Misconceived: Why These Further Criticisms of Anti-natalism Fail

David Benatar

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Contents

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.[1] 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.[2] 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.

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.[3] 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] I have not had sight of the guest editors' introduction, which explains why I am not responding to any-thing they might say there.

[2] 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.

[3] 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.

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$_1$ = Withdraw

Deprive$_2$ = Withdraw or withhold

Professor Hallich then says that if we stipulate D eprive$_1$ 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$_2$, 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.[1]

In other words, the distinction between Deprive$_1$ (withdrawal) and Deprive$_2$ (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.[2]

(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.

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[1] 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.

[2] To clarify, this is deprivation in either of the senses.

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.[3]

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 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.

[3] See David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, Chapter 6.

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,[1] 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:

(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.

[1] David Benatar, "The Wrong of Wrongful Life", in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37/2 (April 2000): 175–183; David Benatar, opus cit., pp. 22–28.

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.[2] (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 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

[2] It also rests partly on empirical evidence, not all of which is psychological.

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,[3] Professor Hauskeller seems to concede that we *can* measure the good and bad in life. He says that my quality-of-live 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.[4] For example: (i) The worse pains are worse than the best pleasures are good.

(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.

[3] 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.

[4] David Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, New York: Oxford University Press 2017, pp. 76–83.

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".[5] 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. 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".[6]

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[5] *Better Never to Have Been*, opus cit., pp. 4, 31.

[6] 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).

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".[7] 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".[8] 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.*

[7] 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.

[8] 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[1]

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 meaningless 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.*

[1] I am grateful to Jessica du Toit for suggesting some stylistic improvements in my response to Professor Metz.

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.

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.[2] 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[3] 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

[2] 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.

[3] 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.

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 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 its still being 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 proximous 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.[1] 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.

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.[2]

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 mas-

[1] These words were her daughter's reaction, but Professor Overall says that she agrees.

[2] 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:

sive 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.[3] 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 the meaning provided by future generations. That problem cannot be prevented, but rather only delayed through a procreational Ponzi scheme.[4]

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

[3] It is not called pro*creation* 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".

[4] I used this term in *Debating Procreation,* opus cit., pp. 129–130.

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.[5]

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 bads 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

[5] 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.)

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,[6] 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,[7] 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.

While his view was plausible, I was not making the claim that it was correct.[8]) The second distinction to be drawn is another that Professor Overall elides:[9]

(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

[6] 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.

[7] *Better Never to Have Been*, opus cit., p. 63.

[8] 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".

[9] 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.

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.[10] 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 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

[10] I have raised and responded to such arguments elsewhere. See, for example, *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., pp. 83–91.

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?"[1] 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,[2] 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".

[1] 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. merri am- webst er. com/ dicti onary/ direc tive (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.

[2] 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.

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.[3] 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.[4]

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 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."[5] However, despite my claim that

[3] 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.

[4] 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.

[5] Benatar, "Still better never to have been", opus cit., p. 125.

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?[6]

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 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?

[6] Here I am simplifying the question for the sake of clarity. My asymmetry argument suggests how we should understand "net good for X".

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.[7] 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.[8] (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 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

[7] 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.

[8] 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.

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.[9] This is because I do not treat subjective assessments of quality of life as definitive.[10] The fact that I think there can be a difference between subjective assessments of life's quality and life's actually 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 (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.[11] 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

[9] 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.

[10] 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).

[11] 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.)

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.

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.*[12]

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"[13] 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[14]. 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 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".[15]

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.

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[12] *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.

[13] Ibid., p. 18.

[14] Ibid., p. 25

[15] 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.

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.[16] 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.

[16] 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?

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".

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".[1]

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

[1] Strictly speaking, it is not the *asymmetry* but rather anti-natalism that, if combined with the Epicurean view, leads to pro-mortalism.

acknowledged that there are no proofs that the Epicurean view is mistaken.[2] 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.[3]

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 in a minority does not mean that they are wrong",[4] 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 be 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,[5] but only that her arguments do not settle the question.[6]

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[2] For example, *The Human Predicament*, opus cit., p. 126.

[3] Ibid., pp. 92–141.

[4] 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.

[5] 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.), L*ayers of Dying and Death* (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press 2007), pp. 136–7.

[6] 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).

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.

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 SullivanBissett'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-Bisset 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.[7] 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)".

[7] Dr Sullivan-Bissett recognizes that there might be other-regarding reasons to desist from suicide.

However, bad those these 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 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.[8] Overestimating death's badness has costs, but so does underestimating it.

[8] 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".

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".[1] I prefer my formulation because it is 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

[1] 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.

justification could also lie in the interests of others.[2] 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".[3] 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".[4] 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".

[2] Dr Magnusson does consider this possibility later in his paper, when he considers possible objections to his preferred version of the risk argument.

[3] 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.)

[4] 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,[5] 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.*[6] 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

[5] 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.

[6] *Better Never to Have Been*, opus cit., pp. 182–193.

clear that in such circumstances, it would be wrong for the initial couple to procreate. 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.

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.

David Benatar
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University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa. David Benatar
philosophy@uct.ac.za