

Better No Longer to Be: The Harm of Continued Existence

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Better No Longer to Be¹

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Abstract

David Benatar argues that coming into existence is always a harm, and that – for all of us unfortunate enough to have come into existence – it would be better had we never come to be. We contend that if one accepts Benatar’s arguments for the asymmetry between the presence and absence of pleasure and pain, and the poor quality of life,² one must also accept that suicide is preferable to continued existence, and that his view therefore implies *both* anti-natalism *and* pro-mortalism³. This conclusion has been argued for before by Elizabeth Harman – she takes it that because Benatar claims that our lives are ‘awful’, it follows that ‘we would be better off to kill ourselves’ (Harman 2009: 784). Though we agree with Harman’s conclusion, we think that her argument is too quick, and that Benatar’s arguments for non-pro-mortalism⁴ deserve more serious consideration than she gives them. We make our case using a tripartite structure. We start by examining the *prima facie* case for the claim that pro-mortalism follows from Benatar’s position, presenting his response to the contrary, and furthering the dialectic by showing that Benatar’s position is not just that *coming into* existence is a harm, but that existence itself is a harm. We then look to Benatar’s treatment of the Epicurean line, which is important for him as it undermines his anti-death argument for non-pro-mortalism. We demonstrate that he fails to address the concern that the Epicurean line raises, and that he cannot therefore use the harm of death as an argument for non-pro-mortalism. Finally, we turn to Benatar’s pro-life argument for non-pro-mortalism, built upon his notion of interests, and argue that while the interest in continued existence may indeed have moral relevance, it is almost always irrational. Given that neither Benatar’s anti-death nor pro-life arguments for non-pro-mortalism work, we conclude that pro-mortalism follows from his anti-natalism. As such, *if* it is better never to have been, *then* it is better no longer to be.

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

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

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

1. Anti-Natalism and Pro-Mortalism

1a: The Dialectic

Benatar's argument for anti-natalism is multi-faceted; first he argues that there is an asymmetry between the presence and absence of pleasure and pain, and second that the quality of lives of sentient beings is very poor. The *prima facie* case for Benatar's anti-natalism entailing pro-mortalism can be seen to be derived from the asymmetry, which briefly¹, is as follows: the presence of pleasure and pain are good and bad respectively; and the absence of pain is good while, significantly, the absence of pleasure is not bad² (Benatar 2006: 30). We take it that the most objectionable claims here are the ones Benatar makes about the *absence* of pleasure and pain, but our concern in this paper is with what follows from his position *if* it works, so we will not spend any time discussing the plausibility of the asymmetry. If we accept the asymmetry, we see that not existing is better than existing: in World A where DB exists, DB experiences pleasure – that is good – and he experiences pain – that is bad; in World B where DB does not exist, DB³ does not experience pain – that is good – and he does not experience pleasure – importantly, that is not bad. This is because the absence of pleasure is only bad if there is somebody who is deprived by that absence, and given that 'one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed', we do not have a case of deprivation for those who never exist (Benatar 2006: 1). As such, the absence of pleasure in these cases is not bad. The thought is then that World B is the better world, and any instance of procreation is an example of a World A situation. One is therefore morally obliged to abstain from procreation. Very roughly, this is Benatar's asymmetry argument for anti-natalism.

If one accepts Benatar's asymmetry between pleasure and pain, then *prima facie* one ought to accept that suicide is always preferable to continued existence. The reason for this is straightforward: if Benatar is right that it is better never to have existed, then non-existence must still be preferable to existing even when the agent in question has

¹ We assume familiarity with Benatar's position and will make only the briefest of introductory remarks.

² See Benatar (2006: 39-40) for reasons why 'not bad' is used rather than 'not good' or 'neutral' to describe the absence of pleasure.

³ There is of course no DB in World B; we write in this way only for ease of exposition.

been unfortunate enough to be brought into existence. When the agent ceases to exist the result is: an absence of pain, which is good, and an absence of pleasure, which is not bad. This is the basic case for the claim that Benatar's anti-natalism entails pro-mortalism.

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

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

1b: Furthering the Dialectic

The discerning reader may have noticed that the way we put the *prima facie* case for the claim that Benatar's view entailed pro-mortalism, left it open to an obvious objection. We suggested that if it is better never to have existed, then similarly non-existence must still be preferable even when the agent in question has come into existence. But if Benatar can claim that only *coming into* existence – and not *existence itself* – is a harm, then pro-mortalism will not follow from his position⁴.

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

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

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

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

- (1*) denied that anyone should start smoking,
- (2*) advocated the global cessation of smoking,
- (3*) claimed that smoking was directly proportional to harm, and
- (4*) held that it was one's duty⁵ to prevent others from smoking.

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

⁴ This is not to say that Benatar can reject the claim that his anti-natalism entails pro-mortalism *only* by arguing that *coming into existence* is a harm, rather we just want to say that if he can argue this, the *prima facie* case for his position entailing pro-mortalism fails.

⁵ Benatar does not use the word 'duty' in the corresponding quote (4). However, given that he is putting forward a normative anti-natalism, we take it that our use of it in the analogy is not contentious.

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

2. The Anti-Death Argument

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

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

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

If one accepts the Epicurean line, we learn that – contra Benatar – death is not a harm. If death does not harm the one who dies, but does bring about an absence of pain, then one should adopt pro-mortalism (if Benatar's asymmetry holds¹).

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

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

¹ Further, if the claims Benatar makes about the poor quality of our lives are also right, we have a stronger case for pro-mortalism: if our lives are terrible *and* non-existence is better than existence *and* death is not a harm, suicide looks preferable to continued existence. It is the last of these three claims which Benatar resists which we seek to support in this section.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It strikes us that the Epicurean line fits the above bill². Its premises are plausible, acting on it neither necessarily reduces nor increases suffering³, and it looks as though Benatar rejects it ‘because of psychological features that compromise our judgement’ (Benatar 2006: 207). These psychological features are also displayed by the judgements we make which conflict with the Epicurean position. Indeed, as Benatar points out, ‘[t]he view that death is a harm to the one who dies is not an unreasonable view [...] It is the common sense view and underlies many important judgements we make’ (Benatar 2006: 196). An example of one such judgement is that murder is a harm, but the Epicurean is of course committed to denying this. Further, we take it that if we can explain *why* it is that people hold views inconsistent with the Epicurean line, then all the better for the latter. With regard to the view that death is a harm, David Suits has done just that:

Our common experience is of course our usual guide, and our common experience tells us that injuries may be mild or severe; they can be graded according to how much damage or pain they cause the victim, and how long it takes to recover. The more severe the injury, the greater the pain, and the longer it will take to recover. Some injuries, such as the loss of an eye or a limb, are so severe that part of the organism cannot recover, and one will remain forevermore in a damaged condition, which sometimes includes unending pain. It is easy to extend such observations to include death, which is then thought of as the most severe injury because the entire organism permanently fails and no recovery at all is possible. On this psychological slippery slope, if mild damage is a mild harm, then death must be the greatest of harms. *Our strong pre-theoretic conviction that death is a harm is a product of our usual way of thinking of things* (Suits 2001: 81-2, our italics).

This observation can also be used to explain why many people think that murder harms the victim: if death harms the victim, then murder – which brings that state about – does so too. To sum up our discussion of Benatar’s first point about the Epicurean line: Benatar claimed in a previous section that a view’s being counter-intuitive cannot, on its own, count against it (Benatar 2006: 207). In his discussion of the Epicurean position he claims that it is *more* counter-intuitive than his own and is

² One might make a case for its not doing so. Perhaps if we acted on Epicurean conclusions it would not be the case that we would ‘reduce suffering without depriving the suffering person of anything’, particularly if one thinks that the person who dies suffers a deprivation of some sort. However, this concern would not move the Epicurean because he denies that one is harmed or deprived by death.

³ One might think that acting on the Epicurean position by killing oneself would reduce suffering (that of the person who dies). However, as Benatar points out, if we follow the Epicurean reasoning, we derive the claim that death is not able to spare anybody from – or deprive anybody of – anything (Benatar 2006: 217). There might be room for claiming that acting on the Epicurean position reduces suffering *in the world* if not for the person who kills himself, but we leave this aside.

at odds with a number of other views that many people have (Benatar 2006: 214). We suggested that this was an odd move to make given his preceding discussion and further offered a reason, drawing on Suits, for why people are affected by psychological factors that arguably compromise their judgment with regard to whether murder harms the victim – one of the views Benatar offered as in tension with the Epicurean line. Given this, although we read Benatar charitably enough to not construe him as using the counter-intuitiveness of the Epicurean position as a decisive argument against it, we take it that it does not help whatsoever in countering the Epicurean line.

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

We have two things to say about Benatar’s discussion here. Firstly, Benatar goes from assuming for sake of argument that his view is mistaken and draws conclusions from this by implicitly appealing to a major tenet of it. He asks us to assume that his position is wrong; that the claim that coming into existence is a harm is mistaken. However, Benatar establishes that claim from his four premises which make up his asymmetry. As such, he cannot conclude in his discussion on precaution that *if* his view is mistaken *then* nobody is harmed, because this assumes premise four of his asymmetry: ‘the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation’ (Benatar 2006: 30). Now it would not be too controversial to take this premise to be false – a utilitarian of a particular stripe may, for example, claim that abstaining from procreation really is a bad thing because the absence of the unborn child’s pleasure is a bad thing, even though of course, that child has not been deprived⁴. So if premise four is incorrect – and it is conceivable that it might be – then it would not be true that refraining from procreating is not bad, something bad (not ‘not bad’) has been done by acting on Benatar’s position. And if we are to assume that his position is mistaken, we are presumably entitled to take any one of his premises

⁴ Even if one accepted premise four, one might still claim that acting on Benatar’s position does cause harm because somebody is in fact deprived by not being born. Saul Smilansky takes this line; he claims that he would feel regret for the unborn child and takes it that this potential child has lost out on a good life, and it thus might be that he really has been deprived (Smilansky, personal correspondence). If the absence of pleasure is bad when there is somebody for whom that absence is a deprivation, not procreating does – contra Benatar – look like a harmful act, and thus the precautionary principle does not apply. Of course, taking Smilansky’s line may well be metaphysically costly, we only mention it to show that Benatar’s claims about the precautionary principle are on shaky ground even if we allow him that ‘the absence of pain is not bad unless there is somebody for whom that absence is a deprivation’ (Benatar 2006: 30).

to be mistaken too. It is thus inappropriate for Benatar to make an implicit appeal to the truth of one of his premises in his discussion of the consequences of acting on his position if it is mistaken⁵.

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

The third point Benatar makes about the Epicurean line is that one cannot derive pro-mortalism from his asymmetry by supplementing it with the Epicurean line. This is because if death does not harm the one who dies, it cannot be good for them either. If we follow the Epicurean reasoning through from the claim that death is not a harm, we also derive the claims that death is not a benefit, and further that death is not able to spare anybody from – or deprive anybody of – anything (Benatar 2006: 217). Now it is not clear what work Benatar takes these claims to be doing, but it is worth trying to work this out as charitably as possible. We will not take issue with Benatar's suggestion that the above claims follow from the Epicurean position; it might be that there is some discussion to be had on whether or not they do, but it is not a discussion in which we will partake. Rather, for our purposes, we need to identify why Benatar thinks that it matters that these claims follow from the Epicurean line. Presumably – and we have to presume, because Benatar does not explain – the thought is this: one cannot get pro-mortalism from Benatar's anti-natalism coupled with an Epicurean view of death, because, on the basis of the latter we are to believe that death does not benefit or spare the one who dies. To motivate this point consider John: John is about to be tortured in the most awful of ways. One might think that John's death (before the torture) would prevent this awful fate from befalling him. But of course, the Epicurean (at least on Benatar's reading) is committed to saying of this case that given that death does not deprive us of good things, it does not prevent us from suffering awful things either. This might strike some people as odd. So if one is convinced by

⁵ One might think that we have been uncharitable to Benatar here; could Benatar not assume that it is only his *conclusion*, namely that pro-creation is wrong, is mistaken? Need he be willing to drop all of the premises in his asymmetry? We take it that this is good point to raise and certainly the way that Benatar *should* go in response to this worry. However, it should be noted that in discussing this point Benatar uses the word 'view', not *conclusion*, which presumably is used as an umbrella term for the asymmetry and his views on the quality of human life. As such we take it that it is legitimate to expect him to be willing to drop the tenets of his view when he appeals to the possibility that his '*view* is mistaken' (Benatar 2006: 215, our italics). We thank Thaddeus Metz for bringing our attention to this.

Benatar's anti-natalism and thinks that it would have been better never to have been *and* they take it that death is not a harm, it does not follow that they should commit suicide because – staying with the Epicurean reasoning – they will not be benefited or spared of anything by doing so.

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

We have shown that Benatar has not been successful in his brief attempt at countering the Epicurean position. He needs to do so because his anti-death argument for non-pro-mortalism – which relies on the claim that death is a harm – will not work against an Epicurean. If one takes an Epicurean line, coupled with Benatar's anti-natalism, one might take oneself to have arrived at pro-mortalism. However, the Epicurean line only undermines the anti-death argument for non-pro-mortalism⁶, and although Benatar hints at this argument, he does not fully articulate it. We turn now to his explicit argument against the claim that his anti-natalism entails pro-mortalism.

⁶ One might think the Epicurean could also say something with regard to the pro-life argument. Benatar claims that his argument for anti-natalism does not commit him to pro-mortalism because the existent have interests in continuing to exist, and life need be sufficiently severe to defeat those interests for suicide to become the preferable option. It looks like there is an implicit appeal here to the fourth premise of his asymmetry, 'the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation' (Benatar 2006: 30). If one has interests in continuing to exist, one's death would be a bad thing in that it would deprive one of future pleasures and satisfaction of interests. However, if one accepts the Epicurean line, then it seems that one's interests do not come into play precisely because the motivation behind premise four is rejected (i.e. an Epicurean would deny that a dead person can be deprived). We take it though that a stronger case can be made against Benatar's pro-life argument, and we will do so in the third section.

3. The Pro-Life Argument

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

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

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

There are at least two problems with interests and the work required of them in Benatar’s theory, one minor and one serious. First, Benatar does not provide much detail. Interests become morally relevant with the development of consciousness: at about twenty-eight weeks; from here conscious interests ‘emerge gradually’ (Benatar 2006: 148). Benatar does spend some time looking at ‘non-negligible’ (Benatar 2006: 147) empirical evidence for his claims, but such evidence does not look sufficient for

them. However, we take it that this is a minor issue, which Benatar is no doubt aware of, and one which can be resolved with further empirical work.

The main problem with interests is revealed in the discussion on the rationality of suicide, it often being ‘an irrational love for life’ that keeps many people alive (Benatar 2006: 219). Benatar provides a detailed analysis showing why our self-assessments of our quality of life are invariably optimistic, a phenomenon he refers to as Pollyannaism.¹ Pollyannaism causes most people – no matter what their circumstances – to over-value their quality of life, and the quality of life of the children they may choose to bring into existence. If Pollyannaism is indeed rife amongst human beings, then it seems that many interests in continued existence over suicide lack a rational basis.

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

Benatar’s anti-natalism is normative; he is stating that it is wrong for all human beings to procreate, as (coming into) existence is always a serious harm. He is prepared to make the claim with respect to anti-natalism but not pro-mortalism, because my own moral relevance means that my interest in increasing harm by continuing to exist is not immoral. It is still *irrational*, however. If (coming into) existence is always a serious harm, then continued existence is also always a serious harm². Benatar may have demonstrated that choosing to continue to harm oneself in this fashion is not

¹ Benatar (2006: 64) employs the term coined by Margaret Matlin and David Stang (1978).

² It might be the case that a weaker version of pro-mortalism follows from Benatar’s position, one which has it that it is only when life becomes sufficiently awful that suicide is preferable to continued existence. We discuss this possibility in the postscript to the paper.

immoral, but he is – given his views on Pollyannaism – bound to the view that the choice to continue to exist is always irrational³. In consequence, therefore: *it is always rational to commit suicide*.⁴

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

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

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

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

³ It might even be that Benatar is aware of this, at one point he claims that 'the desire to continue living may or may not be irrational, but even if it is, this is the kind of irrationality, unlike a preference for having come into existence, that should be decisive' (Benatar 2006: 219).

⁴ As we are not disputing the claim that the choice to continue existing is not immoral, we have omitted a discussion of the harm one's own suicide may cause others. Benatar rightly notes that the effect on family and friends is 'an important obstacle in the way of suicide' (Benatar 2006: 220).

bury advanced his sentimentalist view of virtue as a feeling⁵. Shaftesbury's idea was developed by Hume, who not only separated morality and rationality, but argued for a reversal of the accepted principle that desire should serve reason. All three branches of normative ethics are based on reason, from Aristotle's virtues to Kant's categorical imperative, and Mill's maximisation of utility. Emotivists may challenge the connection, but every cognitivist theory has sought vindication in the rational basis of morality. As rational beings, people usually believe that they *ought* to act in a rational manner, even if their desires lead them astray. The normativity associated with the rational may have a lower cogency than that associated with the moral⁶, but it nonetheless bears authority. We can grant that Benatar is right to state that continued existence is not immoral, but he offers a weaker version of pro-mortalism in its stead. There are two consequences of Benatar's asymmetry, therefore, and both should have been clearly stated:

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

⁵ Shaftesbury's influential work on ethics is notoriously unsystematic. His philosophy was published in a single volume, entitled *Charactersticks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* in 1711 (two years before his death).

⁶ The historical attempts to base ethics on rationality suggest otherwise, however.

4. Conclusion

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

Post Script

After a presentation¹ of this paper, a distinction was raised between two kinds of pro-mortalism; one which would recommend committing suicide *now* and another that would recommend doing so *later* (when one's life became sufficiently bad). We wanted to claim that Benatar's anti-natalism commits him to the first of these versions of pro-mortalism, but one might think that his position only commits him to the second. Of course, this is still a very bold claim and something that does not appear in Benatar's writings; so even if Benatar concedes only the second version of pro-mortalism, this is significant. However, we close by explaining why we remain convinced that Benatar's anti-natalism entails the first, stronger version of pro-mortalism, and that – as sections two and three sought to show – his anti-death and pro-life arguments to the contrary do not work.

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

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

¹ Workshop on Contemporary Anti-Natalism. University of Johannesburg, 23rd-24th November 2011.

We learn from the asymmetry that any presence of pain is a bad thing and any absence of pain is a good thing. Benatar accepts the counterintuitive result one gets if they take this to its logical conclusion: even if a life had a tiny amount of pain – a pin prick at birth – it would still be better for that life not to have begun (Benatar 2006: 49). Now if this is the case, the first version of pro-mortalism according to which it is preferable to kill oneself *now* looks to follow. It may well be the case that our lives are not too bad now (relative to the lives of others, or our own lives in the future), and so perhaps we should wait until our quality of life becomes sufficiently terrible before we commit suicide. But, as Benatar points out, our daily lives are characterised by unpleasant states; ‘hunger, thirst, bowel and bladder distension (as these organs become filled), tiredness, stress, thermal discomfort and itch’ (Benatar 2006: 71). And we learn from Benatar’s asymmetry that the absence of even these minor discomforts is a good thing, whereas the absence of the pleasures we will thus not experience is a not bad thing². Also, Benatar claims that ‘[a]ll things being equal, the longer sentient life continues, the more suffering there will be’ (Benatar 2006: 209). We take Benatar’s claim here to be about sentient life on a larger scale, rather than as applied to any particular life, but it looks like it applies here too. It is quite clear that the longer a person lives, the more suffering there will be. One can remove that suffering (the absence of which is good) by killing oneself. Not at some unspecified later date when such suffering becomes more intense, but now. Thus we have the first stronger version of pro-mortalism.

² Unless you thought that the person who dies is deprived by the pleasures that they would have experienced had they continued to live. However, this is a claim that would not be accepted by the Epicurean position and thus shows further why Benatar needs to say something in response to it.

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