

**Phil 74A/Humbio 174A/Ethicsoc 174:**

**Ethics in a Human Life**

**Notes on David Benatar's argument**

*John Wilcox*

*Department of Philosophy & Department of Psychology*

*Stanford University*

Benatar's argument:

1. Premise 1: There is an asymmetry between the absence of pain and the absence of pleasure:
  - a. Explanation of the first premise:
    - i. Benatar's claim:
      1. "the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone"
      2. "the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation"
    - ii. John's interpretation of the claim:
      1. The absence of pain is good for anyone who exists or who doesn't exist
      2. The absence of pleasure is not bad for anyone who doesn't exist
  - b. Arguments for the first premise:
    - i. Argument 1: It is the best explanation for the commonly held view that while there is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence, but there is no duty to bring happy people into being
      1. Elaboration:
        - a. we think that there is a duty not to bring suffering people into existence [because] the presence of this suffering would be bad (for the sufferers) and the absence of the suffering is good (even though there is nobody to enjoy the absence of suffering).
        - b. we think that there is no duty to bring happy people into existence because, while their pleasure would be good, its absence would not be bad (given that there would be nobody who would be deprived of it).
      2. Objection to this argument:
        - a. There is an alternative explanation:
          - i. we have a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into being, but not a duty to bring happy people into existence, because we have negative duties to avoid harm, but no corresponding positive duties to bring about happiness
          - ii. Note:
            1. negative duties = duties to *not* do specific things (e.g. to *not* cause harm)
            2. positive duties = duties to *do* specific things (e.g. to bring about pleasure, to clean the dishes etc.)
        - b. Benatar's reply:
          - i. If you think we have *no* positive duties, then this is an alternative explanation of why we don't have a duty to bring kids into existence
          - ii. But if you think we have *some* positive duties, then the asymmetry still provides an explanation of why there is

specifically no positive duty to bring happy people into existence

- ii. Argument 2: It is the best explanation for the commonly held view that sometimes we do avoid bringing a child into existence because of the potential child's interests, whereas it seems strange to give as a reason for having a child that the child one has will thereby be benefited
  - 1. If absent pleasures were bad irrespective of whether they were bad for anyone who already exists, then having children for their own sakes would not seem odd
- iii. Argument 3: It explains why one does not grieve because the children which one could have had have been deprived of existence (even though remorse about not having children is remorse for ourselves)
- iv. Objection to argument:
  - 1. Not all the judgments in arguments 1-3 are shared:
    - a. E.g. positive utilitarians who are interested in maximizing pleasure would lament the absence of possible pleasure (even if no currently existing person is deprived of it)
  - 2. Benatar's reply to objection:
    - a. Positive utilitarians could draw the distinction between:
      - i. Promoting happiness of *only actual* people
      - ii. Increasing happiness by *making more* people
    - b. The preferable version of positive utilitarianism is to only make i. a requirement because:
      - i. If making more people was a requirement of morality, then "one would be regarding persons merely as means to the production of happiness"

2. Premise 2: If there is an asymmetry, it is better never to come into existence

- a. John's comment: Is this poor structure?
  - i. Benatar states:
    - 1. "If my arguments so far are sound, then the view about the asymmetry between pain and pleasure is widespread and the dissenters few. My argument *will proceed by showing how, given this common view, it follows that it is better never to come into existence.* To show this..."
    - ii. But then he goes back to defending the common view/asymmetry instead of defending what he takes to *follow* from it!
  - b. Defense of asymmetry via matrices:
    - i. His preferred matrix which he thinks is right:

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

- 1.
- ii. Two alternative matrices that restore symmetry:

1. Alternative matrix #1:

- a. Absence of pleasure goes from not bad to bad

1) Bad	3) Good
2) Good	4) Bad

- b. Benatar's reply:

- i. "if the absence of pleasure in scenario B is "bad" rather than "not bad" then we should have to regret that [a person] X did not come into existence."

2. Alternative matrix #2:

- a. Absence of pain goes from bad to not bad, and absence of pleasure goes from not bad to not good

1) Bad	3) Not Bad
2) Good	4) Not Good

- b. Benatar's reply:

- i. To the suggestion that absence of pain is not bad:  
1. "Avoiding bringing a suffering child into existence is more than merely "not bad." It is good."  
ii. To the suggestion that absence of pleasure is not good:  
1. "important question, when the absence of pleasure involves no deprivation for anybody, is whether it is also "not bad" or whether it is "bad."  
2. "If pain is bad and pleasure is good, but the absence of pain is good and the absence of pleasure not good, then there is no symmetry between pleasure and pain"

- c. The actual argument for premise 2 (finally):

- i. To assess the advantages and disadvantages we need to make comparisons

- ii. Method of comparison #1:

1. Compare 1 with 3:

- a. Then non-existence preferable to existence

2. Compare 2 with 4:

- a. His claim:

- i. The pleasures of the existent, although good, are not a real advantage over non existence, because the absence of pleasures is not bad.

- ii. For the good to be a real advantage over non-existence, it would have to be the case that its absence were bad.



- i. The example of death:
    - 1. Elaboration:
      - a. “there is a serious intrinsic tragedy in any death. That we are born destined to die is a serious harm”
      - b. Even though “How great the harm is relative to others or to the current norm... can vary”
    - ii. Objection to example:
      - 1. Death is not a harm because it is “equivalent to pre-conception non-existence”
      - 2. Benatar’s reply:
        - a. Death happens to someone (the person who dies) but pre-conception non-existence does not happen to someone (since no one exists then)
        - b. “It is, after all, the termination of me and that prospect is something that I can regret intensely”
- 5. Objection:
  - a. “non-existence is not any state in which somebody can be and so it is not possible for it to be better or worse than existing”
  - b. Benatar’s reply:
    - i. “The claim is that for any person (whether possible or actual), the alternative scenario of never existing is better”
- 6. Objection:
  - a. People resist the conclusion that existence is a harm because most do not regret existing because they enjoy their lives
  - b. Benatar’s reply:
    - i. The fact that one enjoys one's life does not make one's existence better than non-existence, because if one had not come into existence there would have been nobody to have missed the joy of leading that life and so the absence of joy would not be bad
- 7. Objection:
  - a. “just as one cannot be mistaken about whether one is in pain, one cannot be mistaken about whether one is glad to have been born”
  - b. Benatar’s reply:
    - i. Whether one is (currently) glad to have been born is distinct from whether existence is better than non-existence
      - 1. One can imagine someone who is glad at one point and not glad at another—someone who “perhaps in the midst of extreme agony, regret his having come into existence”
      - 2. If they were not distinct propositions, then it would and would not be better that they never came into existence (since they were glad at one point and not glad at another)
- 8. Exploration of question: Is it wrong to bring people into existence?
  - a. “If coming into existence is as great a harm as I have suggested, and if that is a heavy psychological burden to bear, then it is quite possible that we could be engaged in a mass self-deception about how wonderful things are for us.”
  - b. Benatar’s reply to those who disagree:
    - i. “Very often, however, people who have or acquire these same appalling conditions adapt to them and prefer existence with these conditions to never existing (or ceasing to exist) ... However, the phenomenon is equally compatible with the

claim that the ordinary threshold is set too low (so that at least some of us should pass it)... Our judgments of what constitutes acceptable limits of suffering are deeply rooted in the state of our well-being. How can we be so confident that we are not guilty of self-deception?"

ii. Question:

1. "But why should such self-deception be so pervasive? One explanation is the strong evolutionary reasons why we might be disposed to view our lives as a benefit. Such a view facilitates survival, of the individual and the species.
2. "adaptive preferences may be operative does provide one response to an objection some critics raise, that the fact that most people do not regret having come into existence provides compelling reason to think that their lives are a benefit to them and therefore that my conclusion to the contrary must be false"

9. Objection:

- a. His view implies at least that existing is not morally desirable [or ideal] and dying out is ideal:
  - i. "Although our potential offspring may not regret coming into existence, they certainly would not regret not coming into existence. Since it is actually not in their interests to come into being, the morally desirable course of action is to ensure that they do not. One implication of my view is that it would be preferable for our species to die out. It would be better if there were no more people."
- b. "Many people, but not I, find such a prospect inherently intolerable"
- c. Benatar's reply:
  - i. "It would be a heroic sacrifice, and if we do not object to heroic sacrifices in other contexts, we should not object to this."