

[Essay]

Asymmetry, Suffering, and Coping Running Alongside Benatar

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Abstract

David Benatar has presented and defended a powerful argument for adopting an anti-natalist stance, avoiding procreation, and embracing the extinction of humanity. His work that deserves to be taken seriously and responded to with caution and care. In the below we will attempt such an undertaking, focusing on two aspects of Benatar's thought in particular: asymmetry and suffering. Although we will find weaknesses in Benatar's analyses on asymmetry and suffering, we will not thereby seek to reject the anti-natalist conclusions that Benatar draws from them, yet nor will we conversely seek to accept them. Instead we will leave the issue open and move into some parallel thoughts on the topic of coping, on the "Now what?" and the "...and so..." that each of us who find ourselves alive inevitably face. In the hard light of life as we come to know it, what are any of us to do?

Keywords: anti-natalism; asymmetry; coping; David Benatar; suffering

1. Being been

Here we are. You find yourself reading this, I find myself writing it, and yet neither of us might have wished to meet this moment, to meet at this moment, had our prenatal selves been given and capable of the choice. You did not ask to be born but you were, likewise I had no say in the matter; still there you sit, or stand, as do I. We are, there is no denying that, and we will remain for at least a little longer. Is there any fairness in this situation? Did our parents consider us, our lives, our futures, our possibilities and potentialities, prior to conception? If so, why did they conclude to create us? If not, why not? We who are should like to know, and although it is a set of questions that can be easily asked I doubt that many would be able to answer.

This is David Benatar's challenge, and he makes it with a forcefulness and resourcefulness that demands a deeper examination than he has perhaps often

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received from his many naysayers. While the arguments he makes might have deep roots – one could handily argue that asymmetry stretches all the way back to the Buddha, or even further into earlier strands of subcontinental philosophy – Benatar, in his seminal *Better Never to Have Been*,¹ makes a series of steps that are nevertheless fresh, original, and provocative. In the below we will concern ourselves primarily with two aspects of his work, stretching them and replying to replies that he has made to others who have raised similar concerns in an effort to give the attention due to this most central of questions: Is my life worthwhile? We will frame our examination in those terms, and with that personal perspective, despite Benatar’s own anti-natal focus because I would like to present a case for coping rather than one regarding procreational choices. The issues involved are of course related, so intimately intertwined in fact that we shall have to think about each, but in my view there is nevertheless room for an investigatory spotlight to be swung onto one more so than the other. At least, that is what I hope to make some progress towards; we will have to see how the proceeding develops.

We who live, what are we to do? Part of that is a response to whether we ought to bring more life into existence and thereby share our limited time, but to my mind that is a query quite apart from the one that asks “Now what?” To have a child or not to have a child can be rationally analyzed and a settlement – however tentative – in the positive or negative made, yet when that same rationality turns inward and one’s own life is seen starkly naked in the mind’s eye the quandaries that present themselves are more opaque and, I think, that much more strenuous. This is likely due to their inextricability from the cobwebs of the self: one cannot really get a proper look, there is no emotional distance to be had, and any claims of objectivity on the matter must be recognized for the chicanery they boil down to. Albert Camus’ famous sole serious philosophical problem – that of suicide² – can never be definitively answered because it must be faced by each creature with the awareness and cognitive ability to address it. That so many of us run from that question our lives long does not reduce its immediacy nor its potency. We did not ask to be but yet we are – again, “Now what?”

¹ David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by Justin O’Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton-Penguin Books, 1955/2005).

The two aspects of Benatar's fine argumentation that we will address on our way to "Now what?" are the titular two listed: asymmetry and suffering. I think that weaknesses can be found in each of the cases he presents, but I do not think that such are sufficient to necessarily negate his conclusions. I think too that there are buried nuances in Benatar's work that are often overlooked but that bear relevance and importance concerning those conclusions. These opening sections will therefore provide the needed background – and a set of tools – with which to then make an attempt at some thoughts regarding coping, regarding "...and so..."

Here we are. You, me, everyone we know and everyone we have yet to know. People and potential people, the existent and the not-yet, the maybe-never. We may finally wish to embrace an anti-natalist position or we may not; in either case we will have to respond to the deeper dilemma of self, of being, of waking up and having to face one's own terrifying ability to wonder why. We will have to say *something* to that mirror.

2. *Better Never 1: Asymmetry*

Benatar primarily bases his anti-natalist arguments in the case he builds for determining that existence is always a harm, and the harm, he asserts, stems from a basic asymmetry between being and non-being. He goes about this through exploring a Cartesian grid-like relationship between poles of pleasure and pain on one axis and existence and non-existence on the other. Starting from the assumption that all lives will contain some pleasure and some pain, Benatar compares the presence of pleasure and pain in the (sentient) existent with the absence of both in the non-existent. Pain for the existent is "bad" while the absence of pain for the non-existent is "good"; pleasure for the existent is also "good", but its absence for the non-existent is "not bad" rather than "bad" – at this point of disjuncture the claimed asymmetry in the relationship is established, and the remainder springs from there.³ The reasoning behind the "not bad" labeling of this absence is that Benatar does not understand there to be any deprivation involved when pleasure is missing for the non-existent. This stance is connected with Benatar's anti-procreation view in that for him only the causing of life "can be regretted *for* the sake of the person whose existence was

³ Benatar, *op. cit.*

contingent on our decision” and that although we may feel regret that an existent person (even a stranger) lacks a particular good, we cannot do so for a never-existent person; if we do then such is actually a feeling for ourselves and not the non-existent (e.g. grief over not having a child).⁴ Further on in his analysis Benatar extends this thought, stating that absent pleasures which deprive (those for the existent) are “‘bad’ in the sense of ‘worse’”, but that those that do not deprive (for the non-existent) are “‘not bad’ in the sense of ‘not worse’” – and that “not worse”, again by way of comparison, as “not worse than the presence of pleasures” for the existent.⁵ In his argument all of the preceding is grounded in judgments made “*with reference to the (potential) interests of a person* who either does or does not exist”,⁶ or, in other words (in our words), the (potential) interests of potential people. In considering this line of reasoning it will be important to keep this perspective in mind, and we must note here at the outset the key words “with reference to”, meaning that this is necessarily a point of view taken from the outside, and the implication therefore being a presumed objectivity, a position from which one may ‘properly’ comment on others. When seen from such a third person perspective, what are the interests of this existent or non-existent person?

Therein lies the rub. From my own vantage, on my first person understanding, if I look at a non-existent person as not having a pleasure and then at an existent person as having a pleasure, and then at a non-existent person avoiding a pain that the existent person suffers, I do see deprivation, and that of both the pleasure and the pain. I may, from my role as outsider, consider the tradeoff in question one worth making (e.g. giving up the pleasure in order to miss the pain) and thus not consider it a ‘harm’ for the person, but what troubles me is that I cannot agree with an evaluation of this sort being taken at face value in the way that Benatar seems to do since the viewpoint involved is not the viewpoint of the (potential) person himself.⁷ We are, again, looking at this “with reference to”, and thus taking what appears logical enough as we sit (or stand) here comfortably as being the final word on the matter. This extension is somewhat disingenuous, I think, for if we are really to pursue the (potential)

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 34, emphasis in the original.

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 30; emphasis in the original.

⁷ I use the male gender here with a nod to another original and thought provoking work by Benatar, his *The Second Sexism: Discrimination Against Men and Boys* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

interests of (potential) people we must do so from the inside, from their own perspectives, and not from ours. We might try to claim an objectivity in our evaluation given that we are an ‘outsider’ to the query being made, but whatever pretensions we may have we are nevertheless speaking from out of our own heads, with our own background biases and prejudices intact. This is important to realize.⁸

If we do try for a shift of perspective into that of the affected potential person and his interests, what do we find? Who knows! I cannot possibly answer for him, nor for you, nor you for him nor for me; but I can answer for me and you for you, and if we then further flip the equation to make room for Benatar’s “not worse” (for non-depriving absent pleasures with regard to the non-existent, as above) we are led to conclude that such are in fact “bad” rather than “not worse”. At least, I am led to conclude that, and I am so because if I imagine my own potential interests I think that I want that pleasure and that not having it is simply “bad”. If I then compare it (its absence) with pain (a present pain) do I want the pleasure enough to also take the pain to get it? If I do then its absence is “bad”, if I do not then I may agree with Benatar that its absence is “not worse”. Do I though agree? Do you? It appears very difficult to draw any universals here if we are serious about taking a first person perspective on the matter. I might, or I might have to first weigh the pain against the pleasure, or I might wish to know how much and how long for each, of what type, or any manner of additional information, but I will still have to decide for myself, and that on each occasion. Yet here we hit another wall: If I am a non-existent potential person (taking his perspective) then how can I decide anything?

This touches on some thoughts Masahiro Morioka presents regarding his “the heart of meaning in life”, a concept that stresses the inapplicability of any judgment of this sort outside of one’s own life.⁹ One’s own life as lived in that

⁸ On this issue of background thinking and its reach interested readers may wish to see especially Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, new edn, intro. by Ian Hacking (London: Verso, 2010), and possibly also Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, intro. by Daniel C. Dennett (London: Penguin Books, 1949/2000) as introductory texts. Related concerns on knowledge, skepticism, critical thought and intuition (including a fascinating aspect of the inexpressible) can be found in Michael Polanyi’s *The Tacit Dimension*, for. by Amartya Sen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966/2009). The notion of “perspectivism” implied here has a long history in Western philosophy (and not only Western), in our tradition its modern force probably takes its root from the widespread influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, particularly his *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. and comm. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House Inc., 1966).

⁹ Masahiro Morioka, “Is Meaning in Life Comparable?: From the Viewpoint of ‘The Heart of Meaning in Life’”, *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 5:3 (2015), 50-65.

moment, we could add, for surely such changes widely during the ebb and flow of not only conditions and contexts but moods and feelings as well.¹⁰ Perspective seems – is – paramount. In that importance we come to appreciate that while it is already very difficult to maintain a proper focus when making comparisons of this nature the problems compound when we attempt the internal outlook of the potential interests of a potential person, because then in seeking a glimpse of how we might ascertain deprivation or non-deprivation regarding pleasure and/or pain we immediately find ourselves stuck in existence, mired in the already existent, cutting out both of our adjectival “potentials”. Nothing at all (from the inside) can really be said about the non-existent for the very basic reason that he does not exist to choose between the options; yet we do nevertheless recognize that – and again this is the real crux of the matter – something can still be said *for* the non-existent: but it can only be said from the outside, from our own (relevant?) assumptions about what he may decide.

The speculation involved in the process we have been investigating should be clear enough, and in that clarity hang all the doubts swirling around the veracity and trustworthiness of such claims when made for another about intensely personal perceptions like “good”, “bad”, “worse”, “not worse”, and even what is and what is not thought of as “deprivation” and “harm”. How could these labels just be taken over from me to you? From out of my experience to yours? From my actual interests to your potential interests? If you do not exist then what can I say other than that your pleasure and its lack are equally empty, and if I then try to guess at what your potential interests might be I will likely determine an absent pleasure to be “bad” and/or “worse” rather than “not worse”, unless perhaps I happen to have an unusually strong aversion to pain when approached in the abstracted way it is elongated to be in such a general comparison.¹¹ To really consider the potential interests of potential people we must seek to do so from the inside, and if we do we quickly discover that we are only able to do so for the existent, breaking down the analogy sought and leaving us with the bare pleasure = good, pain = bad, absent pleasure = bad (worse), absent pain = good (better).

¹⁰ We will return to a deeper exploration of Morioka’s work in the following for it has much to contribute to our thoughts on these matters.

¹¹ Benatar, for his part, argues that even pricking one’s finger on a pin once is enough to justify the conclusions he has made regarding the desirability of pain avoidance, but I am not sure how many of us would concur with that intuition. Even if we do, however, I think that my line here concerning what happens when we take a first person perspective nevertheless stands; see Benatar 2006, *op. cit.*

Benatar has a response to the above. In a reply to his critics written some seven years after his book was published he emphasizes that his objective is in investigating “whether coming into existence is in the interests of the person who comes into existence or whether it would have been better for that person if he had never been.”¹² Critiques along the lines of mine above (Benatar quotes from David DeGrazia, who arrived at similar conclusions¹³) are said to be confused in reasoning that only subjects might have interests, and with the non-existent there is no subject and hence no interests. Benatar’s reply is that what are being compared here are two possible worlds: one with the subject in question, and one without. He writes:

One way in which we can judge which of these possible worlds is better, is with reference to the interests of the person who exists in one (and only one) of these two possible worlds. Obviously those interests only exist in the possible world in which the person exists, but this does not preclude our making judgments about the value of an alternative possible world, and doing so with reference to the interests of the person in the possible world in which he does exist.¹⁴

This is a good point and a strong counterargument to the subject/missing subject objection, yet what is missed here is the important stress that we and not many other commentators have placed on the perspective involved. Benatar’s justification for comparing possible worlds still takes as its focus the same “with reference to”, that is, a look from the outside, a purportedly objective point of view in which the so-called rationality of the suppositions arrived at are presumably grounded. Our concerns for the inside have therefore not been met, and when we return to them, when we again try for a first person based determination, we find the same impossibility of exposition and non-cross applicability that were earlier stressed.¹⁵ I cannot work into the head of a

¹² David Benatar, “Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics”, *The Journal of Ethics* 17:1/2 (2013), 121-151, p. 125.

¹³ The referenced piece is David DeGrazia, “Is It Wrong to Impose the Harms of Human Life? A Reply to Benatar”, *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 31 (2010), 317-331.

¹⁴ Benatar 2013, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

¹⁵ Similarly Morioka also argues that to really compare two possible worlds one must be able to imagine both and one cannot imagine a world in which one does not exist; this is not a direct reply to Benatar since, as we indicated, his is a view from the outside and therefore does not necessitate imagining a world in which one oneself does not exist, but it is a good point and Morioka’s thought is

non-existent potential person to find his potential interests, and what I may rightly claim are my own justified interests as pertaining to pleasure and pain and the derivative judgments I thereby draw do not seem to be the kind of evaluations that can be directly pasted onto another. We are still at our impasse, and in that, I think, we have enough of a reason to be wary of asymmetry. I would like to stress that even so this does not remark on, nor is it meant to remark on, Benatar's anti-natalist position as it pertains to the question of procreation. Ours is instead about the "Now what?", the "...and so...", and we will continue in that focus in the next section on suffering.

3. *Better Never 2: Suffering*

Benatar's secondary argument in his masterful work demonstrates how the same conclusions outlined above can be arrived at through the fact and inevitability of suffering. Given these two aspects (that suffering is real and that all persons will suffer), he extends his case for the preference of not only non-existence but never-existence, "better never to have been". Towards this end a long list of statistics on death from natural disasters, hunger and malnutrition, disease, governmental and private murder and the like are presented, and it is further noted that in addition to the deaths themselves there are many others who are bereaved at the losses and therefrom yet more suffering is born. So much for death, but as we who live know only too well suffering does not end there: additional mention is made of rape, assault, cultural practices like female circumcision, slavery, betrayal, humiliation, oppression,¹⁶ and since we recognize there is no finality to this Benatar's point is very well evident. We all suffer – every conscious creature does; there can be no question of that. Moving from this step to the desirability of never being in the first place though is a rather large leap if we notice that within this argumentation there is a crucial gloss being made.

In the statistics and the listing that he gives, Benatar is essentially taking parts for the whole: he is equating instances of suffering with suffering tout court: he is inferring *life as suffering* from *instances of suffering during life*. He does not do this explicitly, and his position seems to be that any suffering, large or small, that happens in a life is enough for never having been to be better for

worth taking into account here. See Morioka, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Benatar 2006, *op. cit.*

the sufferer, but the structural implication that life simply equals suffering is hard to miss, especially given the realities of the world with which we are familiar. I do not find such a far-reaching evaluation to be justified here, even if it is only a derivative one. This is not to deny suffering, and it is certainly not intended as a downplaying of suffering, rather it is only to point out that a person's (even a potential person's) life might be internally thought of as pretty good – maybe even fully good – despite occasional, often, or frequent sufferings. If so, we might think, then the suffering experienced does not lead to “better never to have been”, or at least not directly. Jonathan Haidt writes that during a course of research on a group of Indian prostitutes living in desperate poverty and pain he was taken aback at how happy many of them reported being.¹⁷ If we are thinking of their interests, and trying to do so from within their own perspectives, we ought to take such self-appraisals into account. Doing so does not of course mean that we cannot think their conditions should be improved, that they might not be even happier in another line of work, in another home situation, or in generally altered circumstances in many or all respects, but it does (or should) give pause to taking “suffering now” to be “suffering full stop”. I am not sure whether Benatar himself would concur that life is suffering full stop, or whether he only wishes to say that some suffering is sufficient to outweigh the positives of existence, but in either case the manner of typical personal evaluating is surely relevant, and in that it does, I think, signal caution about making such a widespread judgment.

Benatar anticipates an objection along the lines of this one as well. He outlines three psychological traits that usually cause people to understand their lives to be more positive than they might be assessed as if seen from another perspective (i.e. an ‘objective’ point of view; Benatar discusses hedonistic, desire fulfillment, and objective list theories in conjunction). The three traits are: Pollyannaism, adaptation to circumstances and the subsequent adjustment of expectations, and comparison of oneself with others around one.¹⁸ This opens the way to a person quite simply being wrong about their own suffering, and if one can be so mistaken then, Benatar argues in a later work, evaluations of life satisfaction can be erroneous too.¹⁹ Moreover, whatever we may say about our

¹⁷ Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

¹⁸ Benatar 2006, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Benatar 2013, *op. cit.*

suffering or our lives now, Benatar adds that “the worst part of many people’s lives is often at the end, those who think that they are satisfied with their whole lives [overall satisfaction] may not have faced the most trying test of that judgment until close to their death.”²⁰

Again, Benatar’s rebuttal is excellent and well worth the effort a thoughtful response requires; yet a response, in my estimation, can still be made, and ours will center once more on concerns of the first person perspective and the related factor of self-deception. For one, the psychological evidence for optimism is not as straightforward as it might at first seem. There is actually strong contrary biological and evolutionary evidence suggesting that our brains are hardwired not for optimism but for pessimism, for concentrating on real and possible dangers and not on the positives already in hand.²¹ It could therefore, I cheekily suggest, be that anti-natalist outcomes are the results of intuitively negative biased thinking rather than conclusions won through rigorous and objective analyses. That said, given the natural drive for procreation that all species have I rather doubt such to be the case, but raising it as a possibility is intriguing (and – I admit – deliciously fun as an unexpected twist to all this). Whatever the brain chemistry involved might or might not be, I think there is regardless a case to be made for the benefits of perspective, and too for the possible self-deception referred to, and it is in that direction where I would now like to turn our attention.

Returning to Morioka’s “the heart of meaning in life” and stretching the concept out somewhat, we find that its focus on legitimacy purely for and about the holder in question – and thus total non-applicability beyond the self – leads us to think that what is far more paramount than the determinations of an externally conducted ‘life goodness trial’ such as we might get from the supposedly objective theories Benatar mentions²² is what one makes of one’s own being as one lives it out day by day. As a precaution (and caveat), I should indicate that by this I do not mean to argue that self-evaluations are necessarily infallible, rather simply that they are valuable, very valuable, and in that value creating. Morioka and Camus seem to agree, the former writing that “although the value and goodness of one’s life cannot be determined only by one’s inner

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 142.

²¹ For a general reader oriented introduction to the science involved that doubles as a self-help book see Rick Hanson, *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence* (New York: Harmony Books, 2013).

²² The three again are: hedonistic, desire fulfillment, and objective list.

judgment, with regard to ‘the heart of meaning in life,’ it ought to be determined in a purely internalist fashion”,²³ and the latter that “Being aware of one’s life, one’s revolt, one’s freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum. Where lucidity dominates, the scale of values becomes useless.”²⁴ For both thinkers, and for us, value assigned comes primarily from within, and in that the perspective that one has, that one embraces (hopefully reflectively though not necessarily so) for one’s own self will be determinative of the judgments one comes to on one’s existence – and, perhaps, on existence itself.²⁵ To an extent Benatar is with us here too, stating that “I agree that one’s own assessments can have *some* impact on the quality of one’s life, and they can influence how bearable one’s life is, but they do not preclude radical error.”²⁶ I appreciate this, but would nevertheless say both yes and no to Benatar’s thought as expressed because I think the term “radical error” calls for a slight expansion, a brief (sideline) discussion.

To begin with, where is the “error” in “radical error”? It could only be one ascertained from the same outside perspective Benatar has been promoting,²⁷ from the same claims to objectivity, but in the kinds of value judgments that we are examining what might be the source for such other than shared intuitions? There can hardly be a data based evaluation made here along the lines of Person X’s twelve excellent years outweigh the forty mediocre years and two bad ones due to Y considerations. What variables might be in play in such an analysis and how might they be measured? If my life’s valuation is internally based, as has been argued, then however incorrect you take my determination of quality to be I would yet be able to simply disagree with you. After all, we are talking about how I understand my life to be, and even your application of an objective list

²³ Morioka, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

²⁴ Camus, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-61.

²⁵ I have argued elsewhere for the benefits of moving away from the typical insistence (in analytical philosophy, but also in mainstream society) on objectivity, and on what I take to be the impossibilities within such demands; see Andrew Oberg, “Thinking Unempirically”, *Philosopher*, 03 July 2017. <<http://philosopher.io/Thinking-Unempirically>>. Accessed 27 September 2018.

²⁶ Benatar 2013, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

²⁷ One could, I suppose, say in hindsight that “I was wrong about such and such”, but the critical feature is the necessity of self-application, that one does not consider oneself in error until one *later* accepts that term vis-à-vis the assessment in question. Why might one do such? It could be the result of additional information, or an altered vantage point, or any number of reasons, but for the person involved it would not be an “error” *at the time*, only possibly afterwards on further reflection. It therefore follows that in the usage employed in Benatar’s quoted sentence – regarding a current assessment of one’s quality of life – what is being considered is an outside judgment, and that is where we take issue.

theory to the contours of my being could only have the impact that I allow it to have, there is no final court of arbitration involved, no third party on a throne that could overrule the view from behind my own eyes. You *could* try and convince me that I am wrong, that I am in “radical error” about just how good (or bad) my life is, but the resultant decision remains mine to make. It could be argued that one or the other is the more rational choice, but again, where is the rationality so appealed to grounded? Any insistence on any superiority of this or that could be refuted by the subject since it is the subject’s own personal take on his own life, and if he will not admit to an error – radical or not, rational or not – how could such be forced upon him?

The example Benatar gives regarding a list of species based objective goods out of which this type of “radical error” might appear itself betrays the same foundation in nothing more than an ostensibly shared intuitive judgment: he writes that “living for a few 100 years in the full vigour of youth, without any ill health would surely be good.”²⁸ I, for one, do not share this sentiment, and if I do not then it is possible that there are others who do not as well. My reasoning for not agreeing here, such as it is, is that I have zero desire to live for a few hundred years or even for one hundred years, despite being granted the prospect of it being spent in vigor and health. Such strikes me, from my own inner valuation and perspective, as an outrageously long time to spend on the planet; I have enough trouble wrestling with awareness as it is. Considering his novel *Galápagos* I think that Kurt Vonnegut at least would agree;²⁹ that now makes two of us. Does this dissent add to or subtract from the ‘objectivity’ in our list of objective goods? We need not belabor the point any longer: judgments of this sort must be from within, and in that non-cross referential, and if yours are thought by me to be self-deceiving then that opinion really amounts to very little – only as much as you permit it to. Furthermore, given the fact of suffering, such self-deception might be very welcome, and if we can adopt an optimistic outlook as well it might provide too a goal to work towards, a challenge for us to live better.

It will be noted again that none of this really has to do with anti-natalism, with the deep and serious question of whether or not to have children. My failure to address that issue is an admission I am more than willing to make, and

²⁸ Benatar 2013, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

²⁹ Or rather would have agreed, Vonnegut passed away in 2007; Kurt Vonnegut, *Galápagos* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1985).

I can only here remind the reader that ours is an examination of coping, of once alive, of “Now what?”, and though all of the above is enlaced with procreation it is not about procreation itself. That, sadly, is beyond our scope, and probably beyond my ability as a philosopher. In our final main section, however, we will have some things to say that may be applicable to anti-natalist/natalist interests, although we will yet maintain our voice of address to our chosen “...and so...”

4. Beside *Better Never*: Some thoughts on coping

Due to the structure and reach of Benatar’s argumentative thrust on the topics of asymmetry and suffering, and to the conclusions which he draws from them, I think it is easy to overlook that his is really – as we have acknowledged in our demurring on the subject – a concern about not creating any more children, additional creatures who would thus have to deal with life. Life as it is. Moreover, when considering how many critics have reacted to Benatar’s work, it seems to me that for most the fact of his being a *moral* concern is completely lost. His arguments are aimed at the morality of procreation, or rather at the immorality of sentient life creation and the morality of its avoidance. This appears to grow from a deep compassion that Benatar evidently feels for all we who can feel: human animals and non-human animals. This is very laudable.

Yet in this, and in order to make the case for these conclusions, Benatar must comment on life per se, and he must establish that regardless of circumstances and contexts it is sufficiently undesirable that it should not be carried through from generation to generation via the continuation of the species. He wishes for there to be an end to the madness, and sentience – well, that is madness. We can see this judgment in his call for the complete disappearance of all humanity, and the sooner the better.³⁰ What is really interesting in this, in my view, is that while Benatar argues that those humans who are alive today should be the very last humans in history (by the fact of no one reproducing), he does not call for suicide. Voluntary extinction is not mass suicide; the latter would be an absolute act of death while the former is an absolute reception of it.

We who are did not ask to be but yet are; now that we are the manner in which we consider our existence will go a long way towards influencing any choices we might take to have children. An assessment of life comes first,

³⁰ Benatar 2006, *op. cit.*

anti-natalism or natalism second. One is wrapped around the other, the other around the one, and so tightly that we have, in a roundabout way, really been half-addressing procreation all along: though only half-addressing because, it should be clear, a determination that life is worth living (continuing) is not the same as a determination that it ought to be continued (reproducing). In his book Benatar covers these issues too, and he has responded in print over the years to critiques making such pithy calls as “Why not just kill yourself then?” in lieu of more thoughtful objections; I do not find fault with Benatar’s work on these points and in fact rather think much of it praiseworthy. We will therefore move on and away from *Better Never to Have Been* into a parallel rumination on suffering and life and life as suffering. Is the nature of our being truly so wrought with suffering to cement a commitment to cease humanity altogether? Benatar is convinced that it is; I am not so sure. In examining this we do not need to argue for the justification of suffering and pain along lines such as beneficial character building aspects or the making of pleasure that much the sweeter or the like, instead we ought to look at life as a whole in the way it is experienced by us to determine whether or not we subjectively accept suffering as just that: acceptable; in the grand scheme of things as one part of life that is okay as being a part of life. Do we? This is the query of coping, the “Now what?”, the “...and so...”, and from it, from out of it, flows all the rest.

To begin we will first need to distinguish between pain and suffering, because while related the two concepts are distinct and in their phenomenology may or may not be inclusive of one another. On my own analysis I find pain to be more temporary than suffering, perhaps akin to a feeling versus a mood, and though bodily harm comes readily to mind I would not insist on a physical basis for pain. I think that both pain and suffering can be either physical or emotional in nature, or indeed both. In this suffering will often contain pain, and pain may be a trigger for suffering, but suffering does not lead to pain because it operates on us in – we experience it as – a more fundamental phenomenon: again, like a mood that undergirds a feeling. Pain comes and then goes, but it may leave a lasting mark in trauma, and if so then that trauma becomes a part of our suffering rather than (on this definition) an extension of our pain. I might suffer my whole life through (in one way or another, to one degree or another), but I am unlikely to be in pain my whole life through, and certainly not intense physical pain for the body has adaptive reactions to that (e.g. passing out). I could, possibly, be in a prolonged state of emotional pain, even intense

emotional pain, but such would likely slide into a condition of suffering at some temporal point, although when exactly that might be seems hard to delineate. Now all this is highly academic, somewhat dry, and in danger of becoming a pathetic limp away from the focus we seek on life and an ascertainment of it as being worthwhile enough – or not – to carry on with despite its undeniable incidents of both pain and suffering. In other words, are we able to sufficiently cope?

These related notions have opened before us a few interesting and applicable conceptual avenues. On such J. David Velleman gives the following: “What makes the difference between pain and suffering is *cop*ing. Suffering occurs when someone cannot or does not cope with adversity of some kind.”³¹ Velleman’s definition seems to imply that suffering is a failure, a shortcoming in “just dealing with it”, as it were, and this nuance is reinforced by him shortly thereafter when he states that “Coping is therefore a way of exercising one’s will in the face of adverse circumstances, by managing one’s response to them and maybe also by managing the circumstances themselves.”³² If this is right then it seems that coping must be possible for all of us, perhaps even no matter what, for anyone *can* exercise their own will and manage their own responses, despite one’s relation to the circumstantial elements naturally varying greatly.³³ “Cannot cope” appears more like a dereliction of duty, an excessive laziness that avoids applying willpower and self-control, leaving us with all the emphasis on “does not cope”. What it comes down to then is not so much an issue of talent as of an effortful desire, a want to feel/do/be otherwise when the world around one is not ‘cooperating’. Similarly Seana Shiffrin takes harm as a condition wherein a person is subjected to X (whatever that may be) unwillingly, and thus is forced to endure said X.³⁴ Although with Shiffrin we have now somewhat unhelpfully encountered another troublesome term (“harm”), what is pertinent in her thought is its indication of both writers’ emphasis on the centrality of will when it comes

³¹ J. David Velleman, “The Gift of Life”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36:3 (2008), 245-266, p. 247; emphasis in the original.

³² *ibid.*, p. 248.

³³ I mean this in general terms; I do understand that it is possible for mentally impaired people or people with certain diseases and/or afflictions to have difficulties in these areas.

³⁴ Seana Valentine Shiffrin, “Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm”, *Legal Theory* 5 (1999), 117-148. Shiffrin also has an asymmetry based argument that states that the harms of life outweigh its benefits due to the passivity of reception of them, the lack of choice involved in being born, and that simply existing does not constitute the kind of “successful effort” required for a benefit to be significant. That last point, I think, is particularly open to argument.

to suffering. This is intriguing and points to deeper psychological structures and models, to awareness and intuitive matters. Let us therefore continue along these lines, tabling “harm” terminologically with pain and centering in on life as suffering (which includes many instances of pain and harm), and the prospect of coping with that.

Given the facts of life, such as the statistics on deep suffering along with the more everyday examples of it that Benatar refers to, I disagree with the buried suggestion in Velleman that to experience suffering involves a negligence of some sort on the part of the sufferer. If suffering is unavoidable, and I do not think that Velleman or even the most advanced Buddhist practitioner³⁵ would refute that, then how can it involve a faulting? You might handle your suffering much better than I do, and in that be more effective in facing it – facing up to it – than me, but we will both suffer and therefore both have to cope in some way: this is a matter of better/worse, not succeed/fail (at least not outright). Following these conclusions, coping can perhaps broadly be seen as a task within reach but one that requires effort, and as such may be done with more or less of said effort and result in more or less efficaciousness; and if life itself is (lifelong) coping with suffering (pain, harm, etc.) – as we have been considering – then life is really a task, a massive undertaking, and, as we have repeatedly pointed out, an entirely unchosen one.

This idea of striving, Velleman remarks, goes all the back to Aristotle, and in discussing the Aristotelean standpoint at play he writes that:

To be born as a human being is to be handed a job of work, with a promise of great rewards for success, a threat of great harm for refusal, and a risk of similar harm for failure. The scene on which a human child appears willy-nilly is the scene of a predicament, a challenge with high stakes.³⁶

In view of our concerns with Benatar’s work, with the question of coping, with pain and suffering, and with life as being either ‘cope-able’ enough or not to justify existence, I find a number of problematic elements in this passage, things

³⁵ That is, in its primary function as a means of reducing/avoiding suffering; I do not mean to comment here on some of the other ritual and belief based practices that have accrued over the centuries to Buddhist philosophy and the lifestyle it promotes.

³⁶ Velleman, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

likely to confuse or blur, and so let us unpack some of the conceptual baggage here to see what we might find in regard to our own “Now what?”

Firstly there is the matter of ‘success’ at the work involved in being human, and if we are following the types of *eudaimonia* oriented ideas that are connected with Aristotle’s thinking on the subject (which Velleman refers to) we may take such to imply a degree of general welfare, a feeling of fulfillment, contentment, satisfaction, wellbeing, that – Velleman reminds us – on the Aristotelean worldview is about an entire life and not a moment or moments within it.³⁷ If that is our interpretation then the related “great harm for refusal” and “risk of similar harm for failure” would be indicative of a person not making the necessary efforts in order to ascertain that he himself has attained the benefits alluded to. What might this mean in real terms? There is foremost here the question of who is judging the success, refusal, and failure. A third party could comment on such, but at this point in our study the irrelevancy of that must be fairly clear from within the bounds of the personal perspective that we have sought to maintain. If you decide that I have failed at the job of being a (fulfilled) human then however many others may agree with your assessment would make very little difference to my own mentality if I do not follow suit, and since we are thinking about a concept as hermeneutically open as “doing the work of being a human well (or not)” surely self-reporting would trump all else. Straightaway, it seems, we find ourselves right back at the same highlighted problems that pertain to devices like the objective list theories argued against above.

Moreover, how might one ‘refuse’ to do the job of being a human? Would ‘refusal’ here mean only drifting through life, taking the default and easy path at each turn, almost a studious avoidance of Heideggerean authenticity? Could a response to existence of this nature really be active enough to be considered a “refusal” rather than a “failure”? Does “failing” here first require trying, while “refusing” does not? Is not “refusing” by and large the acknowledgement and rejection of something? Would that not then denote actually saying “no” to being and – it would appear to follow – “yes” to death via suicide? A refusal would comprehend and then purposely not try; a failure would comprehend, make an effort, and come up short. In either case the final labels applied require at the minimum an acceptance of validity on the part of the person directly involved in

³⁷ Velleman, *op. cit.*

order to have any significant meaning *for the person themselves*, and that is of utmost importance in determining whether one can cope with the inescapable suffering of any human life. We ought to note too that even a self-reported ‘success’ at the work of being human would not necessarily equal a judgment that one was coping (well) with suffering, or that one perforce found life worth living; in the absence of concrete, universal, and unarguable criteria that door very probably must be left ajar.

Thus far we have concluded (more or less) that coping appears possible for any of us but that it may not come easily, and that its effectiveness will hinge on internally applied evaluations. How then, it might be asked, do we tend to rate our own lives? Social psychologists Samantha Heintzleman and Laura King recently related in a much discussed piece that people all over the world, irrespective of age, health, and economic status, said that their own lives are meaningful, purposeful, and had direction.³⁸ This would reinforce the findings on self-deduced wellbeing that Haidt reported,³⁹ referred to in the section immediately above. It points too to the default optimistic valuations that Benatar argues are not valid reasons for deciding that life is worthwhile enough to prefer it over never living, also discussed in the foregoing.⁴⁰ For better or worse our thoughts have now slid the topic in the direction of meaning, but we may yet benefit from extending this slack to our philosophical line since if a life is meaningful it must be more amenable to coping than not, and in that meaningfulness all encountered suffering too would take its place in the backseat of a life and not the driver’s. If I think that my existence has meaning, purpose, and direction (or even just meaning) then the presumption that I will take my suffering in stride – that I will (successfully) cope – appears warranted, and strongly enough so, in my view, that such does not require an independent argument for its backing. Things may not be that simple, however.

Heintzleman and King’s work has been criticized for conflating reported meaning with meaning as a concept, and as Austin Jeffrey and Todd Shackelford argue this is “only compelling or contestable when misunderstood to imply that intrinsic meaning exists.”⁴¹ I think that although evidence of reported meaning

³⁸ Samantha J. Heintzleman and Laura A. King, “Life Is Pretty Meaningful”, *American Psychologist* 69:6 (2014), 561-574.

³⁹ Haidt, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ E.g. Pollyannaism, adaptation to circumstances and the subsequent adjustment of expectations, and comparison of oneself with others around one.

⁴¹ Austin John Jeffrey and Todd K. Shackelford, “Life *Seems* Pretty Meaningful”, *American*

is indeed not intrinsic meaning – that is an important distinction – such should not therefore lead us to another unwarranted conclusion: that reported meaning is without value. My own assessment of my life having a meaning would matter to me – perhaps very much – entirely apart from the verifiability or its lack of a meaning in/to life on the whole. There need not be any ‘real meaning’ to existence, to the universe, to all and sundry in perpetuity throughout eternity, for my self-assigned and self-valued meaningfulness to carry sufficient psychological weight that it allows, or simply aids, in my coping with the suffering that I do and will endure. Jeffrey and Shackelford state that it is only the ‘deep meaning’, the ‘ultimate why’ that matters in the question of whether or not meaning exists and dismiss individual perceptions of meaning as merely derived and inadequate.⁴² For my own part I am inclined to grant that there very likely is no ‘ultimate why’ or underlying reason for existence, or at least not one that is accessible to we human animals, and so what is really essential are *only* the so-called derived meanings that we might be able to take, and such are, I would think, potent tools in the struggle to cope with life as we find it. On this same query of meaning Morioka writes that, “The answer [to having meaning or not] ought to be one of two values, a binary yes-or-no, black-or-white, and there is no ambiguous gray zone between”.⁴³ This stance, self-applied, admittedly says nothing about any ‘why’ to said meaning – whether of the derived or intrinsic sort – but it does emphasize that meaning is a non-comparable term that can only (rightly, on our argument) be internally applied. If one can say “yes” then perhaps one would find oneself able to cope well enough that a further ascertainment of human suffering as not necessitating the cessation of human existence might be within reach. Such would remain a matter of personal perspective and not, by our framework anyway, denote a global judgment, but in that its significance for the questioner should not be underestimated. In the end all any of us can really do is to guide ourselves through another ‘today’.

5. Conclusion interrupted

We have arrived at very little, certainly nothing that could be called an answer to Benatar’s robust and startling challenge. On our analysis we did find

Psychologist 70:6 (2015), 571, p. 571.

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Morioka, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

some difficulties, or potential problems, in his case for an asymmetry regarding being and non-being, as well as in his arguments for what results from the vastness of experienced suffering. The conclusion regarding anti-natalism or natalism thereby drawn however remains open; but then we intended to leave it ambiguous since our quarry has been elsewhere, on the “Now what?”, and that is a matter of coping. We did mostly think that coping with life, with its suffering, pain, harm, but also – in a certain way – with its transitory joys as well, is a possibility for each of us, but that such differs greatly with the individual and throughout a lifetime. Coping, based in the personally bound perspective one has regarding one’s own existence, was not found to be an issue of success or failure but rather of better or worse. It was therefore found that self-evaluations and self-reporting on one’s life are paramount, not only concerning suffering but also meaning (derivative, not intrinsic). Others may judge that we are fooling ourselves, overly positive or negative in our assessments, but on our argument that hardly matters, and some ‘self-deception’ (i.e. so-called from an outside point of view) might in the end be the key to healthy coping. This again does not answer the natalism question, but it does move in the direction of a reply to “Now what?” Perhaps that is enough for the moment, for we who already live.

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