

***Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence***, by David Benatar.  
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What is the most extraordinary philosophical thesis ever defended? Once while discussing this question with colleagues the following theses came to mind: (i) solipsism, according to which the self is the only thing that exists; (ii) dialethism, according to which there are true contradictions; and (iii) modal realism, according to which all possible worlds are as real as the actual world. At that time we were not aware of David Benatar's work, but the extraordinariness of the thesis that he defends in this book is certainly comparable to that of any of the above three.

The following are among the claims Benatar defends in this book:

- It is always wrong to have children.
- It would be better if pregnant women aborted fetuses in the earlier stages of pregnancy.
- Ideally, there should be no people in the world.
- It would be better, all things being equal, if human extinction happened sooner rather than later.

Although Benatar focuses on humans in the book, he says that these claims are equally applicable to any sentient beings.

One might expect the derivation of such extraordinary claims to involve complex and technical philosophical arguments. Yet that is not the case. These startling claims are straightforward implications of the central thesis for which Benatar argues: Coming into existence is *always* a serious harm. Furthermore, the derivation of this thesis itself is quite straightforward. Benatar summarises the thrust of his argument as follows: 'Although the good things in one's life make it go better than it otherwise

would have gone, one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed. Those who never exist cannot be deprived. However, by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms that could not have befallen one had one not come into existence' (p. 1). Benatar is not introducing this as a philosophical joke. On the contrary, he says, 'I am entirely serious in my arguments and I believe the conclusions' (p. 5).

Benatar's discussion is clear and intelligent. While the book contains both substantial philosophical arguments and practical implications, the author succeeds in presenting his ideas in a way that is interesting for and accessible to both philosophers and non-philosophers. As I explain below, however, his central argument seems to contain a flaw. This is disastrous because Benatar's entire discussion is based directly on this argument. In my view the above-mentioned claims are dreadful and possibly dangerous, although of course Benatar finds them perfectly reasonable. In what follows, I summarise the structure of the book and then explain where the fatal flaw lies in the argument.

In Chapter 1, Benatar explains his main claim and introduces anti-natalism, according to which it is wrong to have children. He maintains that there is a pro-natal bias in society. Chapters 2 and 3 constitute the philosophical core of this book. In chapter 2, Benatar defends, first, the modest thesis that coming into existence *can be* a harm and then a potentially much more controversial thesis that coming into existence is *always* a harm. His arguments are based on apparent asymmetries involved in accounting for the presence of pleasure, the absence of pleasure, the presence of pain, and the absence of pain. In chapter 3, he defends the idea that even the best lives are not only much worse than people think ordinarily but also very bad in themselves. He argues, by appealing to empirical research, that people's self-assessments of the

quality of their lives are unreliable. He then goes on to argue that the quality of human life is judged to be bad according to all three of the most common views of quality of life, *i.e.*, the hedonistic view, the desire-fulfilment view, and the objective list view. The rest of the book defends a number of important practical implications of his thesis.

In chapter 4, he focuses on the anti-natalist view mentioned above. He argues not only that there is no duty to procreate but that there is to the contrary a moral duty *not* to procreate. He says, however, that there is no conflict between this idea and the widely recognised right to procreative freedom because the right to procreative freedom is best understood as a legal rather than moral right. In chapter 5, Benatar contends that, once we accept the idea that early fetuses should be granted *no* moral standing, we can see that the view that coming into existence is always a harm entails the ‘pro-death’ view of abortion, according to which it would be better to abort fetuses in the early stages of pregnancy. He says that it is not abortion that requires justification, but rather failure to abort. In chapter 6, he applies his view to the whole population and addresses related questions. How many people should there be? Benatar’s answer is zero because, again, coming into existence is always a harm. Should future human extinction be regretted? Benatar’s answer is negative. He contends that extinction could be bad for those who experience its final stages, but the state of human extinction itself is not bad. Would it be worse if human extinction came sooner rather than later? His answer is, again, negative. He argues that it would be better, all things being equal, if human extinction happened sooner rather than later. In chapter 7, Benatar discusses possible objections to his argument. He tries to refute the claim that his extraordinary conclusion constitutes a *reductio* against his argument and he argues that one cannot reject his arguments on religious grounds. Benatar contends that his argument does not necessarily encourage one to commit suicide

because, even if coming into existence is always a harm, it does not follow necessarily that death is better than continuing to exist. That is, once one comes into existence it might be better to continue to exist than to terminate one's existence.

Let me now evaluate Benatar's main argument for the claim that coming into existence is always a harm. Consider his summary of the argument: 'Both good and bad things happen only to those who exist. However, there is a crucial asymmetry between the good and the bad things. The absence of bad things, such as pain, is good even if there is nobody to enjoy that good, whereas the absence of good things, such as pleasure, is bad only if there is somebody who is deprived of these good things. The implication of this is that the avoidance of the bad by never existing is a real advantage over existence, whereas the loss of certain goods by not existing is not a real disadvantage over never existing' (p. 14).

An obvious flaw in this argument is that it does not take into account the *balance* of pleasure and pain in life. More specifically, it overlooks the following facts: (i) calculating the balance between pleasure and pain is not just a matter of determining whether people exist or not and (ii) pleasure could compensate for pain, and *vice versa*. Whether or not coming into existence is a serious harm depends on how much and what kind of pleasure and pain one has. Most of us believe—reasonably, I think—that coming into existence is not a serious harm because, roughly speaking, the amount and quality of pleasure one enjoys in one's life usually compensates for the amount and quality of pain one suffers. Benatar discusses criticisms in this vein in chapters 2 and 3, but the discussion fails to address such consideration adequately. In failing to formulate such criticisms in the strongest possible way, Benatar spends too much time knocking over straw figures.

Benatar's argument faces several other difficulties but I have too little space to discuss them in detail. I conclude this review, therefore, with a more general point. Despite his defence of anti-natalism, Benatar says that it would be inappropriate to strip people of a legal right to reproductive freedom because he could be wrong. I wonder then why he could not have presented his thesis as a philosophical *puzzle* rather than as an argument. Advancing an argument that (i) is concerned with life and death, (ii) is very controversial, and (iii) has been defended by almost no one is certainly an effective way to attract attention. Yet in arguing positively for his astonishing thesis rather than framing it as a source of counterintuitive puzzlement, Benatar keeps away those who are willing to see their moral intuitions in a new light. I generally enjoy philosophical arguments that derive counterintuitive conclusions but I cannot recommend this book to everyone.

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