ANTI-NATALISM *UNDER FIRE*

Prague, May 30, 2018

Program

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Institute of State and Law, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague
Institute of Philosophy, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague
Faculty of Arts, University of Ostrava

DAVID BENATAR

GREG BOGNAR

DEKE GOULD

TOMÁŠ HŘÍBEK

JIWOON HWANG

IDDO LANDAU

JASON MARSH

CHRISTIAN PILLER

ANNA SMAJDOR

MATEJ SUŠNIK

SAUL SMILANSKY

WILLIAM F. VALLICELLA

INSTITUTE OF STATE AND LAW of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Filosofický ústav AV ČR Institute of Philosophy

UNIVERSITY OF OSTRAVA FACULTY OF ARTS

Program

09:00	– 09:10	Opening Address
09:10	– 10:00	David Benatar, “Better Never to Have Been”
10:00	– 10:30	Saul Smilansky, “Between Parfit and Benatar”
10:30	– 10:45	Coffee Break
10:45	– 11:15	Anna Smajdor, “Who Put the ‘R’ in ‘ART’”?
11:15	– 11:45	Christian Piller, “On What Might Be Wrong with Benatar’s Asymmetry Argument?”
11:45	– 12:15	Jiwoon Hwang, “Benatar’s Asymmetry and Pro-mortalism”
12:15	– 13:30	Lunch
13:30	– 14:00	Jason Marsh, “Why Skepticism Defeats Pessimism: The Epistemology of Well-Being”
14:00	– 14:30	Deke Gould, “Is it Immoral to Create an Artificial Intelligence that Resembles Our Own? Anti-Natalism and Artificial Moral Agents”
14:30	– 14:45	Coffee Break
14:45	– 15:15	William F. Vallicella, “Is the Quality of Life Objectively Evaluable on Naturalism?”
15:15	– 15:45	Matej Sušnik, “David Benatar on the Quality of Life”
15:45	– 16:00	Coffee Break
16:00	– 16:30	Iddo Landau, “David Benatar’s *The Human Predicament*: On the Sensed and Real Quality of Life”
16:30	– 17:00	Greg Bognar, “Overpopulation and Procreative Liberty”
17:00	– 17:30	Tomáš Hříbek, “*Belle Époque* Anti-natalism”

ABSTRACTS

David Benatar

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN, CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA
E-mail: david.benatar@uct.ac.za

"Beter Never to Have Been"

In this presentation, I shall provide an overview of various (philanthropic) arguments for the anti-natalist conclusion that we ought not to bring new people into existence: namely, the axiological asymmetry argument, the quality-of-life argument, and the risk-of-serious-harm argument.

Greg Bognar

STOCKHOLM UNIVERSITY AND STOCKHOLM CENTRE FOR HEALTHCARE ETHICS (CHE) STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN
E-mail: greg.bognar@philosophy.su.se

"Overpopulation and Procreative Liberty"

A few decades ago, there was a lively debate on the problem of overpopulation. Various proposals to limit population growth and to control fertility were made and debated both in academia and in the public sphere. In the intervening decades, however, the idea of anti-natalist policies to limit population growth became taboo in policy discussions and was completely ignored in philosophy.

More recently, there has been a small revival of anti-natalism in population policy and social philosophy. This is in part due to the growing recognition that the demographic transition might not be completed all around the world before overpopulation causes irreversible social, political, or environmental harm. Thus, several proposals have been made to limit family size and lower fertility. However, all of these proposals are based on incentives only, and all are strictly voluntary: in their discussion, involuntary fertility control is considered coercive and therefore thought to necessarily involve a gross violation of procreative liberty and personal autonomy.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that anti-natalist population policies need not involve the violation of procreative liberty

and personal autonomy. To show this, I revive two radical proposals from the old debate on overpopulation.

The first involves mandatory long-term contraception; the second involves the introduction of tradeable procreation entitlements. I show that contrary to what many people believe, these policies can be defended on the basis of broadly liberal principles. It turns out that they not only do not conflict with procreative liberty and personal autonomy, but they can actually increase liberty and promote autonomy.

Deke Gould

AUGUSTANA COLLEGE, ROCK ISLAND, ILLINOIS, USA
E-mail: dekegould@augustana.edu

"Is it Immoral to Create an Artificial Intelligence that Resembles Our Own? Anti-Natalism and Artificial Moral Agents"

In recent years, philosophers, computer scientists, and engineers are increasingly interested in the development of artificial moral agents. The prospect of creating fully autonomous machines with some amount of ethical sensitivity (following Wallach and Allen 2010: "full AMAs") represents a long-held dream for human technological development. Many concerns about such a development are often raised both by science fiction authors and philosophers: typically, those concerns are about how such machines would affect humanity (e.g., Bringsjord 2008, Sparrow 2002). In addition, some philosophers raise concerns about respecting the rights of those full AMAs (Basl 2014, Cockelberg 2010, 2014). In this paper, I will propose a concern that follows the same general path of the latter approach. However, my thesis is a bit starker: out of concern for future potential full AMAs, I argue that we should not bring them into existence. My argument is inspired by the recent anti-natalist "asymmetry" arguments that Benatar (2008) has famously proposed against human reproduction, although I will depart from his reasoning in a couple key places (cf. Reider 2015). One potential upshot of this investigation is that on an orthogonal depiction of artificial agency (Bostrom 2012), some forms of full AMAs should not be brought into existence.

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Tomáš Hříbek
INSTITUTE OF PHILOSOPHY, CZECH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC
E-mail: hribek@flu.cas.cz

"Belle Époque Anti-natalism"

Although anti-natalism is currently discussed primarily in connection with the arguments of a South-African philosopher David Benatar, it is worth reminding ourselves of a particular version of antinatalism native to Central Europe. More than a century ago, a Viennese student Otto Weininger published his dissertation, entitled Sex and Character (1903), which became an unexpected bestseller. Weininger strange book is remembered mostly for its rabid misogyny, but it also offers, in its very last chapter, an argument for a sort of anti-natalism. Its main difference from the currently best known version is that Weininger considers procreation a harm committed against oneself.

Jiwoon Hwang
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR, SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA
E-mail: jiwoonhwang@gmail.com

"Benatar's Asymmetry and Pro-mortalism"

I shall argue that David Benatar's Axiological Asymmetry of harms and benefits, when combined with (exclusively) hedonistic view of harms and benefits, entail promortalism. Benatar's view that the absence of pleasure of who never exists does not deprive, while the absence of pleasure of who ceased to exist do deprive, has some absurd conclusions that judges which life is preferable one differently in "present-" and "future-life cases". I subsequently show that Benatar's asymmetry should be applied to post-mortem nonexistence as well, and argue so long as one's remaining life will contain any pain, it is always preferable to cease to exist than to continue to exist.

I shall argue that Benatar's Asymmetry combined with (exclusively) hedonistic view of harms and benefits entails pro-mortalism, but I, rather than thinking the promortalist implications as a reductio, believe in a soundness of pro-mortalism.

In this paper, I am in no way suggesting that Benatar is a pro-mortalist. Also, I shall note that the pro-mortalism I shall be defending is a pro-mortalism on earlier death, rather than death per se. In other words, while I think (painless) earlier death is preferable to later death, I do not think there is intrinsic positive value in death per se, thereby even implying that being caused to ultimately die by being brought into existence could be a benefit. In my view, earlier death has an instrumental value because of the prevention of future suffering it brings. My view is not that earlier death is necessarily good for everyone, but in fact good because as a matter of empirical fact, everyone's daily life contains a morally considerable amount of suffering.

Iddo Landau
UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA, HAIFA, ISRAEL
E-mail: ilandau@research.haifa.ac.il

"David Benatar's The Human Predicament: On the Sensed and Real Quality of Life"

David Benatar's The Human Predicament is a central work in pessimist thought and probably the most important pessimistic work of our time. To people with an optimistic orientation, such as myself, the book poses a significant and interesting challenge. In my paper I try to cope with some

arguments in the book–those that appear in Benatar's chapter 4. This chapter focuses on two main issues. The first is what has come to be called in empirical psychology "the optimistic bias", namely, people's tendency to overestimate the quality of their lives. Among other issues, I point out that the findings on the optimistic bias are based on problematic and insufficient research; relate only to specific aspects of life's quality; are not true of all people; are often consistent with the view that life's quality is in fact high; and–if one's views on life are seen as a major ingredient of life's quality, may be taken to powerfully enhance rather than diminish life's quality. The second main issue discussed in this chapter is ways in which life's quality is in fact low. I argue that the report about life's quality the chapter suggests is unbalanced, and that there are good reasons to consider many people's lot as, all in all, sufficiently good.

Jason Marsh

ST. OLAF COLLEGE, MINNEAPOLIS, USA
E-mail: marshj@stolaf.edu

"Why Skepticism Defeats Pessimism: The Epistemology of Well-Being"

Most people have very firm convictions about the human condition. Optimists think that average life on earth is quite good and that we can know this. Pessimists think that the average life is quite bad and that we can know this. This paper explores a different idea, namely a kind of skepticism about wellbeing–and in particular, about whole life judgments and whole-globe judgments. I don't claim that skepticism is more plausible than optimism. My claim is rather that it is worth taking seriously, is surprisingly unexplored in the literature, and is more plausible than pessimism. I close by exploring how my remarks concerning an area I call "the epistemology of well-being" relate to the question of whether we should create more people.

Christian Piller

UNIVERSITY OF YORK, YORK, UK
E-mail: christian.piller@york.ac.uk

On What Might Be Wrong With Benatar's Asymmetry Argument

Most of us are happy to be alive. Most of us think that the joys that life brings, some small, some immense, outweigh pain, disappointment, regret, and loss, which are all part of our lives as well. All of us, who hold this attitude, Benatar has argued, are mistaken. We are mistaken insofar as

we claim that our attitude is based on defensible evaluations of joys and sorrows. In this paper, I will try to defend our attitude. Those who have this positive attitude to being alive have reason on their side, or so I will argue.

My approach agrees with Benatar's on the following issues. First, there is methodological agreement to conduct the relevant discussion about the value of existence exclusively in terms of what is good for a person (and not in terms of what is or would be impersonally good.) I also agree with Benatar that meaningful and true comparisons between a person's existence and her non-existence can be made in terms of what is good for this person. Furthermore, there is partial agreement about the truth of comparativism, which is the idea that something's being good for someone can (often) be explained by the comparative fact that this thing's presence is better for the person than this thing's absence. Benatar (2013) rightly points out that it is underspecified what we should understand by the relevant negation of a state of affairs, i.e. by its absence. Using an idea I find in von Wright's *Logic of Preference* (1963), I will argue that the relevant negation is relative to a choice set, which, I argue, needs to include an option of the form "none of the above", so that, for example the relevant negation of "bringing a corkscrew", cannot be "to bring a bottle opener", it rather is "none of the above", i.e. to bring no element of an antecedently specified choice set. This notion of negation plays a role in my explanation of the second point of agreement mentioned above, namely of how it is possible to make true existence/non-existence comparisons in terms of betterness-for-someone. The important point will be that, contrary to what other advocates of this kind of comparability like Melinda Roberts have claimed, these comparisons do not involve comparisons of well-being levels.

Preparing the ground in the first section of the paper, I criticise Broome's (2004) influential argument that we cannot compare existence and non-existence in terms of what is better for the person whose existence is in question. I show that Broome's argument would prove too much. I claim that there is a sense, I call it the presuppositional sense, in which it is true that nothing can be good, or bad (or neutral) for a person who does not exist. However, there is a different sense, I call it the alternative-scenario-sense, in which it may well be true that it is better (or worse) for a person to exist than not to exist. Furthermore, I will argue that we can make sense of comparisons from the perspective of people who have never existed, e.g. we can reasonably claim that, e.g., Kant's son would have had a comparatively good life. This counterfactual variation of the presuppositional sense, however, will not coincide with how Benatar conceives of comparisons on the basis of the potential interests of non-existing people.

In the second section, following Benatar (1997, 2006, 2013), I distinguish between three stages of Benatar's asymmetry argument.

The evaluative stage consists of the following 4 evaluative claims. (E1) The presence of pain is bad. (E2) The presence of pleasure is good. (E3) The absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone. (E4) The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation. The comparative stage consists of the following two comparisons. (C1) The presence of pain is worse than the absence of pain. (C2) The presence of pleasure is not better than the absence of pleasure (if no one is deprived of the pleasure). The last stage is the aggregative stage, which, on the basis of the results of the first two stages, provides a comparison of P's existence and P's nonexistence in terms of what is better for P. As existence has no real advantage over non-existence, (C2), but non-existence has a real advantage over existence (C1), we reach (BC) Benatar's conclusion. As long as an existing P experiences some pain, it would have been better for P never to have existed.

In the third section, I raise various issues with Benatar's argument and assess their implications for the plausibility of Benatar's Conclusion. I start by considering (E3). The action of avoiding pain might well be called good, plausibly morally good, but what this action brings about, the absence of pain, could only be personally good in a comparative sense, i.e. it could be better for P not to suffer than to suffer pain. The evaluation that the absence of pain is neutral for P would still support (C1) and I explain why Benatar insists on a positive evaluation of this absence which is needed for a full explanation of his four asymmetries. Next I consider the consequences of including absences in the evaluation of a person's existence. Then I turn to what I regard as the most problematic stage of Benatar's argument, the aggregative stage. I regard this stage as problematic for two reasons, the second of which affects the comparative stage as well. (Remember that evaluations, including the comparative stage 2 evaluations, provide us with statements of personal betterness, i.e. they are done from the perspective of some person P.) First, (C1), the pain comparison, is done from the perspective of an existing P, whereas (C2), the pleasure comparison, is done from the perspective of a non-existing P. In order to fully justify any aggregative judgement, we'd need to add two more comparisons: a pain comparison from the perspective of a non-existing P, and the pleasure comparison from the perspective of an existing P. Without the addition of these two further comparisons, we'd aggregate on the basis of incomplete information. I will show that complete information invalidates Benatar's conclusion. The second reason for scepticism is that, on the basis of the investigation in section 1, the required comparisons from the perspective of a nonexistent P seem dubious. Although non-existent people can be imagined to exist and their imagined lives can be compared with each other and with their actual nonexistence, non-existent people, imagined as being non-existent,have neither real nor imagined interests on the basis of which the relevant comparisons could proceed.

I then turn to consider the general virtues of row comparisons, the aggregative method Benatar favours, to column comparisons, the method Benator has called "the cost-benefit analysis of the cheerful". I point out that, depending on the evaluations in play, row comparisons, may have a pragmatic advantage (as they do not require column comparisons). In terms of the results, however, we have every reason to expect that both aggregation methods deliver the same results. I show that for some comparisons, like which car to buy, column comparisons have a pragmatic advantage, but that for other comparisons, like whether to buy a car in the first place, column comparisons are more natural. Combined with my criticisms of the aggregation stage, I will have validated the ordinary view that our lives are good for us and that we should be pleased to live such lives whenever their advantages outweigh their disadvantages.

If time allows, I finally reflect on what motivates much of Benatar's writings on this issue, namely an explanation of the procreational asymmetry. I show that, contrary to what he claims, his idea that normal human lives are not worth living fails to explain the procreational asymmetry (it fails as an explanation as it does not fully engage with the normative landscape as we find it). I offer an alternative account of the procreational asymmetry (in all its four forms) which builds on the account of comparability developed in section 1 and relies on the idea that for an action to be wrong it needs someone who would have a legitimate complaint. I conclude with a summary of my findings.

Anna Smajdor
UNIVERSITY OF OSLO, OSLO, NORWAY
E-mail: acsmajdor@gmail.com

"Who put the 'R' in 'ART'?"

It is often assumed that we are subject to a powerful urge to perpetuate our genes, through reproduction.[1] "Children are a parent's most direct route to genetic immortality".[2] These ideas feed into key concepts in reproductive ethics, such as reproductive rights and reproductive autonomy.[3] The genetic imperative is sometimes argued as a basis for providing fertility treatment.[4] However, the association between the reproductive urge and the genetic imperative is neither obvious nor unproblematic. If we were hardwired to seek genetic immortality, we would face two serious problems in pursuing fertility treatment on the basis of this. Firstly, being programmed by nature to do x does not per se give us strong moral reasons for doing x. Rather, we might question the morality of x, and if it is found wanting, seek ways of reprogramming

ourselves. The second issue is that even if our primary drive is indeed to seek genetic immortality, it is not true that "children are the most direct route to achieving this"; there are far cheaper, quicker and more efficient routes to genetic immortality achievable with today's technology.

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[3] M. Hayry. "Philosophical Arguments for and against Reproductive Cloning." *Bioethics* 2001, 17, 5-6: 447-460; J. Harris. "Goodbye Dolly? The Ethics of Human Cloning." *JME* 1997; 23: 353-60; Brock, Dan W., Norman Daniels, and Daniel Wikler. *From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. p. 211.

[4] Robertson, J. *Children of choice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1994, p. 39.

Saul Smilansky

UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA, HAIFA, ISRAEL

E-mail: smilsaul@research.haifa.ac.il

"Between Parfit and Benatar"

The nonidentity problem or effect (henceforth NIP) is one of the great moral discoveries of the 20th century; and a philosophical classic. It is a simple, powerful, philosophical conundrum. It also leads to a further threat, the Repugnant Conclusion (RC). David Benatar has argued for Anti-Natalism (AN) for conceptual (e.g. Asymmetry) and empirical (human misery) reasons. But as an aside he also claims, quite reasonably from his perspective, an added benefit in that, if accepted, his view can get us out of the NIP & RC. In a way Parfit's puzzles and Benatar's views lie at opposite sides of the "Natalist spectrum", and hence exploring their connections should be fruitful. I believe that the NIP and RC are so powerful that, if one bites those bullets, AN is considerably weakened. While usually AN is attacked as it were from the intuitive center, as being too extreme, I will aim to attack AN from the opposite, no less unintuitive, extreme of the NIP & RC.

Matej Sušnik

INSTITUTE OF PHILOSOPHY, ZAGREB, CROATIA

E-mail: matej@ifzg.hr

"David Benatar on the quality of life"

When philosophers think about what it means for one's life to go well, they usually distinguish between three different views: (1) that a good life is the one which contains more pleasure than pain, (2) that in a good life one fulfills most of one's desires, or (3) that there are some objectively valuable things that a life must contain in order to be good (see Parfit 1984: 493-502). In chapter 3 of his Better Never to Have Been and chapter 4 of The Human Predicament David Benatar first argues that–no matter which of these theories one endorses–people are mistaken about the quality of their lives, and then tries to show that all lives are worse than people are usually prepared to acknowledge. In this way, Benatar recognizes the distinction between how somebody thinks his life is going and how one's life is actually going, or, as he puts it, between "the actual and perceived quality of a life" (Benatar 2017: 185). I will suggest that the real source of disagreement between Benatar and his opponents lies in the distinction between personal and impersonal value. I argue that Benatar does not show that all human lives are bad for those who live those lives, but only that all human lives are impersonally bad.

William F. Vallicella

RETIRED PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY, GOLD CANYON, ARIZONA

E-mail: billvallicella@cs.com

"Is the Quality of Life Objectively Evaluable on Naturalism?"

This article examines one of the sources of David Benatar's anti-natalism according to which "all procreation is [morally] wrong." This source is the claim that each of our lives is objectively bad whether we think so or not. The question I will pose is whether the constraints of metaphysical naturalism allow for an objective devaluation of human life sufficiently negative to justify anti-natalism. My thesis is that metaphysical naturalism does not have the resources to support such a negative evaluation. Metaphysical naturalism is the view that causal reality is exhausted by nature, the space-time system and its contents. The gist of my argument is that the ideal standards relative to which our lives are supposed to be axiologically substandard cannot be merely subjectively excogitated but must be objectively possible; they cannot be on metaphysical naturalism; ergo, failure to meet these ideal standards cannot show that our lives are objectively bad.