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The Ethical Motive as Counter to Benatar's Anti-Natalism

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Cover Page Footnote

Benatar, David. 2006. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Benatar, David and David Wasserman. 2015. *Debating Procreation: Is It Wrong to Reproduce?* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Benatar, David. "Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics." *The Journal of Ethics*. 2013. Vol. 17, No. 1/2, Special Issue: The Benefits and Harms of Existence and Non-Existence: 121-151. Kant, Immanuel. 1993. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. Acknowledgements Thank you to my brother, Joel Cox, and my professor, Mason Marshall, for reading over my essay and providing necessary feedback and suggestions.

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1. The Axiological Asymmetry

David Benatar (2006), in several of his writings, argues for the anti-natalist view that “being brought into existence is not a benefit but always a harm” for the one being brought into existence.¹ To show why, he describes this asymmetry between existing and not existing:

Scenario 1 (x exists)		Scenario 2 (x never exists)	
[1]	Presence of Harm (Bad)	[3]	Absence of Harm (Good)
[2]	Presence of Benefit (Good)	[4]	Absence of Benefit (Not bad)

Using the relationships between the quadrants, Benatar (2013) argues that when one compares [1] to [3] and [2] to [4], it is shown that the presence of harm in [1] is worse than the absence of harm in [3], and that the presence of benefit [2] has no advantage over the absence of benefit in [4].² This "axiological asymmetry is widely accepted," because it is similar enough to other asymmetries which are accepted—for example, if a child is not brought into existence, we would not mourn for their sake the happiness they did not get to experience, although it is all too possible to regret bringing a child who suffers greatly into existence.³ What follows this asymmetry is the belief that it is better for a person to have never existed, because their “pleasure and pain are asymmetrical in a way that makes coming into existence always a harm.”⁴ Benatar’s argument is imposing, depicting a forceful reason why coming into existence is "always a serious harm" and "procreation is wrong.”⁵ However, this paper argues that is not the case that Benatar succeeds in proving that, in every circumstance, such harm is insurmountable, and so ethically it is impermissible for parents to bring a child into the world. Upon conceptualizing a different motive for existing people from what Benatar implies, this conditional becomes true: If a parent has sufficient reason to believe that their child can achieve the ends of an ethical motive, then it may be morally permissible for them to bring a child into existence. My foremost intention

¹ David Benatar. 2006. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. p. 28.

² David Benatar. “Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics.” *The Journal of Ethics*. 2013. Vol. 17, No. 1/2, Special Issue: The Benefits and Harms of Existence and Non-Existence: p. 123.

³ Benatar, David and David Wasserman. 2015. *Debating Procreation: Is It Wrong to Reproduce?* Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 24-26.

⁴ David Benatar. 2006. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. p. 49.

⁵ David Benatar. “Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics.” *The Journal of Ethics*. 2013. Vol. 17, No. 1/2, Special Issue: The Benefits and Harms of Existence and Non-Existence: p. 122.

within this essay is to justify the use of this conditional in determining whether or not a circumstance where bringing a child into existence is not ethically wrong exists. I will withhold from issuing a full out defense on the claim that a parent can have sufficient reason to believe their child can achieve the ends of an ethical motive, since such is not necessary for said intention, though near the end of this essay, I will signal towards certain reasons to think it is especially plausible.

2. A Motive Other than Pleasure

In Benatar's axiological asymmetry, the only aspects which are included are benefit and harm. However, there is good reason to think that pleasure should not be the only thing taken into account when judging the quality of one's existence because pleasure and happiness do not appear to be our ultimate motive, i.e. the purpose of our lives is not solely governed by a search for pleasure. In discerning this, one can look to an argument made in Immanuel Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant argues that if a:

“Being's preservation, welfare, or in a word its happiness were the real end of nature in the case of a being having reason and will, then nature would have hit upon a very poor arrangement in having the reason of the creature carry out this purpose.”⁶

Ultimately, Kant sees this “poor arrangement” as reflected by the fact that when “a more cultivated reason devotes itself to the aim of enjoying life and happiness, the further does man get away from true contentment.”⁷ To Kant, then, there must be some different, more supreme purpose other than happiness that people must accept.⁸ If Kant is correct, then there seems to be a motive other than a desire for happiness and pleasure which transcends a desire for pleasure and happiness.

For the sake of this essay, I will accept the truth of the axiological asymmetry. In other words, it is the case that one is harmed by coming into existence in a way that pleasure alone does not compensate for. As this asymmetry indicates, if we were to simply take only pleasure and harm into account—a search for happiness does not lead to contentment because whatever happiness attained is always less than the harm an existing person endures—then Kant's view is plausible. In a sense, if a search for pleasure or happiness were our primary goal, we as humans would be defective in accomplishing that goal—or, as Kant concluded, if nature gave us the motive, nature would have become fixed on a poor arrangement, because we cannot effectively achieve our natural motive. But since nature would not be fixed poorly, happiness does not seem to be our ultimate goal.

However, one could say that Kant is mistaken in believing that it is not the case that happiness is the ultimate motive of our existence. The reason he believes that, they could say, is that he correctly estimated that nature is poorly arranged; our motive is happiness, but due to the disproportionate suffering that we endure, we can never achieve this goal. Furthermore, we still are naturally inclined toward happiness as a means of contentment, which, as the ideal, is what humans seek to settle at, since it seems to be an achievable bearable state. And if a state is

⁶ Immanuel Kant. 1993. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. p. 395.

⁷ Immanuel Kant. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. p. 395.

⁸ *Ibid*, 396.

bearable, then it generally consists of an adequate amount of pleasure. Pleasure and happiness also seems to be a necessary part of a bearable state, for it would be unbearable if it were just suffering without any benefit. A content state could be conceived to be a state in which harm and pleasure are proportionate, and achieving such could be our motive—and because they are currently disproportionate (as made clear by Benatar), such a motive could only be attained through the accumulation of happiness. However, it is likely not possible to achieve enough happiness and pleasure. Simply, the ultimate motive of humanity is happiness; it just so happens that such is an unachievable goal.

This counter-argument raises another problem for this view of human purpose: If our natural motive is directed toward gaining happiness to such an extent where it is proportional to our suffering, and that is an unachievable goal, it would seem wisest then to choose a different goal. That the original motive is natural is hardly an issue; the benefit of the human will is that a human can choose to ignore some natural inclinations if their reason so dictates. These do not include supporting natural bodily functions—like the need to drink water or eat food—though inclinations such as the desire for sex or violence can be ignored if they are deemed inappropriate or unnecessary. For example, it is clear that if acting in some way would be natural, such does not inherently necessitate accomplishing that action.

Perhaps one would say that only those who currently exist, though, should switch their motive away from happiness—that if someone is not going to exist, there is no need for them to worry about fulfilling any motive, as there is no guarantee that they even will. No matter what, if we do not bring them into existence, we are not bringing them into substantial harm and suffering, regardless of their motive. Yet, such harm and suffering can be outweighed by a change of motive away from pleasure, depending on whatever said motive is.

A different, broader idea of what it means for a person to be benefitted can be helpful to conceive. Such benefit, in the way I am going to use the term, cannot be solely exchanged with the word "pleasure." This benefit, while it does include pleasure, can also include encouragement, motivation, moral and personal development, and other sorts of support. This is because it seems apparent that things which positively impact a person should not be constrained to pleasure, and furthermore, those things are worthwhile. To prove this, one would only need to conceive of an uninterrupted, dreamless, good night's sleep; due to them being unconscious, they are not experiencing pleasure, but when they wake up, they feel rejuvenated, heartened, and, in a word, benefitted. Such sleep could help them achieve pleasure—not depriving yourself of sleep is setting yourself up for pleasure, but it is also setting you for being productive at the accomplishment of whatever you need to accomplish. In addition, problem-solving and similar tasks are easier to accomplish when rested. Perhaps, then, what rest is doing is simply lessening how miserable some experiences are, which does not make those experiences more pleasurable but rather more bearable (and so easier), and benefiting us in other ways which are not based on pleasure—namely, they make the accomplishment of other motives more achievable.

My intention in making this distinction clear is to further illustrate the point that pleasure should not be our primary motive in making actions, as other motives can still benefit people in a meaningful (and more potent) way. That being the case, there seems to be good reason to expand the conversation of whether or not it is permissible to bring a human child into existence beyond the asymmetry which Benatar presented. While there is good reason to think that the axiological asymmetry is correct, such an argument should seem lackluster if we grant that our ultimate motive is not to accumulate pleasure (or at least should not be), since if we are not only attempting to accumulate pleasure, we also are not attempting to counterbalance the all the

suffering *with pleasure*. Yet it seems that there should still be a responsibility to counterbalance the suffering that we intake, as the alleviation or surmounting of suffering remains a need for every existing person. The importance of settling on a motive which would be good to have—a motive which not only benefits the person who holds said motive but as well is achievable, worthwhile, and more—is that it provides the ability for a person to surmount suffering by working toward some good goal.

3. The Benefits of an Ethical Motive

There is substantial reason to think that a successful motive is one grounded in the ethical treatment of others—in other words, a priority toward making positive moral decisions. In practice, this motive sees every opportunity one gets to alleviate the suffering of others as a way to accomplish ethical ends. Such a motive does not view the alleviation of all suffering as a single end, though, but values the completion of numerous ends. It is quite straightforwardly directed toward alleviating the suffering of others; if said alleviation is a person's motive, then that will be what they are always ultimately working toward.

To clarify, an ethical motive is not necessarily the motive by which one theoretically *must* live—there could be other motives which may perhaps outweigh the suffering one endures. I set forward here an ethical motive due to its merits and its popularity (which signify its accessibility), though my claims are not exclusive. All that a parent needs to be is sure that the motive and goal their child will have is something which can and will surmount, upon its achievement, the suffering said child will endure.

A promising quality of an ethical motive is that it is a direct response to the substantial suffering which humans endure. To repeat, the motive is not a response to one's personal suffering. Though alleviating such suffering would no doubt benefit the individual, that individual's effort should not be directed self-ward, but rather outward in the benefitting of other people. If successful, then, the motive is focused on an inherently worthwhile (there is good reason to think that human life has great value, whether than be intrinsic or extrinsic) and good outcome (i.e. lessening others' suffering). Such is a worthwhile goal—to know such, one need only think of suffering to be completely eradicated. One would have no grievance in bringing a child into such a world, which would be an ideal state of affairs. An ethical motive is ultimately attending to bringing such a state of affairs into being.

Such a state of affairs is extremely unlikely to ever be accomplished. In such a case, then, there is always some amount of suffering which can in at least some part be alleviated; if this pain went unalleviated, then the world would be worse off (even minimally) than it would have been had it been remedied. At least, then, it is better for the suffering that exists to be remedied, since suffering *will* exist. For it is extraordinarily unlikely to expect that all people will cease all procreation. Even if that were better, as Benatar believes to be the case, there is not nearly enough evidence to believe such would ever happen. That being the future, then, it would be good to have people who exist with an ethical motive, as to lessen the suffering for those (no matter who they are going to be) who will then exist. Ultimately, the suffering in the world is substantial and regrettable, yet regrettable too is the non-existence of people who can alleviate such suffering. If the parents of a child witnessed their daughter transport a vaccine to people in need and graciously disburse it, then it would be considerably strange for them to regret that their child lived and succeeded.

Perhaps to visualize the benefit and make the point clearer, it could then be useful to imagine a patient of a lethal and painful disease in a rural village. Initially, the person has no hope for survival—they fall into a deep despair, as do those that love them. The suffering of this circumstance is extreme to everyone involved, and is increased upon the expected death. However, such is entirely different in the presence of a humanitarian doctor, who, with a truly ethical motive, decided to dedicate her life to serving those who have little access to medical aid. She is stationed in the village and due to her expertise, she is able to cure the diseased patient. Many benefits follow, this time for more people. The doctor would feel joy, pride, and motivation at the accomplishment of such a noble feat; the family would feel immense joy, hope, and gratitude; the patient would experience a new lease on life, motivation himself to continue living life, an alleviation of physical and psychological pain, and much more. Indeed, these are only some of the benefits that could follow from such a possible event. As well, future suffering would then be lessened for those involved, as a numerous amount of the bad things that they would experience would feasibly have a minimized impact on them. Furthermore, worth considering are the chances that among any of those effects, some will adopt an ethical motive, through which they hope to help people, to the eventual end of something similar (or even smaller) happening again. Conceive of a child who, having been told stories of the doctor's actions, decides themselves to follow in her footsteps. While perhaps this is not necessarily to be expected, it is a possibility; perhaps a more likely outcome would be that the person who is cured is motivated to help people. Though one could not be certain of the effects which I have described, they seem likely enough to merit an expectation of them.

Illustrated above is the idea that having an ethical motive leads to acting in such a way which results in benefits, among which could possibly include the foundation of an ethical motive in another. Benefits such as these (specifically, in their impact to both the physical and psychological wellbeing of others) are substantial enough to surpass the weight of the suffering which is endured. To see such, one could look at the amounts; perhaps if the actions accomplished are impactful enough, they could lessen enough suffering to surpass the negative effects with benefits, if that would be necessary.

There is some question, however, as to whether or not that would be necessary. Since the asymmetry is ultimately reliant on the quantity of suffering and pleasure, one could think it required to increase the quantity of benefits, though I would set forth that the potency of the benefits is what matters. If the benefits are few but good enough to surpass the pain of the numerous sufferings they endure, then the suffering would be meaningfully overshadowed. I would suggest, upon final achievement of one's moral ends—though said achievement does not necessarily mean completion of all possible ends, but general success at the ones which are presented to the person—that their suffering is overshadowed. It is misguided to numerically divide our lives between the amount of suffering we have endured against the benefits that we have had, because that does not seem to be the way in which we experience our lives. Despite it being common to grieve the amount of bad things that have happened to them, I would argue that such is to the effect of becoming stunned at their unluckiness. Yet, it would look intensely strange to see someone complaining about how tired they are when a closely loved person has just passed away; likewise, it would be strange to complain about said fatigue when, due to the joy of your brother's wedding, they cannot even recognize themselves as tired. The strength and quality of both pain and benefits are more important to us than their strict amount.

A life led with an ethical motive—with the focus always on the alleviation of the suffering of others—is not devoid of the unrelated legitimate benefits, such as close friendships

and relationships. Yet it is constantly outward focusing as to, whenever the opportunity presents itself, give precedence to benefiting others (though, in turn, oneself is benefitted, in the creation of motivation and pride). The strength of these benefits, when the motive has been achieved, is likely strong enough to surpass the suffering which is endured. Upon accomplishment of an ethical motive, the individual's substantial suffering will appear, at the end, less meaningful compared to the good that has been done.

4. Bringing Someone Into Existence for them to have an Ethical Motive

Ultimately, whoever desires to bring someone into existence should be justified in thinking that whoever they will bring into existence will have the prescribed ethical motive, and will act on it fervently, so that they dedicate enough effort (whatever enough may be) to the alleviation of suffering for others. I intend to use the term ethical motive quite broadly, to make clear that beyond its basic definition being that whoever holds to the ethical motive will act always with the priority of the alleviation of suffering for others, exact uniformity in its application is not necessary and variation is acceptable. They also need to be sure (or at least know the chances are considerable the point of such an outcome being likely) that the motive will be accomplished by the person they are bringing into existence.

It is not the case that the parents are bringing someone into existence in order for said person to fulfill the ethical motive. To do such would be strange on the part of the parents, as those that are already existing can adopt the ethical motive and theoretically lessen suffering for those that are already living—after all, achieving any of the good ends of an ethical motive are only of benefit to those that exist; it would not benefit anyone to be brought into the existence in order to fulfill a motive. Instead, the merits of an ethical motive in relation to the decision to bring someone into existence is that, if the parents have enough reasons to think that the child will succeed, the effects of the substantial suffering in their life will be surpassed by the benefits found within said achievement. Therefore, their being harmed would be outweighed and would no longer remain as a reason indicating that bringing a child into the world is morally impermissible, as there would not be a good reason to regret bringing them into existence. Therefore, if the parents have good reason to be confident in that, they would be warranted in bringing a child into existence, if they have the desire and the capacity.

Crucially, the parents must be extremely confident that they can successfully instill the ethical motive in their child in order to make it permissible for them to give birth to a child. While ultimately the ability of the child to freely make ethical choices cannot be forced, it seems that they can be taught in such a way where the value of such a motive would never be lost on them. While some would be skeptical at the idea that a parent could know that before the child is even conceived, it seems the case that, in existence, there are effective and humane parenting philosophies and resources which could grant the ability to appropriately and effectively instill an ethical motive. Preparation would be necessary, resources would need to be collected and readied, and the parents would need to have a conception of the lessons they are to teach, and must have self-control as to follow such a laid-out plan instead of relying on instinct. Instilling such a motive would be of real difficulty, as parenting generally is, but would be far from impossible, which we know because there are people with ethical motives who exist.

Furthermore, if the motive is instilled, so should be a strong motivation and work ethic. In tandem, all three would lead to someone who is determined to and effective at alleviating the suffering of others. Their personality, tastes, and other unique aspects found to be innate in

people are of little consequence; what are of consequence are the things which can be established in their character, such as knowledge of other people, groups, and their innate value. A value which is evident to most, specifically if the axiological asymmetry is correct—suffering is bad only if we are supposed to care about those that suffer. Since those are what matter to the ultimate success of the ethical motive, the parents simply need to be sure they can teach the ethical motive and support their child in the necessary ways.

The motive does not deny the child social experiences such as schooling or the ability to hold a job which is unconcerned with ethics. Non-ethical benefits, or benefits which are not innately connected to execution of an ethical motive, support the motive by adding social, psychological, and material resources which can better help them accomplish their motive. For example, if someone has a fun time with friends, they will be happier and therefore more adept at conversation, which can allow them to, in general, treat others better than they would otherwise.

6. Conclusion

While Benatar proves that we are harmed by coming into existence, he fails to prove that such harm is insurmountable. I suggest, rather, that whether or not one can hold and accomplish the ends of an ethical motive—practically, that at every opportunity, the ethical end (the alleviation of suffering for, first and foremost, others) is achieved—has merit enough to be used in replacement of others questions if determining if it is morally permissible or not to bring a child into existence. Such can replace the axiological asymmetry presented, which says that it is a harm to bring a child into existence, because such a harm can be surpassed by the benefits experienced. The presented conditional—"if a parent has sufficient reason to believe that their child can sufficiently achieve the ends of an ethical motive, then it is morally permissible for them to bring a child into existence"—can show a way being brought into existence is permissible by replacing the ultimately defective comparison of pleasure and harm. Proper ethical behavior and the benefits therein should instead be taken into account, which the conditional does.

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