this and we were like, yeah, as long as the machine is on, we're in harm's way. The machine is off. You're out of harm's way. So. You know. The sooner it gets off the. Is the. The better because more harm will be prevented. And it will be prevented for good.

In part devoted to exploring that connection.

Excellent. OK. Thank you for your window into that. And I I didn't realize that you've been engaging with meditators since the the 1997 paper, so yeah. Been engaged with this for a long, long time. You spoken a little bit about this already, but if you if you if you care to give some more details, I'd love to if you could tell us a little bit more.

About your, your other areas of research. Yeah, right. And before you read kind of bent how you think? Right. Well, maybe that's people with terminal illnesses or sufficiently.

Let's just jump forward.

Debilitating health conditions, but then you go and read Benatar and you go ohh. It's all of us actually right? Turns out all of our lives meet the bar of being sufficiently burdensome. And if you take that seriously, you might take it. That kind of any conditions relating to life being sufficiently burdensome for some right to kick. You might think that that's met by many, many more lives than might originally be thought, so I think they're kind of natural allies. Although you know I'm a philosopher, right? So I'm looking for the coherence of various positions. I can see the coherence of a position which says that compassion based antinatalism is true. All human lives are horrific. But you don't have the right to die, right?

So yeah, when it comes to the right to die like it's. The. It's very important, right? Because it's a different subject. But its length in the sense that. If there is a right to die euthanasia tomorrow, then that excuse of you know. Ohh, you know it's risky way to die or a horrific way to die goes. Right. And I get. I'll be consistent in, in my view that. If you have to be. You have to be risk averse that you know whatever you're going to do. Maybe you won't be success successful in your attempt to check out and then you might even cause more harm by living a more dysfunctional life, you know, so. Yeah, you have to do if you have the shore where shore way. Now I I wouldn't even say even if it's painful or you know you know it it's undignified. If it's sure, yeah, you have to take it. And they get into this required promo to theism stuff and all that. We keep moving.

I don't know enough about the topics to kind of fill in those details, but it seems to me that that could be coherent, right? And you might have somebody who says that the absence of that right is one of the compounding factors of the horrendous Ness of existence, right? It's so bad. But you don't have this right to die. And that's kind of what makes it worse. So I think that antinatalism is compatible right to die. But also kind of the opposite view and and then you ask me about the veganism. I think veganism is much more tightly aligned with antenatal.

And it's not just like, you know, they think that if you go weak in, that solves the problem. It doesn't like I give, I give this question right. There, people talk about activism and stuff, so I I give the question that you can get a person to become to get a vasectomy, to go vegan, right? I just need them to accept that as an earlier death. And yeah, that would just take like, you know, they don't need to be vegan. They don't need to get a vasectomy or hysterectomy or whatever. You know, the like the animal, right, the the feral cat. You don't need to. There's you don't need to wake the cat. Once you, once you put it to sleep, to you know. Just sterilize it. You don't need to wake it up. So yeah, there's no. There's no harm. In, in, in cessation so. It's like even if you're vegan, you're you're part of the system, you're part of the. You're paying in the system. The system that produces. Suffering. So it's not is the win is



suicide. The win is checking out. The win is more and more people checking out, so I don't need them to go vegan or antinatalist or whatever. I just need them to go to sleep and not wake up. That's that's that's more simpler in my opinion.

Of both compassion and ecological varieties, it's hard to see how those antinatalists wouldn't have veganism as a natural ally, given the environmental consequences of rearing animals. And also, given that human sorry animal lives are probably pretty horrific too, and then it's something that I think. So if you wanted to consistently be an antinatalist without thinking that you at least. To be a vegan, I think you need to also say you know that animals don't suffer or that they're suffering isn't morally relevant, or that it's only permissible to eat roadkill or whatever. And for what it's worth, I think the first two of those claims are wildly implausible. So I I think that if you're an antinatalist, you probably ought to be a vegan, at least in theory.

Excellent, excellent answer answer. Thank you.

I mean, yeah, if you're gonna pay for if you're gonna be against procreation and then you're paying for it. But whatever. It's like, it's like you. Right. You've had a kid like Amanda said that. Yeah, they're auntie need is so bad, kids. But, you know, he even got the argument. And you still. Medicate. It's it's not just about the person himself, it's about the the the game. That's why I feel ISM is important. The the whole game, the whole, the whole game is what matters, not the one individual. And like if you do the asymmetry thing, the asymmetry for an individual, it's better for it to not be born. And if it's born, it's better for it to cease to exist sooner rather than later. As soon as it can. So, but it applies to the whole game because this is not a single player game. Again, in Mendon's main fact, it's not a single player game, it's a multiplayer game. So what what happens on the board is what matters, what happens to one piece is not what matters, and the big the big picture. So. Red button is. The win.

Yes, I've been a vegan for six years strong, I believe. I believe daily is as well. Yeah. No, thank you so much for that. In addition to being a philosophical position, antinatalism over the last 10 years or so has become a social movement as well. What's your general exposure to this side of of the philosophy as as social movement? And what's your opinion? Pro-life arguments for non pro mortalism work. We conclude that Pro Mortalism follows from his antinatalism. As such, if it is always better.

Yeah, this is the paper. Let me go back a little bit.

Are awful. It follows that we would be better to kill ourselves. One last question before we move on to your papers. Outside of Benatar, have you done much research into other antinatalist thinkers and other arguments for antinatalism? Sorry, such as your first paper on the subject of antinatalism, and for mortalism the.

All right.

2012 collaborative effort between. You and Mr. Ray MacGregor and yourself entitled. Better no longer to be the harm of continued existence.

Yeah, the the, that's a good. It's that's a very good statement, right? Because but they're still like they're not getting into the infliction of harm argument. That's and the logical consistency that it doesn't matter. It just doesn't matter if the harm if

the suffering happens in this brain or in a or in some other brain. It just doesn't matter. It's the same thing. So the infliction of harm is a very strong that. That's my my, my argument for promoting this thing goes like this the the, the pointlessness of existence itself, it's pointless and pointlessness is a bad thing, and it shouldn't be perpetuated, right. The risk of suffering. The risk of imposing suffering, the risk of this being humbled and understanding that we're not in control here, anything could happen and. Yeah, that should make us be like, yeah, let's get out now because anything. Anything could happen. We might not be able to get out. So yeah, it's the the risk, the, the, the pointlessness, the risk. Of suffering and imposing suffering and the guarantee of imposing suffering because, like you know, you're living and you're paying in the system, man, you're no matter what you do, you're going to impose. Life is an imposition. At the end of the day, you can't evade that argument, so. That one is good and you know death is inevitable. So these three things, these these you know. Pointlessness. There's no point to any of this. The risk of suffering and the inevitability of death. Will make you come to the conclusion that. It's best that for a sentient being, for this one being, if you do the risk assessment, it's better that it doesn't wake up when it goes to sleep. I I use it in in that German knowledge, and the same applies for the all the other sentient beings too. So. Yeah, that that would be that. I don't think there's a counter argument to anything like the these three arguments that I've given. There's no counter argument to that. None. It's pointless. It's. It's risky and dangerous, and it will end inevitably.

Yeah.

What else is there?

I begin by reading out. The abstract piece. Excellent abstract. David Benatar argues that coming into existence is always a harm, and that for all of us unfortunate enough to have come into existence, it would be better to never have come to be. We contend that if one accepts Benatar's argument for the asymmetry between the presence of and absence of pleasure and pain, and the poor. Quality of life.

Yeah, but you can't evade the argument that. Yeah, for for one, the asymmetry. For one, it's better that it's not born. And the asymmetry, for one, it's better to cease to exist than continue existence cease to exist sooner than continue and cease to exist later. Yeah, for one, it's. You start with the one thing and yeah, you just can't evade the logic of it. It applies to all the other, all the other things that have the property. That would put them in the properties that would put them in the category of Sentients. So yeah, it's. It's about the whole game. And that's why I say euphemism is the dissection of the whole game. And Primordialism is the conclusion.

One must also accept that suicide is preferable to continued existence and that his view therefore implies both Pro Mortalism Antinatalism and.

Right.

Pardon me, this inclusion has been argued. Before by Elizabeth Harmon. She takes it that Benatar claims that our lives are awful. It follows that we would be better to kill ourselves. Harman 2009, though we agree that with Harmons conclusion, we think that

her argument is too quick and that benatar's argument for non pro mortalism. Deserve more serious consideration than she. We make our case using a tripartite structure. We start by examining the prima facie case for the claim that Pro Mortalism follows from Benatar's position, presenting his response to the contrary, and furthering the dialect by showing that Benatar's position is not just that coming into existence as a harm, but that existence itself.

Exactly, existence is the harm. That's a good point. Existence is the harm and not just harm. For one, one of the sentient being, it's harm for all the sentient beings who exist.

That we then look at benatar's treatment of the Epicurean line, which is important for him as it undermines his anti death argument for non pro mortalism we demonstrate that he fails to address the concerns of the Epicurean line raises and that he cannot therefore use the harm of death as an argument for non preorder lism. Finally we turn to Benatar's pro-life. Argument for non Pro Mortalism built upon his notion of interest and argue that. The interest in.

Yeah, exactly. I've made a response to this too, in my Benatar versus Pro Mortalism video, and it's like the it's for, for your best interests, it's best that you check out for your for a sentient beings interest, it's best that it it ceases to exist. Yeah, because if it's. There's nothing bad about that. First of all, and once it's alive and it's inevitable that it's inevitable, the the key thing is once it's alive, it's always going to be at the risk of suffering. It's always going to be that way. So there's the interest is to check out the interest should be to check out the interest. Shouldn't be, yeah, let's just keep on playing.

Continued existence may indeed have more relevance. It is almost always irrational, given that either benatar's anti death or pro-life arguments for non pro mortalism work. We conclude that Pro Mortalism follows from his antinatalism. As such, if it's not always better never to have been that it is better no longer to be. First off, the most basic of questions. What? Led to the writing of this paper.

Yeah. So as I said earlier, I read benatar's better never to have been as a graduate student and and as it as it happened soon after I did fabulous met issued a call for papers for a special issue of South African journalist last week on Benatar's Antinatalism. And so together with brief, we submitted an abstract which was accepted for presentation. At the workshop on Antinatalism and and then that led to our co-authored paper. So we presented it there, got some feedback kind of made some.

OK, excellent. So I have, I have a I have a number of of of sort of loose you know thoughts that this paper inspired and I I I I hope that the sort of what I've prepared is is is all right, I mean I I'd like to sort of jump to the postscript and you say that after a presentation of this paper. Distinction was raised between two kinds of pro mortalism, one which would recommend committing suicide now, and another that would recommend doing so later, when one.

I mean it's.

Like becomes sufficiently bad. We want to claim that Benatar's Antinatalism commits him to the first of these versions of pro.

Yeah, because it's the the longer you are here, every every minute, every day, it's there's. You're always at risk and at the risk of causing suffering. And the inevitable? Like what? What, what you're buying and the the system that you're paying is? There's just no way to win. So. Let's you have to do it now. Yeah, but then again, the the argument comes for like methods, right? And, you know, it should be sure. You should have a sure method, because if it if you fail, then you are at the risk of, you know, even causing more suffering and experiencing more suffering. So you have to do it right. That's why the right to die right? To check out peacefully is very important.

But one might think that his position only commits. Him to this.

And that's the only thing that's important now, in my opinion too. Checking out.

2nd and I just wanted to make a quick comment on this and both of you, please feel free to jump in anytime. I'm I'm personally not sure I I don't know if there is a real distinction to be made between quick and slow pro mortalism as it stands in relation specifically to Benatar, anism and the asymmetry, I mean I've, I've I've gone back and forth on this subject. So, so many times it's it's been a very difficult puzzle to kind of pull apart. I will say that in looking at the. Long-term idea of Pro Mortalism that it would be good to commit suicide later when one's life is sufficiently getting bad? I guess my question here is what separates this from the right to die movement as the human rights issue?

I'll I'll tell you what, like you know, right to die is is a right of an individual choosing to. Go to sleep and not wake up so. Again, they don't necessarily need to be having a really bad life. They can just say that it's I'm a pro modelist and I don't want to take the risk of of existence. You know, I don't want to play the game, and that's what I'm doing, going to do do. I won't be playing the game longer. So yeah, it's like I'll be out soon. The the The thing is with the. In in this argument of yours, you're just. You're just factoring in the being who's going to suffer. Right at old age or whatever, you're not factoring in all the imposed suffering on that being on other sentient beings by by just him merely existing.

I mean, aren't we now at this time living in a world, but without that as a human right? And if we were given that right tomorrow, would we even still be calling this pro world? Like, are we are we, are we attaching this loaded? To something which you know at the minute we're living in in a, in a, in a time where this thing that we should all have a right to decide for ourselves, you know it, it is a wouldn't this just simply be the freedom to plan for one's life, including. One's death.

The problem is, once life will have a price. And one's life if it continues, there will be risk of suffering and one's life is pointless.

So, I mean, you've already spoken about sort of the right to die in its relation to antinatalism, but I I find. I find it to be a strange and and and murky connection. Between pro mortalism. And the right to die? Do you have any thoughts? On all that.

Yeah, I think so. I mean, the the first thing you said was that you kind of weren't sold on the distinction between kind of. Quick and slow pro mortalism you know. And and actually I'm not sure about that anymore either so. You know that 2012 paper was a long time ago, and I think he's moved. On a little. Bit and I talked about that in my more recent paper. So Benatar says that it might make more sense for people who are in the better parts of their lives to delay until the worst bit starts to occur. And I say.

Why? Why? Why delay? Why do they do?

Two things about that, which is that. You know, although some features of our predicament vary across time, right. So for some people, those features like those related to bodily discomfort, might be more appalling later in life. At least some of the kind of more mundane. That make for our appalling lives, according to Benatar, our kind of present right from the after it and. So even if our lives tend to become worse over time, it seems to be that any given point that you might like to look at if you take, but it's not seriously. That's pretty bad, right? And second, even if our earlier lives are only minimally important in terms of quality, right, so we're. Healthy. We're not the victims. Crime or whatever, even. Those days are marred by the more kind of. By by those other components of the of the human particularly, you know, so our lives are always meaning that we're always gonna die. I'm always gonna be annihilated. And so I'm not actually sure anymore that there's much Rd. in distinguishing between quick and slow pro mortalism as it relates to better. But the right to die stuff so. I guess that I think that the right to die movement. Needn't be committed to saying that death is better for people and and that's why I think it's it's good to distinguish it from Pro Mortalism. But.

I mean. That is, yeah, that that's the distinguish the distinction between them between these two subjects. But I would still say like you know. Death is always better because again, again the. The more you are and high. The more you are likely to suffer, and the more you're likely to cause suffer. You being dead is better. Is better not for you. For you. It's better that you're dead. You have to take this. You have to take this pill. You have to take this black pill. This is the this is the darkest of the. This is the fine. The simplest solution. It is better that you cease to exist rather than you continue to exist. It is better for you. And it is better. Because your existence as a price as a cost in terms of infliction of suffering. In in that in the real currency here. So the more you are alive, the more you're going to be causing that, the more sentience, the more players are playing. The Gladiator War game, the you know, survival DNA game, the more suffering.

As I take it, Chrome Mortalism is committed to something like that, so it being better or it being good or it being required? So a view which had it that you. Know you ought to be.

Yeah, it is required. When you add in like let's say, let's say there's no harm being done by your existence. OK, then it would be even then I would be again consistent and different. If you cease him to exist. If somebody shoots you or lets you live. There's,

you know, I'd be indifferent to that. Because again, that is that can't be a bad thing. We don't have any evidence that. That once you are unconscious, you will feel pain. So it's not bad, it's not bad. Death is not bad. It can't be bad.

To plan the course of your life, including your death. Need and also say that you know it's better or good or required so I I do think there is a bit of. Logical space between those.

Two different positions. You know, I just feel like if we had the right to die, there's a bit of what Pro Mortalism is. That would sort of collapse at. That point, like with like it, it just feels that way to me, but again.

I I don't think so because. You know, people still choose to perpetuate existence, even though even if you give them the right to die, they'll still just like. Yeah, I want to live. I want to live. And that's where it all boils down to. Right. There's all this stuff. This boils down to this human and the sentient brains wanting to live. Wanting to be alive. And that's where all the problem is.

Getting a bit lost in. The way people define it and. And and the. Mine and I'm just not sure. You know this, this these are my. These are my loose associations.

No, I guess somebody.

Yeah, my episode is going to be on the Exploring Antinatalism podcast as well. And you know, I get. I bring the inflection argument in that, and I think that's very that, that that's that's a done deal argument, the risk and the infliction. Done deal and the pointlessness to like what? What are we doing here, for \*\*\*\*\* sake? Why? Why? Why do you need to be alive for Fox? See.

We could, you know, be a, you know, a very strong right dive opponent, but think that death is very, very, very, very bad, right. I mean, I take it.

That's very inconsistent. This is it's. It's going to happen and life is bad because life. If you're going to be alive, you're going to have to die. So life the problem is existence. The problem is sentient conscious, experiential reality existence. That is bad. That is not bad, can't be bad.

That Benatar is in that kind of position.

Yeah, he's inconsistent. He he's very inconsistent.

Person so.

And when it comes to promoting ISM.

But I take it pro Mortalism is is kind of for death it says. You should have right? But also it's a good thing, right? So that seems to me the. Difference between the two positions?

OK, I see. I see uh moving on from that though. And and.

And it's like for sentient being. It's better that it ceases to exist and the the logical imperative stuff that is you euthanize like you know, you like that that sort of like models of activism too, like one one form of activism is like, you know, you get more people out. Like I said, if you you don't need. Get them vegan or antinatalist. You just need to just check out. Just check out and more people do that. The better you take the win. So. If somebody watches my video and you know decides to check out. Excellent,

excellent. Very good math. Very good. You're you're being logical so. That's one thing, and you know the other one form of activism is that, you know, like I see insects whenever I see an insect apart, I give an instantaneous death right then and there. Boom. Because I know I won't go to jail and there won't be any other repercussions for that. So yeah, the thing one thing is that you start euthanizing, killing, whatever. Giving an instant trying to give as needed as an instantaneous and peaceful led to all the other animals. And yeah, when you factor in the whole game, then you're like \*\*\*\*, it's too messy to do it. Just this one by one thing, we gotta look for something quick and painless. No Fear, no suffering for all sentient. And that's the that that they don't talk about that.

We've resolved this, but I'll keep going. I mean now, looking at the idea of quick Pro mortalism, the idea that one should die now there is an inconvenient part to this that I think inconveniently, but, but, you know. Is is just. Just true. If your primary goal is to avoid all suffer. Learning and yes, I mean when the machine is on, we're in harm's way when the machine is off, we're not in harm's way anymore. That's just a fact. And. That's sort of.

Yeah, she see she. Amanda is consistent with that.

It's only inconvenient truth, however. This is where I'm slightly afraid of primordialism in in today's context, because most of us simply don't have a great way of ending our lives in.

Yes, it should. We should have sure ways because if but again. I'm I'm arguing for sure and reliable, right? I don't necessarily even have to argue for peaceful because you can say because then you're just saying my suffering is more important than the suffering that I will cause to Morrow. And the day after tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. And the day after tomorrow and yeah. So. To be I would want it to be peaceful and all that. I'm. I'm going out a peaceful way. But I'm just saying to be loyal. I'm just being consistent with my philosophical view that. Yeah, it's you need to have the if you have a sure way, like a gun. Just take it, you know, depending on the bullet and where you hit it and all that, you know. Even if it would be undignified, it's. It still becomes an imperative, but yeah, you can just say like I can live and get more people out. And maybe if I live and I get the right to die for all, then that would be really, really good. Form of pro Mortalism activism that now everybody can just. Go out peacefully.

In order to do it now, we would have to do it badly and I fear that I have lost friends of mine like you know who in wishing to be logically consistent with this implied speed of proof. More. You know, made decisions that caused them to die really badly.

Yeah, it it can happen. There's again, these are the risk of being alive. So again, you have to have a short way to go. And I'm. I'm really sorry about you.

To lose.

Like how he went.

Very. And and this. I I know for a fact, you know, Benatar would would not have known. He perfectly. He's perfectly solid in his advocacy.

For the right, no. But, he says I watched one of his. Interviews on the brain and the VAT in which he says, just because existence is meaningless, that doesn't mean that you should have to end your existence. We can talk about assisted suicide if you're suffering from term. If you're terminally ill or something, so even he doesn't get it.

But he was.

You don't need to be suffering to. More to check out.

Would never advocate that people should do it badly. I'm quite sure that he would say.

People should make sure that it's it gets done. That's my argument. It's done.

This. This is, you know, whatever utility you have while live fight for, you know, better access to things like the right to die antinatalism other clauses like, that's what you should be doing while you're still while you're still here. I think that's part of what you say. Anyway, I think you would say to some degree that we probably stick around to do something about those things and. You know shouldn't give in to. Again, the speed of formalism. Any any thoughts on that? Daily if you do as well.

Yeah, like. So I know that some people think that, you know, it's kind of incoherent or at least inconsistent to be a kind of walking talking.

No, I've talked about this before. You like, you know, it depends on what the situation do, right? If you're living it, you're causing the least amount of harm and you know you're. Yeah. Like they. You have to talk about it, like, even if you're checking out, you can just, you know, write something down and make a video and talk about Pro Modalism. And then check out. So the the IT it. Is on. The the philosophical view lives on. Even though June's gone. Sure. You know, it's not like, again, the whole this whole thing of, you know, but why are you alive then and all that? It's so it's just a myopic thing and you know, yeah, like she is. She's inconsistent. She she's has she's a pro model this and she's had a kid it's just. Yeah, but it's the whole big picture is what's important.

You're still here?

If you think that it's, but I think those people are wrong about that, right. I just think that it's gonna depend what your pro mortalism looks like. So you know you you might think it would be better if all humans when extinct, but you might also think that you cease to exist is not the best way to pursue that goal, especially when you can buy in the position with antinatalism.

I mean. What are you going to do here? Like what? What, like, you know, even if you reduce the suffering, it's still not. It's not good enough. We have to end it. Death is the end of suffering. Death is the end of suffering. Death is the end of suffering.

That you might think exactly what you were saying, that kind of activism towards curtailing procreation would be a more productive way of putting your theory into action. Or you might be a promoter.

No. Like if somebody can watch me. Like I checked out. Like, yeah, it's personal. It's consistent. And yeah, it's, you know. He was he. Lived and died for what he believed in, so that would be people would be inspired. People might be inspired by that and you



know they they would less likely to have kids and you know. Continue their existence or. So it depends.

Good for the one who dies, but you might also think that that good need not. Be an immediate 1. And so although I see the kind of what seems to be an obvious dissonance present when we see a walking, talking grow more of this, I just. I think.

It depends on hey the it's not a dissonance. It's like, yeah. Promoted this couldn't have a sure way to go, and he could recognize that if he uses a method that will he's he's around people who will resuscitate him or something and it doesn't get the job done. So he's not a he's not a walking talking. The cognitive it's that's that's not what it is. That it gets deeper.

The details of the position and when you combine advanced nativism, and again the details are needed, I can see how you can consistently hold those views and yet continue on. That seems entirely kind of fine and appropriate to me, yeah.

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I'm based on something you just said. I mean, you know, I don't know if you know this, but the most common argument. That antinatalist receive back towards their antinatalism is why don't you just go kill yourself?

Exactly. That, that that's very myopic. You know, I I even have an argument to that. Yeah. Give me euthanasia. I'll kill myself right in front of you. Give me or. Or even better, just don't even tell me about it. Shoot me in the back of my head without even me knowing. Please.

What we hear time and time again, it's happened to me. I'm sure it's happened to daily.

And it doesn't solve the problem right. This again, the whole board is what matters. The red button is what's the most important question. And. You know, is people have backed out of it and. I think that's that's discouraging. It's they're not talking about how do we? And sentient existence on this planet.

It's happened to all of us time and time again. What do you think about that? I mean, given what you what you believe about? Primordialism and anti. Or hitting on something important when they say. Are they just being jerks, or what's your present?

I think it's pretty cool. It's pretty crude, right? So as we've already said there, there are lots of ways of being a pro moralist, antinatalist and and that being kind of consistent with with choosing to continued on without getting kind of tangled up in logical inconsistency, right. So you could just think your efforts are better spending activism. It could be that your particular version of primitivism doesn't recommend any ones own existence. Thought, hey, you know what? It could be like just an irrational love of life.

I mean realistically, right? Realistically. What is? What would be like? What did an average person do? I think that's nothing for. To do is just you know. Just check out what it was like, what there's like. I can look in the aisle in any in anybody's eye and just say there is no hope. None. It's never gonna get better. It's not gonna fix. It's gonna end the the heat that will end it so. Yeah, just check out while you have the chance.

To be irrational, that's kind of fine. And of course, there are also arguments for the claim that Antinatalism doesn't get you to pro Mortalism. Right? And.

And I think that's just inconsistent. That's just being really inconsistent.

Take those seriously. You've got to be intellectually humble enough to take those seriously, and I think that, you know, although I disagree, I think by the time makes a really good case for that. So I think people who say that are kind of not paying sufficient attention to the nuances of Pro mortalism and and ways in which it can be consistent with continuing on. It's also, you know. Highly demanding of of 1 being completely. Rational and you know, behaving in ways with all of their beliefs, which I think is a little bit unrealistic given human psychology. And also I think.

Yeah, that that's the problem considering psychology with philosophy. That's a prop, even if they don't want to. Die. That didn't change the fact that they should die.

Other positions don't collapse into one another after all, and there are very good arguments for that. So I think it's pretty poor to react in that way.

Yeah, I agree with you. Thank you for that. Alright. I have two more questions and then I'm gonna hand it over to Daly. So the first one is just a bit of like. Your impression is sort of a bit of how pro mortalism fits into some of the history of all this. So what I'm about to say, many will disagree with, and that's fine. Disagree with me in the comments below. Pro Mortalism is one of these ideas that I think really scared. Antinatalists, who started their antinatalism somewhere between.

Yeah, because they they didn't take the full truth. Took the half truth.

Yeah, the first release of better never to have been 2006.

And the truth is very simple. Existence continuing. You're a part of it. Continuing is. Bad. Existence ending. Is better because there's nothing bad about. There's no nothing bad in. The fact with the fact that there are non existent marks that there are no Martians, it's nothing. There's nothing bad about it.

Really. Because of the way Benatar uses it, better never to have been. And let's say 2010, which was right before the anti natalist YouTube boom. And that's where I came in, you know, for the first time. And that was also slightly before papers like yours and and Christopher Belshaw's emerging make. These types of claims and right just the right before a lot of. Things started to change. If you came into antinatalism again between 2006, 2010, you were witnessed to an antinatalism before a lot of other ideas started to be brought in, like Pro War tilism like atheism, like the the red button, the more.

Yes, that, that, these are these are important one. If it is a red button. Yeah, this is. This is the real these are the real questions.

Symbiotic relationship with both veganism and the right to die atheism, as we've discussed, this was a a time of a kind of more pure antinatalism, as I think many of that particular era would see it where you know, we finally had Benatar. We were, you know. Moving away from whatever pro. No antinatalism is or environmentalist pre antinatalism and you know it led to a it was a more narrow focus of what antinatalism

is. But the way I see it, antinatalism has evolved since that time it's matured and part of that maturity is the growth of some. Of these tentacles. Into these different conversations, again, like primordialism. And that's why I think we're seeing a greater. Acceptance, you know. Things like. Because as time goes on, this is becoming part. Of the identity.

The 111 thing that they're they're they're not talking about is the collapse. You know it's. We don't have much time. Unfortunately so. Like still not having kids as much as like it's a good thing it doesn't. Solve the problem. Not having kids? Does not solve the problem. Ending existence. Ceasing to exist. Cessation of all sentience solves the problem. For good. Not having kids is. Not even close. It's like, like Kevin says, the the first step to a larger 910 steps, whatever. Not having kids is very small. In terms of the whole like again the whole board, the whole gameplay.

Is. And it's no, it's no longer making sense not to accept the the relevance of this and and and the push back to it, which is immense, by the way, is starting to look more and more like.

Yeah.

To a large extent and and passing the buck, I mean it's it's really interesting that I mean I don't you know I don't want to get you too into the trauma of of the antenatal world but it's so fascinating to me that you know this is a an accusation that's been leveled against antinatalism but now a lot of antinatalists who are afraid of this concept have pushed it onto. Other forms of antinatalism like this.

Yeah.

You know, somehow that somehow harmful. So I guess you know again it's it's, it's sort of coming from a more you know internal historical perspective, but do you have any thoughts on anything I just said?

Yeah. Well, obviously you guys are much better versed in the in the social history of athleticism than I am, and particularly the activism side, but. I mean, I agree that primordialism is gonna strike some purpose. Really alarming, right? Especially if you take it that it holds and it you would need to do something horrifying to be consistent as I. Said I don't actually think that's true. But I think it's also important to say that I don't think there's any kind of dishonesty necessarily in those who claim to be antinatalist and not pro motorists. And that's for a few reasons, right? Like so, there are all sorts of kind of competitive biases that explain why people are.

Just jump ahead a little bit.

You know, a lot of antinatalists get really upset with people when they start asking questions about. Pro Mortalism suicide, the value of living their lives or the value of their lived experience because they feel, you know, those questions are kind of missing the point which is not entirely false. They are kind of missing the point getting so wrapped up in life assessments because what we're really talking about is the ethics of starting lives, of bringing lives into existence. What?

Yeah, but again, like I said, if it doesn't solve the problem. The existing wings are still here. Not having kids does not solve the problem. Stopping. Existence for from

perpetuating solves the problem. Stopping sentient existence from perpetuating solves the problem. This not having kids is. Is is going to solve .000001% of the suffering on this planet, the. Outside of the wild is. It doesn't solve that problem where 99% of the suffering is. Not having kids is. Not even close to solving that.

To say that making life assessments is somehow not a perfectly rational psychological reaction to being confronted with, you know, coming into the harm of existence, or have you know it is, is I again, I think something that antenatal is maybe need to get over a little bit. Like, of course people are going to are going to make those kind. Assessments and I don't really have a question attached to that. I just think that that's that's that's I think that's a big part of what you kind of made me realize with with your paper. And again I I sort of apologize because I realize this is a this is I've got a pretty poor job of responding to the 1st paper but these are all the these are all the thoughts that have come out of of of of reading that first one and I really want to.

So yeah, sure, yeah. Alright, no, no, it's it's been great. Yeah.

Thank you. Alright, well, I'm. I'm actually gonna hand you over to to Daley. And he's got some great questions about about your second paper. So your second paper better to return whence we came from. 2022. I would like to quickly read the abstract. I argue that David Benatar's antinatalism. Leads to pro mortalism the view that is better to cease to exist because the human predicament, as he describes the fate worse than death. Continue. Predicament in such predicament is not preferable to an exit form. I revisit my earlier argument. Claim that benefit. The 1st 2006 asymmetry between pleasure and pain paved the way for Pro mortalism, unless Epicureanism about death is ruled out, I replied to benatar's response to that art.

Yeah, asymmetry is a really good argument for Pro model is man antinatalism. But yeah, the the inflection of arm is and the it's the nail in the coffin and that's the thing, right? Either you are pro-life or pro models, either you want life. To. Continue and end peacefully or whatever or you want it to end as soon as it can cause you realize the price of it and the cost of it and the pointlessness of it, and the risk of it.

Argument. Then I turned to Benatar's 2017 characterization. Of. The of the human predicament and suggest that that also leads to. I respond to three arguments from Benatar that seek to block the move from our predicament to Pro Mortalism. I conclude that if Benatar is right about the predicament we find ourselves in, it is better for most people returned whence they.

Came so and also in the paper you discuss sort of two ways that benatar's antenatal's position. Could lead to Primordialism and the first has to. Do with the asymmetry. So as you. Know lots of people think the asymmetry does not lead to. But you challenged this in the paper. Could you maybe take us through that argument?

Yeah, I'm sure. So I tell you that the controversial bit of the asymmetry is the absence of pleasure quadrant, right. The absence of pleasure is not bad. So. But I want to say it's not bad unless somebody for whom there's a declaration and then you add in a fairly popular. The death upon which death is harmful because it deprives one of future goods one would otherwise have enjoyed and will not.

Die, But they don't need. Once they're dead, they don't need even even like again. It's. This is like this is very  $2 + 2$  right? Just like my 5th brother or sister isn't missing out on anything the same way. Blaze Tomorrow Blaze is missing out on something. No, there's none of that is happening or, you know, 10 years later. Oh, you'll have some fun or some good times. No, they that there's no need for that. There's no there's no evidence that that is that is something. Ohh there's a future version of myself. Wanting to say, oh, please, please just keep on living. I want to live. I want to live these good days in the future. That should end true. So once you're dead. There is no. You again, not once you're dead, you're back to. You're back. To fail safe. You're back to 100 years ago, before you weren't born.

And so then you get to say Benatar gets to say that it's not bad, that those who never get to exist don't experience the presence of life, but you also get to say that it is bad for somebody to cease existing. And that's because the absence of the pleasures of. Life from the person you die.

Yeah, it's a. It's a rational because the absence will only be relevant if you wake up tomorrow. If you're conscious. If you're alive. That's when the absence would be absence of pleasure would be bad. He's presuming that that he's presuming that existence should prolong for this already alive and. That's just bull.

This would be the deprivation. And it's that point that the absence of pleasure is bad when it involves A deprivation which does the work of recommending continued non existence for the currently non-existent. But it doesn't recommend bringing about non existence for the already existence, right? So the asymmetry doesn't get you to promote alism. If you think that death is a deprivation. And.

For who that is, the deprivation for who, who is who is going to be deprived. If you're dead. If you're if every sentient being is there, what's the deprivation? And if you're dead? Where's where are you? Where are you going? Are you going to some hell and saying ohh \*\*\*\* I've I'm being so deprived I don't get to have sex anymore. That \*\*\*\* ain't happening.

So I just think, well, I think that right. So as I've already said, I've been pretty attracted to Epicureanism about this view that the person who dies is not harmed or deprived. Now, if that were the correct view, then I take it that coupled with the asymmetry chromatism would be fairly straightforwardly recommended, right? So if death is not bad and we're not deprived by it. The path to Pro Mortalism is clear and can't be blocked by appeal to deprivation, and Benatar recognizes this. In 2006, six in the book and spends a little bit of time arguing against the Epicurean view of death and. And so in 2012, I took on those arguments. I thought they didn't quite do what they needed to do. Since then, Benatar has replied to me, and in. My newspaper? I reply. On those points so. My argument isn't that Epicureanism about death is the correct view, but I do think the.

It's not. Again, this is so. That is. If you don't know about it. Like I put all the stipulations and you don't know about it. Nobody knows about it. And you just lights on, lights out. Why is that a bad thing? Logically, why is that a bad thing logically?

Yeah.

Dennis is on Benatar to give us a little bit more of a robust discussion of it now. He disagrees with me about that and about whether it really is his job to take Epicureanism off the table. And but that's the state of play. I take it between us.

Yeah, thank you. I I guess, can you tell us a little bit about what, what is Epicureanism and? I guess just give us a quick overview.

Yeah, I mean I, I I take it that it's, I don't know much about the kind of history of of. The view but. I take it it's the view that one, the person who dies is not harmed.

Like it's like in one statement. Like sleep is good. Death is better, but the best of all was to not be born. So yeah, the better one is. It's existence doesn't come there being conscious and alive doesn't doesn't cut it. Doesn't does not come in the. In it does not factor in. It's the. The the person who is dead is. Has won. The person who. Was. Not born. One even a better one. And if you're alive and you're. Going to spend most of your time being asleep? That is also better.

By her death, so death does not come. The one who dies. So that yeah, that's basically it. So I take it that it's in direct opposition to the deprivation view of death, which says death is bad. Here's why death is bad because one is deprived of future goods that one would otherwise.

Yeah, but the same could be argued. Why is not being born bad? Ohh, it is bad. Sorry. Yeah, why is not being born bad? Oh, it is bad because somebody would be deprived of the goods of life. So yeah, then be consistent and say yeah, it's. If there's going to be if, if you think you can, if you think that, yeah, you can give a good life to your child, then yeah, have the children be consistent. But you say no. It's risky. It's you have to be risk averse and same for that. Same for your continued existence too. You have to be risk. First you have to get out as soon as you can. We have to get out as soon as we. Yeah. Sentience has to end as soon as it can.

Experience had one not died and Epicureanism just says death is not bad and the quote is something like.

And even if it's bad, it's inevitable. Whatever this is, whatever this experiential reality is, it's gonna end anyways.

Here we are not what we are here. Death is not right. Death is kind of nothing to us. And so one is not harmed by one's death. That's not to say that dying isn't, you know, harmful. That can be very unpleasant. But one having died once death itself is is not a harm to somebody.

Yeah, suffering.

Right. But on your. View on epicureanism. It's we can still say that non existence is better than existence, right? So so in other words, Epicureanism is compatible with Pro Mortalism.

Yeah, no, absolutely. And and that's what I think that if you're in a Epicurean and.

Yeah, that's where the main point is, he said. Daily negativity gets it, like non existence is better than existence. It's. There's just no way to counter argue that.

Better if you're not born better, you're better if you're dead and better if you're asleep. Most of your life.

Take.

Then awake and playing the game.

Natalism. Seriously. Then I think you kind of naturally get yourself to a pro multilist position. And I think that I think that makes sense.

Yeah, I think a lot of deprivation is at that point. Want to say, you know, how is this any different from our review? You know, when Epicureans start talking about? Death being worse, early, non existence, being worse than existence, or in this case you know more is better. At that point it almost seems like it's just the I I think he's just said it's like a verbal dispute, like a mere verbal dispute. Do you agree with that or do you think that there are is an important? There's still an important. Difference here between these views or?

Yeah, I.

Think I think. Yeah, this is like, you know. This is very very simple to me. We don't need to do too much of philosophy for that. It's. It's very simple. We're alive. We're going to die. The more we're alive, the more we're going to, the more likely it is we're going to cause and experience suffering and the inevitable. Suffering that will come with life, and the longer it takes, the more suffering there will be and you know it's just simply logical to. And sentient sentient existence and earth, sentient existence and sentience. As soon as we can, because again, this, that's the implication of the pro model. This view we have to end existence. Or. Not just one, but for. Yeah, it's like, you know, it's better for you too, or you and your existence.

I mean, maybe I missed something, but it seems to. Me that the views are. Opposing views, right? You know, if you're a deprivation, it's then what you're doing is given an. Account of what?

Let's move over.

Self of the limited goods of that relationship. And so in case it's not clear that hate in one's death is not a solution for the human predicament, and so not.

OK.

By it, and that's because death is.

Part, yeah. The thing is, you have to accept the fear, too. You're alive. You're gonna die. This is there's just no way to counter argue you're alive. You're gonna die. So life is death. Essentially. Now it could be a slowed one. It takes you 70 years to die or you die. At 15. The argument is if you're dead at 15, it's better because you prevented all you, you spayed all the risk and the risk of suffering and the suffering that you will inevitably experience and. More importantly, the one that you will cause by existing. To other impose on others, impose on these other beings.

Of that very particular. But I guess it seems to me that cease to exist needn't get you out of all dimensions of the human predicament to be a reason.

Yeah, I think we should just send it. I I'll link this in the description. Just check it out. It's. Yeah, overall good. But you know they they didn't touch much on the

inflection argument, the pointlessness. Pointlessness itself is a negative thing. It's like, what's the need for it? The risk of suffering if sentient beings are alive. And the. The infliction. Of suffering. Risk of the infliction of what kind of suffering. There could be. So yeah, it's. Be pro modalist be like, you know, accept or you can just name it some. You can just call it pro non existence or you know be you know like pro Modalism or pro, nonexistent ISM or, you know, Blaze, ISM. My my version of the. Saying it's just at the end of the day, it's it all depends on what the substance of. The. The view is. So. Yeah, I think that's enough this is. This is pro mortalism. As well as how I argue for it. And this is the truth. And there's no counter argument.

## **The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast #69 - Ema Sullivan-Bissett & Special guest-host Daily Negativity**

**Source:** <[youtube.com/watch?v=5OhtqB4l2jw](https://youtube.com/watch?v=5OhtqB4l2jw)>

**Channel:** The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast

**Date:** Nov 1, 2022

Welcome to the sixty-ninth episode of The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast! Today, Amanda 'Oldphan' Sukenick speaks with Reader in Philosophy at the School of Philosophy, Theology and Religion at the University of Birmingham, and author of the papers, Better No Longer to Be: The Harm of Continued Existence & Better to Return Whence We Came, Ema Sullivan-Bissett!

And returning to The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast as my co-host today, is Antinatalist & Promortalist Youtuber, Daily Negativity!

[https://www.emasullivan-bissett.com/x.com/ema\\_sb](https://www.emasullivan-bissett.com/x.com/ema_sb)

Better No Longer to Be: The Harm of Continued Existence (2012):

<http://pure-oai.bham.ac.uk/ws/files/2...>

Better to Return Whence We Came (2022):

<https://link.springer.com/article/10...>

Misconceived - Why these further criticisms of antinatalism fail (2022) by David Benatar:

<https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.100...>

Daily Negativity:

YT channel: @dailynegativity5429

Thank you for listening to The Exploring Antinatalism Podcast!

This has been Amanda 'Oldphan' Sukenick! You can find me on YouTube channel, Anti-Natal Wolf!

@anti-natalwolf4449



## Transcript

**Amanda:** Hello everyone and welcome to the 69th episode of the Exploring Antinatalism Podcast, a podcast all but the subject of Antinatalism created by Antinatalists. My name is Amanda, old fan Sukenik, formerly known as Feral Films on YouTube, and today. I'm speaking with reader and philosophy at the School of Philosophy, Theology, and Religion at the University of Birmingham and author of the papers better no longer to be the harm of continued existence and better to return whence we came. Emma Sullivan bissett. Welcome to the Exploring Antinatalism podcast.

**Emma:** Thank you. It's lovely to be here.

**Amanda:** It's lovely to have you and welcome back daily negativity. Daily negativity is, of course, an alum of the Exploring Antinatalism podcast and anybody who wishes can hear our interview together along with ex co-host Mark J Maharaj in Episode 21 highly recommended Welcome Daily.

**Daily:** Yeah. Yes, ma'am.

**Amanda:** Absolutely, Emma. It is a great pleasure to have you with us today. You are, of course, the author of two papers on Antinatalism 1 from 2012 called Better no longer to be the harm of continued existence, as well as a much more recent paper released earlier this year. In fact, by the name of better to return whence we came within both of these papers. To defend a very controversial claim that Antinatalism specifically Benatar and Antinatalism implies Pro Mortalism. Something which Benatar has long denied but a subject which nonetheless has taken on a life of its own and come to have great importance within the Ant needless community, so excited to speak with you all about all of this today. But first, a few questions I asked some version of to all my guests, starting with who is. Emma Sullivan, listen.

**Emma:** OK, so I'm a British philosopher and based at the University of Birmingham in the UK. My main work is actually not in procreative ethics. My work actually primarily in the philosophy of mind and psychology, so I'm interested in the nature of belief, including delusional belief and also biological approaches to what are typically taken to be normative questions in the philosophy of mind. And I'm also as of. July this year, a mother to a baby boy, which is probably the most all-encompassing component of my identity right now and maybe not forever, but at least for now, that's kind of who I am.

**Amanda:** Thank you. Emma. Why are you or are you? Not an antinatalist.

**Emma:** Yeah. So this question is genuinely the source of deep philosophical confidence for me, so I'm a huge fan of Benatar's work on this topic. I find his arguments incredibly persuasive. In fact, when I returned to his work, as I often do because I think the wonderful writer, I have a kind of antinatalist. Conversion each time and I really think the case just couldn't be put any better. On the other hand, I go and read people like Michael, Horse, Keller, Michael, Horse Keller, insidious Mets, and then. I. Sort of find myself slightly shaking out of that conviction a little bit and. And so the truth is, I just don't know. And and as I say, this topic isn't my main area of research.

And so sometimes I feel like a bit of an outsider looking in. But there's kind of a sense in which there's something comforting about that, because this has become a kind of personal issue for me recently with the birth of my child. And so I very much like antinatalism to be wrong, or at least I'd very much like it not to be the case that I've kind of irreparably harmed somebody by dragging them into the Hellfire that it's human existence with, you know, very little in the way of redeeming qualities. So I'd like the more optimistic appraisals that you find in people like Michael. Course color and study is meant to have something going for it. So I'm afraid the answer. Is I'm just not sure so this isn't my main area much as I find it fascinating, and also because I've got this kind of recent skin in the game. I wonder whether that's gonna be distorting any recent judgments that I might be able to come to regarding the issue. So as a philosopher of psychology and like really sensitive to the fact that all sorts of things might be affecting my judgment. So I don't know the answer actually.

**Amanda:** That's a very fair and very candid answer. Thank you so much. Well, you know, I I will say there are many antinatalist parents. You know, it's not. It's not. It's not an entirely unheard of circumstance, but a very difficult one to be in. And I I do I sympathize with your position, I mean and yeah. And I didn't realize that you were such a fan of.

**Unknown Speaker:** Yeah.

**Amanda:** Of of Benatar's work. May I ask a little bit? More detail of like what specifically in the work of Michael Householder, Hosteller and tedious Mets, you know, brings you to some other kind of conclusion.

**Emma:** Yeah. So I'm going from a very hazy memory here, but I think Michael says some stuff about the subjective appraisals of I's life. And I I think Benatar wants to say that, you know, we're we're just getting it wrong right there. All sorts of cognitive biases which explain why we come to these judgments and we and we're getting things wrong about that. And I. I remember in Michael's paper he talks about how Benatar doesn't really have the legitimacy to say something like that. You know, it's OK to be a kind of cheery optimist about life, and we need and say that that's because there are various cognitive biases and he sort of, I think he digs deep into the empirical work that Benatar appeals to it and says that it doesn't show what. And so, so that was quite good I thought. And and 30 has met my memory of of his position and my most recent memory has come from your podcast, your conversation with him, where he talks about. Kind of other virtues in life which aren't given proper recognition by Benatar when he talks about kind of pleasures and pains or harms and benefits. He talks about kind of deeper virtues of life and talks about his sons and I. I found all that quite compelling as well. So you know, when I when I listen to people like that, I'm like, OK, I I can sort of feel myself. Pulling away from Antinatalism again, but I go back to Benatar and you know, as I've said, I I don't think anyone. Can put the. Point better. It's extremely compelling. So that's why I I find myself kind of unsure what to think in the end.

**Amanda:** Yeah, excellent. Thank you for, you know, sharing with us that push and pull towards and and and away from antinatalism. It's a unique experience. Thank you. May also ask why are you or are you not a pro moralist?

**Emma:** OK, so this is easier. So do you have a kind of central position on this? So I am only a pro mortalism. To the extent that I'm an antinatalist, right? Because I think that you get pro mortalism from antinatalism. So in those moments where I'm compelled to believe compassionate antinatalism is the right view, then I think I'm a pro. More to this as well. But actually and and maybe I'll I'll think. Well today I've never thought sort of seriously about Pro Mortalism as an independent position rather than one that follows from Antinatalism. And and as an independent physician, I don't recoil from, it seems to me it could well be true. I guess I just need to think about the arguments in its favour in order to tell you whether I find it an attractive kind of stand alone. Review. So the question of whether I'm a pro moralist is kind of parasitic on the answer. The question of whether I'm an antinatalist went so if if yes antinatalism then yes pro mortalism but kind of not really thought about it as an Independent view yet?

**Amanda:** OK. Fascinating. Well connected to that. I'm just curious. Have you ever actually spoken to an antinatalist pro moralist or or pro moralist as as as a standalone so, so daily negativity here is a pro moralist, I don't know daily. Can you you'll have to tell us, would you consider yourself a pro moralist independent of your antinatalism or? How do you feel? They they are connected.

**Daily:** Right. I think they're. Both both views are sort of based on my pessimistic view of life so. The Antinatalism is based on that and also the Pro Mortalism and. Maybe I'll say more about this later, but. Essentially, I just the way that I derive my pro moralist view is just by really just combining, you know, deprivation, ISM, which is a view about death with a pessimistic view of life and. Kind of. All it is for me. So the connection is just that they're both based on this pessimistic view.

**Amanda:** Yeah. Excellent. Thank you for sharing that daily. How did you originally get interested in writing about the subjects of both Antinatalism and Primordialism Emma?

**Emma:** This was a really boring answer I read Benatar right and I was like well. And so I was an undergraduate at the University of York. And the very first paper set in my ethics module was vanitas. Why? It's better never to come into existence. When I was 18 at the time, and I read that and I was really taken by it, I found it really exciting and actually and compelling. And I guess it just stayed with me as I progressed through my studies. And then I went to. South Africa for. A postgraduate conference when I was doing my PhD and I met Benatar at. Another event that I was attending then and I had a quick chat with him and I was quite excited to meet him because I remembered it with this paper five years ago and I really loved it. And then he told me that he had this book and and so I went home and read the book, thought it was excellent. And then the opportunity came up to write about it. So I I just sort of took that opportunity because I I found it also interesting. As for Pro Mortalism,

I don't remember exactly how we settled on that. On the 1st paper, but I can guess thinking about my own psychology, I can guess it went something like this. I'm quite attracted to Epicureanism. About death, which is the view that death doesn't harm, she who dies. And I was unsatisfied with benatar's treatment of it in the 2006 book, so it seemed to me that if benatar's asymmetry and Epicureanism were true, would arrive fairly straightforwardly at Pro Mortalism. And so my papers have been, in part devoted to exploring that connection.

**Amanda:** Excellent. OK. Thank you for your window into that. And I I didn't realize that you've been engaging with Benatar since the the 1997 paper. So yeah, you've been you've been, you've been engaging with this for a long, long time. You've spoken a little bit about this already, but if you care to give some more details, I'd love to if you could tell us a little bit more about your other areas of research.

**Emma:** Yeah, sure. So as I said, I'm a philosopher of mind and psychology and much of my work to date has focused on the nature of belief and its relationship to truth. And more recently, I've been leading to externally funded projects. So one on delusional belief and one on conspiracy belief. And then the project on delusion is the bigger 1, so maybe I'll just I'll say a couple of sentences about that. You tell me if I'm going on too. So the project on delusion clinical delusions are typically taken to be bizarre beliefs which are irresponsive to counter evidence. So, you know, beliefs like my husband is an imposter, or I am dead, or the CIA attracting me or whatever it is. So my work explores how it is that folks come to hold beliefs. Like these and and most people in the debate agree that the highly anomalous experiences or hallucinations for exams. People that people with delusions have are a key ingredient in explaining like why they come to believe as they do. But the orthodoxy in philosophy and psychology is to say that there's this additional ingredient biased or deficient reasoning capacities, and and together with my Co investigator Professor Paul Nordoff at the University of York, we're challenging that claim, and we're arguing instead that people with delusions, they reason on a perfectly normal way. Not rational necessarily, but a normal way, so we don't need to posit this kind of clinical way. And in my other work, I'm interested in the nature of other psychological phenomenon. So like implicit bias, confabulation, conspiratorial ideation, and so. On.

**Amanda:** Amazing. So, so a a study of the American right wing I at some level I imagine, you know, I don't know that. Yeah, I'm.

**Emma:** Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right. All that stuff comes up. Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

**Amanda:** Sure that some of that like. Excellent. That's a fascinating area of research. Very important. Outside of Wikipedia, the word antinatalism is still not included in or defined by any dictionary in the world in any language. I have twice now campaigned to have the word added into the Oxford English Dictionary to no avail, and in addition to this, even the Wikipedia definition keeps changing. So, Emma, do you have any feelings on how antinatalism should be defined?

**Emma:** Yeah. So how do you talk about this on earlier podcasts? And I always thought, God, that's super interesting because of course antinatalism is massively controversial, but here I am naively thinking the definition. Is not controversial, right? We can all settle on that. So it's really interesting that that's the thing that has come to its own controversy. So I've always just understood it as the view that, you know, I ought not to procreate, full stop. That's the view, right. And then you can have various arguments for that claim, which would determine the kind of antinatalist you. Also, you know we can distinguish at least two kind of compassion based antinatalism paved by Benatar. Also some brisk people and then ecological antinatalism motivated by concern for the environment and the harm done by creating more life. But I think both of those positions should count right as antinatalists right they both say. You shouldn't do this. Right. But I think the compassion based one sort of. Seems to me less hostage to contingent factors, right? So I can imagine that if you're a compassion based anti natalist, you might not think there's anything we could plausibly do to make it morally permissible to procreate because you know it's just part of the nature of of life that life is going to be awful in certain kinds of ways where I guess if you're an ecological intimate. It's. You might be moved from your position, right? If we had certain climate policies or if we colonized, have a planet such that we weren't harming, you know our environment anymore. So I think that both of those count as antinatalism because they both say you shouldn't procreate. But I think we should be open to various ways of getting to that conclusion and various strengths. Yeah.

**Amanda:** Yeah. Excellent. Thank you for your thoughts on that. Yeah, it's and it's and it's it's, it's nowhere else, is it more controversial than amongst antinatalists? I mean, we cannot, we cannot agree on what this thing means. As you said, there's conditional antinatalism. There's universal antinatalism, there's sentio centric antinatalism. There's anthropocentric anti. I mean it just goes on and on and on and on. Do you feel and and daily? Please feel free to jump in on on this point. Certainly. I mean, do you feel that given that you believe that Pro Mortalism derives from antinatalism that needs to be part of its definition on some level?

**Emma:** I think that it only comes from certain kinds of antinatalism, so I I guess I wouldn't. I've never thought about this, so this is. Kind of fresh. I guess I think that Primordialism would follow from an ecological antinatalism right, because if that's kind of concerned with the environment and not concerned with, you know what's better for human beings.

**Amanda:** So when you.

**Emma:** Then it seems to me that you wouldn't necessarily get the pro mortalism from there, whereas A compassion based is is much more LinkedIn. My mind I think.

**Amanda:** That's a really good point and I am not sure. I mean one of the one of the most famous forms of of environmentalist. Pre antinatalism as I call it, is the work of of Chris Korda of the the The Church of Youth in Asia and they're like they're like a Dadaist art movement, but they were also very heavily anti natalist before there was a word for it, blah blah blah. And Chris is a like a techno musician and. The most

famous song that he produced around that time when they were really popular was save the planet. Kill yourself. So maybe there is a so if they, but you know no, the the other part of this is how are we defining pro mortalism? And we'll get into.

**Emma:** Right. That's right. Exactly, yeah.

**Amanda:** That. In a second. So they're both a bit of a a bit of a mess, aren't they?

**Emma:** Now that's that's a good point actually. If you think that the most, yeah, the most important thing is kind of saving the planet, then you might think that leaves the pro mortalism if you think that you know all human existence is is harmful to the planet. Yeah. That's right.

**Amanda:** Yeah. OK, it's fascinating. Fascinating. Emma, are you aware that some actually credit you with the creation of the term Pro mortalism? I do know of of of one earlier instance where Benatar uses it. There might be others. I don't know. I don't claim to be any kind of expert on the history of the term primordialism. But he uses it in a different way. We'll get to that in a second. But do you believe that you coined the term either way, and what do you know about the history of this word?

**Emma:** No, right. So here's some time for some intellectual humility. No, right. I was not. I was not aware of that. I'd be really interested to know who on Earth thinks that that I was mine, because that credit is entirely misplaced. And I don't believe that I coined the term. But, you know, it's a mystery to me where I first picked it up. I wish I had access to that piece of intellectual autobiography. Because I don't know where I got it from either, but I do know that I'm not responsible for the term and I don't know anything of this history.

**Amanda:** Either. OK. Fascinating. Well, I will say that I learned that because of issue 3 of Antinatalism magazine.

**Unknown Speaker:** OK.

**Amanda:** And this was written by Andreas Moss. And and he says that in in this book. And he, I certainly will not, you know, now that I need it, I won't be able to find it. But he says that you were responding to something Elizabeth Harmon said and she didn't use the term. But anyway, he thinks that that.

**Unknown Speaker:** Yeah.

**Amanda:** That that it originates from you and and now we know that that's not true.

**Emma:** That's. Very kind of him. No, I don't think so. I don't think so anyway.

**Amanda:** I was curious also if you could tell us a little bit about how you think Pro Mortalism should be defined. But before you answer that, I want to give a quick peek into some examples of how other people appear to be defining it. So David Benatar does in fact use the term in better never to have been. He says it when. In a discussion of two different types of extinction in Chapter 6, when he's making a distinction between killing extinction and dying extinction, so that quote from page 190. The six is we're antinatalists to become pro moralist and embark on a species side program of killing humans. Their actions would be plagued by moral problems that would not be faced by dying extinction. So it's really interesting this particular

quote, because it's using the word Pro mortalism in a way that most promote. Never use it, which is in relation to killing, but we'll get to that in just a second, Christopher Belshaw, who you know and who was a guest on the podcast in Episode 34, which seems like the wrong number. But we'll go with it. So aside from you, I don't know which of you made the claim first. Truthfully. But he was one of the first people to make this claim about Pro Mortalism and Benatar. And in 2000, in 2012 and when Mark J Maharaj and I interviewed him again on episode 3034, we asked him how he would define the term, and he just said that it was for death, which is an incredibly broad. Definition of the term and you daily negativity when Mark and I interviewed you on episode 21, you define the term as meaning death is good for the one that dies. And please let us know if that interpretation has changed at all daily. Did you? Did you pick that definition up from someplace else, or is that entirely your own? Invent invented definition of the term.

**Daily:** I think I did pick up the phrase for the one who died somewhere. I can't remember. It might have been from. It must have been from a paper that I read. I don't think it was Benatar, but it might have been in one of benatar's books that that, that Benatar edited. I forget the name of the book, but yeah, so the phrase for the one who dies. I think I did pick that up somewhere, but it may have made a lot of sense to me. You know, it's to me it is about, you know, it's it's not about how one step affects others or you know, the process of dying or it. It is really for me it's it's about death itself. And for the one that dies. So that's that's still. Basically how I understand it.

**Amanda:** OK, excellent. Thank you for that. So given all of these interpretations and these different versions of the definition, I'm curious again to know how you, Emma, would add to this with your own definition.

**Emma:** Yeah. I think this is a really important question. I think I say a bit about this. In my recent paper. So the way I've understood it is that it's better to cease to exist, but I think it's worth being really careful because I think there's another kind of view which would also be properly called Pro Mortalism, which is the view that ceasing to exist is rationally required, right? And. And and I think those are very different positions, right, because I think plausibly enough there's a gap between something being best for me and it being rationally required for me to pursue that thing, right. So it might be best for me to run 5 \* a week rather than one, but I don't think we'd say that. I'm sort of rationally required to run 5 \* a week or that I behave in. Irrationally, if I failed to run 5 \* A week, I'm not sure. Maybe some folks would deny the gap between what's what's best and what's rationally required, but I I find that gap pulls would be enough plausible enough, and so the kind of crime moralism that I think is a kind of natural consequence of compassion based antinatalism is the. Pro Mortalism, which talks about what's better, not what's rationally required, so I don't want to say that, you know, 8 million humans, or at least the subset of those with the relevant capacities are engaging in massive rationality and choosing to continue to exist, right? So it can be best without it being rationally required. I think they're both pro mortalism. I think we should just understand.

**Amanda:** OK, excellent. I think I I think I think we will come to find that maybe I perhaps have my own version of what you just said we'll we'll get to that in a little bit. Emma, do you believe that it might be possible that Pro Mortalism has become a kind of umbrella term? To can mean to mean quite a lot of different things. When I first started hearing about it a lot, it was being used as kind of a pejorative term for something called an Equalist, which is kind of imagine a negative utilitarian who would press the red button, blah blah, blah blah, blah. And then they're there's a. There's a way that people are using it. It's just all become a bit of a mess as as as we said. So why do you think that might be? And if Pro Mortalism is an umbrella term term, what exactly might it be an umbrella term for?

**Emma:** Yeah, I I think that's totally possible that it's become a term in that way. And as I just said, I. Think. There are at least two ways that you know, even I think about it as as a lone kind of thinker, but I I do think it's appropriate to describe both kinds of position as pro moralists. It actually seems to me that what unites all of the ways that one might be a pro more to this. Is, as Chris Belshaw says, right, pro death now. We can Add all these nuances, of course, right? It's not to say that Pro Mortalism is this crude view, but I think that that's that's the kind of foundation that's the building block. Then there can be particular ways the position might be crafted around that key point. And so death might be thought of as kind of better for the person who dies. That's the kind of pro mortalism. I work with or is. Good for them, which is. What daily negativity works with or is rationally required and so on. But it it seems to me that it it's kind of sensible to think it's for death and then we can kind of. You know, add our additional claims around that key.

**Amanda:** Yeah, I think you're right. I think that that is the definition that keeps coming to my mind is this very broad Christopher Belshaw definition. Moving away from that just slightly for for a period of time. I mean, how do you feel antinatalism intersects, if at all, with other social and ethical issues such as atheism, the right to die and veganism?

**Emma:** Right. OK. So take those one at a time. So I think antinatalism's compatible with atheism, but I also think you could be an antinatalist atheist, right? So now if you're a compassion based anti natalist, you might well have some questions for God, right? So why have you let all this suffering happen to living things? But that wouldn't be a particularly novel thought, right? It's one which constitutes the extremely thoroughly. That's problem of evil in the philosophy of religion. So that's something people have wondered about independently of antinatalism. So I think Antinatalism could be combined with both theism and atheism. It seems to me. The right to die, I think antinatalism. Insofar as it's motivated by considerations about existence being a grievous harm is a kind of natural bedfellow of right to die proponents and.

**Unknown Speaker:** And.

**Emma:** Indeed, it might kind of widen the set of folks to whom that right might apply, right? So imagine if you had a position which said something like, you know, you have the right to die when your life has become. Show them some more horrific,



right. And before you read kind of bentyl you think? Right. Well, maybe that's people with terminal illnesses or sufficiently debilitating health conditions. But then you're going with Benetton. You go. Ohh, it's all of us, actually, right? Turns out all of our lives meet the bar of the insufficiently burdensome. And if you take that seriously, you might take it. That kind of any conditions relating to life being sufficiently burdensome for some right to kick in. You might think that that's met by many, many more lives than might. Maybe thought so. I think they're kind of natural allies. Although you know I'm a philosopher, right? So I'm looking for the coherence of various positions. I can see the coherence of a position which says that compassion based anti natalism is true. All human lives are horrific, but you don't have the right to die right now. I don't know enough about the topics of panic fill in those details, but it seems to me that that could be coherent, right? And you might have somebody who says that. The absence of that right is one of the compounding fractures of the horrendous Ness of existence, right? It's so bad. But you don't have this right to die. And that's kind of what makes it worse. So I I think that antinatalism is compatible with right to die, but also kind of the opposite view and. And then you asked me about veganism. I think veganism is much more tightly. Mind, with antinatalism of both compassion and ecological. Varieties. It's hard to see how those antinatalism's wouldn't have veganism as a natural ally, given the environmental consequences of rearing animals, and also given that human sorry animal lives are presumably pretty horrific too. And Benatar certainly thinks that. I think so. If you wanted to consistently be an anti natalist without thinking that you at least. Ought to be a vegan. I think you need to also say you know that animals don't suffer or that they're suffering isn't morally relevant, or that it's only permissible to eat roadkill or whatever. And for what it's worth, I think the first two of those claims are wildly implausible. So I I think that if you're an antinatalist, you probably ought to be a vegan, at least in theory, yeah.

**Amanda:** Excellent, excellent answer answers. Thank you so much for that. Yes, I've been a vegan for six years strong, I believe, I believe daily. As well. Yeah. No, thank you so much for that. In addition to being a philosophical position antinatalism over the last 10 years or so has become a social movement as well. What's your general exposure to this side of of the philosophy as social movement and what's your opinion of of this side of antinatalism?

**Emma:** Yeah. My general exposure to the social movement is constituted entirely by my exposure to this podcast. So I've, which I've enjoyed. An excellent listen to quite a few episodes and I yeah, I didn't know that there was this.

**Amanda:** Thank you so much.

**Emma:** This movement, my opinion of the movement, is that if antinatalism is. True, the stakes are so high, and so we better have some activism, right? But in general, I think that, you know, you might take a range of positions on the importance of philosophical research. So whether it matters whether it should matter. But it seems to me that the philosophical position of antinatalism is of profound importance. There's so much on the line. So imagine right as I'm sure you do, but then it tells correct

that to bring someone into existence is to irredeemably harm them. That all lives are horrendous, and, you know. Put in some extra premises. You get to the view that you know you. Ought not procreate now if. That's true. That would be a remarkable conclusion to have reached, and it seems to me that people should probably know about it. And and that activism, rather than academia, might be the better route to kind of spreading that knowledge. But. I don't know if I see the future of antinatalism as something more than a kind of purely intellectual move. So I don't know that there's going to be any kind of ground persuasion, so I'm pessimistic or optimistic depending on your point of view about the prospects for antinatalism activism succeeding. If your goal is to prevent procreation rather than to kind of benignly spread the word. So, you know, some folks might abstain from procreate. On the grounds of philosophical argument, but my sense is I could be wrong, kind of not. So, as you'd notice, I'd be surprised if the activist kind of had that kind of effect.

**Amanda:** Yeah, I think that's a perfectly fair assessment. I don't know. I really don't. You know. Yeah, you know, just just to give an example, I mean, antinatalist activism as it as it's exists, right? It it's so new. Like it's such a it's such a new, you know, in 2019 vice wanted to make a documentary about British antinatalism and. They had to scrap the project because there. Was no British. Antinatalism as far as far, I mean, there was some academia going on, as you well know, but no St. activism. No, nothing, nothing resembling traditional activism. That's completely changed in in in just a couple of years. So it's still very much in its infancy. Who knows where it's going? Who knows what it will be able to achieve. I do think based on what you just said, the the peanut butter and Jelly combination of the academia and the the activism. I mean that's that's that's that's the sandwich we're trying to find, I think I think. That's the only.

**Emma:** Yeah, I mean, you're talking to a British person who wouldn't put those two things together.

**Amanda:** Way forward, yeah.

**Emma:** Then yeah. No, no. Yeah.

**Amanda:** And I realize those are those are the troubling combination. But from my perspective anyway.

**Emma:** No, I'm I, I mean the peanut butter and the. Ohh OK. You know the thing we do here?

**Amanda:** That's so funny. OK, well, thank you so much for your thoughts on that one last question before we move on to your papers outside of Benatar, have you done much research into other antinatalist thinkers and other arguments for antinatalism? Sorry, such as consent and risk?

**Emma:** Yeah, only a little. So when I was writing and better return whence we came, I I read. Schiffrin and sing on consent and I remember reading Magnussen's paper and risk in the special issue. But I am extremely hazy on the details of all of these positions. So I guess my answer is kind of not really but very much open to it. And so far as I find this kind of very fascinating.

**Amanda:** All right. So moving on, Emma, we'd love to talk to you a little bit about your first paper on the subject of Antinatalism and Pro Mortalism, the 2012 collaborative effort between you and Mr. Raif MacGregor. And yourself entitled. Better no longer to be the harm of continued existence. May I begin by reading out the abstract.

**Unknown Speaker:** This piece.

**Emma:** Sure. Yeah.

**Amanda:** OK, excellent abstract. David Benatar argues that coming into existence is always a harm, and that for all of us unfortunate enough to have come into existence, it would be better to never have come to be. We contend that if one accepts Benatar's argument for the asymmetry between the presence of and absence of pleasure and pain and the poor quality of life. One must also accept that suicide is preferable to continued existence and that his view therefore implies both Pro Mortalism Antinatalism and Pro Mortalism. Pardon me, this inclusion has been argued for by Elizabeth Harmon. She takes it that Benatar claims that our lives are awful. It follows that we would be better to kill ourselves. Harmon, 2009. Though we agree that with Harmon's conclusion, we think that her argument is too quick and that Benatar's argument for non pro mortalism. Deserve more serious consideration than she gives them. We make our case using a tripartite. We start by examining the prima facie case for the claim that Pro Mortalism follows from Benatar's position, presenting his response to the contrary and furthering the dialect by showing that Benatar's position is not just that coming into existence as a harm, but that existence itself is. Is a harm that we then look at Benatar's treatment of the Epicurean line, which is important for him as it undermines his anti death argument for non pro mortalism we demonstrate that he fails to address the concerns that the Epicurean line raises and that he cannot therefore use the harm of death as an argument for non pro mortalism finally. Return to Benatar's pro-life argument for non Pro Mortalism built upon his notion of interests and argue that while the interest in continued existence may indeed have more. Relevance. It is almost always irrational, given that neither Benatar's anti death or pro-life arguments for non pro mortalism work. We conclude that Pro Mortalism follows from his antinatalism. As such, if it is not always better never to have been that it is better no longer to be. First off, the most basic of questions. What? Led to the writing of this paper.

**Emma:** So as I said earlier, I read Benatar's better never to have been as a graduate student and and as it as it happened soon after I did Fabius Mets issued a call for papers for a special issue of the South African Journal of Philosophy on Benatar's antenatal. Them and so together with Braith, we submitted an abstract which was accepted for presentation at the workshop on Antinatalism and and then that led to our co-authored paper. So we presented it there, got some feedback kind of made some adjustments and then that was published the following year.

**Amanda:** OK, excellent. So I have, I have a I have a number of of of sort of loose you know thoughts that this paper inspired and I I I hope that sort of what I've prepared is all right. I mean I'd like to sort of jump to the postscript. And you say

that after a presentation of this paper, a distinction was raised between two kinds of pro mortalism one which would recommend committing suicide now, and another that would recommend doing so later when one's life becomes sufficiently bad, we want to claim that benatar's antinatalism commits him to the first of these versions of Pro Mortalism. But one might think that his position only commits him to the second, and I just wanted to make a quick comment on this and both of you, please feel free to jump in any time I'm I'm personally not sure. I I don't know if there is a real distinction to be made between. Quick and slow pro mortalism as it stands in relation specifically to Benatar, anism, and the asymmetry I mean I've I've I've gone back and forth on this subject so, so many times it's it's been a very difficult puzzle to kind of pull apart. I will say that in looking at the more long term idea of Pro Mortalism that it would be good to commit suicide. Later, when one's life is sufficiently getting back. That I guess my question here is what separates this from the right to die movement as a human rights issue? I mean, aren't we now at this time living in a world without that as a human right? And if we were given that right tomorrow, would we even still be calling this primordialism? Like, are we are we? Are we attaching this loaded term? To something which you know at the minute we're living in in a, in a, in a time where this thing that we should all have a right to decide for ourselves, you know it, it is a wouldn't this just simply be the freedom to plan for one's life, including one's death? And so, I mean, you've already spoken about sort of the the right to die in its relation. To antinatalism but. I I find. I find it to be a strange and and and murky connection between Pro Mortalism and the right to die and and do you have any? Thoughts on all that?

**Emma:** Yeah, I think so. I mean, so the first thing you said was that you kind of weren't sold on the distinction between kind of quick and slow pro mortalism, you know, and and actually I'm not sure about that anymore either. So you know that 2012 paper was a long time ago, and I think we moved on a little bit and I talk about that in my more recent paper. So Benatar says that it might make more sense for people who are in the better parts of their lives to delay until the worst bits start to occur. And and I say two things about that, which is that. You know, although some features of our predicament vary across time, right. So for some people, those features, like those relating to bodily discomfort, might be more appalling later in life. At least some of the kind of more mundane qualities that make for appalling lives, according to benta, are kind of present right from the arts, right? And.

**Unknown Speaker:** So even if.

**Emma:** Our lives tend to become worse overtime. It seems to me that at any given point that you might like to look at, if you take Benatar seriously, they're pretty bad, right? And second, even. If our earlier lives are only minimally appalling in terms of quality, right? So we're healthy. We're not the victims of crime or whatever. Even those days are marred by the more kind of by by those other components of the of the human predicament, you know, so our lives are always meaning. We're always going to die. We're always going to be annihilated. And so I'm not actually sure anymore

that there's much Rd. in distinguishing between quick and slow pro mortalism as it relates to Benito's antinatalism. But the right to die stuff so. I. Guess that I think that the right to die movement needn't be committed to saying that death is better for people and and that's what I think it's it's good to distinguish it from Pro Mortalism, whereas I take it pro Mortalism is committed to something like that to it being better or it being good or it being required. So a view which had it that you know, you ought to be able to plan the course of your life, including your death. Need and also say that you know death is better or good or required. So I I do think there is a bit of logical space between those two positions.

**Amanda:** You know, I just feel like if we had the right to die, there's a bit of what Pro Mortalism is that would sort of collapse at that point. Like what? Like it, it just feels that way to me. But again, I probably am getting a bit lost in the way people define it and and. And the difference is in the way people define it. I'm just not sure, you know, there's there's. In my these are my loose associations.

**Emma:** No, but I guess somebody could, you know, be a a, you know a a very strong right to die proponent, but think that death is very, very, very, very bad. I mean, I take it that, that that Benatar is in that kind of position, right. He's not a prime mortalism, but he he very much is a right to die person. So. But I take it crime mortalism is is kind of poor deaf it says you know.

**Amanda:** Yeah, I see what you're saying, right?

**Emma:** You should have the right, but also it's a. Good thing, right? So. That seems to me the difference between the two positions.

**Amanda:** OK, I see. I see. Moving on from that though, and and perhaps we've resolved this, but I'll keep going. I mean now looking at the idea of quick Pro mortalism, the idea that one should die now there is an inconvenient. Part to this that I think inconveniently, but but you know is. Is just. Just true. If your primary goal is to avoid all suffering. And yes, I mean when the machine is on, we're in harm's way when the machine is off, we're not in harm's way anymore. That's just a fact. And that's sort of its own income. Truth, however, this is where I'm slightly afraid of. Pro Mortalism in in today's context, because most of us simply don't have a great way of ending our lives in order to do it now, we would have to do it badly, and I fear that I have lost friends of mine like June hung. You know who? In wishing to be logically consistent with this implied speed of Pro Mortalism, you know, made decisions that caused them to die really badly. As a result, I mean Joon's death was. Very impulsive from from all appearances and and this I know for a fact. You know, Benatar would would not condone he perfectly. He's perfectly solid in his advocacy for the right to die. But he would never advocate that people should do it badly. I'm quite sure that he would say this. This is. You know, whatever you. Utility you have while live to fight for, you know better access to things like the right to die antinatalism other causes like that's what you should be doing while you're still while you're still here. I think that's part of what you would say. Anyway, I think you would say to some degree that we probably stick around to do something about those things and that shouldn't give in to again

the speed of primordialism. Any any thoughts on that and daily if you? Do as well. Yeah, like.

**Emma:** So I know that some people think that, you know, it's kind of incoherent or in at least inconsistent to be a kind of walking, talking, break more to this. Right? Why? Why are you still here? If you think that it's. But I think those people are wrong. About that right. I just think that it's going to depend what your home Organism looks like, so you know you. You might think it would be better if all humans when it's stinct, but you might also think that. You ceasing to exist is not the best way to pursue that goal, especially when you combine in the position with antinatalism. You might think exactly as you were saying that kind of activism towards kartalian procreation would be a more productive way of putting your theory into. Action or you might be a promoter. This he thinks that death is good for the one who dies, but you might also think that that good. Need not be an immediate 1 and so. Although I see the kind of what seems to be an obvious dissonance present when we see a walking, talking pro more for. This. I just, I think it depends on the the details of the position and when you combine it antinatalism and again the details are needed. I can see how you can consistently hold those views and yet continue on. That seems entirely kind of fine and appropriate to me, yeah.

**Amanda:** Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I'm based on something you just said. I mean, you know, I don't know if you know this, but the most common. Argument that antinatalists receive back towards their antinatalism is why don't you just go kill? Yourself. That is what we hear time and time again. It's happened to me. I'm sure it's happened to daily. It's happened to all of us time and time again. What do you think about that? I mean, given what you believe about Pro Mortalism and antinatalism, do you think people are? Hitting on something important when they say that, or they're just being jerks, or what's your impression?

**Emma:** I I think it's pretty poor. It's pretty crude, right? So as we've already said there, like there are lots of ways of being a pro moralist, antinatalist. And that being kind of consistent with with choosing to continued on without getting kind of tangled up in logical inconsistency, right. So you could just think your efforts are better spending activism. It could be that your particular version of Pro Mortalism doesn't recommend ending ones own existence. Well, hey, you know what it could be like just an irrational love of life and it's OK to be irrational. That's kind of fine. And of course, there are also arguments for the claim. That antinatalism doesn't get you to pro Mortalism, right? And you've got to take those seriously. You've gotta be intellectually humble enough to take those seriously, and I think that, you know, although I disagree, I think better makes a really good case for that. So I think people who say that are kind of not paying sufficient attention to the nuances of Pro mortalism and and ways in which it can be consistent. With continuing on, it's also, you know, highly demanding of of 1 being completely irrational and you know, behaving in ways consistent with all of their beliefs, which I think is a little bit unrealistic given human psyche. And also,

hey, maybe the positions don't collapse into one another after all, and there are very good arguments for that. So I think it's pretty poor to react in that way.

**Amanda:** Yeah, I agree with you. Thank you for that. Alright. I have two more questions and then I'm going to hand it over to Daley. So the first one is just a bit of like. Your impression is sort of a bit of how pro mortalism fits into some of the history of all this. So what I'm about to say, many will disagree with and that's fine. Disagree with me in. The comments below. Pro Mortalism is one of these ideas that I think really scared Antinatalists, who started their antinatalism somewhere between. Yeah, the first release of better never to have been 2006, particularly because of the way Benatar uses it, and better never to have been. And let's say 2010, which was right before the Antinatalist YouTube boom. And that's where I came in for the first time. And that was also slightly before papers like yours and Christopher Belshaw's emerging, making these types of. Claims and right just right before a lot of things started to change if you came into antinatalism again between 2000 and six 2010, you were witnessed to an antinatalism before a lot of other ideas started to be brought in like Pro mortalism like atheism, like the red button, a more symbiotic. Relationship with both veganism and the right to die atheism as we. Discussed this was a time of a kind of more pure antinatalism as I think many of that particular era would see it where you know, we finally had Benatar. We were moving away from whatever proto Antinatalism is or environmentalist pre antinatalism. And you know, it led to. Uh. It was a more narrow focus of what antinatalism is, but the way I see it, antinatalism has evolved since that time. It's matured and part of that maturity is the growth of some of these tentacles into these different conversations. Again, like pro mortalism. And that's why I think we're seeing a greater acceptance of things like Pro Mortalism, because as time goes on. This is becoming part of the identity of what Antinatalism is. And it's no, it's no longer making sense not to accept the the relevance of this and and the pushback to it, which is immense, by the way, is starting to look more and more like denial to a large extent and passing the buck. I mean, it's really interesting that, I mean, I don't want to get you too into the drama of the antenatal world. It's so fascinating to me that this is an accusation. That's been leveled against Antinatalism, but now a lot of antinatalists who are afraid of this concept have pushed it onto other forms of antinatalism like it's somehow somehow our fault. So again, again, it's sort of coming from a more internal historical perspective, but do you have any thoughts on anything that I've just said?

**Emma:** Yeah. Well, obviously you guys are much better versed in the than the social history of antinatalism than I am, and particularly the activism side. But I mean, I agree that pro Mortalism is going to strike some purpose. Like really alarming, right? Especially if you take it that in holding that you would need to do something horrifying to be consistent. As I said, I don't actually think that's true.

**Unknown Speaker:** But I think.

**Emma:** It's also important to say that I don't think there's any kind of dishonesty, necessarily, and vocally claim to be anti. Its lists and not Chrome organists. And that's

for a few reasons, right? So there are all sorts of kind of cognitive biases that could explain why people are motivated to kind of block the move from one position to another because you know that second position just seems so horrifying.

**Unknown Speaker:** But.

**Emma:** Also, you know and then it all might be right, it it could be completely consistent to be a compassion based antinatalist and not be a pro mortalism. And I think in his replies to me, he makes a really good case for that. And we still disagree. But I'm not kind of close to the idea that that I'm wrong, that there's a link between the two positions, but I also really strongly agree with you. And this really is kind of the point of my more recent paper. If you're an antinatalist, particularly of a compassionate kind, it doesn't make any sense to not consider pro mortalism as a natural ally of your position. It doesn't make any sense to take it that you know the position is not relevant, or too fringe or whatever, and so even if you end up saying that the positions aren't linked, if you are an antinatalist, I think Pro Mortalism. Is relevant to your theorizing and shouldn't be dismissed as ridiculous or fringe. I just think that that would be a mistake.

**Amanda:** Yeah. I mean, as time goes on, I, I I think I agree with you more and more. I I think that the IT if and this is sort of leading into my my last question you know a lot of antinatalists get really upset with people when they start asking questions about. Pro Mortalism suicide, the value of living their lives or the value of their lived experience because they feel, you know, those questions are kind of missing the point which is not entirely false. They are kind of missing the point getting so wrapped up in life assessments because what we're really talking about is the ethics. Of starting lives or bringing lives into existence. But to say that making life assessments is somehow not a perfectly rational psychological reaction to being confronted with, you know, coming into the harm of existence or is again, I think something that. Antenatal is maybe need to get over a little bit, like of course people are gonna are gonna make those kinds of assessments. And I I don't really have a question attached. To that, I just think that that's. That's that's a that thing. That's a big part of what you kind of made me realize with with your paper. And again, I I sort of apologize because I realize this is a this is I've got a pretty poor job of responding to the 1st paper, but these are all the these are all the thoughts that have come out of of of reading that.

**Emma:** So yeah, sure, yeah.

**Amanda:** First one and I really want to thank you for that.

**Emma:** All right. No, no, it's it's been great. Yeah. Talk to you about it.

**Amanda:** All right, well, I'm. I'm actually gonna hand you over to to Daley. And he's got some great questions about about your second paper. So your second paper better to return whence we came from 2022. I would like to quickly read the abstract. I argue that David Benatar's Antinatalism leads to pro mortalism the view that is better to cease to exist. Because the human predicament. And as he describes it as a fate worse than death, thus continued existence is such a predicament in such a predicament is not preferable to an exit form. I revisit my earlier argument for the



claim that Ben Benatar's 2006 asymmetry between pleasure and pain paved the way for Pro mortalism unless Epicureanism about death is ruled. Now I replied to benatar's response to that argument. Then I turned to Benatar's 2017 characterization of the of the human predicament and suggests that that also leads to pro mortalism I respond to three arguments from Ben. Guitar that seek to block the move from our predicament to primordialism. I conclude that if Benatar is right about the predicament we find ourselves in, it is better for most people returned whence they came.

**Daily:** So and also in the paper you discuss sort of two ways that benatar's antinatalist position. Could lead to primordialism. And the first. Has to do with the asymmetry. So as you know, lots of people think the asymmetry does not lead to pro Mortalism, but. You challenged this in the paper. Could you maybe take us through that argument?

**Emma:** Yeah, I'm sure so.

**Amanda:** I tell you.

**Emma:** That the controversial bit of the asymmetry is the absence of pleasure quadrant, right. The absence of pleasure is not bad. So first I want to say it's not bad unless there's somebody for whom there's a deprivation, and then you add in a fairly popular account of death upon which death is harmful because it deprives one of future goods one would. Otherwise, have enjoyed had one not died. And so then you get to say Benatar gets to say that it's not bad, that those who never get to exist don't experience the pleasures of life. But you also get to say that it is bad for somebody to see it existing. And that's because the absence of the pleasures of life for the person who dies would be a deprivation. And it's that point. But the absence of pleasure is bad when it involves A deprivation which does the work of recommending continued non existence for the currently non existent. But it doesn't recommend bringing about non existence for the already existent right, so the asymmetry doesn't get you to promote alism. If you think that death is a deprivation. Umm. So I just think, well, I think that. Right. So as. I've already said I'm. I'm pretty attracted. To Epicureanism about. Death, the view that the person who dies is not harmed or. Deprived by their death. Now, if that were the correct view, then I take it that coupled with the asymmetry Pro mortalism would be fairly straightforwardly recommended, right? And so death is not bad, and we're not deprived by it. The path to Pro Mortalism is clear and can't be blocked by appeal to deprivation. And Benetton recognises this in 2006, in the book, spends a little bit of time arguing against the Epicurean view of death and. And so in 2012, I took on those arguments. I thought they didn't quite do what they needed to do. And since then, Benatar has replied to me, and in my new paper, I've replied to him on those points. My argument isn't that Epicureanism about death is the correct view, but I do think the onus is on Benatar to give us a little bit more of a robust discussion of it. Now he disagrees with me about that, and about whether it really is his job to take Epicureanism off the table, and but that's the state of play I take it. Between us.

**Daily:** Yeah. Thank you. I guess, can you tell us a little bit about what, what is, Epicureanism and? I guess just give us a quick overview.

**Emma:** Yeah, I mean I, I I take it that it's, I don't know much about the kind of history of the view, but I take it it's the view that one, the person who dies is not harmed. By her death, so death does not harm the one who dies. So that. Yeah, that's basically it. So I take it that it's in direct opposition to the deprivation view of death, which says death is bad. Here's why death is bad because one is deprived of future goods that one would otherwise have experienced had one not died and Epicureanism just says death is not bad. And the quote is something like when death is here. We are not. When we are here, death is not right. Death is kind of nothing to us. And so one is not harmed by one's death. That's not to say that died. Isn't, you know, harmful? That can be very unpleasant, but one having died once death itself is not a harm to somebody.

**Daily:** Right. But on your view. On Epicureanism, it's we can still say that non existence is better than existence, right? So so in other words, Epicureanism is compatible with Pro mortalism on your view.

**Emma:** Yeah, no, absolutely. And and that's what I think that if you're an epicurean, then you take compassionate and naturalism seriously. Then I think you you kind of naturally get yourself to a primal for this position. And I think that I think. That makes sense.

**Daily:** Yeah, I think a lot of deprivation is at that point. Want to say, you know, how is this any different from our view? You know, when Epicureans start talking about? Death being worse or like non existence being worse than existence. Or in this case you know more is better. At that point it almost seems like it's just a I I think he's just said it's like a verbal dispute, like a mere verbal dispute. Do you agree with that or do you think that there are is an important. There's still an important difference. Here, between these views or.

**Unknown Speaker:** No.

**Emma:** Yeah, I think, I mean maybe I'm missing something, but it seems to me that the views are opposing views, right? You know, if you're a declaration list, then what you're doing is given an account of why death is bad, right? So the question you're answering is, why is death bad for the person who dies? And your answer is something like, well, because she could have experienced. All these pleasures. Had she not died? Whereas if you're asking Epicurean why is that bad for she who dies, the Epicurean will say, well, it isn't right. I don't owe him an account of that because it's not bad at all, right? So I don't need to tell you why it is bad. So I take it at the starting assumptions for these two positions on death are radically different. The Epicurean and says, look, this is death isn't something that harms us. It's not something that's bad. The deprivation account says it is something that's bad for us and my job now is to tell you why. It's because you're deprived of future goods, so they they seem to be very different positions.

**Daily:** Is it on the Epicurean view that you're considering here is, is there a reason to avoid death? So if if non existence, if we think that non existence is worse than existence, does that give us a a reason to avoid that?

**Emma:** Yeah, I don't know.

**Daily:** Is that?

**Emma:** Yeah, I guess it would depend on. On your your other views and on nearby issues so. I'm not sure I wouldn't want to speak for Epicureanism on that, but I my sense is that if you think that death is not a harm, then you might not. Have any reason to avoid it? But I might be being a little bit too quick there because I've not thought about that. It might be consistent with Epicureanism that you recognise that it's not harmful, but there are nevertheless reasons to delay it. I can see a a position which can make sense, so yeah, so I think. That. If you're an Epicurean, it's probably open to you. To be pro delay or not, right? If you're not an anti natalist for example, do you think? That life is wonderful. Then maybe you would have a position reason to delay death, even though you recognize that death is not a harm. I'm. I'm not sure. But if you're an antinatalist, I think that's kind of much harder to make out if you're an antinatalist. And during Epicurean then, it seems to me that you've got less reason to delay death because of course, if you delay death, then you're having this kind of horrific life experience. And if death isn't harmful, then what? You're.

**Amanda:** Doing.

**Emma:** Why are you delaying it?

**Unknown Speaker:** Right.

**Daily:** Thank you. So I think at this point it's important to say that you're not actually arguing that, you know, if benatar's antinatalism has this implication like leads to pro mortalism that we should reject senators antinatalism. So as you say in the paper, you know, say my point was and it is only that senators. This in the tree leads to pro mortalism, but that point was never put. In the spirit of reductio. Did you want to say just a little bit more about that you kind of touched on this before, but you know, my guess is that a lot of people listening to this are going to think, you know, just gonna kind of assume that the point of this paper and other papers that you've written is that benatar's antinatalism should be rejected because it has this kind of absurd many people think anyway. It's kind of a crazy implication.

**Emma:** Yeah. Thanks for bringing that up. It's it's good for me to have the opportunity to be really clear about this. Now I can speak for my co-authors view 10 years ago. That's possible. His mind has since changed, but back then it was his view that if Benatar's Antinatalism got us the Pro Mortalism, then that's a reduction of the view, right? Then. Clearly something's gone wrong in. The view if. That's the consequence, and I disagreed with him about that, which is why the paper was was not written in that spirit. I just thought it was an interesting theoretical consequence. Maybe I have a pretty high tolerance for what folks might take to be bizarre views. I'm not sure I I don't find myself immediately thinking that pro Mortalism is so odd that any view which entailed it must be wrong and. And as I said, I've I've not really thought about. The plausibility of Pro Mortalism kind of as an independent position. But it doesn't strike me as kind of obviously incorrect seems to. Me that sure. It could be true, and so if it is the consequence of antinatalism, I don't think that that's a strike against

antinatalism. So I don't, you know, I don't have clever things to say about why I don't think the move to Pro Mortalism constitutes a reductio of antinatalism. I guess I. Just don't find that particularly alarming if you've already accepted antinatalism, which is. Pretty fringe and pretty controversial. Seems to me that Pro Mortalism really isn't all that unsavoury, but I realize that my intuitions are a little bit out of whack there with the with certainly in academia and in the kind of more activist means. See, people do seem to be really, you know, I know I don't want my position to lead to that, but I. I just don't find that particularly alarming. Pro Mortalism sure might be true, yeah.

**Daily:** Right. And and do you think that pro Mortalism? Implies suicide because I think. You say you have a kind of short discussion. I think near the beginning of the paper about, you know, how there are. Well, there are particular ways of dying. Let's say that, you know, could be so awful, right, that that can sometimes outweigh, say, the good of. Ceasing to. This and then you also talked about maybe obligations to others and things like that. So there are these other regarding reasons perhaps to continue existing. So given that, do you think that there's a clear like this pro mortalism get us to suicide straight to suicide or you know does it automatically, you know implies suicide or do you think? These it's not so the connection is not. As tight as the.

**Emma:** Yeah. No, I I, I don't. I don't think the connection is a logical 1 whatsoever. I think it might be true that it's better for one not to exist without it being true that it's better for one to die by suicide, and I think it makes perfect sense to be a pro moralist who is against death by suicide, right? So you know, all you need to do is add in another view, right. So if you thought that, you know, you had a particular religious belief that suicide would be so egregious that it would affect. The kind of afterlife. Be likely to enjoy it, or if you believe that it would affect your relationship with God, or if you just think that suicide is morally egregious because of, you know, the harm it inflicts on other people. So if you had one of those beliefs, whilst nevertheless maintaining that it would be better for you to no longer exist, then you're our pro moralist without being an A pro suicide. But although I don't think there's a logical connection between those 2 views, I did move between those views fairly freely in my paper. And that's because the various ways of blocking that connection, which I've just outlined, are not available to Benatar. I take it so. He's clear in various places that although suicide is sometimes morally wrong, it's not always and and when he discusses meaningless of our lives, he argues against what he calls the theistic gambit as a way of generating meaning. And so I don't think that he can appeal to any religious reasons for ruling out suicide. And also when he discusses suicide, he explicitly assumes there's no afterlife. And so that's why I think it's OK when we're talking about Benito's position to treat Pro mortalism as implying that suicide is the best for us, but they don't think that there's a logical connection between them. I think you can be a pro multilist then you can also think that suicide is completely wrong and no one should do it or whatever. So no logical connection. But when we're talking about Benetton's position. I think it's theoretically legitimate to kind of link them up in the way that I did.

**Daily:** Thank you. And in the literature, do you think from what you've read and that pro morals and the suicide, do you think these views are typically distinguished in this way or do you think or have you noticed? Sometimes people use pro mortalism as almost synonymous with like pro suicide.

**Emma:** Yeah. So I I haven't. Read very much on Primordialism except as as part of the question of whether Antinatalism leads to it. And there I think there is a move where people don't distinguish the kind of the legitimacy of being a pro moralist without kind of being pro suicide. So in the Harman paper, and she says explicitly, you know, life is so bad, then we should kill ourselves and. There's a review. I forget who wrote it now and the way she talks is, you know, if if antinatalism is true, then you should kill yourself, right? So. So there's not a kind of move to pro mortalism and then a separate move to suicide that that kind of middle section is cut out so. My sense is in my limited reading that for mortalism and suicide are linked, but I think that they needn't be.

**Amanda:** And that's very much the way that it is within the community. And that's again one of the reasons why I thought this conversation was so important, because the two of you have a completely different. Impression of what Pro Mortalism is then that is that is more actively, you know, discussed within antenatal circles. Pardon. Me for jumping in again.

**Unknown Speaker:** So so going.

**Daily:** Back to the paper, you also argue, in addition to the, you know, stuff about the asymmetry, the arguments about the asymmetry. You also argue that benatar's view of the human predicament leads to primordialism as well. So could you tell us what, in a nutshell, is better towards view of the human condition?

**Emma:** Right. OK. Well, I'll do my best to do this some justice from my memory of the of the 2017 book. So then it's I think that life is awful. And that's given a book length defence and the human predicament which I, you know, really enjoyed in in some sense of the word, enjoy of course. And and he's got several reasons for that. And he thinks that our lives are meaningless, at least from the perspective of the universe. And he thinks that that's tragic. I find that really compelling and and he also thinks that the general quality of our lives is pretty appalling, right? So even those lives that we think, you know, pretty good lives, they're permeated by, you know, the inconveniences and discomforts of hunger and thirst and minor illness and psychological hurdles, hurdles and, you know, losing our elders and so on. And then, of course, you know, many of us face the risk of truly horrifying fate so severe or chronic illness and physical or sexual abuse, torture, murder. So on. And finally, all our lives end in death, and that's bad in so far as it deprives of future goods and annihilation, which he understands as the kind of total and irreversible obliteration of a person. So I take it that that's the human condition, and all of those things constitute our lives, and and that makes our lives pretty appalling.

**Daily:** So Benatar kind of argues that despite the fact that life is really quite terrible, death doesn't solve these problems. So, like the problem of, you know, meaninglessness,

of course, Senator does believe that we have some kind of limited kind of meaning where we can, it doesn't solve the problem of our. Mortality and.

**Unknown Speaker:** 1.

**Daily:** And sort of in this connection you have an example in the paper that I quite like. It's about an unhappy relationship and unhappy relationship. Can you tell us what that example is and what you think it shows?

**Emma:** Yeah. So this is in response to the idea that hating in one's death is not a solution to the human predicament and so not recommended by it. And that's because death is part of that very predicament. But I guess it seems to me that ceasing to exist needn't get you out of all dimensions of the human predicament to be a reasonable response to it, or or even the best response to it. And so I draw this analogy, which I hope shows that partial solutions can be both reasonable and the best option, and the analogy is. Jill is in an unhappy relationship, but soon she's going to move across the world, and that relationship will end. And you know, I just ask you to accept that that that's definitely going to happen and the baldness of the relationship is constituted by kind of arguments or an abuse, lack of affection, but also the trauma of ending that relationship. And so part of Jills unhappy predicament is the trauma of the break up. But I take it that the trauma of the breakup is not a reason not to bring the break up forward, because in doing so, now she's not going to solve her predicament and she's not going to solve it because, you know, the trauma of the breakup is part of that. Vitamin, but if we agree that Jill ought to break up with her partner, then I don't think it's any argument against us doing so. But that wouldn't free her from all dimensions of her predicament, right? Namely, the trauma of the break up. But look, it would rehab from the arguments and the verbal abuse and the lack of affection. And that's true even if it's also true that in ending the relationship early, Jill would deprive herself of the limited goods of that relationship. And so in case it's not clear yet, the analogy is supposed to be this. Although death might be part of our predicament, that doesn't mean that it can't be at least a partial solution to the predicament as a whole, right? So if life is as awful as Benatar says it is. Then ceasing to exist might be best, even whilst recognizing that that's not a cost free solution. So just because that's part of our solution of our predicament doesn't mean that it's not an appropriate way to respond to that predicament.

**Daily:** That's what I think. Yes, thank you. Yeah. And I found that really quite persuasive myself. So. Many people think the you already explained to us the deprivation account of deaths badner or I guess goodness. And then people think that's kind of, you know, roughly the correct view, correct account. You're not among those people. But so the idea again roughly is like when death is bad. When it's there, it's there because it deprives the individual of goods that they would have had had they not died at that time. So Benatar understand like. While Benatar accepts deprivation ISM, but believes it's not really the whole story. Like it's not the whole of what makes that bad for us. So Benatar thinks that in addition to depriving one of future goods, that this bad because it obliterates, it annihilates the individual. But you argue that

in the paper that even if annihilation is bad in the way that Benatar suggests. Benefit views still lead to Pro Mortalism. Could you tell us more about that?

**Emma:** Yeah, so I found the material on annihilation in the human predicament. Again, extremely compelling. And I think I agree that if you think death is a harm, it makes sense to think that annihilation is a separate harm too, by those arguments. And Benatar appeals to this to block the path, to promoting ISM by saying that annihilation is something that we ought to delay. And that's because I cannot get over it. And and I guess I just don't see why the fact that we can't get over it gives us a reason to delay it. So if our lives were overall good. That ended in annihilation. Then fine. It would probably be worth putting off, but if there are no good lives. And if whilst not annihilated, things are very bad, I don't see why it would be good to delay the inevitability of a bad which would relieve us of other bads. So like, think back to Jill, right? So imagine she never gets over that breakup, right. And she knows this when she's deliberating over whether to end the awful relationship. She knows that that trauma of her breakup is something she's never going to get over. You might ask. Well, does that give her a reason to delay the break up, bearing in mind that breaking up gets her out of all of these other bads, and I'm just not sure that it does once we take into account how awful the relationship is. And Kirsten Eckerstrom so she reviews the human predicament and she makes a similar point. And I wrote this. Because it's it's cool quote, she says. Look, if annihilation is going to be a bummer no matter when it occurs, one may as well die early to avoid the future. This value associated with the poor quality of life. So. I guess I just. Don't quite see why it is best delayed, given that it would get one out of the other bads of life. Yeah, that was my point there.

**Daily:** Right. And the Airstream quote, I mean, I suppose Benatar would object to the no matter when it occurs, right? So, you know, Eric Trump says, you know, it's gonna be a bummer no matter. Well, I mean it, it will be a bummer no matter when it occurs. But this is the kind of implication there is that it really doesn't matter when it occurs, I think. Right. And so as you were saying, Benatar thinks that.

**Emma:** Hmm.

**Daily:** It's good to or we should delay annihilation and I just want to know if you had any thoughts on the the example that Benatar discusses in the human predicament. It's it's an example from Francis Camp and it's the limbo man example. And you know, this is the person that. This is a quote prefers putting off a fixed quantity of goods of life by going into a coma and returning to consciousness at a later point. To have them. And I guess Benatar thinks that to the extent that we share, you know, this limbo man's preference to delay these goods, this is kind of best explained by this is because we think it's good to delay annihilation. And, you know, the thought is like, the deprivation is. Going to be the same either way. Did you have any thoughts on this example? And I mean because for for me it was actually the most compelling thing in that section in the human predicament because my my view too is that. Death is not itself. There's there's no additional, you know, I'm just kind of a simple, you know,

deprivation is. So I don't. I don't necessarily agree with the Benatar on the annihilation. So but but that example I thought was quite interesting. And so I wanted to just have your here some of your thoughts on that example and whether it affects your. View in any. Interesting way.

**Emma:** Yeah. So I think it would affect my view. If it were true that limbo man's preference is the right one, but I guess I want to say two things about that. The first is that it's not at all obvious to me that that preference is intuitive. It's not one that I have. I mean, I've already said that, you know, my intuitions are a bit out of whack sometimes, but I just don't have the intuition that I would. I would rather delay things and, like, wake up and have that. Same amount of goods and and I also can't make much sense of that intuition. If one takes really seriously the idea that. Human lives are appalled. The second, let's say that you know I I'm just weird and and that you actually talk to a lot of people and lots of folks have that preference. And so we need to explain that preference and one way we can explain it is by appeal to you know, annihilation being a separate band. So I take it that most folk have a pre theoretical or gut feeling that. Death is bad and something they'd like to do. Way and they might find themselves with that limbo man intuition. But, you know, huge parts of Benatar's works are devoted to explaining why various intuitions or preferences we have are failing to track how rotten our lives are. And so I think that you know, and I've not thought much about this, but I think it the limbo man intuition that lots of people might have might be explainable by appeal to the ways we explain other preferences that express a love of life or a desire to have one's legacy stretched as far into the future as possible. And so on. So. I think I would reach for a kind of psychological debunking explanation of the limbo man intuition before reaching for the idea that annihilation is a bad, best, delayed even when lives are appalling. I think that just sounds much more plausible to me, to kind of explain why people have that intuition rather than say that this shows this kind of deep. Physical fact that annihilation is something that that we should delay, even whilst recognizing that human lives are appalling. Well, I guess that's what I think about that I I wasn't really moved very much by that discussion.

**Daily:** Right. OK, thank you. So, Amanda, sorry, that's all the questions I had.

**Amanda:** No, that's excellent. Thank you. Thank you so much daily. Thank you so much, Emma, for all of that. That was absolutely fascinating. I just want to quickly touch on benatar's responses to you.

**Emma:** Would be very much.

**Amanda:** Both of them both every conceivable harm of further defense of Antinatalism by David Benatar, and also misconceived why these further criticisms of of Antinatalism fail. What did you think of his responses? I mean, just some simple simple question really. But I mean, yeah. What? What? What do you think that there's still more unanswered questions. Do you think that there will be more back and forth between the two of you eventually?

**Emma:** Well, so in his 2012 response, I found what he said about the relationship between Antinatalism and Epicureanism. A bit unsatisfactory, but that was great for



me because it gave me a kind of starting point to to write this new paper. But in his more recent response, Benatar agrees that Antinatalism combined with Epicureanism could lead to Pro Mortalism. I don't think he goes as far as saying that it definitely does, but he says that it could and. And so I guess the disagreement between us is, you know. But perhaps, perhaps not particularly deep one. I think we agree on a lot of stuff, and as as I've said, I find his work really compelling. But the disagreement is going to come down to how much the burden is on him to take the Epicurean view of death off the table. And I take it he thinks that he should do something in that regard. Right. And, you know, just talk about it in the book, in both books. And I guess I think that he should do more. And and that his arguments on the view are not terribly persuasive. But as he says in in one of his replies, but asking for proof that Epicureanism is incorrect, he's asking for too much and I agree right, so very rarely are philosophical positions proven false or true. But it's still my. View that the arguments Benatar wields against Epicureanism about death are a bit quick and and they also appeal to things that he shouldn't appeal to right, like the position being counterintuitive, I don't think he should appeal to that, given where. He's coming from or. The position being such that proponents of it wouldn't be bothered by Pro Mortalism, he says that he's like, well, you're an epicurean and. Then you won't be bothered. Like I'm also with him and. I'm like sure that's fine. But that doesn't mean that the position doesn't lead to it. But as I've said a couple of times already, I do think that if there's a case for compassion based antinatalism not to lead into pro mortalism denatale gives it its very best to render him right. So I think his responses are very good, but I am not. But.

**Amanda:** Alright, well Emma, this has been absolutely fascinating. What are you currently working on?

**Emma:** Well, I'm on maternity leave at the moment, so I'm not working as normal, but what I was working on before my son was born and what I'll go back to are the projects I mentioned earlier to do with delusional belief. And conspiratorial ideation. That's going to take the next couple of. Years, I think.

**Amanda:** Excellent. Do you believe that the subject of Antinatalism will continue to play a role in your future works and pro mortalism along with? But.

**Emma:** Yeah, I I'm certainly open to it. You know, every time I I write something on it, I think that'll be the last one. And then and then, you know, something comes in my inbox and I end up sort of going back to it. So I'm not sure I have much more to contribute, but I do find the topic like, incredibly engaging. I wouldn't rule out another swim in these. Waters so that.

**Amanda:** Excellent. That's excellent news. Where can people find you on the Internet and how can people best support you?

**Unknown Speaker:** Work.

**Emma:** I have a. Website and the Sullivan visit.com and that's got a list of my publications and current activities on it. A lot of my work is Open Access, which means you don't need to have an institutional affiliation to.

**Unknown Speaker:** Get a hold.

**Emma:** Of it. But if any of your listeners wanted to read something they couldn't get, they should just drop me an e-mail and I'll send you a copy.

**Amanda:** Excellent. Thank you so much and daily, how can people find you and do you have any videos or anything coming up soon that you'd like to talk about before we close up?

**Daily:** Sure. Thanks. Well, I have a channel, it's called daily negativity. I also have a channel called pessimism daily where I basically just share like pessimistic quotations. Do I have anything planned? I have ideas but no definite thing at the moment.

**Amanda:** OK, brilliant. Daily. Thank you so much for being my co-host today. It was wonderful to work with you again.

**Daily:** Yeah. Thank you.

**Amanda:** And Emma, thank you so much for being our guest today on the Exploring Antinatalism podcast.

**Emma:** Thanks so much for having me, both of you. It's been really fun to talk to you. Thank you.

**Amanda:** Thank you. The pleasure been all. To learn more about the work of Emma Sullivan, visit, please visit her website at [www.emmasullivanvisit.com](http://www.emmasullivanvisit.com) and follow her on Twitter. Also, make sure to read both of her papers discussed in this episode 2012 better no longer to be the harm of continued existence, and this year's better to return whence we came links below. And also don't forget to subscribe to daily negativity on YouTube as well as the second channel pessimism daily. You can find both links in the description. For listening to the Exploring Antinatalism podcast, this has been Amanda old Fansub. You can find me on the YouTube channel Antinatalism Wolf. Keep up with my daily antinatalist news updates at antenatal news on Twitter. Please follow the podcast on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. You can listen to the podcast on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Buzzsprout, Stitcher, SoundCloud, Amazon.com. RSS feed and so many other platforms. E-mail me at [exploringantinatalism@gmail.com](mailto:exploringantinatalism@gmail.com), the podcast website [www.exploringantinatalism.com](http://www.exploringantinatalism.com), was designed by the Amazing Visions. New orders. Please follow him at [www.billnewer.com](http://www.billnewer.com) and also follow him on Instagram logo art by the amazing life sucks. Subscribe to him on YouTube and check out his merch. At [www.etsy.com/shop/life\\_sucks](http://www.etsy.com/shop/life_sucks) publishing music by the wonderful. I doubt it. Subscribe to him on YouTube and check out our collaborative project along with our Friend Evil WV. The right to no longer exist, which includes the podcast the right to no longer exist, a right to die podcast all the best, and. Bye for now.

# Better No Longer to Be: The Harm of Continued Existence

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## Better No Longer to Be<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

David Benatar argues that coming into existence is always a harm, and that – for all of us unfortunate enough to have come into existence – it would be better had we never come to be. We contend that if one accepts Benatar’s arguments for the asymmetry between the presence and absence of pleasure and pain, and the poor quality of life,<sup>2</sup> one must also accept that suicide is preferable to continued existence, and that his view therefore implies *both* anti-natalism *and* pro-mortalism<sup>3</sup>. This conclusion has been argued for before by Elizabeth Harman – she takes it that because Benatar claims that our lives are ‘awful’, it follows that ‘we would be better off to kill ourselves’ (Harman 2009: 784). Though we agree with Harman’s conclusion, we think that her argument is too quick, and that Benatar’s arguments for non-pro-mortalism<sup>4</sup> deserve more serious consideration than she gives them. We make our case using a tripartite structure. We start by examining the *prima facie* case for the claim that pro-mortalism follows from Benatar’s position, presenting his response to the contrary, and furthering the dialectic

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<sup>2</sup> We will not discuss whether Benatar’s arguments for his anti-natalism work; for the purposes of this paper, we assume that they do. This is a point upon which the authors disagree.

<sup>3</sup> Where pro-mortalism is understood as the claim that suicide is always preferable to continued existence. Though we think that this strong claim really does follow from Benatar’s anti-natalism, towards the end of the paper we take a more charitable line and give back a bit of ground in allowing that perhaps only a weaker version of pro-mortalism follows from Benatar’s position, namely, that suicide is (*almost*) always preferable. Even if only the weaker claim follows, we take it that this is significant.

<sup>4</sup> We use the term ‘non-pro-mortalism’ to refer to Benatar’s claim that his position does not entail promortalism.

by showing that Benatar's position is not just that *coming into* existence is a harm, but that existence itself is a harm. We then look to Benatar's treatment of the Epicurean line, which is important for him as it undermines his anti-death argument for non-pro-mortalism. We demonstrate that he fails to address the concern that the Epicurean line raises, and that he cannot therefore use the harm of death as an argument for non-pro-mortalism. Finally, we turn to Benatar's pro-life argument for non-pro-mortalism, built upon his notion of interests, and argue that while the interest in continued existence may indeed have moral relevance, it is almost always irrational. Given that neither Benatar's anti-death nor pro-life arguments for non-pro-mortalism work, we conclude that pro-mortalism follows from his anti-natalism. As such, *if* it is better never to have been, *then* it is better no longer to be.

## 1. Anti-Natalism and Pro-Mortalism

### 1a: The Dialectic

Benatar's argument for anti-natalism is multi-faceted; first he argues that there is an asymmetry between the presence and absence of pleasure and pain, and second that the quality of lives of sentient beings is very poor. The *prima facie* case for Benatar's anti-natalism entailing pro-mortalism can be seen to be derived from the asymmetry, which briefly<sup>5</sup>, is as follows: the presence of pleasure and pain are good and bad respectively; and the absence of pain is good while, significantly, the absence of pleasure is not bad<sup>6</sup> (Benatar 2006: 30). We take it that the most objectionable claims here are the ones Benatar makes about the *absence* of pleasure and pain, but our concern in this paper is with what follows from his position *if* it works, so we will not spend any time discussing the plausibility of the asymmetry. If we accept the asymmetry, we see that not existing is better than existing: in World A where DB exists, DB experiences pleasure – that is good – and he experiences pain – that is bad; in World B where DB does not exist, DB<sup>7</sup> does not experience pain – that is good – and he does not experience pleasure – importantly, that is not bad. This is because the absence of pleasure is only bad if there is somebody who is deprived by that absence, and given that 'one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed', we do not have a case of deprivation for those who never exist (Benatar 2006: 1). As such, the absence of pleasure in these cases is not bad. The thought is then that World B is the better world, and any instance of procreation is an example of a World A situation. One is

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<sup>5</sup> We assume familiarity with Benatar's position and will make only the briefest of introductory remarks.

<sup>6</sup> See Benatar (2006: 39-40) for reasons why 'not bad' is used rather than 'not good' or 'neutral' to describe the absence of pleasure.

<sup>7</sup> There is of course no DB in World B; we write in this way only for ease of exposition.

therefore morally obliged to abstain from procreation. Very roughly, this is Benatar's asymmetry argument for anti-natalism.

If one accepts Benatar's asymmetry between pleasure and pain, then *prima facie* one ought to accept that suicide is always preferable to continued existence. The reason for this is straightforward: if Benatar is right that it is better never to have existed, then non-existence must still be preferable to existing even when the agent in question has been unfortunate enough to be brought into existence. When the agent ceases to exist the result is: an absence of pain, which is good, and an absence of pleasure, which is not bad. This is the basic case for the claim that Benatar's anti-natalism entails pro-mortalism.

Benatar, however, maintains that his anti-natalism does not entail pro-mortalism; he puts forward an explicit argument for this, which we will call the 'pro-life argument' and discuss in section three. The pro-life argument is a response to his observation that '[i]f our lives are quite as bad as I shall still suggest they are, and 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: 69). Benatar rejects the claim that his position entails pro-mortalism on the following basis: 'the existent can have interests in continuing to exist, and thus harms that make life not worth continuing must be sufficiently severe to defeat those interests' (Benatar 2006: 213). The moral agent who accepts Benatar's asymmetry and also desires to minimise harm is therefore not required to commit suicide, as the frustration of her interests is a harm in itself. As such it is also legitimate to claim that there is a difference between a life worth starting and a life worth continuing – the threshold is higher in the former case. This is because the non-existent do not and cannot have any interests in coming into existence. The avoidance of harm achieved by not bringing them into existence is therefore decisive (Benatar 2006: 213).

There is also an implicit argument for non-pro-mortalism, which has been suggested by Thaddeus Metz. He claims that there is a further reason for the incompatibility of Benatar's anti-natalism with pro-mortalism: part of the harm of existence is that its end – death – is itself a harm (Metz 2011: 236). Benatar claims that '[a]lthough it may be bad for anyone of us to die, it is still worse to die earlier than we need to' (Benatar 2006: 196), and that '[c]oming into existence is bad in part because it invariably leads to the harm of ceasing to exist' (Benatar 2006: 213). It might seem that the claims that those who exist have an interest in continuing to do so and that death is a harm are equivalent. This would be the case if the harm posed by death is instrumental, i.e. if death is a harm *because* it frustrates the agent's interest in continued existence. However, Benatar does not qualify his claim about premature death by stating that it is *usually* worse to die earlier than later; he states simply: 'I assume that death is bad for the one who dies' (Benatar 2006: 196). We think this justifies us in taking death to be *intrinsically* – not merely *instrumentally* – bad for Benatar. Benatar never makes the explicit claim that the harm of death is a reason for continued existence, but if death is intrinsically bad, then an 'anti-death argument' could be employed in a case

for non-pro-mortalism. Given that the agent already exists, the agent's death is – in this conception – a further harm. We shall discuss the anti-death argument in section two. Before this, though, we will show that Benatar's position is not just that *coming into existence* is a harm, but that *existence itself* is a harm.

## 1b: Furthering the Dialectic

The discerning reader may have noticed that the way we put the *prima facie* case for the claim that Benatar's view entailed pro-mortalism, left it open to an obvious objection. We suggested that if it is better never to have existed, then similarly non-existence must still be preferable even when the agent in question has come into existence. But if Benatar can claim that only *coming into existence* – and not *existence itself* – is a harm, then pro-mortalism will not follow from his position<sup>8</sup>.

Benatar's argument does not obviously require the claim that *existence is a harm*, only that *coming into existence* is a harm. Nonetheless, he goes to great lengths to show why the quality of life cannot be calculated by working out the difference between good and bad (Benatar 2006: 61-4), and why self-assessments of the quality of life are invariably over-optimistic (Benatar 2006: 64-9). Importantly for our purposes, he makes the following claims:

- (1) 'I deny that *any* lives are worth starting' (Benatar 2006: 121, Benatar's italics).
- (2) '[I]t would be better if humans (and other species) became extinct' (Benatar 2006: 194).
- (3) 'All things being equal, the longer sentient life continues, the more suffering there will be' (Benatar 2006: 209).
- (4) 'I have argued that our lives are very bad. There is no reason why we should not try to make them less so, on condition that we do not spread the suffering (including the *harm of existence*)' (Benatar 2006: 210, our italics).

We take it that these four claims are sufficient to show that existence itself is a harm: if it should not be begun under any circumstances, and its continuation increases suffering such that extinction is preferable, then it is reasonable to hold that existence and not just *coming into existence*, is harmful.

We propose an analogy with smoking cigarettes. Consider the situation of someone who:

- (1\*) denied that anyone should start smoking,
- (2\*) advocated the global cessation of smoking,
- (3\*) claimed that smoking was directly proportional to harm, and
- (4\*) held that it was one's duty<sup>9</sup> to prevent others from smoking.

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that Benatar can reject the claim that his anti-natalism entails pro-mortalism *only* by arguing that *coming into existence* is a harm, rather we just want to say that if he can argue this, the *prima facie* case for his position entailing pro-mortalism fails.

<sup>9</sup> Benatar does not use the word 'duty' in the corresponding quote (4). However, given that he is putting forward a normative anti-natalism, we take it that our use of it in the analogy is not contentious.

The primary reason for holding this view is that *smoking* is harmful, not just that *starting smoking* is harmful. Starting smoking is harmful because smoking itself is harmful. In the same way, the primary reason for holding Benatar's anti-natalist view is that *existence* is harmful, not merely that *coming into existence* is harmful. We shall therefore state Benatar's proposal as follows: (*coming into*) existence is always a harm.

It might be that Benatar could reject this analogy in the following way: even if one accepts the correlation between the two sets of statements above, if death itself is a harm, then it is not the case that ceasing to exist is analogous to stopping smoking. If it is true that death is harmful, but stopping smoking reduces harm, we have a disanalogy. We shall, however, show in part two that Benatar fails to prove that death is a harm, and that this is therefore not a premise upon which he can rely to sustain his non-pro-mortalism. So, we take it that coming into existence and existing are both harmful. Given this, anti-natalism and pro-mortalism follow: I can prevent harm by stopping someone coming into existence if I am an anti-natalist; I can reduce harm by terminating my own existence if I am a pro-mortalist.

## 2. The Anti-Death Argument

As outlined in the previous section, Benatar's case for non-pro-mortalism relies on his pro-life argument from interests and a more implicit anti-death argument based on the harm of death. This part will look to the Epicurean line as a way of undermining the anti-death argument. It is important for Benatar that the Epicurean line is mistaken, for if one accepts it then Benatar's anti-death argument for anti-natalism *not* entailing pro-mortalism is not going to hold. The burden of showing the error of the Epicurean line really is therefore one Benatar bears. Indeed, he recognises this problem and spends some time addressing it. As we have seen, the anti-death argument for non-pro-mortalism is that part of the harm of existence comes from the fact that that existence will end. Coming into existence is a harm in part because it 'invariably leads to the harm of ceasing to exist' (Benatar 2006: 213). So it might look like if one accepts that death is a harm, then one cannot get pro-mortalism from Benatar's anti-natalism.

Of course, the Epicurean would not accept the anti-death argument. Epicurus argued that death is not a harm, as it is not something which can be experienced. As he put it:

[W]hen we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer (Epicurus 2009: 406).

If one accepts the Epicurean line, we learn that – contra Benatar – death is not a harm. If death does not harm the one who dies, but does bring about an absence of pain, then one should adopt pro-mortalism (if Benatar's asymmetry holds<sup>10</sup>).

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<sup>10</sup> Further, if the claims Benatar makes about the poor quality of our lives are also right, we have a stronger case for pro-mortalism: if our lives are terrible *and* non-existence is better than existence *and*



Clearly Benatar cannot accept this and he makes three points against the Epicurean line.

We should note though that at one point Benatar seems less worried by the Epicurean position than he ought to be. He says '[t]hose who think that death does not harm the person who dies may simply leave death off my list of harms' (Benatar 2006: 29, fn. 20). But of course if one does leave death off the list, Benatar becomes entirely reliant on his pro-life argument for non-pro-mortalism – his argument from interests – making his position more vulnerable. So it really is important for Benatar to argue for the claim that death is a harm; in what follows we suggest that he is unsuccessful in this.

The first point Benatar makes against the Epicurean line is that there are a number of ingrained views which – if we accept the Epicurean line – would have to be given up. These include the view that a murder victim is harmed by being murdered, that we ought to respect the wishes of the dead, and that a longer life is better than a shorter one *ceteris paribus* (Benatar 2006: 214). If one thinks that death is not a harm, one should reject these three views, which is counterintuitive.

At this point we should note what Benatar says about the counter-intuitiveness of his position. In response to any potential objectors who claim that Benatar's conclusions are too counter-intuitive to accept or even take seriously, Benatar has this to say:

[I]t is noteworthy that a view's counter-intuitiveness cannot by itself constitute a decisive consideration against it. This is because intuitions are often profoundly unreliable – a product of mere prejudice (Benatar 2006: 203).

Returning to the point at hand: Benatar quite rightly notes that an appeal to the counter-intuitiveness of the Epicurean line is not going to be sufficient to 'dismiss [it] out of hand' (Benatar 2006: 215); it is particularly important to Benatar that the counter-intuitiveness of an argument is of no serious consequence to that argument's soundness given the conclusions he wants his readers to swallow. However, Benatar maintains that the counter-intuitiveness of his anti-natalism and the counter-intuitiveness of the Epicurean line differ in that the latter is 'far more radically counter-intuitive' than the former (Benatar 2006: 214). He suspects that there are more people who balk at the claim that murder does not harm the victim than the claim that coming into existence is a harm; and that many people accept the latter whilst there are very few who accept the former.

We think that Benatar is probably correct in his suspicions, but this is nonetheless a strange argument. We already know that pointing to the counter-intuitiveness of an argument is not on its own decisive; we have learnt this from Benatar's discussion in 'Countering the Counter-Intuitiveness Objection' (2006: 202-208). It is odd then that

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death is not a harm, suicide looks preferable to continued existence. It is the last of these three claims which Benatar resists which we seek to support in this section.

he goes on to claim that the Epicurean conclusion is *more* counter-intuitive than his own. It is worth quoting Benatar from this section:

[W]hen one has a powerful argument, based on highly plausible premises, for a conclusion that if acted upon would reduce suffering without depriving the suffering person of anything, but which is rejected merely because of psychological features that compromise our judgement, then the counter-intuitiveness of that conclusion should not count against it (Benatar 2006: 207).

It strikes us that the Epicurean line fits the above bill<sup>11</sup>. Its premises are plausible, acting on it neither necessarily reduces nor increases suffering<sup>12</sup>, and it looks as though Benatar rejects it ‘because of psychological features that compromise our judgement’ (Benatar 2006: 207). These psychological features are also displayed by the judgements we make which conflict with the Epicurean position. Indeed, as Benatar points out, ‘[t]he view that death is a harm to the one who dies is not an unreasonable view [...] It is the common sense view and underlies many important judgements we make’ (Benatar 2006: 196). An example of one such judgement is that murder is a harm, but the Epicurean is of course committed to denying this. Further, we take it that if we can explain *why* it is that people hold views inconsistent with the Epicurean line, then all the better for the latter. With regard to the view that death is a harm, David Suits has done just that:

Our common experience is of course our usual guide, and our common experience tells us that injuries may be mild or severe; they can be graded according to how much damage or pain they cause the victim, and how long it takes to recover. The more severe the injury, the greater the pain, and the longer it will take to recover. Some injuries, such as the loss of an eye or a limb, are so severe that part of the organism cannot recover, and one will remain forevermore in a damaged condition, which sometimes includes unending pain. It is easy to extend such observations to include death, which is then thought of as the most severe injury because the entire organism permanently fails and no recovery at all is possible. On this psychological slippery slope, if mild damage is a mild harm, then death

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<sup>11</sup> One might make a case for its not doing so. Perhaps if we acted on Epicurean conclusions it would not be the case that we would ‘reduce suffering without depriving the suffering person of anything’, particularly if one thinks that the person who dies suffers a deprivation of some sort. However, this concern would not move the Epicurean because he denies that one is harmed or deprived by death.

<sup>12</sup> One might think that acting on the Epicurean position by killing oneself would reduce suffering (that of the person who dies). However, as Benatar points out, if we follow the Epicurean reasoning, we derive the claim that death is not able to spare anybody from – or deprive anybody of – anything (Benatar 2006: 217). There might be room for claiming that acting on the Epicurean position reduces suffering *in the world* if not for the person who kills himself, but we leave this aside.

must be the greatest of harms. *Our strong pre-theoretic conviction that death is a harm is a product of our usual way of thinking of things* (Suits 2001: 81-2, our italics).

This observation can also be used to explain why many people think that murder harms the victim: if death harms the victim, then murder – which brings that state about – does so too. To sum up our discussion of Benatar’s first point about the Epicurean line: Benatar claimed in a previous section that a view’s being counter-intuitive cannot, on its own, count against it (Benatar 2006: 207). In his discussion of the Epicurean position he claims that it is *more* counter-intuitive than his own and is at odds with a number of other views that many people have (Benatar 2006: 214). We suggested that this was an odd move to make given his preceding discussion and further offered a reason, drawing on Suits, for why people are affected by psychological factors that arguably compromise their judgment with regard to whether murder harms the victim – one of the views Benatar offered as in tension with the Epicurean line. Given this, although we read Benatar charitably enough to not construe him as using the counter-intuitiveness of the Epicurean position as a decisive argument against it, we take it that it does not help whatsoever in countering the Epicurean line.

The second point that Benatar makes in his discussion of the Epicurean line is that there is another distinction which can be drawn between it and his own view: ‘a precautionary principle applies asymmetrically to the two views’ (Benatar 2006: 214). This is to say that *if* the two positions are wrong, the consequences of acting on them differ significantly. If the Epicurean line is wrong in its claim that death is not a harm and people act on that claim by killing themselves or others, those who were killed would be seriously harmed. If Benatar is wrong in his claim that coming into existence is a harm and people act on it by not procreating, however, nobody is harmed because the non-existent do not suffer.

We have two things to say about Benatar’s discussion here. Firstly, Benatar goes from assuming for sake of argument that his view is mistaken and draws conclusions from this by implicitly appealing to a major tenet of it. He asks us to assume that his position is wrong; that the claim that coming into existence is a harm is mistaken. However, Benatar establishes that claim from his four premises which make up his asymmetry. As such, he cannot conclude in his discussion on precaution that *if* his view is mistaken *then* nobody is harmed, because this assumes premise four of his asymmetry: ‘the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation’ (Benatar 2006: 30). Now it would not be too controversial to take this premise to be false – a utilitarian of a particular stripe may, for example, claim that abstaining from procreation really is a bad thing because the absence of the unborn child’s pleasure is a bad thing, even though of course, that child has not been deprived<sup>13</sup>. So if premise four is incorrect – and it is conceivable that it might be – then

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<sup>13</sup> Even if one accepted premise four, one might still claim that acting on Benatar’s position does cause harm because somebody is in fact deprived by not being born. Saul Smilansky takes this line; he

it would not be true that refraining from procreating is not bad, something bad (not ‘not bad’) has been done by acting on Benatar’s position. And if we are to assume that his position is mistaken, we are presumably entitled to take any one of his premises to be mistaken too. It is thus inappropriate for Benatar to make an implicit appeal to the truth of one of his premises in his discussion of the consequences of acting on his position if it is mistaken<sup>14</sup>.

Our second point is simply that, just as with the discussion on counter-intuitiveness, we fail to see the relevance. Benatar’s point here against the Epicurean line addresses the consequences of acting on the view. Given that considerations of this sort are not epistemic in kind – they are not considerations regarding the truth of the view in question – we take it they are not relevant to Benatar’s purposes; a philosophical enquiry which concerns itself with a view’s truth. If Benatar is not offering these discussions as arguments against the *truth* of the Epicurean line (and he surely cannot be), then one might think that his inclusion of them just unfairly stacks the deck against the Epicurean, but does not do so with any substance.

The third point Benatar makes about the Epicurean line is that one cannot derive pro-mortalism from his asymmetry by supplementing it with the Epicurean line. This is because if death does not harm the one who dies, it cannot be good for them either. If we follow the Epicurean reasoning through from the claim that death is not a harm, we also derive the claims that death is not a benefit, and further that death is not able to spare anybody from – or deprive anybody of – anything (Benatar 2006: 217). Now it is not clear what work Benatar takes these claims to be doing, but it is worth trying to work this out as charitably as possible. We will not take issue with Benatar’s suggestion that the above claims follow from the Epicurean position; it might be that there is some discussion to be had on whether or not they do, but it is not a discussion in which we will partake. Rather, for our purposes, we need to identify why Benatar thinks that it matters that these claims follow from the Epicurean line. Presumably –

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claims that he would feel regret for the unborn child and takes it that this potential child has lost out on a good life, and it thus might be that he really has been deprived (Smilansky, personal correspondence). If the absence of pleasure is bad when there is somebody for whom that absence is a deprivation, not procreating does – contra Benatar – look like a harmful act, and thus the precautionary principle does not apply. Of course, taking Smilansky’s line may well be metaphysically costly, we only mention it to show that Benatar’s claims about the precautionary principle are on shaky ground even if we allow him that ‘the absence of pain is not bad unless there is somebody for whom that absence is a deprivation’ (Benatar 2006: 30).

<sup>14</sup> One might think that we have been uncharitable to Benatar here; could Benatar not assume that it is only his *conclusion*, namely that pro-creation is wrong, is mistaken? Need he be willing to drop all of the premises in his asymmetry? We take it that this is good point to raise and certainly the way that Benatar *should* go in response to this worry. However, it should be noted that in discussing this point Benatar uses the word ‘view’, not *conclusion*, which presumably is used as an umbrella term for the asymmetry and his views on the quality of human life. As such we take it that it is legitimate to expect him to be willing to drop the tenets of his view when he appeals to the possibility that his ‘*view* is mistaken’ (Benatar 2006: 215, our italics). We thank Thaddeus Metz for bringing our attention to this.

and we have to presume, because Benatar does not explain – the thought is this: one cannot get pro-mortalism from Benatar’s anti-natalism coupled with an Epicurean view of death, because, on the basis of the latter we are to believe that death does not benefit or spare the one who dies. To motivate this point consider John: John is about to be tortured in the most awful of ways. One might think that John’s death (before the torture) would prevent this awful fate from befalling him. But of course, the Epicurean (at least on Benatar’s reading) is committed to saying of this case that given that death does not deprive us of good things, it does not prevent us from suffering awful things either. This might strike some people as odd. So if one is convinced by Benatar’s anti-natalism and thinks that it would have been better never to have been *and* they take it that death is not a harm, it does not follow that they should commit suicide because – staying with the Epicurean reasoning – they will not be benefited or spared of anything by doing so.

If this is what Benatar is alluding to here, we – once again – think that he has failed to undermine the Epicurean line. In fact, this is another very odd position to take given that, as Benatarian anti-natalists, we are motivated by the asymmetry, the third premise of which is: ‘the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone’ (Benatar 2006: 30). And because we take this to be the case it is not benefit with which we are concerned, but the reduction of pain. Our point (and indeed Benatar’s point for his anti-natalism) is that *nobody needs to be spared* for suicide to be preferable. As Benatar points out, there is nobody ‘suspended in the metaphysical void’ (Benatar 2006: 129) who is spared by not being brought into existence, but that is not to say that we should not refrain from procreation. Equally, even if one is not spared by committing suicide, that is not to say that one should not do so; once again: ‘the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone’ (Benatar 2006: 30).

We have shown that Benatar has not been successful in his brief attempt at countering the Epicurean position. He needs to do so because his anti-death argument for non-pro-mortalism – which relies on the claim that death is a harm – will not work against an Epicurean. If one takes an Epicurean line, coupled with Benatar’s anti-natalism, one might take oneself to have arrived at pro-mortalism. However, the Epicurean line only undermines the anti-death argument for non-pro-mortalism<sup>15</sup>, and

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<sup>15</sup> One might think the Epicurean could also say something with regard to the pro-life argument. Benatar claims that his argument for anti-natalism does not commit him to pro-mortalism because the existent have interests in continuing to exist, and life need be sufficiently severe to defeat those interests for suicide to become the preferable option. It looks like there is an implicit appeal here to the fourth premise of his asymmetry, ‘the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation’ (Benatar 2006: 30). If one has interests in continuing to exist, one’s death would be a bad thing in that it would deprive one of future pleasures and satisfaction of interests. However, if one accepts the Epicurean line, then it seems that one’s interests do not come into play precisely because the motivation behind premise four is rejected (i.e. an Epicurean would deny that a dead person can be deprived). We take it though that a stronger case can be made against Benatar’s pro-life argument, and we will do so in the third section.

although Benatar hints at this argument, he does not fully articulate it. We turn now to his explicit argument against the claim that his anti-natalism entails pro-mortalism.

### 3. The Pro-Life Argument

Benatar maintains that judgements concerning future-life cases (judgements about starting lives) are made at a different level from judgements we make about present life cases (judgements about continuing lives). He not only takes it that we *do* make judgements in this way, but also thinks that we *should* (Benatar 2006: 121). This is because there is a difference in the quality threshold between those lives worth starting and those worth continuing; the former is (and should be) set higher than the latter. The reason for this is interests: those in existence can (and usually do) have interests in their continued existence and those interests must be defeated for us to claim that the life is not worth continuing (Benatar 2006: 213).

We should note that Benatar is not opposed to suicide; in fact he states that his view does not preclude ‘the possibility that suicide may more often be rational and may even be more rational than continuing to exist’ (Benatar 2006: 219). This claim comes from the fact that what can keep people alive is an ‘an irrational love for life’, even when that life has become sufficiently bad such that ‘ceasing to exist would be better’ (Benatar 2006: 219).

We believe that Benatar’s notion of interests is questionable, juxtaposed as it is against his categorical claim that (coming into) existence is not only always a harm, but a *serious* harm (Benatar 2006: 93). He uses the example of someone who is severely disabled. Many people who agree that aborting a severely impaired foetus (for example, one with no legs) would be right, would not themselves commit suicide were they to lose their own legs in an accident at the age of thirty (Benatar 2006: 25). Once someone exists in the morally relevant sense, which Benatar believes occurs with the development of consciousness in foetuses at around twenty-eight to thirty weeks of age, then that person begins to have morally relevant interests (Benatar 2006: 148). Benatar holds that existence in the morally relevant sense is (usually) accompanied by a very strong interest in continued existence (Benatar 2006: 25). This interest in continued existence is sufficient such that even the moral agent who wishes to reduce harm is not required to commit suicide.

There are at least two problems with interests and the work required of them in Benatar’s theory, one minor and one serious. First, Benatar does not provide much detail. Interests become morally relevant with the development of consciousness: at about twenty-eight weeks; from here conscious interests ‘emerge gradually’ (Benatar 2006: 148). Benatar does spend some time looking at ‘non-negligible’ (Benatar 2006: 147) empirical evidence for his claims, but such evidence does not look sufficient for them. However, we take it that this is a minor issue, which Benatar is no doubt aware of, and one which can be resolved with further empirical work.

The main problem with interests is revealed in the discussion on the rationality of suicide, it often being ‘an irrational love for life’ that keeps many people alive (Benatar 2006: 219). Benatar provides a detailed analysis showing why our self-assessments of our quality of life are invariably optimistic, a phenomenon he refers to as Pollyannaism.<sup>16</sup> Pollyannaism causes most people – no matter what their circumstances – to over-value their quality of life, and the quality of life of the children they may choose to bring into existence. If Pollyannaism is indeed rife amongst human beings, then it seems that many interests in continued existence over suicide lack a rational basis.

We’ll adapt our smoking analogy, comparing our reading of Benatar’s book with someone of an earlier generation discovering that smoking is harmful. We were already in existence when we read Benatar’s book (our births being prior to publication), but having read it we are now convinced that the rest of our lives are going to be harmful. We are convinced by his argument – in particular the premise that ‘the absence of pain is good even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone’ (Benatar 2006: 30) – but desire to continue existing. Benatar’s position is that because we are morally relevant beings with interests, our desire is not immoral, only (at least sometimes) irrational. Our position finds an exact parallel in the smoker of thirty years who discovers that her habit is harmful. An adult’s decision to start or stop smoking is not usually considered a moral one. Most people do not find smoking a morally repugnant habit; the basis for disapproval is rationality: we disapprove of smoking because science has shown that the harms of smoking far outweigh the benefits. Even though we are operating in the sphere of the rational rather than the moral, however, we still maintain that our smoker *should* stop. We accept that she is unlikely to stop, and that this decision is not a moral decision (unless she has dependents, in which case we might think other wise), but the rationality of stopping smoking nonetheless carries normative valence. While it is not immoral to continue smoking, it is irrational, and we censure the decision on that basis. As in the case of continued existence, our censure comes from our concern for the individual: we do not want the smoker to continue to smoke because of the harm she is doing to herself.

Benatar’s anti-natalism is normative; he is stating that it is wrong for all human beings to procreate, as (coming into) existence is always a serious harm. He is prepared to make the claim with respect to anti-natalism but not pro-mortalism, because my own moral relevance means that my interest in increasing harm by continuing to exist is not immoral. It is still *irrational*, however. If (coming into) existence is always a serious harm, then continued existence is also always a serious harm<sup>17</sup>. Benatar may have demonstrated that choosing to continue to harm oneself in this fashion is not immoral, but he is – given his views on Pollyannaism – bound to the view that the

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<sup>16</sup> Benatar (2006: 64) employs the term coined by Margaret Matlin and David Stang (1978).

<sup>17</sup> It might be the case that a weaker version of pro-mortalism follows from Benatar’s position, one which has it that it is only when life becomes sufficiently awful that suicide is preferable to continued existence. We discuss this possibility in the postscript to the paper.

choice to continue to exist is always irrational<sup>18</sup>. In consequence, therefore: *it is always rational to commit suicide*.<sup>19</sup>

Benatar's commitment to the view that despite the moral relevance of interests, (coming into) existence is always a harm is firm:

On the assumption that this interest [in continued existence] is not always defeated by the poor quality of life, death is not always a benefit. But is this assumption really reasonable, given how serious a harm I have said it is to come into existence? I think that it is, but saying that it is a reasonable assumption is not to make a very strong claim. It is to say only that the quality of life is not always so poor that ceasing to exist is a benefit. It leaves wide open the question of how often it is not so poor (Benatar 2006: 218).

Even if we allow that Benatar agrees to exceptions, his position at the very least entails that it is usually rational to commit suicide. His reluctance to admit of counterexamples to the harm of existence is obvious, however, and the final sentence above implies that such exceptions are rare indeed. Continued existence is thus for the most part – if not always – a serious harm. We shall therefore summarise Benatar's position as: *it is (mostly) rational to commit suicide*. The corollary of his reasonable assumption that death is not always a benefit is the reasonable assumption that death is mostly a benefit. This, *pace* Benatar, *is* a very strong claim. If one accepts his position, then suicide is rational for most of the 6.94 billion human beings currently in existence. Whatever numerical value one assigns to 'most', the consequence is that billions of people are better off dead, and that it would be rational for them to commit suicide. We are convinced Benatar is well aware of this. That he does not want to advocate the rationality of mass suicide is perhaps admirable, but it is a consequence of his anti-natalism which cannot be denied.

Our view is that even in our charitable interpretation, Benatar's anti-natalism *does* commit him to pro-mortalism, and that his pro-life argument for pro-mortalism thus fails. In the smoking analogy, the recommendation that the smoker stop smoking is normative despite the appeal to rationality rather than morality. There is a simple reason for this, the historical coupling of morality and reason. The first attempt to prise them apart was not until the eighteenth century, when the Third Earl of Shaftesbury advanced his sentimentalist view of virtue as a feeling<sup>20</sup>. Shaftesbury's idea was

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<sup>18</sup> It might even be that Benatar is aware of this, at one point he claims that 'the desire to continue living may or may not be irrational, but even if it is, this is the kind of irrationality, unlike a preference for having come into existence, that should be decisive' (Benatar 2006: 219).

<sup>19</sup> As we are not disputing the claim that the choice to continue existing is not immoral, we have omitted a discussion of the harm one's own suicide may cause others. Benatar rightly notes that the effect on family and friends is 'an important obstacle in the way of suicide' (Benatar 2006: 220).

<sup>20</sup> Shaftesbury's influential work on ethics is notoriously unsystematic. His philosophy was published in a single volume, entitled *Charactersticks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* in 1711 (two years before his death).



developed by Hume, who not only separated morality and rationality, but argued for a reversal of the accepted principle that desire should serve reason. All three branches of normative ethics are based on reason, from Aristotle's virtues to Kant's categorical imperative, and Mill's maximisation of utility. Emotivists may challenge the connection, but every cognitivist theory has sought vindication in the rational basis of morality. As rational beings, people usually believe that they *ought* to act in a rational manner, even if their desires lead them astray. The normativity associated with the rational may have a lower cogency than that associated with the moral<sup>21</sup>, but it nonetheless bears authority. We can grant that Benatar is right to state that continued existence is not immoral, but he offers a weaker version of pro-mortalism in its stead. There are two consequences of Benatar's asymmetry, therefore, and both should have been clearly stated:

- (1) Anti-natalism: *it is (always) wrong to procreate.*
- (2) Pro-mortalism: *it is (mostly) rational to commit suicide.*

## 4. Conclusion

To conclude: we first showed that Benatar's views on *coming into* existence entail that *existence* itself is harmful. We then discussed the Epicurean line, which threatens to undermine Benatar's anti-death argument for non-pro-mortalism: if existence is a harm and death is not, then pro-mortalism seems to follow. We discussed Benatar's three points against the Epicurean line and argued that none of them was successful, and that Benatar could not therefore base an argument for non-pro-mortalism on the claim that death is a harm. We then moved on to Benatar's pro-life argument for non-pro-mortalism, showing that while interests are sufficient to show that continued existence is not immoral, they are insufficient to show that it is not irrational, and that Benatar cannot therefore maintain that continued existence is rational as this is in tension with his claim that (coming into) existence is harmful. Our conclusion is therefore that Benatar's position entails pro-mortalism, where pro-mortalism is understood as the view that it is (mostly) rational to commit suicide. Thus: *if it is better never to have been, then it is better no longer to be.*

## Post Script

After a presentation<sup>22</sup> of this paper, a distinction was raised between two kinds of pro-mortalism; one which would recommend committing suicide *now* and another that would recommend doing so *later* (when one's life became sufficiently bad). We wanted

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<sup>21</sup> The historical attempts to base ethics on rationality suggest otherwise, however.

<sup>22</sup> Workshop on Contemporary Anti-Natalism. University of Johannesburg, 23rd-24th November 2011.

to claim that Benatar's anti-natalism commits him to the first of these versions of pro-mortalism, but one might think that his position only commits him to the second. Of course, this is still a very bold claim and something that does not appear in Benatar's writings; so even if Benatar concedes only the second version of pro-mortalism, this is significant. However, we close by explaining why we remain convinced that Benatar's anti-natalism entails the first, stronger version of pro-mortalism, and that – as sections two and three sought to show – his anti-death and pro-life arguments to the contrary do not work.

There is some evidence in Benatar's writings that he might be willing to concede that his anti-natalism entails the second version of pro-mortalism. When discussing the Epicurean position, Benatar looks at the deprivation account of why death is bad for the one who dies. According to this account, death is bad for the one who dies because it 'deprives that person of future life and the positive features thereof'. However, as Benatar notes, this account is not committed to the claim that death is *always* bad. Rather, 'where the further life of which somebody is deprived is of a sufficiently poor quality, death is not bad for that person. Instead, it is good' (Benatar 2006: 216). Benatar's view on death is that it is 'sometimes a harm and sometimes a benefit' (Benatar 2006: 219), which supports his claim that '[l]ife can be so bad that it is better to die' (Benatar 2006: 218). As we have seen, Benatar thinks that it is often 'an irrational love for life' which can keep people alive, even when life has become sufficiently bad such that 'ceasing to exist would be better' (Benatar 2006: 219). All of this can be read as supporting a commitment to the weaker version of pro-mortalism outlined above.

However, to us, this looks like a weighing procedure, which Benatar explicitly warns against. He considers an opponent who might claim that a life's quality can be assessed 'by subtracting the disvalue of life's negative features from the value of its positive features' (Benatar 2006: 61). In response, Benatar claims that the quality of life *cannot* be calculated by working out the difference between good and bad (Benatar 2006: 61-4).

We learn from the asymmetry that any presence of pain is a bad thing and any absence of pain is a good thing. Benatar accepts the counterintuitive result one gets if they take this to its logical conclusion: even if a life had a tiny amount of pain – a pin prick at birth – it would still be better for that life not to have begun (Benatar 2006: 49). Now if this is the case, the first version of pro-mortalism according to which it is preferable to kill oneself *now* looks to follow. It may well be the case that our lives are not too bad now (relative to the lives of others, or our own lives in the future), and so perhaps we should wait until our quality of life becomes sufficiently terrible before we commit suicide. But, as Benatar points out, our daily lives are characterised by unpleasant states; 'hunger, thirst, bowel and bladder distension (as these organs become filled), tiredness, stress, thermal discomfort and itch' (Benatar 2006: 71). And we learn from Benatar's asymmetry that the absence of even these minor discomforts is a good thing, whereas the absence of the pleasures we will thus not experience is a

not bad thing<sup>23</sup>. Also, Benatar claims that '[a]ll things being equal, the longer sentient life continues, the more suffering there will be' (Benatar 2006: 209). We take Benatar's claim here to be about sentient life on a larger scale, rather than as applied to any particular life, but it looks like it applies here too. It is quite clear that the longer a person lives, the more suffering there will be. One can remove that suffering (the absence of which is good) by killing oneself. Not at some unspecified later date when such suffering becomes more intense, but now. Thus we have the first stronger version of pro-mortalism.

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<sup>23</sup> Unless you thought that the person who dies is deprived by the pleasures that they would have experienced had they continued to live. However, this is a claim that would not be accepted by the Epicurean position and thus shows further why Benatar needs to say something in response to it.

# Misconceived: Why These Further Criticisms of Anti-natalism Fail

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I am grateful to Oliver Hallich and Michael Hauskeller for proposing this special issue of *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, and for inviting me to write a response to the seven contributions.<sup>1</sup> I am pleased to have been given the opportunity to respond to a new round of criticisms of my anti-natalist views.

Some of the criticisms come from philosophers to whose earlier critiques I have previously replied.<sup>2</sup> In the case of other contributors, this is my first response to their criticisms. Some authors in both these categories have offered, in their contributions to this volume, criticisms of my broader existential views, and most especially those about life's meaning (or lack thereof). Where they do so, they connect this to criticisms of my anti-natalist views.

Each of the contributors to whom I am responding were allocated about eight thousand words. Although the editors graciously granted me more than eight thousand words to respond to all seven contributions, it is nonetheless the case that my responses had to be limited by space constraints. Therefore, I had to respond selectively to each author. I could not reply to every point each author made. My silence on some objections should thus not be construed as agreement. However, this is not to deny that I found some points of agreement. I have referred to some of those. However, given the choice between mentioning more of those and responding to further points of disagreement, I have tended towards the latter.

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<sup>1</sup> I have not had sight of the guest editors' introduction, which explains why I am not responding to any-thing they might say there.

<sup>2</sup> Thaddeus Metz and Ema Sullivan-Bissett in David Benatar, "Every Conceivable Harm: A Further Defence of Anti-Natalism", *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31/1 (2012): 128–164; Christine Overall in David Benatar, "Not 'Not Better Never to Have Been': A reply to Christine Overall", *Philosophia* 47/2 (2019): 353–367; and Thaddeus Metz again in David Benatar, Thaddeus Metz, Jason Werbeloff and Mark Oppenheimer, *Conversations about the Meaning of Life*, Johannesburg: Obsidian Worlds Publishing 2021.

While most of the papers seem to have been written in a neutral academic tone, some of them contain what seems like a thinly veiled anger, aggression, and mocking.<sup>3</sup> I understand those impulses in response to views that some people find deeply threatening. However, they are neither productive nor warranted, and I have sought to avoid responding in kind. I hope that I have been successful.

## 1. Unqualifying the Defence: A Response to Oliver Hallich

Oliver Hallich offers a qualified defence of my thesis that there is an asymmetry between the good and bad things in life. His defence is qualified, he says, because he defends it only after criticising it. In my reply, I shall comment only on his criticisms and not on his defence.

He offers two criticisms – each, he says, is based on different readings of what role I think that the explanatory role of the asymmetry thesis plays. On the first reading, the thesis stands independently of its explanatory value, even though its explanatory value provides further support for it. On the second reading, the explanatory power constitutes the full grounds for accepting the asymmetry thesis.

### An Irrelevant Distinction:

In his first criticism, Professor Hallich argues that “we *can* harm potential persons by not bringing them into existence”. He does this by focusing on the fourth claim of my asymmetry:

(4) The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.

He says that the argument for “the claim that the absence of pleasure is not bad for potential people can be reconstructed as follows”, where (4) is the first premise (P1):

(P1) The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom the absence of pleasure is a deprivation.

(P2) Potential persons cannot be deprived of the pleasures of life.

(C) Therefore, the absence of pleasures is not bad for potential persons.

He then distinguishes two senses of “deprive”. The first of these, he says “presupposes possession”, whereas the second does not. The second sense, he says further, amounts to “taking a good away from someone as well as the idea of withholding it from him.” The explanation of this distinction is not entirely clear, but it seems to amount to this:

Deprive<sub>1</sub> = Withdraw

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the latter comments, I acknowledge, could be interpreted instead as humorous. It is sometimes hard to tell the difference in written rather than oral renditions, but I’m certainly not averse to humour.

Deprive<sub>2</sub> = Withdraw or withhold

Professor Hallich then says that if we stipulate D eprive<sub>1</sub> then P1 is false, and P2 is true:

(P1) The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom the absence of pleasure is a *withdrawal*.

P1 is false, he says, because somebody could be harmed through a withholding (even if there is no withdrawing).

(P2) Potential persons cannot have the pleasures of life *withdrawn*.

P2 is true because potential persons cannot have pleasures that are then withdrawn.

Professor Hallich says that if, by contrast, we stipulate D eprive<sub>2</sub>, then P1 is true and P2 is false:

(P1) The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom the absence of pleasure is either *withdrawn or withheld*.

P1 is now true, he says.

(P2) Potential persons cannot have the pleasures of life (*withdrawn or withheld*).

This is false, Professor Hallich says, because the pleasures can be withheld (even though they cannot be withdrawn). In other words, the disjunction is true because one of the disjuncts is true.

The problem with this argument is that it rests on a misunderstanding of what I am saying.

When I say that:

(4) The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom the absence of pleasure is a deprivation.

I mean:

(4) The absence of pleasure (*whether through withdrawal or withholding*) is not bad unless there is somebody for whom the absence of pleasure is a deprivation.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the distinction between Deprive<sub>1</sub> (withdrawal) and Deprive<sub>2</sub> (withdrawal or withholding) makes no difference to my claim. This is because the suppressed premise in my argument is not P2 in Professor Hallich's reconstruction, but is instead better captured in this way:

P2\*: If there is no person then there is nobody who can be deprived (either through withdrawal or withholding).

With this correction, my argument can be read as follows:

(P1) The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom the absence of pleasure is a deprivation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I mean parallel things in claims (1) to (3):

(1) the presence of pain (whether imposed or not withdrawn) is bad

(2) the presence of pleasure (whether provided or not withdrawn) is good.

(3) the absence of pain (whether withdrawn or withheld) is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone.

<sup>5</sup> To clarify, this is deprivation in either of the senses.

(P2\*) If there is no person then there is nobody who can be deprived (either through withdrawal or withholding).

(C) Therefore, the absence of pleasures is not bad for potential persons. Both P1 and P2\* are true, and immune to Professor Hallich's criticism.

## The best explanation:

Professor Hallich says that his second criticism is directed at a different reading of my argument, according to which the explanatory power of the asymmetry thesis constitutes the full grounds for accepting it. To clarify, I should say that this is not my view. I take the asymmetry thesis to be obvious (to me, at least). I think that other people would do so too if they did not see its implications for procreation. The asymmetry thesis's power to explain four other widely held asymmetries constitutes further support for it. Yet further support is to be drawn from the key that the asymmetry thesis provides to solving notoriously intractable problems in population ethics.<sup>6</sup>

Although Professor Hallich's second criticism is aimed at a view that I do not hold, it is possible to see his argument as a critique of what I *do* think – namely that the explanatory power of the asymmetry thesis provides *additional* support for it. However, the problem with this criticism is that it is significantly underdeveloped.

He notes, as he recognizes I did, that there are some people who reject one of the four asymmetries that I said are explained by the asymmetry thesis. This other asymmetry is the view that while there is a duty to avoid creating suffering people there is no duty to create “happy” people. Some utilitarians reject this view, at least in some circumstances. However, Professor Hallich devotes most of his attention to responding to *some* of my arguments against Richard Hare's Golden Rule argument against abortion (and by extension in support of a duty to procreate).

Space constraints prevent me from replying to Professor Hallich's defence of Professor Hare, and thus I shall offer a more general response to Professor Hallich's argumentative strategy. If one wants to argue that the asymmetry thesis does not draw support from providing the best explanation for the other asymmetries, and one wants to argue that this is because the other asymmetries can be rejected, then one has a lot of argumentative work to do.

I realise that Professor Hallich had space constraints of his own, but the fact remains that it is not sufficient to say that some people reject those other asymmetries. One would need to demonstrate that *all* four of those asymmetries *should* be rejected, and one would need to do so in a way that is consistent.

Moreover, one would (actually) have to accept the implications of rejecting those views. Consider, for example, our asymmetrical view of distant suffering (which we regret) and absent happiness on uninhabited planets (which we do not regret). You

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<sup>6</sup> See David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, Chapter 6.

can tell me that we should reject this asymmetry, but it is another thing actually to accept either of these views:

- a) We should not regret the suffering of distant people.
- b) We should regret the absent happiness of non-existent Martians.

Furthermore, as I noted earlier, the asymmetry thesis draws support not only from its power to explain four other asymmetries. It also draws support from its capacity to solve otherwise intractable problems in population ethics. If one gives up the asymmetry thesis, one is left with those problems. Thus, one's argument against the asymmetry thesis would have to solve those problems too – and preferably in the unifying and parsimonious way that the asymmetry thesis does. I grant that that is an extraordinarily ambitious project, and thus more than could be expected in a short paper, but that is exactly what needs to be done if one wishes to dismiss the explanatory power of the asymmetry thesis.

## 2. A critique of “cheery optimism”: A response to Michael Hauskeller

Michael Hauskeller argues for two conclusions. His initial statements of these conclusions do not entirely match the conclusions he does in fact reach, and thus I shall both attempt to ascertain what he is arguing, and also respond to those arguments. *The psychological evidence:*

His initial characterization of his first conclusion is as follows:

I will argue that Benatar's claim that those cheery optimists – those who think that life is, despite everything, worth living – vastly overestimate the quality of our lives is baseless because it relies on the unwarranted assumption that even when we feel that our lives are worth living, they may *actually* not be.”

This formulation is inaccurate in two ways. First, as I have noted often,<sup>7</sup> the phrase “a life worth living” is ambiguous between “a life worth continuing” and “a life worth starting”. Because different standards should be used for determining when a life is worth continuing and when it is a worth starting, there are many lives that, on my view, are (for the time being) worth continuing even though they were not worth starting. In failing to disambiguate the term, Professor Hauskeller may be garnering support for his view about “lives worth starting” from reasonable judgements people might make about “lives worth continuing”. Although he does not disambiguate the phrase, I shall interpret him to be defending those who hold the view that life is worth *starting*, for otherwise he is not arguing against my position.

A second inaccuracy is that he says that this claim:

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<sup>7</sup> David Benatar, “The Wrong of Wrongful Life”, in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37/2 (April 2000): 175–183; David Benatar, opus cit., pp. 22–28.



(a) “those who think life is worth starting ... vastly overestimate the quality of our lives”,

“relies on the unwarranted assumption that”

(b) “even when we feel our lives are worth starting, they may actually not be”.

This is back to front: (b) is, in fact, one of my conclusions, and (a) is one of the premises that supports it. The relevant argument takes roughly this form:

P1: People’s subjective assessments of the quality of their lives are very unreliable.

P2: The quality of human life is actually bad.

C: Therefore, our lives are not worth starting even when people think that they are worth starting.

Professor Hauskeller asks why we should accept P1. I had referred to detailed empirical evidence of an optimism bias and other psychological traits that should lead us to accept P1. Professor Hauskeller’s response is that “the results of those studies are not quite as straightforward as Benatar thinks they are and do not lend support to Benatar’s claim”.

For example, he says that “Myers and Diener ... do not conclude that people are *mistaken* about how well their life is going” and that they “do not commit to the view that life is *in fact* a tragedy, but only that we rarely see it as such.” Instead, he says, they conclude from their evidence “that people’s subjective wellbeing is largely unaffected by their life situation”. Professor Hauskeller responds similarly to my citation of Frank Andrews and Stephen Withey’s *Social Indicators of Well-Being*. He says that they too “do not make any claims about objective quality of life being different from subjective quality”.

Professor Hauskeller is correct that the authors of the psychological research do not embrace P2 or reach the conclusion of my argument, but that is irrelevant. I cited their research in support of P1, which is what it does support. When I say that the psychological research “supports” P1, I do not mean that P1 is based *only* on the psychological evidence. On some readings, it is also based in part on a fallibilist view of subjective self-assessments (which falls within the domain of philosophy rather than psychology). I mean only that the psychological evidence provides contributory reasons for accepting P1. That said, many psychologists do think that their findings demonstrate, *inter alia*, an optimism *bias*, which suggests a degree of non-veridicality.

I did not cite the psychological evidence in support of P2 or, except via P1, in support of C. There is very good reason why the research psychologists I cited do not speak about P2 or C. This is because P2 (even more obviously than P1) rests in part on a philosophical claim – a claim about what the appropriate standard is for determining the quality of life.<sup>8</sup> (I argued that irrespective of which philosophical view one adopts, P2 is true.) Psychologists are not in the business of answering philosophical questions. Their research tells us about subjective assessments of well-being. Their research cannot tell us anything about whether the correct view of well-being is subjective. That

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<sup>8</sup> It also rests partly on empirical evidence, not all of which is psychological.

is a philosophical question rather than a psychological one. *A fortiori*, the conclusion of my argument is a philosophical rather than a psychological claim, even though it rests in part on psychological evidence.

It is thus unsurprising that Professor Hauskeller introduces a philosophical claim into his argument. More specifically, he questions the introduction of any “objective measure of one’s quality of life that can be contrasted with how one *feels* one’s life is going”. He says that if one introduces any such measure, we are not bound to “conclude that those whose lives lack those features overestimate the quality of their lives”. This is because “we could just as well conclude ... that the features we thought are needed to make a life good are actually *not* needed and that the quality of a person’s life is in fact independent of those features.”

Professor Hauskeller is correct that one *could* make the latter inference, but we need to see what such a move would entail. It requires us to believe that to the extent that able-bodied and disabled, rich and poor, healthy and sick people assess the quality of their lives the same, is also the extent to which there is no difference in the quality of their lives. That is not plausible. If I am correct about that, then Professor Hauskeller is mistaken in thinking that there “is simply no convincing way to measure the quality of someone’s life objectively, independent of how they feel about it”. (Perhaps we cannot do it with precision, but it does not follow that we cannot do it at all.) If Professor Hauskeller were correct, then massive changes to social policy would be required. We would need to devote fewer resources, if any, to preventing or relieving disability and disease, or to alleviating poverty. After all, it would make little or no difference to people’s well-being.

Elsewhere in his paper,<sup>9</sup> Professor Hauskeller seems to concede that we *can* measure the good and bad in life. He says that my quality-of-life arguments

*largely consist in enumerating and puffing up the many evils that we supposedly can and often do encounter in our lives ... In contrast, all the goods we experience are said to be trivial, fleeting, weak, infrequent, and therefore hardly worth considering. And yet, it would be very easy to list an equally large number of goods and joys that we can and often do experience on a daily basis.*

In other words, he concedes that we can measure the good in life and that if we do, we will find that the number of goods is “equally large” as the number of bads. Of course, how much good and bad there is, is not merely a matter of number, but also of duration and intensity. I did not provide only lists, but also pointed to a number of empirical asymmetries that should lead us to think that harms outweigh benefits.<sup>10</sup> For example: (i) The worse pains are worse than the best pleasures are good.

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<sup>9</sup> For reasons that are unclear to me, part of Professor Hauskeller’s response to my quality-of-life arguments are presented as part of his response to arguments about axiological asymmetry. For clarity, I consider them here, where they fit more naturally.

<sup>10</sup> David Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, New York: Oxford University Press 2017, pp. 76–83.

(ii) There are chronic pains but not chronic pleasures. (iii) Injury can be instant, but recovery never is.

Professor Hauskeller ignores rather than engages these empirical observations that should lead us to a less cheery view than the one he holds.

## **Axiological asymmetry and not being better off never existing:**

Professor Hauskeller's initial characterization of his second conclusion is that while he accepts the following claims:

- (a) not creating happy people is not wrong,
- (b) creating unhappy people is wrong,
- (c) we would not be worse off if we had never existed, he rejects the claim that:
- (d) we would be better off if we had never existed.

The "main problem" with (d), he says, "lies in the fact that it is difficult to make sense of the claim that it would have been good for me if I had never existed, because if I had never existed there could not possibly have been anything that was good for me since there would have been nobody *for whom* it could have been good".

The main problem with Professor Hauskeller's rejection of (d) is that this rejection is not incompatible with my position, at least if one takes (d) literally, which is exactly the reading that his supporting argument suggests. I have been quite clear in saying that I do "not claim that the never-existent literally are better off".<sup>11</sup> Professor Hauskeller does not engage what I have said I mean when I say that it is "better never to have been". As a result, he has not argued against my position.

A second problem is that Professor Hauskeller seems to conflate (d) with (at least some part of) my axiological asymmetry. For example, it is in support of his claim that the axiological asymmetry is "quite obviously false", that he cites the above argument against (d). But (d), even in the non-literal sense in which I mean it, is not equivalent to the axiological asymmetry. Instead, it is an implication of the asymmetry.

When he does engage the asymmetry between harms and benefits, he misunderstands it. His reason for rejecting the asymmetry is that:

*The presence of harm is bad, and so is the absence of benefit. In fact, many of the harms we suffer are absences of goods, for instance the absence of health, the absence of freedom, the absence of friends, the absence of love.*

This is a misunderstanding because when we existing people suffer the absence of health, freedom, friends and love, there *are* people who are deprived of these goods.

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<sup>11</sup> *Better Never to Have Been*, opus cit., pp. 4, 31.

Recognition of this is implicit in the asymmetry, according to which absent goods are not bad “*unless* there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation”.<sup>12</sup>

## The risk argument and the misanthropic argument:

Professor Hauskeller says that because, in *Debating Procreation*, a book published nine years after *Better Never to Have Been*, I discuss the risk argument for antinatalism, this “may be read as a tacit acknowledgement that maybe not *all* lives are so bad that they are not worth starting”.<sup>13</sup> In *Debating Procreation*, I also have a chapter on the misanthropic argument. Professor Hauskeller says that because I make “so much of it” this “clearly shows that his main concern is not primarily *theoretical* (i.e. to establish the truth of the claim that existence is always harmful), but *practical* (i.e. to convince that it is always wrong to reproduce)”.

In these cases, Professor Hauskeller either over-interprets or misinterprets. First, my concerns are *both* theoretical *and* practical. I hold the theoretical view that coming into existence is always a serious harm, and the practical view that therefore procreating is always wrong. I stand by the arguments advanced in *Better Never to Have Been*. I advanced the risk argument to show that even those who reject my view that coming into existence is always a serious harm could reach my practical conclusion via another route. That is a common argumentative technique: “Even if you do not accept X, you should still conclude Y on the basis of Z”.

In the case of the misanthropic argument, Professor Hauskeller is flatly wrong that I advance this argument in order “to convince us that it is *always* wrong to reproduce” (my emphasis). When I advanced the misanthropic argument, I specifically noted that it yields a less extensive conclusion than the philanthropic argument. I said that it only creates a presumption against procreation, and that “this presumption could sometimes be defeated”.<sup>14</sup> The misanthropic argument is relevant to those “debating procreation”, but it is not an argument for the conclusion that coming into existence is always a harm to the being brought into existence. That is why the misanthropic argument would have been out of place in *Better Never to Have Been*.

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<sup>12</sup> Emphasis added. I have made this clear in various places, including David Benatar, “Still better never to have been: A reply to (more of) my critics”, *The Journal of Ethics* 17/1–2 (June 2013): 121–151 (and especially pp. 135–138).

<sup>13</sup> As Erik Magnusson notes, I did also discuss the risk argument in *Better Never to Have Been*, although it is true that the discussion in *Debating Procreation* is longer.

<sup>14</sup> David Benatar and David Wasserman, *Debating Procreation: Is it Wrong to Reproduce?*, New York: Oxford University Press 2015, p. 111.

### 3. Ultimately pointless suffering: A response to Thaddeus Metz<sup>15</sup>

Thaddeus Metz is interested in whether “cosmic meaninglessness as a disvalue distinct from harm” provides “at least some moral reason not to create new human lives”. He attributes to me the view that it does, and he argues against this view.

#### What disentangled threads he leaves:

The first problem with his argument is that he is mistaken in claiming that some of my arguments for anti-natalism are based not on the quality of life but “instead” on “the apparent bad of life’s [cosmic] meaninglessness”. His purported evidence for his claim, lies in my having said, in the course of an interview, that once you believe that life “is ultimately pointless, it is ridiculous to generate more adversity-facing meaning-seekers”.

Both the context of that quotation (namely, responding to a question that referenced “daily pains, the horror of death, immense suffering”), as well as the words themselves (“*adversity-facing* meaning-seekers”) show that insofar as I invoke life’s meaninglessness in support of anti-natalism, I do so on the back of life’s poor quality. In other words, there is no ultimate (or even great) meaning to our lives that could be invoked to justify procreation in the face of life’s poor quality.

Thus, the words he quotes are not an exception to the way that he later acknowledges I usually connect cosmic meaninglessness to anti-natalism – namely, by appealing “to the absence of cosmic meaning combined with the presence of harm”. Unfortunately, Professor Metz seems to walk back that acknowledgement when he summarizes my argument thus:

*the argument in a nutshell is that eternally influencing other persons in positive ways throughout the spatio-temporal universe is an important kind of meaning and that no human life can exhibit such a meaning, which, in turn, is an unfortunate, regrettable, and sad cost that we ought not to impose on anyone by creating a new human life.*

In this characterization, no mention is made of the poor quality of human life. There are also other problems with it. For example, it ignores other, and arguably better ways in which our lives could theoretically have cosmic meaning, such as fulfilling some important, positive divine purpose. However, Professor Metz is correct that I think that *one way* in which a life could have some cosmic meaning is if it mattered to sentient beings throughout the universe.

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<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Jessica du Toit for suggesting some stylistic improvements in my response to Professor Metz.

## How much value does cosmic meaning have?

Professor Metz agrees that cosmic meaning would have *some* value, but he argues that its absence is not *very* important. In support of this, he asks us to consider the government funding of the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project. He is sympathetic to the government providing *some* funding to SETI, but would be opposed to *most* of government's budget being directed to such research. Because, he says, others are likely to share these views, they are evidence that while interacting with extra-terrestrials would contribute to life's meaning, the absence of such interaction is not that important.

The problem, however, is that thoughts about public funding of SETI cannot do the heavy lifting that Professor Metz suggests they can do. This is because there are many explanations, other than Professor Metz's, why most of us would be opposed to the government spending most of the state's resources on searching for extra-terrestrials.

First, the chance of discovering extra-terrestrial life is low.<sup>16</sup> Second, even if such life were discovered, it is not clear that such a discovery would be good for us – the aliens might be hostile. Even if they were not hostile, we might be unable to have the sort of positive impact on their lives<sup>17</sup> that would give our lives some cosmic meaning. Third, even if the occasional human life could acquire some cosmic meaning, the cosmic meaning attained would likely be limited in at least two ways: very few human lives would acquire such meaning, and the extent of the cosmic meaning that even those lives could have, would be restricted. Cosmic meaning, just like terrestrial meaning, can vary in its extent. If your life has an impact on a single alien in some distant corner of the universe, then one's life has a modicum of cosmic meaning, but not much. It would be a parody of my position to suggest that it implies that one's life would have ultimate meaning if it acquired some scrap of cosmic meaning.

Finally, the chief reason why the government should not devote the bulk of state resources to searching for extra-terrestrial life is that the quality of human life can be

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<sup>16</sup> Thad Metz does consider that I might respond that “expected value” rather than mere “value” is the relevant guiding principle for public policy. He rejects this point by saying that even if the chances of discovering extra-terrestrial life were much greater, government should still not fund such research. What this shows is that the likelihood of discovering extra-terrestrial life is not the only relevant variable. My point is that there are a number of reasons, other than Professor Metz's, that make it reasonable to reject the idea that most of a state's resources should be devoted to searching for extra-terrestrial life.

<sup>17</sup> A “positive impact on” is not equivalent to “interacting with”. Professor Metz's focus on the latter results in some of his arguments sounding more persuasive than they actually are. For example, in seeking to show that terrestrial meaning is more important than cosmic meaning, he asks who would “ditch” their “spouse and children in order to join the crew of a starship” in pursuit of an attractive extra-terrestrial. However, trade-offs between relationships, while sometimes necessary, are not always so. Some people can engage in activities that have meaning from the perspective of humanity, without sacrificing their personal relationships. There is no in-principle reason why the same could not be true of cosmic meaning. Your activities here on earth could have import for beings across the universe, in just the same way that a scientist's work in the lab could have import for people around the globe.

expected to plunge to cataclysmic levels if the state no longer spent (as much) money on food, physical infrastructure, education, healthcare, and security.

Professor Metz takes this to be evidence that these goods are more important than cosmic meaning. However, that is insufficient to justify his claim that the absence of substantial cosmic meaning is not very bad. It is quite possible that, all things being equal, the quality of life is more important than life's (either terrestrial or cosmic) meaning, while it's still the case that the absence of meaning is very bad. Poor quality life may be worse than meaningless life, but one cannot infer from this that a lack of meaning is not nonetheless tragic, especially given life's poor quality.

### **The likelihood principle:**

Towards the end of his paper, Professor Metz's argues that even if one thinks that cosmic meaning would be ("quite") valuable, its absence is neither very bad nor worthy of great regret. His argument for this conclusion focuses on regret and related attitudes rather than on badness. He offers a principle, according to which "the less likely one would have had a good, the less reason there is for such reactions to its absence". He says that this principle supports ordinary intuitions about various cases in which one does not win the lottery – ranging from one's having purchased the winning ticket but having inadvertently destroyed it, to there never having been a lottery to enter.

I agree with Professor Metz that most people are more likely to regret the absent lottery winnings in the earlier of these cases than in the later ones. However, we should not infer from this either that the absence of cosmic meaning is not bad or that we should not deeply regret such absence. There are a few, cumulative reasons for this. First, our intuitions about the lottery case might report only what we do feel rather than what it is *apt* to feel.

Second, the lottery cases introduce confounding variables. For example, we have to disentangle how bad the absence of the lottery win is, from our sense of responsibility for the absence. When you leave the winning ticket in your pocket and it gets destroyed in the wash, you are reacting not only to the absence of the win but also to your own carelessness. It is true that none of us is responsible for one's own life lacking cosmic meaning, which makes this case more like the last of the lottery examples. However, the point is that the intuitions garnered by the lottery cases exceed those warranted by Professor Metz's principle, which examines only how likely the benefit was.

Third, even if the likelihood of having received a benefit is *relevant* to how much it is apt to regret it, it is unlikely that it is the only relevant variable. It should surely be the case that how bad an absent benefit is – and how much it is apt to regret it – depends at least in part on how significant the benefit would have been. The absence of (substantial) cosmic meaning (the best kinds of which would be ultimate goods) is generally much worse than the absence of a lottery win (an instrumental, but not unmitigated good).

Fourth, there are often difficulties with disentangling absent benefits from actual burdens. One very important reason why the absence of cosmic meaning is so bad is because life is both so laden with adversity and so brief. If our brief lives of suffering at least had some kind of ultimate meaning, there would have been significant mitigation of our overall condition. Even if it is impossible for our lives to have had such meaning, it is by no means impossible for us to have avoided the fate – coming into existence – that would have been mitigated (but not entirely ameliorated) by this benefit. Indeed, the odds of any one of us having come into existence are arguably immensely small. Even slight changes in the world would have resulted in our great-grandparents', grandparents', or parents' never having met or, if they had met, not having conceived the particular offspring they did. In other words, in almost all proximate possible worlds, any being that actually exists would never have existed.

Imagine that you are born, without your consent and for no good reason, into an impoverished and failed state. As a result of these conditions your health is adversely affected. What is worse, you cannot obtain the medical treatment that would alleviate your condition. If there is a possible world in which *you* would have had access to appropriate healthcare, it is a remote possible world. In other words, your having access to the requisite healthcare is very unlikely. (It is much more likely that any changes to the world that resulted in the availability of such care would also have resulted in *your* not being born.) Yet, it seems entirely reasonable to think that the absence of your benefiting from medical treatment is very bad – and that it is apt for you to regret that absence.

## 4. Her children, their children, and my anti-natalism: A response to Christine Overall

As evidenced both by the title and the content of her paper, Christine Overall takes my arguments for anti-natalism personally. By her own account, she is “indignant” and “offended” by the implication that she should not have brought her two children into existence.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, she says that she cannot bring herself “to regret or feel guilty about having given birth” and that if she were to return to her “young womanhood with knowledge of” my arguments but no knowledge of her future children, she “would probably procreate again”. She tells her readers that she is “committed to the value” of her “children’s and grandchildren’s lives and cannot believe that it would be better if they had never existed”.

Taking general arguments personally is ill-advised, not least because one’s personal investments are prone to introduce well-known biases. This is not to deny that a personal perspective can be relevant. Instead, it is to caution that one can take arguments *too* personally, thereby precluding a fair evaluation of them.

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<sup>18</sup> These words were her daughter’s reaction, but Professor Overall says that she agrees.



Professor Overall acknowledges that there is much suffering in life, but she seeks to show that despite this she was justified in having her two children. In responding to her arguments, I shall not be drawn into discussing her specific reproductive decisions. My own responses will be directed to defending the general anti-natalist conclusions.<sup>19</sup>

## Counter-intuitiveness:

There is a common theme running through some of Professor Overall's arguments, namely that the anti-natalist conclusion is deeply counter-intuitive and should be rejected (at least in part) for that reason. The counter-intuitiveness (to most people) of anti-natalism has never been lost on me. The question is how much store we should put on that widespread sense of counter-intuitiveness, given that procreation leads to so much suffering and death. After all, any view that permits the imposition of a massive risk of severe suffering and the certainty of death is – or should be – at least as counter-intuitive, if not more so.

This is why I find so many of Professor Overall's arguments unpersuasive. For example, she claims that procreation is a creative project. That is true in some senses but not in others.<sup>20</sup> However, even if we were to grant the premise, it does not follow that our creative projects take priority over the interests of those we create. It is not obvious, for example, that we may breed "thoroughbred" dogs that will suffer as a result of that inbreeding, even though this practice is not only widespread, but also meaningful both to the breeders and to those people who purchase dogs from them.

Similarly, while I grant that new generations can be a significant source of meaning in the lives of previous generations, it does not follow that we are entitled to endow our lives with meaning at the expense, to those new people, of creating them. That some activity creates meaning does not mean that the usual injunctions against harm evaporate.

In any event, Professor Overall exaggerates. While new children are *significant* sources of meaning, they are not the only ones. Contrary to what Professor Overall says, much of what people do, would have *some* meaning even if we knew that there would be no new generations. Books might be written, films made, plays produced, buildings and bridges built, and food grown for the benefit of current people. I grant, of course, that some of these projects will have much greater meaning if there are future generations, but it does not follow that we are entitled to help ourselves to that meaning at the expense of those we would create. This is especially so, given that whatever we do, there will eventually be a final generation that will be deprived of

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, I cannot be sure that Professor Overall will not nonetheless interpret my arguments personally, as she seems to have done in claiming that:

<sup>20</sup> It is not called *procreation* for nothing. On the other hand, birds and bees, roses and rabbits to it too. To the extent that, roses, for example, are being creative in procreating, it must be a minimal sense of "creative".

the meaning provided by future generations. That problem cannot be prevented, but rather only delayed through a procreational Ponzi scheme.<sup>21</sup>

Professor Overall says that insofar “as the arts, engineering, education, health care, ... hope and plan for future people, and also contribute to their future existence, Benatar’s argument from suffering requires that they be morally condemned and discontinued.” Very few activities in the arts, engineering, education, and health care will *contribute* to the existence of future people. If that false clause is removed from her statement, then the inference from anti-natalism to condemning and discontinuing all these practices does not follow. The same can be said about her more general inference, that if we judge procreation to be wrong then we are repudiating “just about *every* activity and project that human beings, individually or collectively, undertake”.

These inferences cannot be made because one can be opposed to procreation while also recognizing the reality that because most people are not similarly opposed, there *will be* new generations for the foreseeable future. The suggestion that because one personally opposes procreation one should not plan for those future people is not only ludicrous, but also morally derelict. If there will be future people independently of whether one procreates, then one must plan accordingly for them. Anti-natalism is not a licence for the view that *après moi, le deluge*.

Professor Overall also says that:

*Accepting Benatar’s view requires agreeing that everyone who has been happy about a pregnancy, celebrated a birth, felt joy for a newborn, or just generally appreciated women’s procreative labor is simply mistaken.*

The claim about feeling joy *for* a newborn is a valid inference from (philanthropic) anti-natalism, but the others are not. One can be happy about a pregnancy or celebrate a birth for other reasons, such as the joy it will bring the parents. Similarly, somebody might appreciate women’s procreative labour for the sake of national interests, or because that labour has fulfilled one’s wish to be a father.<sup>22</sup>

## The authority of subjective assessments:

A second broad way in which Professor Overall attempts to defend procreation in the face of all the harms attendant upon coming into existence, is by arguing that individuals have authority over judgements about the quality (and meaning) of their own lives, and that it is presumptuous of me (and presumably other anti-natalists) to suggest that they are mistaken.

To this end she distinguishes between (i) the goods and bads in people’s lives, and (ii) people’s “*meta-level assessments* of the significance and salience of those goods and

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<sup>21</sup> I used this term in *Debating Procreation*, opus cit., pp. 129–130.

<sup>22</sup> Or a mother, where the new mother is not also the one providing most of the procreative labour. (It is hard to see how one could “appreciate” in the sense of “being grateful” for one’s own procreative labour.)

bad in their life.” She says that the latter “is and must be a *subjective* judgement”, and that “individuals are ordinarily recognized to have cognitive authority over the assessment of their own inner life.”

In response, I wish to clarify two distinctions. The first of these is a distinction between two ways in which individuals can be said to have authority over assessments of their lives:

(a) Individuals’ assessments of the quality or meaning of their lives are infallible.

(b) Competent individuals’ assessments of the quality or meaning of their own lives, even if fallible, should not be interfered with.

In rejecting the first of these claims, I am not denying that an individual’s inner (rather than reported) judgement about whether they are *now* in pain can be in error. If you feel that you are in pain, then you *are* in pain. You cannot be mistaken about that, just as you cannot be mistaken about whether you are now feeling pleasure. However, claim (a) is a more extensive claim. It implies that you cannot be wrong about whether you *were* in pain, whether you *will be* in pain, or whether over a particular period you experienced more pleasure or more pain. About all of these things, an individual can clearly be mistaken – just as individuals can be mistaken about almost anything else. A similar point, *mutatis mutandis*, can be made about the satisfaction of desires, for example.

Given this, any “meta” assessment that an individual makes about the bads and goods in his or her life must be predicated on fallible judgements. Accordingly, these assessments too can be fallible. One may *think* that the goods make the bads “worth it”, but if that assessment is based on inaccurate information about, for example, the full quantum of the goods and bads,<sup>23</sup> then the assessment is inaccurately informed.

Just because people are fallible and can be mistaken in their assessments about the quality of their lives, does not mean that we may override their autonomy. That is why I accept (b) even though I reject (a). Moreover, it is because I accept (b) that I think Donald (Dax) Cowart should not have been treated against his wishes. If somebody else, with exactly the same severity and extent of burns, were to reach the opposite decision to his, and were to want treatment to continue, then I would similarly say that we should defer, resources permitting, to that person’s view about continued treatment. This does not mean that they would both be right. Indeed, it is not even to say that Mr Cowart was right. (When I discussed his case,<sup>24</sup> I was not making the claim that his continued life was actually contrary to his interests. Instead, I was making the claim that *he* had assessed death to be preferable to continued life.

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<sup>23</sup> Professor Overall ignores another distinction: (i) Being aware of some of life’s hardships, and (ii) being aware of all of them. (See her comment that author Alison “Wearing has not overlooked the discomfort of being a writer”.) I am not denying that people have some awareness of life’s suffering. I am saying that the psychological evidence demonstrates that people tend to have an overly rosy view of life’s quality.

<sup>24</sup> *Better Never to Have Been*, opus cit., p. 63.

While his view was plausible, I was not making the claim that it was correct.<sup>25</sup>) The second distinction to be drawn is another that Professor Overall elides:<sup>26</sup>

(c) The quality of a life.

(d) The meaning of a life.

I agree that meaning can be sought and found in hardships and even in poor quality lives. When that meaning is *felt* then it can have some impact on the felt *quality* too, even though that positive impact does only marginally modulate the poor quality. Thus, Professor Overall's examples of the author, the teacher, and the nurse, who endure hardships but whose work is "worthwhile and meaningful", are entirely consistent with my claims about life's *quality*. Notice, however, that just because those we create might find meaning in their hardships does not mean that coming into existence is in their interests.

### Avoidable and inevitable bads:

Professor Overall's final line of argument is that while some bad in life is avoidable, other bad is inevitable.<sup>27</sup> Although Professor Overall denies that she is an optimist, both components of this argument are unduly optimistic. Professor Overall says that "we have the power to make our lives better" and that "over the past century, at least, we have done so". There obviously is an element of truth to this. There are ways in which the quality of lives has improved in many places and in many ways. However, it is certainly not true everywhere. Just as improvement can occur, so things can also get worse – and they often do. Think of what Hugo Chavez did to Venezuela, what Robert Mugabe did to Zimbabwe, and what China has been doing to Hong Kong.

Professor Overall is also unduly sanguine about the "inevitable" bads. (They are inevitable only for those who are brought into existence.) I agree that life would be very different – and unrecognizably human – if it were devoid of all bad. If, for example, we were invulnerable to pain and suffering, and if achievement came with ease, we would no longer be humans. However, it is not merely my "preference" as Professor Overall suggests, that life be devoid of bads. This is because there is a reason why they are called bads: they *are* bad. It would be better if there were not bads.

Professor Overall asks us what kind of beings we would be "if we did not feel worry when a friend is not well, fear when a child takes a risk, regret at the end of an

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<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is not true, as Professor Overall alleges, that I accept the individual's authority over assessments of their own inner life "but only in regard to an individual who, as it happens, assessed the bads in his life as not worth the goods – that is, someone whose judgment suits Benatar's own theory".

<sup>26</sup> For example, she says that "most people don't calculate the meaning of their lives as merely a mathematical sum, the subtraction of suffering from pleasure, desires unfulfilled from not fulfilled, or supposedly objective goods not acquired from those acquired." One can be at least as mistaken, if not more so, about the meaning of one's life as one can be about its quality. For more on the relationship between the meaning and the quality of life, see *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., pp. 64–67.

<sup>27</sup> I have raised and responded to such arguments elsewhere. See, for example, *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., pp. 83–91.

important relationship, or sorrow at the death of a loved one”. The answer is that if we lived in a world in which friends were not unwell, children were not at risk, valuable relationships did not end, and loved ones did not die, it simply would not matter that we felt no worry about these bads.

## Getting impersonal:

In conclusion, I want to offer some conciliation. I suspect that one reason why Professor Overall and others are so indignant about anti-natalism is that they take it (personally) to impugn their standing as good people. This seems implicit in Professor Overall’s claim that if “it is truly better never to have been, it is hard to see why people of good will, like my children, who try to be morally good human beings, would decide to bring more people into existence”. She also says that if anti-natalism is correct then, “we have to accept that all of us are leading unethical lives”.

I reject such inferences. One can make a moral judgement about a practice without being judgemental about those who perform the practice. We all have our moral shortcomings (and moral blind spots). Some otherwise very good people held slaves, eat animals, have an excessive carbon footprint, or procreate. That somebody does something that should not be done, does not mean that the rest of what they do is unethical. Contrary to the views of some, the moral world is not Manichean. People are complex, and even the best people can have significant flaws. This does not mean that we may write them (or oneself) off as evil.

## 5. Recognizing the personal: A response to Nicholas Smyth

In Nicholas Smyth’s paper, and my response to it, the terms “personal” and “impersonal” are used differently than they were used in my response to Christine Overall’s paper.

Professor Smyth’s paper is entitled “Nothing Personal”. The subtitle, “On the limits of the impersonal temperament in ethics”, reveals a non-ironic reading of the title. On this reading, the absence of the personal refers to a defect in purportedly impersonal views of ethics. However, there is another, related reading of the title that is ironic. If impersonal views of ethics are deficient for omitting the personal, then the corrective is “*something* personal”. There is also another way in which his paper *is* personal. He wants to attribute my anti-natalist and other existential arguments to (what he takes to be) my “philosophical temperament”.

Professor Smyth says that any “moral philosopher who issues edicts or directives faces a simple question: what *practical reasons* do agents have in favor of the directives

you are assigning to them?”<sup>28</sup> By “practical reasons” he seems to mean what are called “internal” reasons – reasons that a person has as a result of their own motivational set. His complaint is that much applied ethics fails to engage or answer this question. He thinks it is especially true of procreative ethics in general,<sup>29</sup> and of me in particular. This, he says, is because my arguments, reflecting my alleged philosophical temperament, are “impersonal”. Arguments of this impersonal kind, he claims, amount to “applied ethics which cannot be applied”.

In responding to Professor Smyth, I am not going to write about my philosophical “temperament”. He might take this as evidence of my alleged impersonal bent, but I am not going to play the game of responding to psychologising with first-person psychological reports.<sup>30</sup> He reads my purported temperament off my arguments, and I shall respond by arguing that they are not all the impersonal ones that he imagines them to be.

First, however, it is important to note that Professor Smyth uses the term “impersonal” in two different ways, but without acknowledging that he does so:

1. Impersonal arguments as those that relate to states of affairs rather than to individual persons.<sup>31</sup>
2. Impersonal arguments as those not pertaining to, referencing, or rooted in a person’s motivational set.

These two meanings of impersonal are distinct. Moreover, the distinctions between each of them and their corresponding senses of “personal” cut across one another. Arguments that are impersonal (or personal) in the first sense can be either impersonal or personal in the second sense. Thus, for example, an argument that (assumes that) the right action is the one that produces the best state of affairs could be connected with some person’s motivational set, but be disconnected from the motivational sets

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<sup>28</sup> The language of “edicts” and “directives” is uncharitable, to say the least, given the connotations if not also the denotations of these words. An edict is that “which is proclaimed by authority as a rule of action” or “an order issued by a sovereign to his subjects” (*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973 p. 629). One denotation of “directive” is “an authoritative order or instrument issued by a high-level body or official” (Merriam Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/directive> (Accessed 19 July 2021). I doubt that most moral philosophers see themselves as offering “edicts” or “directives”. A more charitable and reasonable interpretation is that they are arguing for conclusions about what people ought to do.

<sup>29</sup> I do not know why he thinks this. Demonstrating his claim would require an extensive comparison of different areas within applied ethics. I realise that this would be a mammoth undertaking and thus I am not faulting Professor Smyth for failing to provide the evidence for his impression. Instead, I am registering my own impression that procreative ethics is not much different, in this regard, from many other areas of applied ethics.

<sup>30</sup> Given the authority he grants to subjective assessments, he might be obliged to think that subjective reports of one’s temperament trump whatever inferences others might make.

<sup>31</sup> I purposefully use the somewhat vague phrase “rather than to individual persons” in order to gloss over different ways in which Professor Smyth speaks about personal views of ethics.

of others. Some people are motivated by arguments that are impersonal in the first sense, while others are not. Similarly, an argument that (assumes that) treating people in certain ways is wrong even if that produces the best state of affairs could connect with the motivational sets of some people but not of others. Again, some people are motivated by arguments that are personal in the first sense, while others are not.

Professor Smyth repeatedly elides the distinction between the two meanings, and his criticisms of my arguments certainly slip between them. Given the space constraints, I cannot show this for every argument of mine that he discusses. Thus, I shall focus on his discussion of my arguments for anti-natalism, and then comment more briefly on his caricature of my views about meaning in life.

## Arguments for anti-natalism:

Professor Smyth first considers my asymmetry argument, the conclusion of which is that “it is better *for a person* that he never exist, on condition that we understand that locution as a shorthand for a more complex idea.”<sup>32</sup> However, despite my claim that I am interested in what is best for the person who might be brought into existence, Professor Smyth claims that I am actually offering an impersonal argument. This is because I compare two possible worlds – one in which the person exists and one in which that person does not exist. It does not matter to Professor Smyth that I am comparing these two possible worlds “with reference to the interests of the person who exists in one (and only one) of these two possible worlds”. This is because he thinks that my “reference to the interests of the person” is unhelpful.

The problem, however, is that he seems to be ignoring two different ways of comparing two states of affairs. To see this, consider the following possible worlds:

World A: X exists.

World B: X never exists.

There are two ways of comparing these two worlds:

1. Which world contains the greatest net good?
2. Which world contains the greatest net good for X?<sup>33</sup>

If one thinks, as Professor Smyth seems to do, that “for X” makes no difference, then 1 and 2 collapse into one another. In other words, they are then the same question. However, the questions are obviously different. If one asks the first question, one will have to reference not only the good for X, but also the good for everybody else affected. By contrast, if one asks the second question, one is interested only in what is good for X. These are different. We can certainly imagine a scenario in which X is utterly

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<sup>32</sup> Benatar, “Still better never to have been”, opus cit., p. 125.

<sup>33</sup> Here I am simplifying the question for the sake of clarity. My asymmetry argument suggests how we should understand “net good for X”.

miserable in World A, but that World A contains more net good than World B, perhaps because X's misery in A is instrumental to producing the greater good.

For this and other reasons, we can see why Professor Smyth's purported analogy of the red ball that exists in only one of two possible worlds does not support his conclusion. He says:

it is true that *ceteris paribus* the world containing the red ball is *more red* than the world without it, and this is a comparison that is made "with reference to" the redness of the existing ball. But it is not true that the *existing ball* is more red than it is in the second world: the phrase "more red" here applies to worlds and not to objects within the worlds.

There are reasons to think that this is a poor analogy, but we can provisionally bracket that worry and consider the following possible worlds:

World R: Contains a red ball.

World O: Does not contain that red ball.

There are two ways of comparing these two worlds:

1. Which world contains more red?
2. Which world contains more red with reference to the red ball?

Again, if "with reference to the red ball" makes no difference, then 1 and 2 collapse into one another. However, the questions are again different – and for similar reasons.<sup>34</sup> If one asks the first question, one will have to reference not only the red of the particular red ball in R and its absence in O, but also all other redness in the two worlds. (This is why Professor Smyth has to use the *ceteris paribus* clause in answering the first question.) In other words, if one is interested in total redness, it is not only the one red ball that counts. World O might contain more red even though it does not contain one particular red ball.

What about the second question? The meaning of this is less clear than it was in the previous comparison (between Worlds A and B). Professor Smyth understands it as asking whether the ball in R is redder than it is in O. Perhaps there is a loose sense in which we can *answer* that question affirmatively, but it is not the only way of interpreting the *question*. Another way is to interpret it as asking which world contains more red-from-the-particular-red-ball. The answer must then be R rather than O.<sup>35</sup> (No *ceteris paribus* clause is required here.)

Of course, there are some people who claim that personal comparisons between two states of affairs are only possible if the person exists in both states of affairs. I

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<sup>34</sup> There is a crucial disanalogy here, namely that we are not comparing the interests of the red ball. This is because red balls do not have (morally considerable) interests.

<sup>35</sup> Now, obviously, it is harder in the case of the red ball to explain how the absence of the red ball in O might relate to there being more red overall in that world. However, to the extent that this is true, the red ball is a weaker analogy for procreative ethics.



anticipated these objections early and responded to them. Professor Smyth has not engaged those arguments, and I shall not repeat them here.

Professor Smyth seems to think that because, according to him, my asymmetry argument is impersonal in the first sense, it is therefore also impersonal in the second sense. He says:

*Benatar must therefore assume that prospective parents have significant motivating practical reasons to prioritize world-ranking when deciding whether to have a child. This, to put it mildly, is not an assumption that anyone should take for granted.*

I hope that it is now clear that my asymmetry argument is *not* impersonal in the first sense. My argument should show any potential parents that if they procreate, their offspring will thereby be harmed. I do not seek to draw any practical conclusions – including anti-natalism – from this by itself. For one thing, the quality of life argument must be added to show just how harmful it is to come into existence.

However, whether or not the conclusion that coming into existence is *a* harm will be personal in the second sense, depends on who is considering it. I would hope that most people would care whether their children are harmed, but the argument will have no motivational force against those who do not.

Consider, next, Professor Smyth's response to my quality of life argument (which he calls my "badness of life" argument). Here he acknowledges that my argument is presented in a way that is personal in the second sense. He says:

Benatar does at least give a practical consideration that will surely resonate with prospective parents: don't create a being that will have an on-balance disvaluable life.

However, he denies that the way in which I reach the conclusion about life's poor quality is impersonal.<sup>36</sup> This is because I do not treat subjective assessments of quality of life as definitive.<sup>37</sup> The fact that I think there can be a difference between subjective assessments of life's quality and life's actual quality is, he says, "exactly what you would expect from a moral philosophy which does not try to connect itself to the subjective practical reasoning of deciding agents". Here Professor Smyth fails to recognise the difference between (i) an infallibilist subjective view of well-being and

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<sup>36</sup> It is not entirely clear whether he here means impersonal in the first or the second sense. However, his conclusion seems to refer to impersonal in the second sense.

<sup>37</sup> He initially seems to attribute to me the view that subjective assessments make no difference but then he says that "in a recent reply to Christine Overall, Benatar grudgingly concedes" that subjective assessments can make *some* difference. However, there was nothing grudging about it. Nor was it a "concession" to Christine Overall. I have repeatedly made the point about a "feedback loop", including not only the source he cites (which was not a response to Christine Overall), but also *Debating Procreation*, opus cit., pp. 44, 73n8, and *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., p. 70).

(ii) practical reasoning. One can reject the former and attempt to make people aware of systematic biases. Whether that connects with the motivational set of agents will depend on whether the particular agents care about such biases. Some do and some do not.

Professor Smyth considers a third argument that I have advanced for anti-natalism, namely the misanthropic argument. He is correct that the dominant presentation of that argument was impersonal in the first sense. I argued that each new human created would contribute to aggregate harm caused by humanity.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately for Professor Smyth, his being correct in this characterization of this argument undermines rather than supports his broader argument. It, along with the recognition of my other arguments are personal in the relevant sense, reveals something about my general approach to practical ethical questions. I seek to appeal to the broadest possible range of views about what makes actions right. I do this either by bypassing normative theoretical disagreements or by demonstrating the extent to which those who disagree about these matters can agree on a practical matter.

Professor Smyth thinks that I need to respond to a *metaethical* disagreement about whether only internal or also external reasons are real reasons to act. However, that discussion certainly can be – and regularly is – bypassed in practical ethics. I cannot provide a full argument for this here, but I shall note that while Professor Smyth says that I must provide a metaethical argument, what he actually says is about the reasons that *do* motivate people rather than about the metaethical question whether those reasons that do not motivate people are nonetheless reasons.

Is the misanthropic argument impersonal in the second sense that I outlined earlier? Is it detached from people's motivational sets? The answer is the same as for other arguments: “yes” for some people, and “no” for others. Some people are motivated by impersonal reasons (in the first sense), others by personal reasons (in the first sense), and yet others by various combinations of these. A *connection* between an argument and a person's motivations depends not only on the argument but also on the person hearing the argument. Granted, some arguments might have broader appeal than others, but even that can change. Arguments, whether personal or impersonal in the first sense, can leave the vast majority of people cold at a particular time and place, but be embraced by most people at a different time or place. Indeed, the very *same* people might be unmotivated by an argument at one time in their lives and yet be motivated by it at another.

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<sup>38</sup> However, it should be noted that the misanthropic argument does not have to take an impersonal form. While some of the harm that humans do is the result of aggregation, there is plenty of harm that each individual who we bring into existence is likely to cause. Many of those who reject impersonal views about right action can recognize a moral presumption against creating a harm-causing being. (My chapter on the misanthropic argument also included some specifically non-utilitarian considerations for weighing up the benefits and harms that one's prospective child would produce. See *Debating Procreation*, opus cit., pp. 107–108.)

## Meaning:

After inauspiciously characterising me as somebody with an impersonal philosophical temperament, Professor Smyth then proceeds to criticize my views on meaning in life as also being excessively impersonal. This, it seems, is because I say that the absence of cosmic meaning is cause for deep regret, and because I draw a distinction between subjective assessments of a life's meaning and whether a life actually is meaningful. (It does not seem to matter that I recognise an array of valuable, personal forms of meaning.)

Unfortunately, Professor Smyth's critique is riddled with mischaracterizations of my position. There are so many, that I cannot possibly respond to them all. Thus I shall restrict myself to only a few examples.

He says that a "purely impersonal account of meaning leads to ... bizarre conclusions" and claims that "the view implies that a person who is made suicidally miserable by their limit-transcending pursuit of some objectively valuable end is living an ideally meaningful life".

There are at least two reasons why this is a caricature rather than an accurate characterization of my view. First, it should be obvious that I do not take such a life to be ideally meaningful. This is because I don't think that *any* lives are *ideally* meaningful, given how limited all actual meaning is. Moreover, as I was careful to clarify:

*We can affirm that the preferred scenario is one in which a life is both meaningful and also feels as though it is, without implying that the subjective experience of meaningfulness is necessary for the life to be meaningful.*<sup>39</sup>

Second, even if one thinks, as I do, that a meaningful life can feel meaningless and thereby cause distress, such a life is also far from my ideal in other important ways. Contrary to what Professor Smyth might have his readers believe, I *do* think that the subjective feel of a life makes a significant (but not a decisive) contribution to life's actual quality. Subjective features are crucial to any plausible conception of an objective conception of wellbeing. (However, they cannot be all there is to it.)

Another parody of my position: I had said that a "meaningful life is one that transcends one's own limits and significantly impacts others or serves purposes beyond oneself"<sup>40</sup> and that therefore, "it seems odd to think that lives devoted to watching soap operas ... would be meaningful even if they were felt to be meaningful by the persons who lived them"<sup>41</sup>. To this Professor Smyth responds that "some alert readers will notice that watching entertaining programming ... could easily bestow meaning on an *afternoon*" (my emphasis). Let us set aside the difference that might be made by

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<sup>39</sup> *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., p. 26. Here I quote only the conclusion, which is supported by some further comments, which I encourage critical readers to review.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 25

spending an *afternoon* rather than a *lifetime* watching soap operas. It is still not clear that what an afternoon watching soap operas adds is “meaning” rather than something like “relaxation”, “distraction”, or perhaps even “pleasure”.<sup>42</sup>

In another objection, Professor Smyth professes ignorance about what I mean by “perspective” when I say that lives can have (or lack) meaning from different terrestrial perspectives and especially from the cosmic perspective. What I said to elucidate this, does not seem to help him. He wants to know “what *is* the cosmic perspective ... if it is not actually a perspective?” He seems happy with reference to a “God’s eye view” even if that is figurative, but he ignores that one sense in which we can speak about a “cosmic perspective” is as a “God’s eye view”.

However, this is not the only way in which we can imagine a cosmic “perspective”. We need only imagine any other suitably endowed agent who could zoom out sufficiently far to “view” parts or all of the cosmos in order to see what positive impact a life on earth has beyond our globe. If there is *some* such impact then there is that degree of cosmic meaning, but if there is no such impact then there is no cosmic meaning.

This is no more mysterious than the “human perspective”. Humanity is not itself an agent, but that does stop us from saying that some lives have an impact on vast swathes of humanity. Such lives have meaning from the (figurative) perspective of humanity. Those who recognise that the concept of a “perspective” can be used in such figurative ways will recognize that this usage is not undermined by the literal insistence that “the cosmos is not and cannot be an agent”.

Professor Smyth has another objection that arises from my talk of “perspective”. He suggests that my allegedly impersonal view begins to show “cracks” because “*it is an anti-subjectivism which ends up in a profoundly subjective place*” (emphasis in the original). However, this objection is just another manifestation of insistent literality.<sup>43</sup> To speak about perspectives in the figurative ways that I have, is not to be “in a profoundly subjective place”. If it were, then all the earlier arguments that Professor Smyth has characterized as impersonal could immediately be recharacterized as subjective and personal, which would not serve Professor Smyth’s argument well.

## 6. Anti-natalism and pro-mortalism again: A response to Ema Sullivan-Bissett

In her paper, Ema Sullivan-Bissett argues that anti-natalism leads to pro-mortalism, by which she means “the view that it is better to cease to exist”.

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<sup>42</sup> Perhaps an afternoon of watching soap operas would add meaning if the watching were a way of bonding with a parent, child, spouse or friend.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Nagel, whom Nicholas Smyth cites approvingly, refers to “‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ perspectives in philosophy” and authored a book entitled *The View from Nowhere*. If all perspectives are necessarily subjective, what is an objective perspective? And what exactly is a *view* from nowhere?

## Whether death is a harm:

Part of her paper is a response to my reply to an earlier paper of hers in which she (then with a co-author) also argued that anti-natalism leads to pro-mortalism. To the extent that she still disagrees with me – and I suspect that this is less than it seems – I believe that she is making fundamentally the same mistakes as she made before. These include failing to distinguish what anti-natalism leads to, and what anti-natalism combined with other views may lead to.

In my earlier reply, I denied that anti-natalism by itself leads to pro-mortalism, but I agreed that if anti-natalism were combined with an Epicurean view that death is not bad for the one who dies, it could lead to pro-mortalism. There are many places in her latest article where Dr Sullivan-Bissett seems to recognize this, and yet she insists that “to think that the asymmetry does not imply pro-mortalism is just to ignore the possibility that one is not deprived by death”.<sup>44</sup>

One problem with this claim is a logical one. Assume that: i) If (X and Y), then Z. It does not follow from this that: ii) If X then Z.

In other words, if i) is true, we cannot then say that “to think that X does not imply Z is to ignore the possibility that Y”. This is because it is not X, but rather “X and Y”, that implies Z.

A second problem arises from the difference between “ignoring the possibility” that the Epicurean view is correct and rejecting that view. Dr Sullivan-Bissett knows that I do not ignore the possibility, because she engages (some of) my arguments against the Epicurean view. She says that I need to have “shown” that the Epicurean view is false. I am not sure what she means by “shown”. If she means “proves”, I have long acknowledged that there are no proofs that the Epicurean view is mistaken.<sup>45</sup> By the same token, there are no proofs that the Epicureans are correct. (If Dr Sullivan-Bissett thinks that she has provided such a proof she is mistaken.) However, asking for proofs is asking for too much. I provided a wide array of reasons for thinking that the balance of considerations favour rejection of the Epicurean view.

Dr Sullivan-Bissett seems to disagree with me, but there are at least two broad kinds of response to that disagreement. First, even if we do not expect her to “prove” her view, her responses to my arguments are wanting. For example, she engages *only some* of the considerations I advanced. Instead of my rehashing all the considerations she has ignored, I shall simply refer the reader to them.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, in some of the cases in which she purports to be responding to an argument of mine, the argument is not one that I actually advance. For example, while I did observe that Epicureanism is a minority view, I did not suggest that this was an argument against the view. Indeed, I specifically noted that the fact that “they are

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<sup>44</sup> Strictly speaking, it is not the *asymmetry* but rather anti-natalism that, if combined with the Epicurean view, leads to pro-mortalism.

<sup>45</sup> For example, *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., p. 126.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 92–141.

in a minority does not mean that they are wrong”,<sup>47</sup> which was why I then provided arguments against this view.

Even when she does engage arguments that I advance, her responses do not settle the question. Consider my argument that the Epicurean cannot explain why killing somebody painlessly would be bad for that person. In response, she offers Simon Cushing’s suggestion that the Epicurean could argue that even though the murdered person is not harmed, he or she is wronged. It is not clear, however, that anybody advancing the Epicurean argument could respond in this way without inconsistency. After all, when the “victim” is still alive there is nobody who can be said to be wronged by having been killed because the person is still alive, and once the “victim” is killed, there is no longer anybody who can be said to be wronged. I do not presume that there is nothing more to say about this,<sup>48</sup> but only that her arguments do not settle the question.<sup>49</sup>

The second broad kind of response is to ask what our response should be to the fact that the Epicurean view has neither been proved nor disproved. It certainly should not be to assume its truth and to claim that, combined with this truth, anti-natalism leads to pro-mortalism. Perhaps Dr Sullivan-Bissett will reply that I cannot similarly assume the falsity of the Epicurean view in order to deny that anti-natalism leads to pro-mortalism. However, that is not what I did. In addition to arguing against the Epicurean position, I considered the various possibilities and (sometimes) their implications:

0) Anti-natalism by itself does not lead to pro-mortalism.

1) If Epicureanism is false, then anti-natalism cannot be combined with this view to lead to pro-mortalism.

2) If Epicureanism is true, then that view, combined with anti-natalism, may lead to pro-mortalism, but there are then two responses to this:

(a) The pro-mortalist implication is a reductio of anti-natalism.

(b) The pro-mortalist implication is not a reductio of anti-natalism.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 123. I acknowledge that what I say elsewhere might have been insufficiently clear to ward off the misinterpretation. (See “Every conceivable harm: A reply to (more of) my critics”, *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31/1 (2012), p. 158.) However, the fact that the Epicurean view is embraced by a minority does have some relevance. If you are among the vast majority of people, you do not accept the view that Dr Sullivan-Bissett acknowledges needs to be combined with anti-natalism to lead to promortalism. You are then hardly in a position to tell me that if anti-natalism were combined with a view that neither you nor I hold, then anti-natalism would lead to pro-mortalism. That would be of merely theoretical interest.

<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Simon Cushing has a reply to such an objection (even though it was not worded in this way). See Simon Cushing, “Don’t Fear the Reaper: An Epicurean Answer to Puzzles about Death and Injustice,” in Kate Woodthorpe (Ed.), *Layers of Dying and Death* (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press 2007), pp. 136–7.

<sup>49</sup> She seems to recognise this, because she says a view like Simon Cushing’s “*might* have the resources to retain the badness of murder” (my emphasis).

Dr Sullivan-Bissett has indicated that (b) is the correct description of her view. I agree that that is the appropriate response to 2) for an Epicurean. However, I was – and am – responding not only to people such as her, but also to those who instead respond to 2) by saying (a). That is precisely the view that Dr Sullivan-Bissett’s earlier co-author accepted. I shall not fully rehearse my response to (a) but, in summary, it is that the implications of Epicureanism are much more alarming than those of anti-natalism (when anti-natalism is not combined with Epicureanism). If one does not take the implications of Epicureanism to be a *reductio* of that view, then one has very little reason to think that the implications of the combination of views should constitute a *reductio* of anti-natalism.

If Dr Sullivan-Bissett is willing to accept 0), 1), and 2) and to acknowledge that there are both the (a) and (b) responses to 2), and if she is willing to accept my reply to both (a) and (b), then there is no disagreement between us on those matters. We can then focus any future discussions on whether the Epicureans are right about death.

### **A complication:**

I have allowed that anti-natalism combined with Epicureanism “could” or “may” lead to pro-mortalism. However, it *might* be impossible to combine these positions. To the extent that anti-natalism is based on an assessment that coming into existence is a net harm to the person brought into existence, it rests on a comparison between two states – one in which that person exists and one in which the person does not exist. According to an influential reading of the Epicurean argument, this is precisely the kind of comparison that the Epicurean rejects. On this reading, the Epicurean thinks that a state can only be good or bad for a person if the person exists in that state. Similarly, when making comparisons between two states they think that one state can only be better or worse for a person if the person exists in both the states. This is the so-called “existence requirement”.

If the Epicurean argument rests on the “existence requirement”, then the very reason why Epicureans have the view they do about death would block their acceptance of my anti-natalist argument. In the reverse direction, it is my rejection of the “existence requirement” which both underpins my central anti-natalist arguments and facilitates my rejection of the Epicurean view of death. It is for this reason that Dr Sullivan-Bissett may be mistaken that “the Epicurean can help herself to the component of Benatar’s asymmetry which has it that the absence of pain is good, even if there is nobody to enjoy that good”.

### **Whether continuing to exist is a fate worse than death:**

Dr Sullivan-Bissett says that I am “highly permissive about the contexts in which suicide is better than continued existence” but complains that I do not draw the more extreme conclusion that “suicide is always preferable to continued existence”. She thinks

that this is incompatible with my arguments about how awful the human predicament is.

Her complaint is based, in large part, on her view that death is not bad for the person who dies. If life is awful and death is not bad, then it seems that suicide would be better for oneself than continuing to exist.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, if death is not at all bad for the person who dies, it might be better than continued life, even if life contained only modest amounts of bad. (I set aside here the complication considered in the previous section.)

For reasons mentioned and referred to earlier, I am not bound to accept the Epicurean view of death. If, as I maintain, death *is* bad for the person who dies, then for suicide to be the best prudential option, the bad within a life has to be sufficiently great in order to outweigh the bad of death. When suicide is prudentially warranted will then depend on just how bad both (a) continued life, and (b) death are. The worse death is, the worse continued life has to be before suicide is prudentially indicated. To the extent that Dr Sullivan-Bissett does not assume the Epicurean view of death in her arguments, she seems to lose sight of the need to determine the relative weight of these factors.

For example, she responds to my argument that sometimes suicide is not warranted in the earlier parts of life because the worse parts of those lives come only later, by saying that “at least some of the more mundane qualities that make for appalling lives are present early on (form-filling, queuing, full bladders and bowels, and so on)”. However, bad those things are, one has to have quite a low estimation of death’s badness if one is to think that it is better than having more of these experiences.

I also argued that death is often not a solution to life’s problems because it is not an escape from some features of the human predicament. These include the badness of death itself, but also the challenges of infusing one’s life with meaning. I argued that, all things being equal, the earlier we die the less opportunity we have to generate meaning.

In response, Dr Sullivan-Bissett says that ceasing to exist “need not get one out of all dimensions of the human predicament to be a reasonable response to it, or even the best response to it”. She says that partial solutions “can be both reasonable and the best”. I agree in principle with that general claim. However, there is still a weighing-up to be done. If the quality issues are not yet that bad and one can generate more meaning, there are good reasons to delay death. In other words, although ceasing to exist does not have to solve *all* our problems, it does have to solve enough of them and be worth the cost.

The analogies that Dr Sullivan-Bissett provides do not help her case. Consider the stronger of these analogies – that of Jill, who is in an unhappy relationship. We are told that the breaking up with her partner is part of her predicament – something about which she will feel sad. We are also told that the relationship will “end in a

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<sup>50</sup> Dr Sullivan-Bissett recognizes that there might be other-regarding reasons to desist from suicide.



few months when she moves across the world”. Given the description of this case, and assuming that relevant details have not been omitted, I agree that breaking up earlier than the move abroad may well be reasonable. But all that means is that this may be an analogy to those cases in which suicide *is* preferable to continued existence. (Notice, too, that Dr Sullivan-Bissett does not suggest that Jill use suicide as a way out of the relationship. If the relationship is bad enough to warrant breaking up, it does not follow that it is bad enough to warrant suicide. This is because death is typically worse than breaking up.)

Factors that could change our judgement about Jill’s situation and lead us to think that she should wait until her emigration to break up, would include: just how unhappy the relationship is, how many other problems would be created by a short-term local move before the emigration, and whether staying in the relationship a while longer could endow the ill-fated relationship with some (even partially) redemptive meaning. In any event, if a break-up is inevitable, it is one of those bads – unlike death – that is better to get over earlier (all things being equal).

Dr Sullivan-Bissett responds to this last point by arguing that just because we cannot get over something bad, does not mean that we should delay it, especially if delaying this bad results in our experiencing other bads in the interim. Again, I agree with that general point, and with the application to the case of Jill, but it would be a mistake to infer that the bad of death is not often worth delaying. Again, Jill could avoid all the unhappiness both of the relationship and of the break-up if she killed herself instead of either persisting with the relationship or breaking up. Even though her eventual death is inevitable, it does not follow that killing herself is in her interests. This is partly because death is typically worse than a break-up (and much more).

Dr Sullivan-Bissett also takes issue with my argument that because many people’s subjective assessment of their quality of life is better than an objective assessment would be, and because the subjective assessment can create a feedback loop in which the objective quality comes less bad, there are cases in which suicide is not in the person’s best interests.

She seeks to use my own words against me by noting that in discussing the quality of life I had argued that even if there is a feedback loop that makes our lives feel better, “this is not sufficient to obliterate the distinction between one’s perceptions of the quality of one’s life and one’s actual quality of life”. Contrary to what Dr Sullivan-Bissett may think, this statement does not undermine the limited point I seek to make about suicide. Here are three categories of lives:

i) Those that even in the absence of the feedback loop, are above the threshold that renders a life prudentially worth continuing.

ii) Those sufficiently beneath this threshold that the feedback loop does not render life prudentially worth continuing (even if one cannot see that oneself).

iii) Those whose objective quality, absent the subjective over-estimation, is just below the threshold. In these cases, the effect of the subjective assessment on the objective quality might be sufficient for death not (yet) to be in one’s interests.

I recognize that there can be disagreement about how many lives fall into each of these categories. The answer will depend, again, on just how bad both continued life and death are. My view is that the quality of life is poor, but that for much of most lives, death is even worse. Perhaps I am mistaken about how bad death is. However, as I have argued elsewhere, when it comes to ceasing to exist (unlike coming into existence), there is no side of caution on which to err.<sup>51</sup> Overestimating death's badness has costs, but so does underestimating it.

## 7. Understanding the risk-based argument for anti-natalism: A response to Erik Magnusson

It is unclear whether Erik Magnusson rejects the anti-natalist conclusion. What is clear is that he rejects what he takes to be my version of the risk-based argument for this conclusion. In response, I shall argue that he has failed to show that my riskbased argument is flawed.

He presents my version of the argument in this way:

1. It is impermissible to non-consensually impose a risk of catastrophic harm on others when there is a high probability of occurrence;
2. Bringing a child into existence involves non-consensually imposing a highly probable risk of catastrophic harm on that child; therefore,
3. It is impermissible to bring children into existence.

He considers objections to the first premise, but his focus is on the second premise, which he takes to be the weaker of the two. However, before I discuss his objection to the second premise, I want to suggest that the first premise should be refined for a reason that Dr Magnusson acknowledges but does not include in his reconstruction of my argument. This refinement is the addition of a proviso that there is insufficient justification for the infliction of the risk of catastrophic harm. So revised, the first premise might read:

1'. It is impermissible to non-consensually impose a risk of catastrophic harm on others when there is a high probability of occurrence, *and there is insufficient justification for the imposition of that risk of that harm.*

This is not the refinement that Dr Magnusson proposes in his own version of the risk-based argument. Instead of my italicized addition, he adds the proviso "unless doing so is necessary to advance their interests".<sup>52</sup> I prefer my formulation because it is

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<sup>51</sup> Moreover, given the difference between "never coming into existence" and "ceasing to exist", it is not strictly accurate to say that death is "a return whence we came".

<sup>52</sup> He also drops the clause "when there is a high probability of occurrence". I shall discuss that unnecessary change when I respond below to his rejection of the second premise in my argument.

neutral between those who think that the justification must lie in the interests of the person on whom the risk of catastrophic harm is visited, and those who think that the justification could also lie in the interests of others.<sup>53</sup> For this reason, my formulation should have broader appeal.

For the argument to work, the second premise also needs to be revised in order to carry over to that premise, the revised middle term of the syllogism:

2☒. Bringing a child into existence involves non-consensually imposing a highly probable risk of catastrophic harm on that child, *with insufficient justification for imposition of that risk of that harm.*

## **Against making molehills out of mountains:**

Dr Magnusson's objection to the second premise in (his version of) my argument turns on a mistaken (and even hyperbolic) understanding of "catastrophic harm".<sup>54</sup> He interprets this to "mean harm of a magnitude that would cause us to question whether a person experiencing that harm could be living a worthwhile life, or a life that is of at least some value to her". Given such an interpretation, he takes the second premise to be false in very many cases of procreation. In other words, bringing a child into existence does not impose a highly probable risk of a catastrophic harm understood in this way.

The first problem with his interpretation of "catastrophic harm" is that the correct standard for determining whether something counts as such a harm is not whether the afflicted person is "living a worthwhile life" or whether life has "at least some value" to the person whose life it is. Whether life is "worthwhile" can connote a *purpose* rather than the *quality* of life. Similarly, life can have "at least some value" even in the face of catastrophe. Indeed, sometimes a harm is catastrophic precisely because it threatens life.

A second but related problem is that far too many people have very low standards for what counts as a life worth living. A harm does not have to meet those low standards in order to count as catastrophic. Dr Magnusson's failure to see this may explain why he says that "as terrible as it can be to suffer from a disease like cancer ... it is debatable whether it falls into the category of catastrophic harms".<sup>55</sup> Perhaps I could be persuaded that some early diagnosed, easily treatable malignancies, while very unfortunate, are not catastrophic. However, life-threatening cancers, the treatment of which causes immense suffering, is most certainly catastrophic, at least if one understands catastrophe in one of its plain senses: "an event causing great ... damage or suffering".

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<sup>53</sup> Dr Magnusson does consider this possibility later in his paper, when he considers possible objections to his preferred version of the risk argument.

<sup>54</sup> To clarify, the term "catastrophic harm" was not one that I used, but if understood in its plain sense, it is a fair representation of the harms about which I was speaking. (Dr Magnusson, as I shall now show, does not understand the term in the correct way.)

<sup>55</sup> This is one of a few reasons why his thought experiment about the cancer patient fails.

A third problem is that Dr Magnusson's interpretation of "catastrophic harm" is far more demanding than it needs to be, in order to accord with our ordinary standards about when the imposition of risks is unacceptable. (This brings us back to the first premise.) According to our ordinary standards, there is a very strong presumption against the permissibility of exposing non-consenting people to a high probability of suffering from conditions such as cancer. For example, if smoking in the presence of a non-consenting smoker put the latter at an approximately 38.5% chance of developing lung cancer,<sup>56</sup> I think it would be clear that smoking in the presence of a non-consenting non-smoker would be wrong. Indeed, many people think that smoking in the presence of non-consenting non-smokers is unacceptable even with the actual, much lower chances of causing them to have cancer.

Of course, cancer is only one of the terrible things that can befall any being who one brings into existence. In my earlier work, I presented many other examples too. Dr Magnusson is correct that "a list is not an argument" but he is mistaken in thinking that I only provided a list of (catastrophic) harms. It is quite clear that if the risk of only cancer is as high as it is, the cumulative risk of all the possible catastrophes that can befall us is outrageously high.

## Justification:

Premise 2' includes a clause that is absent from Premise 2 – namely, that there be insufficient justification for infliction of the high risk of catastrophic harm. Perhaps some will argue that there sometimes *is* such justification, rendering Premise 2' inapplicable in such cases. However, it is very difficult to see how there could routinely be such a justification.

Dr Magnusson considers but rejects the possibility that the justification might lie in the interests of the child created. Given my formulation of 2', I have to consider the possibility that some might think that the justification could lie in the interests of people other than the person created. It is certainly possible to imagine such cases, and I did write about such a possibility in my discussion of phased extinction in *Better Never to Have Been*.<sup>57</sup> However, it is extraordinarily difficult to see how procreation could be justified in all but the most exceptional of cases – and even then, only if we accept certain utilitarian views. Just which interests would justify the routine infliction of high risks of catastrophic harms? For example, it is hard to see how parental interests in procreating or in rearing children could justify the infliction of such risks of such harms.

To see why this is so, consider an imaginary scenario in which a couple's procreating would put some *other* couple at a very high risk of suffering from cancer. It should be clear that in such circumstances, it would be wrong for the initial couple to procreate.

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<sup>56</sup> In *Debating Procreation*, opus cit., p. 68, I noted that in the UK, forty percent of men and thirty-seven percent of women develop cancer.

<sup>57</sup> *Better Never to Have Been*, opus cit., pp. 182–193.

If that is the case, why should procreation become acceptable in the actual cases in which the offspring (rather than some other couple) is put at high risk of cancer as a result of their parents' procreating? For this reason, Dr Magnusson is mistaken in saying that my drawing an analogy between procreation and Russian roulette "is surely unwarranted".

## 8. Conclusion

In responding to the papers collected in this special issue, I am mindful of the many other critical responses to my work that have been published elsewhere and to which I have not responded. There are now too many to reply to, but I am no less grateful to those authors for their interest in my work, than I am to the authors whose papers I have engaged in this article.

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When I presented a paper critiquing Benatar's anti-natalism at a conference he hosted in 2008, he informed me that I should contemplate the fact that if I had not had my children, they would not have to suffer.

# Better to Return Whence We Came

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I argue that David Benatar's anti-natalism leads to pro-mortalism (the view that it is better to cease to exist) because the human predicament as he describes it is a fate worse than death. Thus, continued existence in such a predicament is not preferable to an exit from it. I revisit my earlier argument for the claim that Benatar's (2006) asymmetry between pleasure and pain paved the way for pro-mortalism unless Epicureanism about death is ruled out. I reply to Benatar's response to that argument. I then turn to Benatar's (2017) characterization of the human predicament and suggest that that also leads to pro-mortalism. I respond to three arguments from Benatar that seek to block the move from our predicament to pro-mortalism. I conclude that if Benatar is right about the predicament we find ourselves in, it is better for most people to *return whence they came*.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Preliminaries

Benatar motivates his anti-natalism with two arguments: the argument from asymmetry and the argument from the appalling quality of our lives. Let us start with the first.

The asymmetry has it that existing people experience pleasure, which is good, and pain, which is bad. For each case of non-existence, there is an absence of pain, which is good (even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone), and an absence of pleasure, which is neither good nor bad (such absences are bad only if there is somebody for whom the absence is a deprivation). As Elizabeth Harman puts it:

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<sup>1</sup> I take this language from Sophocles (*Oedipus at Colonus*, cited in David Benatar), *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 212.

Never to have been born is best  
But if we must see the light, the next best  
Is quickly returning whence we came.

By bringing someone into existence, one harms her by causing all the bad aspects of her life. By bringing someone into existence, one does not benefit her at all by causing the good aspects of her life.<sup>2</sup>

I have previously argued that Benatar's asymmetry leads to pro-mortalism, the view that it is better to cease existing than continue existing.<sup>3</sup> If that is right, I suggested, Benatar's asymmetry leads us to the view that suicide is preferable to continued existence. There is, admittedly, a move here from *non-existence* being preferable to existence, to *a particular route* (suicide) to non-existence being preferable to existence. And there is, of course, room to deny the *particular route* claim even whilst accepting the *non-existence* claim. For example, if the particular route to one's demise had some feature which trumped any benefits of non-existence and costs of existence, then perhaps the asymmetry would call for non-existence as a destination but not for one to pilot the journey. Might Benatar exploit the gap between the claims of *non-existence* and *particular route*? Candidate approaches for doing so might include holding suicide to be so morally egregious that it trumps any considerations which might otherwise motivate it. Another option might relate to the possible ramifications of suicide for the afterlife one is likely to enjoy, or one's relationship with God. Benatar is not in the business of exploiting the gap in these ways. He is clear that although suicide is sometimes morally wrong, it is not always,<sup>4</sup> and his argument against the 'theistic gambit' with respect to life's meaning(lessness)<sup>5</sup> suggests that a similar gambit in this context would not be indulged (he also notes in his discussion on suicide that he will assume that there is no afterlife<sup>6</sup>). I proceed then with a benign equivocation between it *being better for one not to exist* and it *being better to end one's life*, speaking in the former terms where possible.

One more clarification is called for. I am understanding pro-mortalism strictly as defined earlier, as the view that *it is better to cease to exist*. It is this view which I think is a natural endpoint of each of Benatar's two arguments for anti-natalism. A slightly different version of pro-mortalism might have it that *ceasing to exist is morally or rationally required*.<sup>7</sup> I will presume that these versions are different insofar as something can be best for us even if it is not thus morally or rationally required of us to bring that thing about. This is especially important to keep in mind when we turn to the importance of subjective evaluations of one's quality of life (§6). Let

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Harman, "Critical Study: David Benatar. Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence," *Noûs*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2009): 776–785, p. 776.

<sup>3</sup> Rafe McGregor and Ema Sullivan-Bissett, "Better No Longer to Be," *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2012): 55–68.

<sup>4</sup> David Benatar, *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 36–45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>7</sup> For an argument that suicide is not even rationally evaluable, see Christopher Cowley, "Suicide is Neither Rational nor Irrational," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 9 (2006): 495–504. If Cowley is right the kind of pro-mortalism I have in mind is unaffected.

us begin then by briefly revisiting my earlier argument, and responding to Benatar's reply.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Death is a Harm

In a previous paper I suggested that Benatar's asymmetry got us to pro-mortalism since when somebody ceases to exist "the result is: an absence of pain, which is good; and an absence of pleasure, which is not bad."<sup>9</sup> Of course, Benatar has an answer to this quick piece of click bait, which is built into his asymmetry: the absence of pleasure is *not bad* unless there is somebody for whom the absence is a deprivation. A natural thought then is that when a person dies they are thus *deprived* of future pleasures, and the absence of those pleasures is *bad*. In which case the most that could be said when we turn to whether it is better for someone to cease existing is that Benatar's asymmetry raises a question concerning whether the badness of being deprived of future goods outweighs the badness of continued existence. However, that that question might be the basis of whether it is better to cease to exist is hardly controversial, indeed, it may well be exactly such a weighing procedure that those who die by suicide engage in. The theoretical pay off would be Benatar's asymmetry framing or elucidating an already recognized form of deliberation about one's life and death. Indeed, Gerald Harrison notes that '[t]o think that Benatar's [asymmetry] implies pro-mortalism is just to ignore the asymmetry thesis that is central to it'.<sup>10</sup> However, as I will now argue, to think that the asymmetry does not imply pro-mortalism is just to ignore the possibility that one is not deprived by death.

The above characterization of the situation and the asymmetry's benign relationship to ending one's life only stands insofar as one is willing to endorse a view of death on which death is bad for the person who dies because it *deprives* her of future goods. This deprivation moves the absence of pleasures from *not bad* to *bad*, and distinguishes that absence for the *never-existent* compared to the *no-longer-existent*. Accordingly, there would be no grounds from the quarters of possible pleasures for bringing people into existence, since the non-experience of those possible pleasures is neither good nor bad. But there would be grounds from the quarters of possible pleasures for not ending existence, since in doing so we would create a deprivation, which is bad. That death deprives the one who dies then is crucial to Benatar's asymmetry not leading to pro-mortalism.

However, on one familiar if unpopular view of death, which we can trace back to Epicurus, death is not bad for the one who dies:

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<sup>8</sup> David Benatar, "Every Conceivable Harm: A Further Defence of Anti-Natalism," *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2012): 128–64.

<sup>9</sup> McGregor and Sullivan-Bissett, *op. cit.*, pp. 56–7.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Harrison, "Antinatalism, Asymmetry and an Ethics of *Prima Facie* Duties," *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2012): 94–103, p. 101, fn. 11.



[W]hen we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.<sup>11</sup>

If death is not bad and we are not deprived by it, the path to pro-mortalism opened up by Benatar's asymmetry cannot be blocked by appeal to deprivation. Benatar seems to recognize this and spends some time arguing against a view of death on which it is not bad.<sup>12</sup> I have previously replied to those arguments by suggesting that they can all be answered by the Epicurean.<sup>13</sup>

Before turning to Benatar's response to those replies, it is worth noting that Epicureanism about death is not a bygone position, of interest only to historians of philosophy. If it were we might happily recognise that Benatar's blocking of the path to pro-mortalism is hostage to the falsity of this view, but if no one took it seriously anyway, that fact needn't be anything to lose sleep over. However, although far from orthodoxy, Epicureanism nevertheless has some modern day proponents.<sup>14</sup> It is a live option which, if true, facilitates the move from Benatar's asymmetry to pro-mortalism. And so, contrary to Benatar's claim that refuting it is not required,<sup>15</sup> or that it is merely 'fine for the seminar room,'<sup>16</sup> its status as a live option represents a challenge for his view. If Epicureanism about death is true, then one is not deprived of future pleasures when one ceases to exist, one's death is not bad for one. By the asymmetry then, pro-mortalism follows. Let us turn to Benatar's earlier replies to this point.

He first points out that if his view *plus some other view* implies pro-mortalism that is not to undermine his claim that his view alone does not imply pro-mortalism. That is, "[t]o say that view X combined with view Y yields view Z is not to say that X entails or implies Z."<sup>17</sup> But, as Benatar points out, this could seem like a logical nicety if the Epicurean view were true. Let us reflect then on the status of Epicureanism in the context of Benatar's anti-natalism. Of course, we should recognize that almost all philosophical claims proceed with a background of relevant truths in mind. To take two examples: detailed debates about the ontology of implicit bias are downstream of

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<sup>11</sup> Epicurus, "Death is Nothing to Us," in Linda Zagzebski, and Timothy D. Miller, eds. *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: Ancient to Contemporary* (est Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009), 405–406, p. 406.

<sup>12</sup> Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, op. cit., pp. 214–17.

<sup>13</sup> McGregor and Sullivan-Bissett, op. cit., pp. 59–63.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Simon Cushing, "Don't Fear the Reaper: An Epicurean Answer to Puzzles about Death and Injustice," in Kate Woodthorpe (ed.), *Layers of Dying and Death* (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2007), 117–127; David Suits, "Why Death is Not Bad for the One Who Died," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2001): 69–84; and to some extent, Byron J. Stoyles, "Challenging the Epicureans: Death and Two Kinds of Well-Being," *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2011): 1–19; and Christopher Williams, "Death and Deprivation," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 88 (2007): 265–83.

<sup>15</sup> Benatar, "Every Conceivable Harm", op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>16</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

the claim that solipsism is false. Discussions regarding the nature of epistemic normativity would be derailed if we required discussants to refute eliminativism about belief. In these cases, theoretical inconvenience is overcome by legitimately parking positions sufficiently far from the starting terms of the debates in question. However, not all parking of inconvenient positions is legitimate. Consider those interested in what kind of mental state is constitutive of implicit bias, or the relationship between bias and behaviour. Such theorists *do* have a theoretical duty to engage with the recent scepticism concerning the very existence of implicit bias. Similarly, those concerned with the precisification of a guiding epistemic norm of belief ought to take seriously the family of views which have it that belief is essentially non-normative, and that there is, in fact, no such norm.

In the context of Benatar's philosophical programme, is Epicureanism about death analogous to solipsism in discussions of implicit bias, and eliminativism in the context of epistemic normativity? Or is it more like scepticism about implicit bias, and error theories about epistemic normativity? That is, can we park Epicureanism about death, taking its falsity for granted when in the business of defending anti-natalism from the possible bridge to pro-mortalism? Or is it incumbent on anti-natalists to establish its falsity if they wish to avoid their views motivating pro-mortalism?

Although I cannot determine the answer to this here, I'm inclined to the second option, for two reasons. First, Benatar's overall approach is, as he recognizes, replete with claims concerning the nature of our lives and the ethics of procreation that are, to put it mildly, unorthodox. Given that, it would be strange to nevertheless help oneself to the presumed falsity or irrelevance of a similarly unorthodox view on a nearby topic which has significant ramifications for his position. Second, given that Benatar spends some time seeking to refute Epicureanism,<sup>18</sup> we can take it that he doesn't consider Epicureanism to stand to his view as solipsism does to the ontology of implicit bias, or eliminativism does to the normativity of belief. It is rather a view to be reckoned with.

Benatar's second point is that very few people think that the Epicurean view of death is true.<sup>19</sup> We are not, though, given a reason to give much weight to this observation. It might be thought that positions with minority status are more legitimately parked in the way described above, but I have already noted why that would not be appropriate in this case. There is also a clear symmetry here that ought not go unremarked: Benatar's view that *existence is a harm* shares the feature of being believed by very few folk. This is something he recognizes which is why the view is often accompanied by an explanation of why we tend not to believe it.<sup>20</sup> This works to disarm she who points to the bare unpopularity of a view as suggestive of its falsity, or at

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<sup>18</sup> Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, op. cit., pp. 213–18; *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., pp. 96–136.

<sup>19</sup> Benatar, "Every Conceivable Harm", op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>20</sup> Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, op. cit.; "Every Conceivable Harm", op. cit.; *The Human Predicament*, op. cit.

least, its implausibility. If we can explain why our view might not be widely believed in spite of its truth, or even better, if our view *predicts* its own unpopularity, it is thus to some extent inoculated from that very unpopularity having any epistemic lessons to impart. It is worth noting then that just like Benatar's own unpopular views, reasons have been offered for why folk do not think Epicureanism about death is true *even though it is*.

David Suits has given an explanation of why we take death to be bad by appeal to our common experience of injuries:

The more severe the injury, the greater the pain, and the longer it will take to recover. [...] It is easy to extend such observations to include death, which is then thought of as the most severe injury because the entire organism permanently fails and no recovery at all is possible. On this psychological slippery slope, if mild damage is a mild harm, then death must be the greatest of harms.<sup>21</sup>

(Following Benatar, my discussion is in terms of *bads* not *harms*, and so we can understand Suits as explaining why we take death to be a serious *bad*.<sup>22</sup>) Just like Benatar's work on Pollyannaism and other cognitive biases as explanatory of why we find his position implausible,<sup>23</sup> here we have an explanation of the unpopularity of the Epicurean view of death. In light of these kinds of consideration, the bare unpopularity of these views is less able to get an argumentative hold.

Benatar's third point is that if Epicureanism were true, it would follow that killing somebody would not be bad for the person, which is an even harder view to accept than his anti-natalism.<sup>24</sup> However, that claim about the relative intuitiveness of positions does not—at least not without some further premises—suggest anything about the epistemic status of the Epicurean position. And, like the central idea that death is not bad, we can explain why it is widely thought that bringing about the death of a person is bad for them by appeal to similar considerations as those raised by Suits. If death is bad for someone, then murder (which brings about death) is bad for them too. But if the badness of murder is based on the badness of death, we are able to explain why folk mistakenly hold onto the latter claim, and thus also explain their commitment to the former. We might also challenge the idea that the Epicurean cannot accommodate the idea that murder is bad (even though death is not bad for the victim). This has been attempted recently by Simon Cushing, who moves from thinking in terms of *harms* to *wrongs*. He argues that one can be wronged by a death one is not harmed by, because the victim “has the right of self-determination that [the murderer's] action robs of its essential basis”.<sup>25</sup> It is unclear whether Cushing thinks it is *bad* for one to

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<sup>21</sup> Suits, op. cit., pp. 81–2.

<sup>22</sup> See Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., pp. 96–97.

<sup>23</sup> See Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, op. cit., pp. 64–9, and Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., pp. 67–71.

<sup>24</sup> Benatar, “Every Conceivable Harm”, op. cit., p. 158. See also Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., pp. 124–125.

<sup>25</sup> Cushing, op. cit, p. 136.

suffer a wrong, but a view of this kind might have the resources to retain the badness of murder, without that spreading to our characterization of death simpliciter.

Benatar's final point is that if one were an Epicurean, one would not find pro-mortalism alarming.<sup>26</sup> Again though, this is not an argument against Epicureanism, but a dialectical point about the how unsavory the putative consequence of Benatar's view is when it fails to rule out Epicureanism. If it is true that Epicureans would find pro-mortalism entirely reasonable that is fine by me; my point was and is only that Benatar's asymmetry leads to pro-mortalism, but that point was never put in the spirit of reductio. Indeed, Benatar notes that through personal correspondence he learned that one of the authors of my earlier paper took the argument from pro-mortalism to be a reductio, whilst the other took it to be merely of theoretical interest.<sup>27</sup> I am the other author, and if Benatar's anti-natalism turns out to have a surprising or unintuitive consequence, that is fine by me.

More recently Benatar has pointed out that the Epicurean has no one for whom death would be good: "[j]ust as Epicureans cannot think that death is bad, so they cannot think that death is good (or even less bad)."<sup>28</sup> Space constraints prevent a full discussion of this point, suffice to say for now that the Epicurean can help herself to the component of Benatar's asymmetry which has it that the absence of pain is good, even if there is nobody to enjoy that good. Even Epicureans can talk about what is *better*, just as Benatar talks about it being better never to have come into existence (even though there is nobody for whom it is better).

Overall then, Benatar's reason for denying that we get to pro-mortalism from his asymmetry requires the falsity of Epicureanism about death, which has not been shown. I turn now to Benatar's second argument for anti-natalism, which is based on the appalling quality of human lives. I will argue that from this argument we also arrive at pro-mortalism.

### 3. The Human Predicament and Pro-mortalism

The claim that *life is awful* is given a book length defence in Benatar's *The Human Predicament*. To summarise, the human condition is a "tragic predicament" from which we cannot escape.<sup>29</sup> This can be seen by reflection on its inevitable features.

First, our lives have no *meaning* from the perspective of the universe,<sup>30</sup> and at best they have very limited terrestrial meaning. As Katie Mack puts the point:

Whatever legacy-based rationalization we use to make peace with our own personal deaths (perhaps we leave behind children, or great works, or somehow make the world

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<sup>26</sup> Benatar, "Every Conceivable Harm", op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>28</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 35.

a better place), none of that can survive the ultimate destruction of all things. At some point, in a cosmic sense, it will not have mattered that we ever lived. The universe will, more likely than not, fade into a cold, dark, empty cosmos, and all that we've done will be utterly forgotten.<sup>31</sup>

Benatar takes it to be “deeply disturbing” that our lives are meaningless from the cosmic perspective.<sup>32</sup> Despite our trials and tribulations, the ups and the downs, we are left facing “the pointlessness of the entire human endeavor.”<sup>33</sup>

Second, the overall *quality* of our lives is appalling. Whilst recognizing that there is huge variation in the quality of human lives, Benatar argues that even the best of those lives are not good ones. On the best of days each of us experiences hunger and thirst, the relief of which leads to the discomfort of full bladders and bowels. Relieving *that* is sometimes easy enough, but often is not when and where one would prefer. Further, we are often not at a comfortable temperature, but are either too warm or too cold, and we spend a lot of our waking hours feeling tired.<sup>34</sup>

These are the best of days. But many of our days are not the best of days, and so involve all of the above plus additional physical and psychological discomfort and pain. From minor illnesses affecting basically everyone, to the menstrual pain, discomfort, and inconvenience suffered by women, which ends only when they go through the often highly symptomatic and difficult process of menopause. Many people also have chronic illnesses, which can be highly disabling, painful, and life-limiting. There are also the common psychological hurdles: form filling, queuing, inefficiency, job dissatisfaction, unrequited love, unfulfilled desires and ambitions, and, if we are among the lucky ones: the loss of our elders.<sup>35</sup>

Then of course there are the horrifying possibilities we face, which, when added altogether, the “cumulative risk of something horrific occurring to each one of us is simply enormous.”<sup>36</sup> To name just a handful of possible fates, we each face the possibility of becoming victim to serious burns, paralysis, cancer, depression, rape, abduction, torture, and murder.<sup>37</sup> Taken as a whole, human life is “an unenviable condition.”<sup>38</sup>

Against this assessment, Saul Smilansky has argued that the relative infrequency of suicide among humans is “a great embarrassment” for Benatar’s claims about the awfulness of human lives.<sup>39</sup> However, as I have alluded to already, Benatar’s view has the resources to accommodate its *prima facie* implausibility and its related unpopu-

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<sup>31</sup> Katie Mack, *The End of Everything (Astrophysically Speaking)*. New York: Scribner (2020), p. 206.

<sup>32</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 72–3.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 73–5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>39</sup> Saul Smilansky, “Life is Good,” *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2012), pp. 69–78, p. 71.

larity. Part of Benatar's discussion of the awfulness of life concerns the fact that we are prone to overestimating the quality of our lives, given a host of cognitive biases, including optimism bias, adaptation, and comparison.<sup>40</sup> If we corrected for such biases, we would see that the quality of our lives is in fact very poor. To simplify: if suicide occurs based on the judgement that one's life is overall bad, it is a prediction of Benatar's position that this would be an infrequent event. Indeed, he is explicit that our being self-deceived about the quality of our lives is "unsurprising from an evolutionary perspective because it militates against suicide and in favour of pro-creation."<sup>41</sup> In addition, taking one's life is an extremely difficult thing to do, even for those who do not want to live anymore; Benatar takes this to be part of the explanation for why contemplation of suicide is more common than attempt or completion.<sup>42</sup> In sum, there is no embarrassment for Benatar here.

Third, all lives end in *death* and *annihilation*. These are taken to be separate bads which are certain for every life. As we have already seen, the badness of death is based on the idea that death *deprives* us of future goods. *Annihilation*, understood as the total and irreversible *obliteration* of a person, is a bad that survives those cases in which a person is not deprived by their death. Benatar's example is of a soldier's death which is overdetermined (had he not died in a given instant, he'd have died moments later). The death does not deprive the soldier of any future goods, but his death is nonetheless bad. We can account for this once we recognize that the badness of death is not exhausted by deprivation but comes with the additional bad of annihilation.<sup>43</sup> (Although others have argued that such cases can be accommodated by the deprivation account.<sup>44</sup>)

Against this background of human lives as horrendous, Benatar is, unsurprisingly, highly permissive about the contexts in which suicide is better than continued existence. However, he stops short of saying that suicide is always preferable to continued existence. He has at least three reasons for this. The first is that death is part of the human predicament, and so suicide which results in death cannot be a solution to it. The second is that the annihilation which comes from death is something which, all else equal, is best delayed. And the third is that for those who already exist, subjective appraisals of one's quality of life can trump objective ones which would suggest that suicide is better than continued existence. I respond to these points shortly.<sup>45</sup> Two fur-

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<sup>40</sup> See Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, op. cit., pp. 64–69, and Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., pp. 67–71.

<sup>41</sup> David Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics," *Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 17 (2013): 121–51, p. 146. See also "Every Conceivable Harm", op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>42</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., p. 177.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Wareham, "Deprivation and the See-saw of Death," *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2009): 246–56, pp. 252–253.

<sup>45</sup> Some of the arguments in what remains of the paper were presented in fetal form in my review of *The Human Predicament* (Ema Sullivan-Bissett, "Review of David Benatar, *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*," *The American Journal of Bioethics*, Vol. 18, No. 7 (2018):

ther reasons for denying that suicide is always the best option if Benatar is right about the human predicament are worth noting before I do so. One reason might be found in reflecting on the other-directed obligations we have not to take our own lives.<sup>46</sup> I put this aside because I am interested in what is better for the person whose life is ended, discussion of blocking pro-mortalism via reflection on obligations to others is for another time. Another reason might draw our attention to the fact that for many lives, the worst parts come later, and so “[i]t thus might make sense for people who are still in the better part of their lives to delay suicide until the worst aspects begin to manifest themselves.”<sup>47</sup> I say two things in response. Firstly, this strikes me as a point about the extent of one of the features of our predicament across time. That is, the level at which our lives are appalling is a non-static feature of them – for many people, they are more appalling later in life. However, at least some of the more mundane qualities that make for appalling lives are present early on (form-filling, queuing, full bladders and bowels, and so on). So even if lives tend to become worse over time and our earlier lives are less bad, as Benatar puts it, “[s]omething’s being very bad is not negated by the possibility that things could still be worse.”<sup>48</sup> Second, even if our earlier lived days are only minimally appalling in terms of quality, even those days are ones marred by the other components of our predicament (meaninglessness, eventual death, and annihilation). If we put aside the foregoing considerations, at best there may be a tipping point when one has more bad to miss out on by ceasing to exist than the goods one would be thus be deprived of. *If* our lives were not overall bad in their earlier parts, then pro-mortalism would simply be true for different people at different times. Overall, there is little mileage in the fact that our lives are worse towards the end if one is seeking to block the path from the human predicament to pro-mortalism.

## 4. Death is Part of the Human Predicament

We can understand the role of death in blocking pro-mortalism in two ways. The first is that *death being bad* means that suicide is no solution to our predicament.<sup>49</sup> Earlier I argued that Benatar has not successfully ruled out Epicureanism about death. If death is not bad for the person who dies, presumably it would not be properly characterized as part of the human predicament. I will assume for the sake of argument that death is part of our predicament. The second role that death plays in blocking pro-mortalism

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4–6). Harman, *op. cit.*, p. 784, also makes the point that pro-mortalism follows from Benatar’s claims about the poor quality of our lives, although she does so relatively briefly. It has also been argued more generally that it follows from *nihilism* (no lives are, all things considered, worth living) that it cannot be better to continue to exist than to cease to exist (David Matheson, “The Incoherence of Soft Nihilism,” *Think*, Vol. 16 (2017): 127–135.

<sup>46</sup> Harman, *op. cit.*, p. 784.

<sup>47</sup> Benatar, “Still Better Never to Have Been”, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>48</sup> Benatar, “Every Conceivable Harm”, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>49</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, *op. cit.* 3.

is its not being a solution on the grounds that it *does not solve all the components of our predicament*.<sup>50</sup> I will focus mostly on this line of argument, although the badness of death will enter towards the end of this section.

Hastening one's death is said not to be a solution to the human predicament because doing so does not solve the problem of mortality, or the fact that our lives have no meaning beyond limited terrestrial meaning that some of our lives might enjoy.<sup>51</sup> Nor does it stop us from being annihilated, which, recall, is a harm independent of the harm of deprivation from death, and something which "only deepens the predicament".<sup>52</sup> It cannot be said then that the human predicament warrants the claim that ceasing to exist is a better response to our predicament than continued existence.

However, those who consider the natural and right response to learning of our predicament to be ceasing to exist may not be swayed by the fact that doing so does not fully spare us of our predicament. Ceasing to exist need not get one out of all dimensions of the human predicament to be a reasonable response to it, or even the best response to it. Partial solutions can be both reasonable and the best.

Compare the following case: Jemma is hungry and thirsty; call this *Jemma's predicament*. There is no food in her house, but there is water. Whether she goes to the kitchen or the bedroom she will remain hungry, but her thirst can be satiated. It is no objection to the claim that it would be better for Jemma to drink water than remain thirsty that she will nevertheless remain hungry. Similarly, our predicament is such that there is no avoiding lack of meaning or our eventual death (and annihilation), both choosing to cease to exist and choosing to continue on keeps one facing those dimensions of the predicament. This means that one can appropriately respond to the poor quality of our lives by choosing to cease to exist.

There is one way in which this analogy might be thought inappropriate. Jemma faces a situation in which she has two unsatisfied desires, the proposed course of action will satisfy one of those desires, and so she ought therefore pursue that course even whilst recognizing that her other desire will remain unsatisfied. Whereas in the case at hand, ceasing to exist is not one yet-to-be-satisfied desire among others which can be singularly satisfied, it is rather something which would relieve one of some features of a predicament, and of course, lead to the cessation of desire altogether. For those who take this disanalogy to be argumentatively fatal, I offer a closer, although slightly artificial, case.

Jill is in an unhappy relationship which is certain to end in a few months when she moves across the world. She feels sad that she faces the trauma of a break-up, and she also feels sad that the relationship consists of arguments, verbal abuse, and a lack of affection. Part of Jill's predicament then is the trauma of a break-up, but that is no reason not to bring the break-up forward. Of course in doing so Jill does not *solve*

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 2–3.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



her predicament, since the trauma of a break-up is part of that very predicament, but here, like Jemma's case, partial solutions can be appropriate. It is no argument against the claim that it is better for Jill to break up with her partner that doing so does not free her from all dimensions of her predicament (namely, the trauma of a break-up). It does however free her from arguments, verbal abuse, and the lack of affection from a partner. And this is the case even whilst recognizing that in ending the relationship prematurely, Jill will be deprived of the (albeit limited) goods of it. Just like human lives, Jill's relationship contains much more bad than good, and so whilst recognizing that she will be deprived of some goods, and that ending the relationship prematurely does not relieve her of all dimensions of her predicament, it would nevertheless be better for her if the relationship ended.

Similarly then, although we can grant that death is part of our predicament, that does not mean that it cannot be a (albeit partial) solution to it. If life is as awful as Benatar says, ceasing to exist is entirely appropriate, even whilst recognizing that death is not a cost-free solution but is rather "the second jaw of our existential vice."<sup>53</sup> But given that it releases us from the suffering of continued existence, even if it is itself a serious bad, if the human predicament is as dire as Benatar claims, it might be the best of a bad bunch of options.

## 5. Annihilation is Best Delayed

Benatar's second reason he gives for the claim that the awfulness of life does not get us to pro-mortalism is that annihilation is best delayed.<sup>54</sup> Annihilation, our total *obliteration*, is an inevitable awful feature of our lives, and is a badness of death in addition to deprivation. This means that for those attracted to the idea of death as bad but who do not buy into that being grounded in deprivation, or in cases where death deprives one of no future goods, the independent badness of our annihilation could explain why death is bad.

Of course, something being bad need not mean that it is best delayed, especially if doing so prolongs one's exposure to further bads, not least the bad of anticipating the delayed bad. The calculation might change if annihilation had some additional features which means it is, all else equal, best delayed. This is indeed Benatar's claim – he argues that it is best to delay annihilation because *one cannot get over it*.<sup>55</sup>

However, why think that this additional feature of the bad of annihilation is thus a reason to delay? Perhaps in cases where life is overall good *but* for annihilation this would make sense. But Benatar thinks that there are no such lives, rather, even when we have not been annihilated things are very bad, and there is more bad than good in

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 133.

our lives. Given that, why would it be good to delay the inevitability of a bad which would relieve us of other bads?

Let us return to Jill. Imagine that Jill never gets over the relationship break-up, and let us stipulate also that she knows this. Does that fact give her a reason to delay it? I don't think it does once we take into account that the relationship involves more bad than good. Even in this case where the fact that she doesn't get over it is experienced *as such*. We can grant that relationship break-ups and annihilation are bads we cannot get over, but that does not yet give us any reason to hold them off. As Kirsten Egerstrom puts it, if annihilation "is going to be a bummer no matter when it occurs, one may as well die early to avoid the future dis-value associated with a poor quality of life."<sup>56</sup>

## 6. Subjective Appraisals

The final reason Benatar gives for his view not leading to pro-mortalism is that we ought to give weight to the subjective appraisals of our lives. Although these are often not rational, Benatar nevertheless takes them to be relevant in his discussion on suicide. It might be thought that if we take these evaluations too seriously we could wonder whether the impermissibility of procreation based on objective quality of the life brought into existence could be trumped by the perceived quality of the life created. And this really matters—Benatar is all too aware that most of us judge that our lives are pretty good. So if subjective assessments matter when it comes to making a judgement on whether it is better to cease existing, could we not insist that they matter when it comes to beginning life?

This is related to the hypothetical consent objection to anti-natalism which has it that procreation is permissible since potential procreators "can [...] reasonably rely on some notion of hypothetical consent on the part of the ones created."<sup>57</sup> However, hypothetical consent in the procreation case is, at the very least, complicated. Seana Shiffrin notes that there are people who regret being born, and those who are ambivalent (even those who are glad to have been brought into existence may be engaged in defective reasoning related to failure to consider the appropriate counterfactual<sup>58</sup>). In addition, there is no cost-free escape from the condition of existence bestowed upon one if it is not to one's liking.<sup>59</sup> Asheel Singh argues that the hypothetical consent objection

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<sup>56</sup> Kirsten Egerstrom, "Review of *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions* by David Benatar," *The Philosophers' Magazine*, Vol. 78 (3<sup>rd</sup> quarter, 2017): 111–112, p. 112.

<sup>57</sup> Asheel Singh, "The Hypothetical Consent Objection to Anti-Natalism," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 21 (2018): 1135–50, p. 113.

<sup>58</sup> David Benatar, "To Be or Not to Have Been? Defective Counterfactual Reasoning About One's Existence," *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2001): 255–266.

<sup>59</sup> Seana Valentine Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm," *Legal Theory*, Vol. 5 (1999): 117–48, p. 133.

doesn't work because non-existents do not have preferences.<sup>60</sup> Benatar takes a similar line: the bar for ending a life is set in a different place from the bar for beginning a life in part because the existent typically have an interest in continuing to exist, the potential existent have no interests at all. No life is worth starting even if one knew that one's child would subjectively evaluate her life extremely positively (as most of us are wont to do). But, once dragged into the nightmare of existence, Benatar says, some lives are worth continuing, even though they are awful, "even if objectively one would be better off dead."<sup>61</sup>

Getting to this verdict requires a move from thinking about the objective quality of possible lives, to thinking (at least in part) about the perceived quality of actual lives. This is entirely sensible: in some cases, the rationality of suicide based on the objective quality of one's life can be trumped by the perceived quality of one's life (at least in part because optimistic appraisals can themselves improve one's quality of life). If Sisyphus loves his stone pushing duties, who are we to say he should stop? As Benatar puts the point:

Although their overestimation of the quality of their lives is a kind of irrationality, their perception of the quality of their lives, even if mistaken, is obviously relevant to an all-things-considered appraisal of their failure to kill themselves.<sup>62</sup>

As I tried to make clear at the outset, my aim is not to show that Benatar's anti-natalism gets us to the claim that ceasing to exist is rationally required, only that it gets us to the claim that doing so is in one's best interests. To see the point consider Jackie, who is in a relationship as awful as Jill's, but nevertheless (due to self-deception) appraises her relationship as pretty good. It could still be the case that it is better for Jackie to end the relationship, even if she does have false beliefs about its quality. Similarly, Benatar notes:

[T]here is a difference between a subjective assessment of one's wellbeing *influencing* the objective level and a subjective assessment *determining* the objective level. Even if an overly optimistic subjective assessment makes one's life better than it would otherwise be, it does not follow that one's life is actually going as well as one thinks it is.<sup>63</sup>

Even if there is a feedback loop in which our thinking our lives are better than they are actually makes our lives better, "this is not sufficient to obliterate the distinction between one's perceptions of the quality of one's life and one's actual quality of life."<sup>64</sup> Pro-mortalism then, understood as the claim that it is better for each of us to cease to exist, is not defeated by the fact that many of us overestimate the quality of our lives. Even if it is the case that, under an ends-means conception of rationality, choosing to cease to exist is not on the table for most folk, that does not mean that it is not what

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<sup>60</sup> Singh, op. cit., p. 1142.

<sup>61</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., p. 188.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 70–1.

<sup>64</sup> Benatar, "Every Conceivable Harm", op. cit., p. 156.

is best for us. As Matej Sušnik points out, Benatar's claim that all human lives are appalling is taken to be a claim about life's actual quality, not a claim about how we perceive it. Sušnik suggests that this distinction can be extended to the question of lives worth continuing:

[I]t seems perfectly consistent to distinguish between somebody thinking his life is worth continuing and his life actually being worth continuing. Armed with this distinction, one can then insist that Benatar does not rule out the possibility that most people merely think that their lives are worth continuing but that no human life is actually worth continuing.<sup>65</sup>

If the human predicament really is as bad as all that, then, from the objective point of view, lives are neither worth starting nor continuing. Unreliable subjective evaluations of the quality of one's life can stave off pro-mortalism understood as a claim about what is rationally required. But they cannot do this work when it comes to making a difference to the objective fact of whether a life is worth continuing. Defective evaluations notwithstanding, it is still better no longer to be.

## 7. Back to Deprivation

One thing that could be said in reply to the foregoing is that the awfulness of life does not get us to pro-mortalism because bringing forward one's death *deprives* one of future goods:

[I]t is quite possible to think that even a stage of life is very bad without thinking that it is bad *enough* to make death preferable. If one takes death to be an extremely serious harm then life has to be doing worse than very bad in order to make life preferable.<sup>66</sup>

There are two things to say to this. One is to refer to my earlier work and my reply to Benatar's response to it at the start of the paper, and note that Epicureanism about death has not been ruled out. And so it isn't the case that Benatar can—without further argument—rely on the claim that we are deprived by death to block pro-mortalism.

For those who find the idea of deprivation by death attractive I say this. On Benatar's view, there is much more bad than good in our lives. Even granting that we are deprived of future goods (which is bad), for most folk, the goods one is deprived of are far outweighed by the bads one avoids having to endure, after all, "while some lives are better than others, none are (noncomparatively or objectively) good."<sup>67</sup> Indeed, as Egerstrom notes, even if we grant that ceasing to exist is called for only when one's quality of life falls below some threshold (given the harm of being deprived of future pleasures), it is unclear "how the average person's life—if it as terrible as Benatar

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<sup>65</sup> Matej Sušnik, "Why Would Very Bad Lives Be Worth Continuing?" *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2020): 285–95, p. 289.

<sup>66</sup> Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been", op. cit., p. 150.

<sup>67</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., p. 67.

claims it to be—can manage to make it above that threshold.” [sic]<sup>68</sup> Benatar himself notes that “[i]f our lives are quite as bad as [he suggests], and 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.”<sup>69</sup> At the very least, even accepting the deprivation account of death, ceasing to exist is the better option *for most people*.

## 8. Conclusions

I have argued that Benatar’s anti-natalism gets us to pro-mortalism. I began by revisiting my earlier claim that the asymmetry got us to pro-mortalism, at least without ruling out Epicureanism about death. I replied to Benatar’s response to that earlier argument. I then looked at Benatar’s argument for anti-natalism from the quality of life. I argued that that position makes ceasing to exist the best option. I looked at three ways Benatar seeks to block the move from his anti-natalism to pro-mortalism and replied to each of them. To conclude, if Benatar is right about the human predicament, it is better for us to return whence we came.

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<sup>68</sup> Egerstrom, op. cit., p. 112.

<sup>69</sup> Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, op. cit., p. 69.

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