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Every Conceivable Harm: A Further Defence of Anti-Natalism

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Many people are resistant to the conclusions for which I argued in *Better Never to Have Been*¹. I have previously responded to most of the published criticisms of my arguments². Here I respond to a new batch of critics (and to some fellow anti-natalists) who gathered for a conference at the University of Johannesburg³ and whose papers are published in this special issue of the *South African Journal of Philosophy*. I am also taking the opportunity to respond to two other critics whose articles have previously been published in South African philosophy journals⁴. Clearly I cannot respond to all the arguments in each of these papers and thus I shall focus on what I take to be some of the central issues in each. None of the arguments to which I shall respond have caused me to revise my views. However, I am pleased to have the opportunity to show why this is the case.

Asymmetries

One of my arguments for the conclusion that coming into existence is always a harm appeals to an asymmetry between pleasures and pains (and between benefits and harms more generally):

- 1) The presence of pain is bad; and
- 2) The presence of pleasure is good.
- 3) The absence of pain is good (even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone); but
- 4) The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.

We can employ this asymmetry, which I shall call the *basic asymmetry*, in order to compare existing and never existing:

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- 1 David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
 - 2 A list of comments and responses is being collected here: http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/philosophy/staff_benatar_betternevertohavebeen.htm
 - 3 I am grateful to Thaddeus Metz for conceiving and organizing the conference and for inviting me to participate.
 - 4 Thaddeus Metz, "Are Lives Worth Creating?" in *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 40, No. 2, July 2011, pp. 233-255, and David Spurrett, "Hooray for babies", *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 30, No 2, 2011, pp. 197-206.

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

Figure 1

We find that (3) is a real advantage over (1). However, while (2) is good for X in scenario A, it is not an advantage over (4) in scenario B. There are thus no net benefits of coming into existence compared to never existing.

The basic asymmetry strikes me as a fundamental moral truth. I suspect that it is widely accepted – that is, until people see where it leads, namely to the conclusion that coming into existence is always a harm. Once people see this implication they scramble desperately to find some way to avoid having to accept the asymmetry. Because I anticipated this reaction, I did not simply assert the asymmetry. I also argued that we should not abandon it. One reason for retaining it is that it is, I suggested, the best explanation for four other asymmetries that are widely accepted⁵:

i) The asymmetry of procreational duties:

While we have a duty to avoid bringing into existence people who would lead miserable lives, we have no duty to bring into existence those who would lead happy lives.

ii) The prospective beneficence asymmetry:

It is strange to cite as a reason for having a child that that child will thereby be benefited. It is not similarly strange to cite as a reason for not having a child that that child will suffer.

iii) The retrospective beneficence asymmetry:

When one has brought a suffering child into existence, it makes sense to regret having brought that child into existence – and to regret it for the sake of that child. By contrast, when one fails to bring a happy child into existence, one cannot regret that failure for the sake of the person.

⁵ While all the following asymmetries were mentioned in *Better Never to Have Been*, the names I give to them below were not used in the book. I used them for the first time in “Still Better Never to Have Been: A reply to more of my critics”, forthcoming in *The Journal of Ethics*. (“Still Better Never to Have Been” was written well before the current response, but it seems that it might only be published afterwards.)

iv) *The asymmetry of distant suffering and absent happy people:*

We are rightly sad for distant people who suffer. By contrast we need not shed any tears for absent happy people on uninhabited planets, or uninhabited islands or other regions on our own planet.

My critics have responded to these asymmetries in various ways.

David Spurrett:

David Spurrett, denies that the asymmetry of procreational duties is widely accepted⁶. In support of this he cites the many religious people who think that we do have a duty to reproduce – a duty based on the divine command to “be fruitful and multiply” – and nationalists who think that their co-nationals have a duty to procreate for the sake of the nation.

This is a flippant response. First, it should be clear that the procreational duties of which I spoke are duties grounded in the interests of those who would be brought into existence. Neither the religious nor the national case is a counter-example to that. The followers of God’s (purported) commandments are reproducing not for the sake of the offspring but because God has commanded them to. And the nationalists are reproducing for the sake of the nation, not for the sake of the children they produce.

Second, almost all the philosophers who have written about ethical issues pertaining to future people have accepted the asymmetry of procreational duties. It is far too glib to ignore this. Even if he were correct that many people deny the asymmetry, it would remain true that the asymmetry is widely accepted by people who have actually thought seriously about it.

Something similar might be said of Professor Spurrett’s response to the prospective beneficence asymmetry. Here he says, first, that because there are “plenty of strange truths”⁷, the strangeness of citing as a reason for having the child the fact that the child will be benefited, does not mean that we are not warranted in citing such a reason. He then questions whether citing such a reason really is so strange. People do speak in this way, he says.

Both of these responses rely on appeals to the views of those unschooled in these matters. Just as unschooled people do sometimes say that they want to have a child for the child’s sake, so people *do* address the deceased in the second-person in death notices and eulogies. That people do speak in these ways does not mean it is not strange – and in a “strange and false” rather than “strange but true” way. Professor Spurrett wants to know what is strange about it. But that is to ask for the explanation – and my answer is that what is strange about it is that it runs counter to the basic asymmetry. This might sound circular, but it is not. It is not circular because I think that people reflecting on the idea of creating a child for that child’s sake will discern something odd about it even if they cannot explain it. My basic asymmetry helps them by explaining the oddness.

The same critique can be offered of his response to the retrospective beneficence asymmetry where he again refers to the possibility that somebody might regret “not

6 David Spurrett, “Hooray for babies”, pp. 200-202.

7 Ibid, p. 202.

having a child because of the benefits that child might have enjoyed”⁸. In defence of this possibility he says that plenty “of people clearly *think* they do things for their *actual* children”⁹. This fact, however, is completely irrelevant. It makes perfect sense to think that one can sometimes benefit actual children by doing things for them. The problem is in thinking that one can benefit somebody by creating him.

Professor Spurrett does not discuss the asymmetry of distant suffering and absent happy people. This is because he restricts himself, for some unknown reason, to a discussion of my early article, “Why it is Better Never to Come into Existence”¹⁰ where I raised only the first three asymmetries that I say are explained by the basic asymmetry. Thus we do not know whether he would accept this asymmetry and, if so, how he would explain it.

Professor Spurrett next turns his attention to the basic asymmetry itself. Here he objects to the fact that I speak only of pains and pleasures. He acknowledges that I treat these as exemplars of harms and benefits but he complains that “being exemplary is far from being exhaustive”¹¹ and that I need to take account of “harms and benefits besides pleasures and pains”¹². He thus proposes the addition of at least one further row in my matrix, to yield the following:

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of Pain (Bad)	(3) Absence of Pain (Good)
(2) Presence of Pleasure (Good)	(4) Absence of Pleasure (Not bad)
(5) Presence of a valuable human life (Good)	(6) Absence of a valuable human life (Bad)

Figure 2

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 David Benatar, “Why it is Better Never to Come into Existence”, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 2, July 1997, pp. 345-55.

11 David Spurrett, “Hooray for babies”, p. 203.

12 Ibid, p. 204.

In making this move, Professor Spurrett has completely misunderstood how to make the transition from the exemplary nature of pleasure and pains to the exhaustive categorization of harms and benefits that he desires. This is how one does it:

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of <i>Harm</i> (Bad)	(3) Absence of <i>Harm</i> (Good)
(2) Presence of <i>Benefit</i> (Good)	(4) Absence of <i>Benefit</i> (Not bad)

Figure 3

There is no need for an additional row in order to capture all benefits and harms. Professor Spurrett anticipates this objection, but his response to it is a non-sequitur: He says that my reasons for the asymmetry “aren’t convincing”¹³. But that is an objection to the evaluations of each quadrant and is not relevant to whether there should be the additional quadrants he wants to add.

Moreover, if one does add the additional row, it is far from clear that the evaluations of (5) and (6) should be “Good” and “Bad” respectively. Professor Spurrett thinks that (5) is good because “an individual human life is a valuable thing” and that (6) is bad because the absence of a value is bad. Here he makes a mistake that I shall consider below (when I discuss Skott Brill’s discussion of Sick, Healthy and the logic of value).

Thaddeus Metz:

Unlike David Spurrett, Thaddeus Metz accepts the asymmetry of procreational duties. However, he thinks that it is not best explained by my basic asymmetry. Instead, he thinks that the best explanation is “the principle that *it is permissible to start a life if and only if it would be worth continuing.*”¹⁴ He thinks that this is a better explanation because it is simpler – it “appeals solely to the facts about the nature of the lives that

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Thaddeus Metz, “Are Lives Worth Creating?”, *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 40, No. 2, July 2011, p. 241.

would exist upon their being created” whereas mine “appeals to those kinds of facts plus facts about non-existence”¹⁵.

One problem for Professor Metz’s suggestion is that the principle to which he appeals is not so much an explanation of the asymmetry of procreational duties as another way of stating it. To say that “it is permissible to start a life if only if it would be worth continuing” is to say that one has a duty not to create lives that are not worth continuing, but that one has no duty to create lives that are worth continuing¹⁶. For this reason, the principle to which Professor Metz appeals lacks explanatory value. The same is not true of my principle.

Moreover, it is *my* explanation that is preferable on the grounds of simplicity. This is because my explanation explains all four of the other asymmetries, whereas Professor Metz has to proffer more than one explanation – and he provides no explanation at all for the asymmetry of distant suffering and absent happy people.

Consider next his explanation for the prospective beneficence asymmetry. He says that the strangeness of citing a benefit to the child as a reason for creating that child, could be explained equally well if we treated the absence of pleasure as being “not good unless there is already a potential bearer of it”¹⁷. Similarly, he says that the reason why it is not strange to cite the suffering of a prospective child as a reason not to have that child is that “the absence of pain is *not bad* (and that the experience of pain is bad)”¹⁸.

It is difficult to understand how these are explanations of the prospective beneficence asymmetry. I can see how the presence of pain being bad could explain why it is not strange to cite as a reason for not having a child that that child will suffer. I do not see, however, what explanatory work is done by the claim that the absence of pain is “not bad”. And why is the purported non-goodness of absent pleasure an explanation why it is strange to cite the future possible presence of pleasure as a reason to create the child that will experience that pleasure?

Professor Metz appeals to the same evaluations of absent pain (that is, “not bad”) and absent pleasure (that is, “not good”) to explain the retrospective beneficence asymmetry. Here too these evaluations fail to explain the *asymmetry*. We can see how the presence of suffering in an existent child can be cause for regret (on the basis of that suffering being bad). However, it is hard to see how the absent pleasures of the happy child that was not brought into existence is not cause for regret if those absent

15 Ibid.

16 The asymmetry of procreational duties, as I formulate it, refers to “miserable lives” and “happy lives” rather than to lives that are or are not “worth continuing”. However, I presume that Professor Metz understands “miserable lives” as ones that are “not worth continuing” and “happy lives” as ones that “are worth continuing”.

17 Thaddeus Metz, “Are Lives Worth Creating?”, p. 242. The quoted words are replete with ambiguity. First, the phrase “not good” is ambiguous. On the most reasonable reading of his words here, Professor Metz is providing an alternative to my evaluation of “not bad”. I proceed, for the moment, assuming that he is providing an alternative. However, it seems later (as I shall still show) that he may not be disagreeing with me, which only makes his words here more confusing. Second, the phrase “potential bearer” is ambiguous between “an actual bearer who would potentially experience the pleasure” and “a potential but not actual person who, if he were actual, would experience the pleasure”. If Professor Metz means the former, as I suspect he does, he should perhaps have said: “unless there is a person who is deprived of the pleasure”.

18 Thaddeus Metz, “Are Lives Worth Creating?”, p. 242. I am assuming here that when he describes absent pain as “not bad”, Professor Metz does not mean that it is good, because then his evaluation of (3) would be equivalent to mine. Thus he must mean “not bad, but not good either”.

pleasures are “not good”. If the presence of pleasure would be good and its absence is not good, surely we should regret the good that does not exist?

It is not surprising that Professor Metz’s alternative evaluations of absent pain and absent pleasure do not explain the prospective and retrospective beneficence asymmetries. His evaluations of absent pain and absent pleasure appear to be symmetrical (both with each other and with the presence of pain and pleasure) and thus it is hard to understand how they could explain an *asymmetry* in prospective and retrospective beneficence.

Part of the problem, I think, is that Professor Metz’s evaluations of absent pain and pleasure are unclear. Consider absent pleasure. Although he designates this as “not good”, it is not clear that he is actually disagreeing with me. He says that “there is probably no qualitative difference between claiming that the absence of pleasure upon the non-existence of a person is ‘not bad’ as per asymmetry, and saying that it is ‘not good’, supposing that the latter is not meant to imply that it is bad, as I have above”¹⁹. But if that is the case, why complicate matters and not just accept my designation of absent pleasure as “not bad” especially since I have argued that designating it simply as “not good” is insufficiently informative?²⁰ And why suggest that it is an *alternative* explanation?

Consider next absent pain. Professor Metz says that this is “not bad”. I said explicitly that when I evaluated absent pain and absent pleasure of the non-existent I was not making a claim about the intrinsic value of these absent experiences. Instead, I was making a claim about their relative value – that is relative to the scenario in which the person exists. Thus, when I say that absent pain is “good”, I mean that it is better than the presence of pain in Scenario A²¹. If that is where Professor Metz disagrees with me, then he is on very weak ground. Surely the absence of pain in Scenario B is better than its presence in Scenario A, when judged with reference to the interests of the person who exists in A. And if he does not disagree with me, and is simply making a point about the intrinsic value of absent pain in Scenario B, then it is not clear how he has undermined my argument for the conclusion that coming into existence is always a harm.

Professor Metz next argues that even if one accepts my basic asymmetry, it does not follow that coming into existence is always a harm. He thinks that before we can reach such a conclusion we need to know something about the magnitude of the goodness and badness. He is aware that I consider and respond to this view, but his reply mischaracterizes my argument.

I argued that (3), the absence of pain in Scenario B (where X does not exist), is an advantage over (1), the presence of pain in Scenario A. By contrast, (2), the presence of pleasure in Scenario A, is not an advantage over (4), the absence of pleasure in Scenario B. Because Scenario B (where X never exists) has an advantage over Scenario A, but Scenario A (where X exists) has no advantage over Scenario B, Scenario A is worse than Scenario B. Scenario A is thus a harm – and it is a harm irrespective of how much pain and pleasure X might experience.

19 Thaddeus Metz, “Are Lives Worth Creating?”, p. 243.

20 In *Better Never to Have Been* I specifically said that absent pleasure of the non-existent is “not good” and that the question was whether it was therefore “bad” or instead, “not good but not bad either”. (pp. 39-40).

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 41-2.

It is hard to see how one can resist this conclusion *if* one accepts the respective evaluations I accord to each quadrant. The claim that absent pain in Scenario B is “good” means, I said, that it is better than the presence of pain in Scenario A. Similarly, the claim that absent pleasure in Scenario B is “not bad” means that it is not worse than the presence of pleasure in Scenario A. Some people, as we have seen, object to those evaluations, but once they are accepted, it follows that coming into existence is always a harm.

Professor Metz attempts to ward off this conclusion but he does so by mischaracterizing my claim that “absent pleasures that do not deprive are ‘not bad’ in the sense of ‘not worse’”. He interprets this claim as saying that “if one has not been created yet²², and so has not been deprived of pleasure, then one is not badly off ... in the sense of worse off than one could have been.” He wants to reject the latter claim and asks rhetorically: “Why is one not badly off in the sense of worse off than one could have been *had one existed?*”²³

If one insists on asking the question that way, the answer is that one is not worse off because although the presence of the pleasures would have been good if one had existed, their absence is not worse if one does not exist. We have already seen - and at this point Professor Metz is accepting for the sake of argument - that *had one existed* the presence of one’s pleasures would have been good, but if one *never exists* the absence of those pleasures is not worse. If one accepts that asymmetry it makes no sense to then judge the absence of pleasure for the never existing person by the standards of absent pleasure for an existing person.

Rivka Weinberg:

Unlike most of my other critics, Rivka Weinberg declares herself “very sympathetic to the intuitions that inspire” my arguments and thinks that my “conclusion is probably right”²⁴. However, she says that she has “yet to find an argument to support it”²⁵. It seems that my basic asymmetry is not among the intuitions to which she is sympathetic, because she devotes a lot of attention to the arguments I provide for why we should not reject that asymmetry. More specifically, she thinks that the other asymmetries that I say are explained by the basic asymmetry could be explained better by either a “simple and obvious metaphysical fact” or a “common moral principle”²⁶.

The metaphysical fact is that all “interests are contingent upon existence” – unless “an entity exists at some point, there is no real subject for the interest”²⁷. The common moral principle is “the view that our moral obligations are to persons who do or will exist”²⁸.

Although the metaphysical fact and the moral principle can explain some of the asymmetries, they do not explain all of them. Consider, for example, the asymmetry of procreational duties. Professor Weinberg says that “there may be a duty to avoid

22 It is tendentious to include the word “yet”. Scenario A is a situation in which a person exists, while Scenario B is a situation in which that person *never exists*.

23 Thaddeus Metz, “Are Lives Worth Creating?”, p. 247.

24 Rivka Weinberg, “Is Having Children Always Wrong?”, p. 26.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid, p. 28. In fact, she thinks that the metaphysical fact grounds the moral principle.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

bringing unhappy people into the world because those existent, interested people would be unhappy” but that there is “no corresponding duty to bring would-be-happy people into existence because ‘failing’ in that ‘duty’ would not cause anyone’s interests to be set back”.²⁹

The problem is that Professor Weinberg is selective in her invocation of the metaphysical fact and the moral principle. To see how this is so, consider the two duties under examination and the possible outcomes of acting or not acting up on them:

1. A purported duty not to bring Sad into existence:
 - (a) If violated, there is an existent person whose interests are set back.
 - (b) If fulfilled, there is no existent person whose interests are advanced.
2. A purported duty to bring Happy into existence:
 - (a) If violated, there is no existent person whose interests are set back.
 - (b) If fulfilled, there is an existent person whose interests are advanced.

In explaining the asymmetry of procreational duties – that is, the existence of the first duty and the absence of the second duty – she appeals only to (a) and (c). However, there is nothing in either the metaphysical fact or the moral principle that requires us to consider only these options and to ignore (b) and (d). If one acted on the duty not to bring miserable people into existence, there would be no existent person. And if one fulfilled the purported duty to bring happy people into existence, there *would* be an existent person³⁰.

If one *did* appeal to (b) and (d) in applying the metaphysical fact and the moral principle, one would find that the asymmetry of procreational duties, far from being explained, is actually negated.

Exactly the same problem arises for the prospective beneficence asymmetry: If one does create the happy child it will exist, and if one fails to create the miserable child, it will not exist.

Thus, if one wants to use the metaphysical fact and the moral principle to explain asymmetries (i) and (ii), one needs some explanation why only (a) and (c) are relevant and why (b) and (d) can be ignored. My basic asymmetry could provide the necessary explanation, but if Professor Weinberg were to accept that explanation, she would not have provided an alternative to my basic asymmetry. Indeed, she would be deeply dependent on it.

Another possible explanation is the view that avoiding harm is more important than bestowing benefit. However, Professor Weinberg specifically rejects this idea³¹. Her basis for rejecting it is that we often risk harms in order to gain benefits. However, this may be too quick. Perhaps balancing harms and benefits is reasonable within a life, but that when it comes to creating lives avoiding harms takes priority over benefits. If Professor Weinberg accepted this view, however, she would be lead to my anti-natalist conclusion.

29 Ibid.

30 Perhaps in response to this thought, Rivka Weinberg says: “We need not do an action in order for its foreseeable results to give us a reason not to do that action.” (p. 29). This move does not solve her problems. On one reading this claim actually negates the moral principle. And if it is thought not to negate this principle, a parallel claim could be made: “We need not do an action in order for its foreseeable results to give us a reason to do that action.” This claim could lead us to treat the purported duty to bring Happy into existence like the duty not to bring Sad into existence.

31 Rivka Weinberg, “Is Having Children Always Wrong?”, p. 33.

In the absence of an explanation why (b) and (d) can be ignored, Rivka Weinberg has not demonstrated how the metaphysical fact and the moral principle can explain asymmetries (i) and (ii). She has thus not provided an alternative to my basic asymmetry.

David Boonin:

David Boonin's response to my asymmetry argument is a sophisticated one. He recognizes that my basic asymmetry leads to the conclusion that coming into existence is always a harm. This is a conclusion he wants to avoid and thus he seeks a way to reject my basic asymmetry. To do this, he must provide an alternative explanation of the other asymmetries that I suggested are best explained by the basic asymmetry. His solution is a conjunction of two principles – his *Relational Symmetry Principle* and his *Actual Persons Principle*.

According to the *Relational Symmetry Principle*³²:

- (1) the presence of pain is intrinsically bad
- (2) the presence of pleasure is intrinsically good
- (3) the absence of pain is better than the presence of pain if either
 - (a) there is an actual person whose interests are better served by the absence of the pain or
 - (b) the presence of the pain would require the existence of a person who would not otherwise exist and whose potential interests are better served by the absence of the pain
- (4) the absence of pleasure is worse than the presence of pleasure if either
 - (a) there is an actual person whose interests are better served by the presence of the pleasure or
 - (b) the absence of the pleasure would require the absence of a person who would otherwise exist and whose potential interests are better served by the presence of the pleasure.

The *Actual Persons Principle* says that³³:

When choosing between two options, it is prima facie wrong to make the choice the acting on which will result in its being the case that there is an actual person for whom your act made things worse.

There are many things to say in response to this interesting idea. The first is to note that the Relational Symmetry Principle is unhelpful in determining when lives are worth starting. This is because the principle contains two curious clauses, namely the final clauses of 3b) and 4b): "... and whose potential interests are better served by" either "the absence of pain" or "the presence of pleasure".

What 3b) and 4b) say is that the absent pains of non-existence are good only if the life that the person would otherwise had lived would not have been a life worth starting, and that the absence of pleasure is bad if the life that the person would otherwise had lived would have been worth starting. This allows one to insert whatever view one

32 David Boonin, "Better to Be", p. 15.

33 Ibid, p. 16.

has about which lives are worth starting or, put another way, about which lives it is not a harm to create. If we try to use the Relational Symmetry Principle to determine when coming into existence is a harm, we find that we already need to know when coming into existence is a harm in order to use the principle to reach a conclusion. This is question-begging.

The inclusion of these vague clauses in his principle enables Professor Boonin to smuggle in what we might call the orthodox view of procreation ethics – namely, the view that creating people is morally permissible if their lives will be of an acceptable quality. Thus he says that it is acceptable for the Lucky Couple to conceive the Lucky Child – a child that will experience 1 million units of pleasure and only 100 units of pain³⁴. Readers who share the orthodox view of procreation and thus accept his assumption that creating such a life is not a harm to the child created, will thus reach the conclusion they want to reach.

But now notice that there is nothing to stop those, such as I, who think that coming into existence is always a harm, to say that the Lucky Child, although he may be lucky relative to other children (who suffer more than he does), is not lucky *enough* if he is actually brought into existence. We can say that in choices between creating and not creating somebody, it is *always* the case that the potential person's interests are better served by the absence of pain³⁵ and that it is *never* the case that a potential person's interests are better served by the presence of the pleasure that would be attendant upon his existence. Professor Boonin might disagree with me, but his Relational Symmetry Principle provides him with no resources to show that I am wrong.

Now, it might be responded that it is not only Professor Boonin but also I who face the problem of the vague clause in 3b). After all, 3) including 3b) is, according to Professor Boonin, a more precise restatement of the 3) in my basic asymmetry³⁶. However, this is exactly what I deny. Professor Boonin has not restated the same claim I made. Instead he has altered my claim. My claim is that absent pain (in a scenario in which somebody does not exist) is *always* better than the presence of pain. That is a very precise statement. To restate my claim in the way that Professor Boonin does is to make it not merely less precise but so vague as to render it open to innumerable interpretations.

My second concern about the combined Relational Symmetry Principle and Actual Persons Principle is that it does not do all the explanatory work that Professor Boonin says it does. It *does* explain the asymmetry of procreational duties. However, contrary to what Professor Boonin says, it fails to explain the other three asymmetries, namely (ii) to (iv). This is because these three asymmetries do not refer to our duties, that is, to what we ought or ought not to do. Instead they are about what is good or bad for people. Not all talk about what is good or bad for people must be cashed out in terms of duties. Some things might be good for people without our being duty-bound to bestow that benefit. And there are some actions that harm people but which are not wrong to

34 Ibid, p. 10.

35 How could the absence of pain in Scenario B not be better than its presence in Scenario A? Professor Boonin's view seems to be that the absence of pain in Scenario B is not better if the presence of the pain in Scenario A is the cost of attaining the pleasures in Scenario A as long as the pleasures are sufficiently plentiful to more than compensate for the pain. I, by contrast, think that it is always an advantage of non-existence that there no pain accompanying it. It is a separate question whether the absence of pleasure in non-existence is a disadvantage.

36 David Boonin, "Better to Be", p.13.

do³⁷. Thus, when it comes to asymmetries (ii) to (iv), the Actual Persons Principle, which talks about what it is wrong to do, has no application. The Relational Symmetry Principle does apply, but rather than explaining the three asymmetries it actually negates them.

Consider first the prospective beneficence asymmetry. The Relational Symmetry Principle says that the absence of pleasure is worse than the presence of pleasure if the absence of the pleasure would require the absence of a person who would otherwise exist and whose potential interests are better served by the presence of the pleasure. But if the absence of pleasure is worse (when judged with reference of the interests of the person who would otherwise exist), as the orthodox view would hold about many lives, there is nothing strange about citing, as a reason for having a child that that child will thereby be benefited. Of course the Actual Persons Principle would deny that one had a *duty* to create that child, but the prospective beneficence asymmetry says nothing about our duties. It comments only on the oddity of electing to have a child for that child's sake. The Relational Symmetry Principle, far from explaining that oddity, must deny it.

A similar problem arises when we consider the retrospective beneficence asymmetry. If one fails to bring a happy child into existence – a child that, according to the orthodox view, has a life worth starting – one *does* have a reason to regret the failure to bring that child into existence. The reason is that that child would have been benefited. Again, the Actual Persons Principle will rule out the possibility that one acted *wrongly* in not creating that child and thus one could not regret acting wrongly. But one can regret things one failed to do even if one's failure to do them was not a violation of one's duties.

If we turn to the asymmetry of distant suffering and absent happy people we find, again, that the Relational Symmetry Principle must deny the asymmetry. This is because the principle *does* provide us with grounds for regretting the absent happy people on uninhabited islands or planets. According to that principle, the absence of this pleasure is worse than its presence (because the lives would have been worth living) and that is a basis for regret, even though the situation is not the result of our having acted wrongly.

Perhaps Professor Boonin could respond that an amended version of the Actual Persons Principle could address the above problems and thus, combined with Relational Symmetry Principle, explain asymmetries (ii) to (iv). The Actual Persons Principle could be reformulated to yield the *Reformulated Actual Persons Principle*:

When comparing existing and never existing people we should only be concerned about actual people³⁸ and that things not be worse for them.

Because this reformulated principle refers not to what is right and wrong but rather to what is good and bad (or better and worse) it might be thought to solve the problems I have described. However, there would be a cost to such a move. Professor Boonin specifically says that a bridging moral principle is needed in order to justify “conclusions about what should or should not be done”³⁹. The Reformulated Actual Persons

37 For example, incarcerating murders may harm them, but it does not follow that it would be wrong to lock them up.

38 By “actual people”, David Boonin means those “who actually exist at some point in time” (p. 16).

39 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Principle is not a moral principle and thus would fail to do the necessary bridging work if one wants to generate conclusions about what we ought to do.

Perhaps some hybrid of the original and reformulated Actual Persons Principle could do the trick. However, this brings me to a third concern about Professor Boonin's argument – a problem that confronts both this Actual Persons Principle, the reformulated principle or a hybrid of the two⁴⁰. The problem is that while the principle purports to focus our attention on actual people it has another, equally strong focus which is masked by the principle's name. The principle says that it is wrong to make choices that make it the case that (a) there is an actual person (b) for whom your act *made things worse*.

However, there is nothing about (a) the focus on actual persons that necessitates (b) the focus on whether a choice makes things worse, rather than better, for actual persons. Thus we should ask why the Actual Persons Principle should be adopted over the following *Alternative Actual Persons Principle*:

When choosing between two options, it is *prima facie* wrong to *fail to* make the choice the acting on which will result in its being the case that there is an actual person for whom your act made things *better*.

Combining this principle with the Relational Symmetry Principle has catastrophic results. Not only does it explain none of the asymmetries (i) to (iv), it actually negates them. Some will favour the Actual Persons Principle over its alternative precisely because the latter has these worse implications. However, we need to ask whether the Actual Persons Principle is just masking problems in the Relational Symmetry Principle – problems that are exposed when that principle is combined with the Alternative Actual Persons Principle. Thus, what we need is a deeper reason to explain why the Actual Persons Principle is to be preferred to its alternative⁴¹. In other words, we need to know why, in procreational choices, we should make the choice that prevents what is worse for actual persons rather than making the choice that is better for actual persons.

Some might be tempted to respond as follows⁴²: If, in procreative decisions, we fail to make the choice that prevents what is worse for actual persons, there will be an actual person who will suffer, whereas if we fail to make the choice that is better for actual persons there will be no actual person to suffer as a result of our choice. The problem with this response is that it begs the question. Why focus on the consequence of failing to do what one should do? Why not focus on the consequence of doing what one should do? If one *did* make the choice that resulted in what was best for an actual person, there *would* be an actual person who benefited. And if one *did* make the choice that prevents what is worse for actual persons there *would not* be an actual person who would benefit.

40 I shall discuss the problem as it confronts Professor Boonin's version, but the same objection can be levelled, *mutatis mutandis*, to the reformulated version or to the hybrid.

41 In fact, as before, there is more than one alternative. Consider a hybrid of the Actual Persons Principle and the Alternative Actual Persons Principle:

When choosing between two options, it is *prima facie* wrong to, either:

a) make the choice the acting on which will result in its being the case that there is an actual person for whom your act made things worse; or

b) *fail to* make the choice the acting on which will result in its being the case that there is an actual person for whom your act made things *better*.

42 David Boonin, "Better to Be", p.24.

Whatever the answer, it must have something to do with an asymmetry of some kind or another between harming and benefiting⁴³. One possible suggestion is that, all things being equal, preventing harm takes priority over bestowing benefit, even if not generally, then at least in procreative contexts. However, if anybody were to appeal to an idea of this kind to rescue the Actual Persons Principle, he would have leapt out of the frying pan of the asymmetry argument and into the fire of the quality-of-life argument. Given the amount of harm that can be expected to characterize human life, a principle prioritizing harm avoidance would lead to anti-natalism, albeit via a different route.

Sick and Healthy, and Intrinsic value

Skott Brill's thoughtful paper is devoted to a critical discussion of the analogy of Sick and Healthy. His paper was written on the assumption that I employed the analogy because it was necessary in order to demonstrate that the absent pleasures of non-existence are not worse than the pleasures of existence - or, in other words, that quadrant (4) is not worse than quadrant (2). However, what I had said about the analogy is that it

need not be read as proving that quadrant (2) is good and that quadrant (4) is not bad. That asymmetry was established in the previous section. Instead, the analogy could be interpreted as showing how, given the asymmetry, (2) is not an advantage over (4), whereas (1) is a disadvantage relative to (3). It would thereby show that Scenario B is preferable to Scenario A.⁴⁴

While this implies (but does not explicitly say) that the analogy *can* be seen as proving that quadrant (4) is not worse than quadrant (2), it is explicitly saying that it does not *have* to be read that way. In other words, the analogy can be seen as simply an illumination or illustration of what has already been proved. However, even if one does interpret the purpose of the analogy in the first way, one must still distinguish between:

- (a) the analogy being an *additional* way of proving that (4) is not worse than (2); and
- (b) the analogy being *necessary* to proving that (4) is not worse than (2).

Professor Brill seems to assume that (b) is the case. He thinks that without the analogy, I have not demonstrated the basic asymmetry⁴⁵. However, because I take myself to have demonstrated the basic asymmetry without the analogy, my purpose for the analogy is, at most, to provide a further argument (and at least to illuminate and illustrate what I had already demonstrated). If I am correct in thinking that the basic asymmetry is demonstrated without the analogy, then even a successful critique of the anal-

43 There seem to me to be a number of such asymmetries, with which my basic asymmetry is consistent (and thus less surprising).

44 *Better Never to Have Been*, p. 43.

45 He says: "To establish the crucial claim that the non-badness of absent pleasures in non-existence is relative rather than intrinsic, Benatar constructs an analogy involving two people, Sick and Healthy. In this paper, I show the inaptness of the analogy and consequent unsoundness of the argument as it stands." (Skott Brill, "Sick and Healthy: Benatar on the Logic of Value", p. 38.

ogy would fail to undermine the asymmetry argument. Professor Brill thus overstates the importance of the Sick and Healthy analogy⁴⁶.

However, we can set this issue aside and consider Professor Brill's critique of the analogy on its own terms. He suggests that the analogy is in violation of what he calls the *reasonable assumption*, namely that

in the absence of any countervailing consideration, there is more reason to believe that the logic of intrinsic value that applies to existing things also applies to non-existing things than to believe (as Benatar does) that the logic of instrumental value that applies to existing things becomes part of the logic of intrinsic value when applied to non-existing things.⁴⁷

The so-called reasonable assumption contains a further, unstated assumption – that there is a (single) “logic of intrinsic value”. According to Professor Brill's conception, the “logic of intrinsic goodness is such that, unlike the case of an instrumental good, the presence of an intrinsic good is *always* good ... which in turn makes its absence *relatively bad* and *intrinsically value neutral*”⁴⁸. Professor Spurrett, we saw earlier, had the same view about intrinsic goodness.

The crucial problem, however, is that there is not a single logic of intrinsic value and this is because different things might be meant by the phrase “intrinsic value”. Consider the claim that “Pleasure is intrinsically good.” This is ambiguous between at least the following two claims:

- (a) It is intrinsically good that sentient beings have pleasure.
- (b) It is intrinsically good that there be sentient beings with pleasure.

(a) is the view that pleasure is intrinsically good *for* sentient beings, whereas (b) is the view that pleasure is intrinsically good *simpliciter*. Both of these conceptions satisfy the understanding of intrinsic goodness as non-derivative goodness. However, they have quite different implications for my matrix that compares existence and non-existence. If we adopt (a)⁴⁹ then there is nothing stopping us from saying that:

- 1) is (intrinsically) bad;
- 2) is (intrinsically) good;
- 3) is (relatively) good (that is, better than 1); and
- 4) is (relatively) not bad (that is, not worse than 4).

46 Here is another example of how he overstates the importance of the analogy: In *Better Never to Have Been*, I considered the challenge of those who propose to assign a numerical value of zero to quadrant (4). I said that the best way to see that this is mistaken is to apply the same reasoning to the analogy of Sick and Healthy where its error becomes patent (p. 47). Professor Brill discusses at length whether the analogy really does show the error of assigning a value of zero. However, although I think that the analogy is a particularly lively way of showing the error, we do not actually require the analogy to prove this. The whole point in my original matrix, is that the presence of pleasure in (2) is good for the existent X but does not constitute an advantage over the absent pleasure in (4) of the never-existing X. Assigning a positive charge to (2) and a zero to (4) implies that (2) is an advantage over (4), and thus is clearly an inaccurate way of capturing the relative value “not bad” in (4). The same is true of these quadrants in the Sick and Healthy matrix, but one does not need the analogy to show that absent pleasures in the never existing should not be assigned the value of zero.

47 Skott Brill, “Sick and Healthy: Benatar on the Logic of Value”, pp. 44-45.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

49 And extend the conception to include a parallel understanding of intrinsic badness.

The reasonable assumption now becomes unreasonable. This is because the relevant components of the logic of instrumental value that apply to existing things are *the same* as the relevant components of the logic of intrinsic value when applied to non-existing things. More specifically, in both cases, the absence of an intrinsic bad is good, but the absence of either an intrinsic or instrumental good is not bad unless somebody is deprived. It is not that the logic of the one is applied to the other. Instead, it is the case that both logics are the same in the relevant cases.

Perhaps Professor Brill will suggest that we should adopt (b) rather than (a). If we did so, then the logic of instrumental value that applies to existing things would indeed be different from the logic of intrinsic value when applied to non-existing things⁵⁰. However, (b) is problematic. There is a famous distinction between “making people happy” and “making happy people”. Most philosophers have thought that any moral reasons or duties we have are restricted to the former. One would have to give up this view if one accepted (b). Because the absence of the sentient beings that would experience pleasure would be relatively bad, there would be some reason to make happy people.

Or consider another implication of accepting (b). Imagine a possible kind of being – we might call them “shmersons”. Now imagine that if shmersons existed they would get a lot of pleasure from putting their fingers in their ears, a practice called “shmearing”. There are no shmersons, and shmearing means nothing to all beings that do exist. Is it really worse that there are no shmersons because in their absence there is no shmearing-induced pleasure? If one accepted (b) one would have to answer affirmatively, but an affirmative answer seems bizarre. Surely the goodness of shmearing is goodness for shmersons and not goodness simpliciter?

Professor Brill’s central argument hinges on the specific interpretation he has of intrinsic value. There is no reason why I need accept his interpretation, and indeed there are good reasons to reject it. I take this to be the most damaging flaw of his argument.

It might now be asked *why* I think that the logic of instrumental value that applies to existing things is the same as the logic of intrinsic value (as I have understood it) when applied to non-existing things. In other words, why is the case of Sick and Healthy a good analogy, even though it embodies an instrumental good, whereas the pleasure of existing people is intrinsically good (albeit in the sense I have said)?

Professor Brill characterizes my answer thus:

- 1) Using an analogy involving an exister and a non-exister is inappropriate. (For it is too close to the matter at hand.)
- 2) Therefore, (by default) an analogy involving two existers is appropriate.
- 3) An analogy involving two existers in conjunction with an intrinsic good is inappropriate. (For, since all existers who lack an intrinsic good *are* deprived, such an analogy would beg the question against the asymmetry argument.)
- 4) Therefore, (by default) an analogy involving two existers in conjunction with an instrumental good is appropriate.⁵¹

50 This would not suffice – Professor Brill’s argument would still be susceptible to other criticisms – but it would be a response to the particular criticism at hand.

51 Skott Brill, “Sick and Healthy: Benatar on the Logic of Value”, p. 45.

He then argues that this argument is “based on two *non sequiturs*” that are “perhaps best identified as instances of the fallacy of Correct by Default”.⁵²

However, this is a mischaracterization. My argument (or at least the core of it) is better understood as follows:

- 1) In my matrix comparing X’s existence and X’s never existing, (4) represents absent pleasures that do not deprive.
- 2) It is because these absent pleasures do not deprive that (4) is not worse than (2).
- 3) Therefore, a suitable analogy for such pleasures is another good that does not deprive.
- 4) The absence of some instrumental goods in an existent person is not a deprivation⁵³.
- 5) The absence of the capacity for quick recovery in Healthy is a case in point.
- 6) Therefore, the absence of the capacity for quick recovery in Healthy is a suitable analogy.

This interpretation of my argument is immune to Professor Brill’s objections and it explains why the comparison of Sick and Healthy is analogous to the comparison of X existing and X never existing⁵⁴.

While I do not have the space here to respond to all the arguments Skott Brill advances, I do want to clarify some things about where Professor Brill and I disagree in our evaluations of the various quadrants of my matrix and what implications this has for the asymmetries that I say are explained by the basic asymmetry.

Professor Brill seems to think that I deny that the non-badness in quadrant (4) is intrinsic non-badness⁵⁵. However, that is a mistaken account of my view. The absence of pleasure in the non-existent is indeed intrinsically neither good nor bad. It is intrinsically value-neutral. However, the intrinsic value (including value-neutrality) of something does not preclude a different relative value. Thus the pain in (1) is intrinsically bad, but also relatively bad, in comparison with (3) for example. Similarly, I take (3) to be intrinsically neutral, but relatively good – that is, better than (2). And I take the non-badness of (4) to be both intrinsic and relative. The absent pleasure is intrinsically neither good nor bad, but it is also not worse than the presence of pleasure in (2). That said, it is true that when I describe (4) as “not bad” I am not referring to its intrinsic value, and am instead referring to its being “not worse” than (2), as that is what is key to the comparison of existence and non-existence.

Perhaps Professor Brill meant to say that I deny that the non-badness in quadrant (4) is *merely* intrinsic non-badness. That would be an accurate account of my view. (I

52 Ibid.

53 The problem with using the absence of an intrinsic good in a non-existent person is not, as Professor Brill says, that it is “too close to the matter at hand”. It *is* the matter at hand and is thus not an analogy at all.

54 Professor Brill says that “Benatar needs to give reasons for the legitimacy of using in his analogy two existers in conjunction with an instrumental good” (p. 46). I do give a reason: It is that this is a case of an absent good that is not a deprivation, and is thus like the absent pleasure that does not deprive the non-existent.

55 For example, he says that my asymmetry argument “hinges on the non-badness at issue here [that is, in quadrant 4] being *relative* (no worse than the presence of pleasures in existence) rather than *intrinsic* (value neutral)” (p. 38). And he claims (on p. 46) that I contend “that if non-badness were intrinsic ... it would be better to be S than H ...”

think that it is both intrinsically and relatively not bad.) It seems, then, that Professor Brill and I agree on the intrinsic values of the four quadrants:

- 1) Presence of pain in the existent is intrinsically bad.
- 2) Presence of pleasure in the existent is intrinsically good.
- 3) The absence of pain in the non-existent is intrinsically value-neutral (neither good nor bad)⁵⁶.
- 4) The absence of pleasure in the non-existent is intrinsically value neutral (neither good nor bad).

Since intrinsic values do not preclude relative values, what does Professor Brill think the relative values of each quadrant are – where each quadrant is evaluated relative to its horizontally adjacent quadrant? It seems to me that he is committed to the following:

- 1) The presence of pain in the existent is (relatively) bad – that is worse than (3).
- 2) The presence of pleasure in the existent is (relatively) good – that is better than (4).
- 3) The absence of pain in the non-existent is (relatively) good – that is better than (1).
- 4) The absence of pleasure in the non-existent is (relatively) bad – that is worse than (2).

The evaluations for (1) and (2) here are inescapable for him. I also cannot see how he could deny that the absence of pain in (3) is better than its presence in (1). Quadrant (4) could be regarded as “not bad” – that is, not worse than (2). That is my evaluation. However, because Professor Brill rejects it, the only other plausible view is that he thinks it *is* worse than (2) – that is, that it is relatively bad.

With these evaluations in hand, we can assess Professor Brill’s claim that asymmetries (i) to (iv) do not “support the claim that the absence of pleasures in non-existence is specifically relatively not bad”⁵⁷.

Consider (ii) the prospective beneficence asymmetry. Professor Brill says that

if the absence of pleasures in non-existence is only value neutral (intrinsically not bad), then in view of all the burdens and sacrifices having children places on parents, it is not at all surprising that we do not feel more moral pressure ... than we do to have children.⁵⁸

This is a *non-sequitur*. The prospective beneficence asymmetry is not about our duties. It is about whether the interests of a possible child provide us with a reason to create or not create it. Those reasons might be overridden by other factors (such as the burdens or sacrifices of having children), but that has no impact on whether the interests of the child provide a reason for or against having a child. My basic asymmetry explains the prospective beneficence asymmetry. However, if one looks only at the intrinsic values of (1) to (4), which are symmetrical, there is no explanation for the prospective beneficence asymmetry. The presence of pain in (1) is bad, and its absence in

56 Professor Brill is not explicit about what intrinsic value he thinks attaches to (3), but I cannot see how it could be anything other than value-neutral.

57 Skott Brill, “Sick and Healthy: Benatar on the Logic of Value”, p. 50.

58 *Ibid.* p. 52.

(3) is neither good nor bad. The presence of pleasure in (2) is good, and its absence in (4) is neither good nor bad. Thus if one has no reason to create a child that will experience more of the good than of the bad, one similarly has no reason to avoid creating a child that will have more of the bad than the good, and *vice versa*.

It will not help Professor Brill if he adds to the above intrinsic evaluations, the relative evaluations that I have said he makes. These too are symmetrical, and adding this symmetry to the symmetry of intrinsic values is not going to explain the prospective beneficence *asymmetry*.

Consider next (iii) the retrospective beneficence asymmetry and (iv) the asymmetry of distant suffering and absent happy people. Professor Brill's response to these is not to show how his symmetrical evaluations can explain the asymmetries, but instead to deny the asymmetries. He suggests that perhaps we should regret that happy people were not created. I shall not here rehearse the various problems with denying these asymmetries and with claiming that we do indeed have a reason to regret the absence of non-existing people (for *their* sakes).

The Quality of Human Life

The asymmetry argument is the argument in *Better Never to Have Been* that has elicited most response. However, it is not the only argument I provided. Indeed, by itself, the asymmetry argument is insufficient to yield the anti-natalist conclusion. It shows that it is better never to come into existence. It does not show how great a harm it is to come into existence. The second argument – what I shall call the quality-of-life argument – reveals the magnitude of that harm⁵⁹. However, the quality-of-life argument can also be understood as a separate argument for the conclusion that coming into existence is a harm⁶⁰.

The first step of the argument establishes that self-assessments of quality of life are extremely unreliable. There is ample empirical evidence that most humans have an optimism bias, which leads them to overestimate the quality of their lives. Quality of life assessments are also corrupted in other ways. First, humans are prone to “adaptation”. That is to say, if something bad happens to them, there will be an initial dip in self-assessment of well-being, but this will soon return to close to the original baseline assessment even without any actual improvement in well-being. Second, people's assessments of the quality of their lives are influenced by comparisons with the quality of life of others. Insofar as some harm affects all people it tends not to influence self-assessments of well-being.

The second step of the quality-of-life argument is to show just how many bad things are missed in self-assessments, suggesting that the quality of people's lives is much worse than they typically think. Being brought into existence with such a life is a significant harm.

The third step of the argument is to show that even if the earlier steps are thought to fail, there is nonetheless good reason to criticize procreation. In support of this conclusion I showed just how much suffering there is in the world and how liable any new life is to at least some of these serious harms. Thus any procreators impose the risk of

59 The second argument is presented in Chapter 3. The rest of this paragraph and the following three paragraphs, in which I summarize this argument, are drawn from “Still Better Never to Have Been: A reply to more of my critics”, forthcoming in *The Journal of Ethics* and are used here with permission of the journal editors.

60 I disagree with Skott Brill, who thinks that I take this argument to be a “fall-back argument”. (“Sick and Healthy: Benatar on the Logic of Value”, p. 38).

those serious harms on those they bring into existence. They play a procreational “Russian Roulette”, in which their children stand to pay the price. If the asymmetry argument works then the gun is fully loaded. But even if the asymmetry argument fails, and the gun is only partly loaded, taking such risks for one’s offspring is morally problematic.

Brooke Trisel:

Brooke Alan Trisel offers a number of criticisms of my quality-of-life argument.

Questioning the evidence for an optimism bias:

First, he takes issue with the evidence I cite for a general optimism bias. He refers to two studies⁶¹ that found that the overwhelming majority of psychological studies in the influential journals that were examined had only undergraduate students as research subjects. One of the studies also showed an overwhelming bias towards American research subjects. Neither of the studies to which he refers, however, was specifically about optimism bias, and thus one can ask to what extent *they* provide evidence about a selection bias in studies about optimism bias. Perhaps this is why Mr Trisel then quotes Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown, whom I had cited, but who say that “much of the evidence for these positive illusions comes ... from research with college students”⁶². However, those same authors note a few lines later that all three of the illusions they discuss “have been documented in noncollege populations as well”⁶³.

Margaret Matlin and David Stang, whom I also cited, go further. They take specific note of the question about how generalizable the results about disproportionate recall of positive experiences are. They respond

that the perceived abundance of pleasant events is not limited to upper middle-class college students. A large number of studies included other subject populations, such as children and mill-workers ... In all studies conducted on normal populations, the percentage of experiences perceived as pleasant remains remarkably constant... We were able to find only one exception to the rule⁶⁴.

When talking about happiness more generally, the same authors refer to studies whose subjects are not undergraduates and not in the United States⁶⁵. Other important works about subjective well-being that I cited also include data on a wide range of subjects⁶⁶.

61 Reginald Smart, “Subject selection bias in psychological research”, *Canadian Psychology*, Vol. 7a. No. 2, 1996, pp. 115-121; Jeffrey Arnett, “The Neglected 95%: Why American Psychology Needs to Become Less American”, *American Psychologist*, Vol. 63, No. 7, pp. 602-14.

62 Shelley Taylor & Jonathon Brown, “Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health”, *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 103, No. 2, 1988, p. 194.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 195.

64 Margaret Matlin & David Stang, *The Pollyanna Principle: Selectivity in Language, Memory and Thought*, Cambridge MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1978, p. 143.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 150-54.

66 For example, Frank M. Andrews and Stephen B Withey, *Social Indicators of Well-Being: American’s Perceptions of Life Quality*, New York: Plenum Press, 1976; Angus Campbell, Philip E Converse and Willard L. Rodgers, *The Quality of American Life: Perceptions, Evaluations, and Satisfaction*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1976; Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*,

In summary, although psychologists in general have focused disproportionately on undergraduates (and especially undergraduate psychology students) and on Americans, there is plenty of evidence that the optimism bias is characteristic of humanity more generally. Mr Trisel is simply wrong when he says (or implies) otherwise.

To say that an optimism bias is a human tendency is not to say that everybody has this characteristic, or that they have it to the same extent. Mr Trisel goes further and says that some “research has raised doubt about the universality of optimistic bias” and that “the ‘normality’ of self-enhancing biases might be specific to Western cultures”⁶⁷.

There is much that could be said about this research, but I shall restrict myself to a few comments. First, the cited studies examined only one feature of the optimism bias, namely estimation of how well things will go in the future. The optimism bias, however, has many more features, including recall of positive and negative experiences and subjective assessments of current well-being. Thus even if these studies show that the Japanese research subjects in the studies lacked one manifestation of optimism bias (or lacked it to the same extent), the studies do not show that the research subjects lack other features of an optimism bias.

Second, even if it were found that some cultural groups lack an optimism bias entirely, their subjective assessments of well-being might still be unreliable for other reasons, namely the other two psychological phenomena that I said made people’s self-assessments unreliable. Mr Trisel does not call those into question⁶⁸.

Third, even if a group (or individual) lacked all three of these psychological attributes, it could be that the relevant people’s self-assessments of their well-being were reliable but also unfavourable. That is to say, people without these psychological attributes might think that the quality of their lives is not good.

Mr Trisel’s paper is an exemplary manifestation of an optimism bias. For example, he says that only “6% of children born throughout the world have a serious birth defect” and this “indicates that 94% of new people do not have a serious birth defect”⁶⁹. However, serious birth defects are only a few of thousands of terrible things that can happen to people in the course of their lives. Even lives that start without serious defect can become laden with other harms. This is why it does not help that Mr Trisel

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990; Ed Diener and Carol Diener, “Most People are Happy”, *Psychological Science*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1999, pp. 181-5; and Ed Diener, Eunkook Suh, Richard E. Lucas and Heidi L. Smith, “Subjective Well-Being: Three Decades of Progress”, *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 125, No. 2, 1999, pp. 276-302.

67 Brooke A. Trisel, “How Best to Prevent Future Persons from Suffering: A Reply to Benatar”, p. 82. He cites the following studies: Steven J. Heine and Darrin R Lehman, “Cultural Variation in Unrealistic Optimism: Does the West Feel More Invulnerable than the East?”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 68, No. 4, 1995, pp. 595-607; Edward C. Chang and Kiyoshi Asakawa, “Cultural Variations on Optimistic and Pessimistic Bias for Self Versus a Sibling: Is there Evidence for Self-Enhancement in the East when the Referent Group is Specified?”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 84, No. 3, 2003, pp. 569-581.

68 In my book I considered three psychological phenomena that provide us with reason not to trust subject assessments of well-being. Mr Trisel considers only Pollyannaism (the optimism bias) because, he notes on p. 82, I say that “it is only Pollyannaism that inclines people unequivocally towards more positive assessments of how well their life is going” (*Better Never to Have Been*, p. 68). But this is not a reason to ignore the other two phenomena because, as I noted on the same page, both of them “operate both from an optimistic baseline and under the influence of optimistic biases” with the result that “in the best cases [they] reinforce Pollyannaism” and in “the worst cases, they mitigate it but do not negate it entirely”.

69 Brooke A. Trisel, “How Best to Prevent Future Persons from Suffering: A Reply to Benatar”, p. 85.

adds that “many children throughout the world are born into good conditions, are well cared for by their parents, and *never experience serious harm in their lives*”⁷⁰. How many people escape *all* of the following serious harms (among others): severe pain, rape, assault, serious disease or disability, or early death? (Nobody, of course, escapes death entirely, and death is commonly viewed as a serious harm.)

Mr Trisel quotes a World Health Organization study that “found that 22% of primary care patients experienced persistent pain in the prior year”⁷¹. That sounds like a lot to me. Mr Trisel focuses on the positive and tells us that “78% of primary care patients did not experience persistent pain in the prior year”⁷². But that is only in *the prior year*. Over the course of a lifetime, one’s chances of suffering persistent pain are much higher than 22%. The World Health Organization estimates that “each year tens of millions of patients are suffering [moderate to severe pain] without adequate treatment”⁷³. This includes “1 million end-stage HIV/AIDS patients” and “5.5 million terminal cancer patients”⁷⁴. In more than 150 countries morphine and codeine are almost not available⁷⁵. Nor is the problem restricted to the developing world. Access to pain relief is better in developed countries, but still inadequate. According to a recent report, more than “116 million Americans have pain that persists for weeks to years”⁷⁶. These figures exclude “pain in children or people in long-term care facilities, the military, or prison”⁷⁷. The treatment for this pain “doesn’t fully alleviate Americans’ pain”⁷⁸.

The instrumental value of pain:

A second objection Brooke Trisel levels is that pain can have considerable instrumental value. He devotes many lines to defending this claim, but it is not clear why it constitutes an objection to my views about the quality of life. One possible interpretation is that he thinks this fact undermines my claim that pain is intrinsically bad. This may seem like an extraordinarily uncharitable interpretation but it is not an unreasonable one. This is what he says:

Benatar believes that pain is *intrinsically* bad ... Many people share this view. Are pain and discomforts something that we would be better off without, as most people assume, or do pain and discomforts have *instrumental* value ...?⁷⁹

It should be obvious, however, that a pain’s having instrumental value does not preclude its being intrinsically bad. If our lives contain lots of pain and discomfort, that is intrinsically very bad even if those pains and discomforts have some instrumental

70 Ibid. (Emphasis added.)

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 “Access to Controlled Medicines Program,” World Health Organisation Briefing Note, February 2009, http://www.who.int/medicines/areas/quality_safety/ACMP_BrNoteGenr1_EN_Feb09.pdf (accessed 24 January 2012).

74 Ibid.

75 Sevil Atasoy, Statement by Professor Sevil Atasoy, President of the International Narcotics Control Board (2009) http://www.incb.org/documents/President_statements_09/2009_ECOSOC_Substantive_Session_published.pdf

76 Philip A. Pizzo & Noreen M. Clark, “Alleviating Suffering 101 – Pain Relief in the United States”, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 19 January 2012, Vol. 366, No. 3, p. 197.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Brooke A. Trisel, “How Best to Prevent Future Persons from Suffering: A Reply to Benatar”, p. 83.

value. The suffering somebody endures might lead to great good, but it does not follow that the suffering is intrinsically any less bad as a result.

Perhaps Mr Trisel means, or could be taken to mean, that intrinsically bad though pain is, our lives would be much worse without it. This would clearly not be true of *all* pain. Mr Trisel says as much about chronic pain⁸⁰. But surely it is also true of some acute pain. What is the instrumental value of labour pains or of the terminal stages of cancer? And what, for most of human history, was the instrumental value of pain induced by kidney stones, for example? Even those pains that do have instrumental value may sometimes be gratuitously severe – much more severe than they need to be in order to get our attention.

However, there are problems even if we focus merely on those pains that not only have instrumental value but which also have that value without being unnecessarily severe. Perhaps our lives would be even worse without them. That does not mean that our lives are not already bad. Mr Trisel claims that if “the quality of our lives is very bad ... then it would be difficult to imagine that they could be worse”⁸¹. He is mistaken. Something’s being very bad is not negated by the possibility that things could be still worse. Losing both one’s arms is surely very bad even though things would be still worse if one also lost both one’s legs.

There is a still deeper problem. I agree that without some (but not other) pains and discomforts our lives would be even worse. But that itself is a terrible feature of sentient life. It would be so much better if some pains were not necessary – if we could have the benefits that pain sometimes brings but to have those benefits without the pains. The response to this brings us to Mr Trisel’s third criticism of my quality-of-life argument.

Perfection is an inappropriate standard:

Brooke Trisel says that perfection is an inappropriate standard by which to judge the quality of human life. More specifically, he says that standards “must be based on what is nomologically possible, not on logically possible, but nomologically impossible conditions”⁸².

His main argument for this conclusion appeals to three demanding standards one might use to judge the quality of life: the Extreme Standard, the Super Extreme Standard, and the Perfection Standard. All of these standards are nomologically impossible, but the Super Extreme Standard is even more demanding than the Extreme Standard, and the Perfection Standard is the most demanding of the three. Mr Trisel says that if one denies, as I do, that we should judge the quality of life by the standards of the nomologically possible, then one is unable to choose, in a non-arbitrary way, between the three nomologically impossible standards he discusses.

However, I see no reason why we should not judge the quality of life by the highest (logically) possible standard. There is nothing arbitrary about choosing perfection over any standard that approximates but does not reach it.

Mr Trisel thinks that this move is not open to me because if I use “the Perfection standard to judge the quality of our lives, this would be inconsistent with maintaining

80 He says that “chronic pain no longer serves a biologically useful purpose” (p. 84). He may be overstating the case here. Perhaps *some* chronic pain does have instrumental value, by preventing one from doing things that would harm oneself further.

81 Brooke A. Trisel, “How Best to Prevent Future Persons from Suffering: A Reply to Benatar”, p. 86.

82 Ibid, p. 88.

that a higher standard should be used to judge whether life is worth starting than whether life is worth continuing"⁸³, as I suggest we should.

But there is no inconsistency. The quality of both future and current lives could be judged by the Perfection Standard. In using that standard, however, we might think that different conditions need to be met (a) for a life to be worth starting; and (b) for a life to be worth continuing. Thus we might say that only perfect lives are worth starting (in the sense of not being a harm at all), but that even lives that fall significantly short of this standard might be worth continuing even while recognizing how far they are from perfection.

Consider the following analogy. In marking a student's work, we might employ a kind of perfection standard (100%) in judging the student's work. This does not mean that we cannot use one threshold to determine a Pass and another to determine a First Class Pass. Setting a perfection standard is one thing, and benchmarking against that standard is another.

Thaddeus Metz:

Thaddeus Metz also takes issue with my employing a perfection standard, although his criticism is not framed in the same way. Instead, he objects to my appealing to an objective perspective – *sub specie aeternitatis* – in evaluating the quality of human life.

He advances two arguments. The first refers to the evolutionary origins of our making value judgments and says that for this reason "it is extraordinarily unlikely that" our judgment "would be informed by the point of view of the universe"⁸⁴. His second argument is that I routinely make "judgments of what is immoral and what is harmful ... without appealing to the point of the view of the universe"⁸⁵. He says that if I "can know *which* conditions are good or bad without appealing to a non-human standpoint" then I should be able to "make judgments of *how* good or bad something is without appealing to such a standpoint"⁸⁶.

The problem with these arguments, however, is that they seem to be based on a mistaken interpretation of what it means to judge the quality of life *sub specie aeternitatis*. Such a perspective does not commit us to the level of abstraction or removal from human evaluation that Professor Metz seems to think. Instead what this perspective does is prevent the limited horizons and imagination of most human beings from getting in the way of reaching conclusions about what would be good for them. Thus, people take sickness, disability, pain, discomfort, frustration, and sadness to be bad. They take intelligence, understanding and vigour to be good. And they want to live as long as possible (unless the life ceases to be worth continuing). What the objective perspective enables us to see is how far short of the ideal we fall on all these things that we value. We get sick, including very sick. We suffer terrible pain, discomfort, frustration and sadness. Our intelligence and understanding, even though they surpass that of other animals, are meagre. We typically live for less than a century. The implication of all this is that our lives are considerably worse than they could be. What stands in the way of people recognizing this is a reigning-in of expectations and a curtailment of imagination in the face of human limitations. The more objective perspective is required to show up these coping mechanisms for what they are and to provide a more

83 Ibid, p. 89.

84 Thaddeus Metz, "Are Lives Worth Creating?", p. 252.

85 Ibid, p. 253.

86 Ibid.

reliable view of the quality of human life.

Rivka Weinberg:

These same points can be made in response to Rivka Weinberg's suggestion that there is no outside perspective from which we can judge human life. She says that because life "is something we are all stuck in ... there seems no 'outside' position from which to assess the preference for human life"⁸⁷. Thus, she says, the "common preference for life is not analogous to standard adaptive preference cases"⁸⁸.

For the reasons I have already stated, this seems like a simple failure of imagination. There is a perspective beyond an unreflective subjective perspective – and one that we can access if we think about it. We are not as paralyzed as she seems to think we are in the face of conflicting assessments of life's quality.

She quotes director Roberto Benigni who, in his Academy Award acceptance speech, thanked his parents "for the greatest gift of all: *poverty*"⁸⁹, and she refers to Viktor Frankl who "did not regret his excruciating experience in the Nazi death camps because he felt that the experience enriched his understanding and appreciation of the meaning of life"⁹⁰. Commenting on such cases she says:

One may argue that it is the benefits that are valued in these cases and not the pain that it took to acquire them but that is not how the value is described by the people in the examples above. They describe the pain itself not as an unfortunate yet necessary means to benefit but as itself a benefit.⁹¹

It is far from clear that this analysis is correct. The pains do seem to be described as instrumentally good. (Note, for example, that Viktor Frankl explains his lack of regret and the explanation consists in the good that arose from it.) However, if it were the case that these and other such people thought that the pain was valuable in itself, we would have excellent grounds to say that they are wrong. Being starved, treated with contempt, and living under the constant threat of death is not intrinsically good, even if it has some instrumental value. If Viktor Frankl could have "enriched his understanding and appreciation of the meaning of life" without having had to endure Nazi death camps, his life would have been that much better. And insofar as people are not able to gain understanding and to appreciate the good in the absence of suffering, that itself is a serious reduction in the quality of human life.

Saul Smilansky:

Saul Smilansky says that life is good. He does not think that it is *always* good, but he thinks that it is good often enough to exonerate much procreation. He advances a number of arguments for this conclusion. One of his arguments is the now familiar one that the bad things in life can have instrumental value. As I have already pointed to the flaws in this argument in responding to Brooke Trisel and Rivka Weinberg, I shall not

87 Rivka Weinberg, "Is Having Children Always Wrong?", p. 34.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid, pp. 34-5.

respond to Professor Smilansky's version of it. Nor shall I reply to his argument that if death is bad, life must be good. My response to this will be implicit in my response to the paper by Rafe McGregor and Ema Sullivan-Bissett. Instead, I shall consider Saul Smilansky's other arguments.

The first of these arguments begins with the observation that most people report being happy, and then claims that "genuine first-personal reports of happiness have strong evidential weight"⁹². But just how much evidentiary weight do they have? Professor Smilansky says that happiness "seems akin to pain" in this regard. Since people cannot be mistaken about whether they are in pain, (truthful) first-personal reports of pain will have massive evidentiary weight. But is happiness really like pain in this way? If by "happiness" one means "pleasure" then I agree that happiness is relevantly similar to pain. One cannot be mistaken about whether one is now in pain or is now feeling pleasure. But this is not what Professor Smilansky means by happiness and it is not what I meant. By happiness we both mean "well-being" – that is, how well one's life is going. People *can* be mistaken about that. Perhaps one cannot be mistaken about how well one's life *seems* to be going, but one can certainly be mistaken about how well it is in fact going. In *Better Never to Have Been*, I showed how irrespective of which account of well-being one adopts, life is much worse than most people think. Professor Smilansky's claim that happiness "seems akin to pain" does nothing to respond to, let alone undermine those arguments.

I referred to vast empirical evidence that gives us very good reason to doubt that people's self-assessments are a reliable indicator of a life's quality. Professor Smilansky says that I do "a good job of pointing all this out" and that "with all this undeniably going on" he "will not have a simple decisive reply".⁹³ Thus he attempts to mitigate the significance of the evidence I cited.

For example, he notes that divergences in subjective reports of well-being "tend to make good sense"⁹⁴. More specifically, societies "which report higher levels of happiness are by and large the societies where we would expect this to be so"⁹⁵. But the problem with this argument is that these divergences are entirely compatible with a global illusion. In other words, it is entirely possible that while people in all countries over-estimate the quality of their lives, their overestimations are off an objective baseline. That is to say, people everywhere overestimate, but because their objective conditions do differ, the combination of objective conditions and overestimation yield the result that people report being happier where conditions are better. This can be represented as in Figure 4 on the next page.

The vertical axis represents a range of objective conditions, from worse below to better above. The horizontal axis represents a range of perceptions of life's quality. The A-gradient represents the reports that would be made if reports accurately tracked objective conditions. The B-gradient is one possible representation of reports that are made if reports are subject to the psychological phenomena that cause people to over-estimate the quality of their lives.

92 Saul Smilansky, "Life is Good", p. 70.

93 Ibid, p. 74.

94 Ibid, p. 70.

95 Ibid.

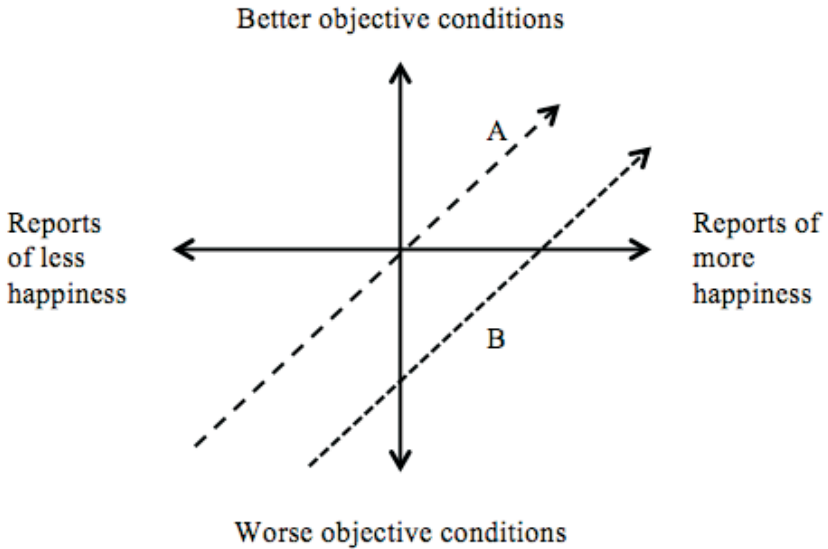


Figure 4

What is surprising is not that people report more happiness in societies in which conditions are better (or less bad), but rather that people report as much happiness as they do even in societies where the conditions are objectively among the worst.

Professor Smilansky seems more confident of his arguments about suicide. He says that suicide is “a great embarrassment” for my claims, because very few people kill themselves⁹⁶, which suggests that life is not that bad.

This reasoning is flawed for at least three reasons. First, the fact that coming into existence is a harm does not entail that death (and thus suicide) is preferable. I shall consider challenges to this claim in the next section. Second, if people’s self-assessments about the quality of their lives are (generally) unreliable, we should expect that they would want to continue living in many cases when life is no longer worth living. Third, there are good evolutionary reasons why people are generally not inclined towards suicide.

Professor Smilansky claims that “fairly decisive points”⁹⁷ can be made against this last point. He says that we find that two categories of people are most likely to take their own lives. The first group is young people, which he attributes to “the temporary instability of hormonal-affected youth”⁹⁸. The other group, he says, is the “terminally ill, decrepit or elderly”, who, he says, “are frequently people for whom it *makes sense*

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 71.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

to wish to cease living"⁹⁹. He claims further that "most people who kill themselves in fact do so because of the *absence* of something: life is good unless crippled"¹⁰⁰ in some way.

These observations fail to ward off my claim that there are good evolutionary reasons why people are generally disinclined to suicide and why we cannot therefore take the yearning to go on living as an indication of life's quality. Even if a more accurate assessment of life's quality would lead many people who currently want to live to instead prefer death, it does not follow that most of those who *have* taken their own lives had lives that were not worth continuing. In other words, it may be irrational for some people to continue living and also be irrational for many of those – including many (but not all) young people – who take their own lives to have done so.

Nor is my position threatened by the suicides of those people, such as the terminally ill, for whom suicide was rational. Indeed, what may be surprising is how bad things have to get before people want to die. Professor Smilansky himself recognizes this when he says that people "typically cling to life even when life objectively seems to be very bad and even hopeless"¹⁰¹. If people want to continue living when even a cheery optimist such as Professor Smilansky thinks their condition is hopeless, it is not hard to see how people want to continue living when their condition is seen to be very bad only by those without an optimistic bent.

Professor Smilansky's claim that "most people who kill themselves in fact do so because of the *absence* of something" does not help his case either. Ill-health can be characterized as the *absence* of health, but it can equally be characterized as the *presence* of illness. Whether we phrase it as the presence of bad things or the absence of good things is irrelevant. But perhaps that is not what Professor Smilansky's point rests on. Perhaps he is saying only that life is good unless enough bad intrudes. It is not clear, though, how that assertion undermines the argument that life is not good. This is in part because of how much bad can intrude. Nor is it clear how Professor Smilansky's point undermines the argument that life is merely worth continuing (rather than being good) until enough bad intrudes.

Saul Smilansky invokes suicide in a further way in order to defend procreation. He says that "if life is so bad, the badness can be stopped ... there is, almost always, a way out"¹⁰². As a result, he says, "taking the risk of generating life seems reasonable"¹⁰³.

This strikes me as a callous argument. Taking one's own life, at least when done rationally, is no easy task. Even if one has the physical means to do the job painlessly and effectively, the psychic hurdles are significant. One knows that if one now performs a certain action, one's life will end – one will cease to exist for all eternity. Even when life has become unspeakably bad, the prospective suicide might still face an agonizing choice – even when it is a Hobson's choice. To suggest that it is acceptable to create people because they can take their own lives if things get bad enough, is to underestimate how appalling it is to face the choice of either taking one's own life or endure terrible suffering.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid, p. 72.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid.

The potential suicide also has to consider those who are left behind – bereaved family members and friends. In response to this, Professor Smilansky takes refuge behind logical possibility without considering the practicalities. He considers the possibility of some connected circle of people taking their own lives together so that none is left bereaved. But this simply fails to consider the real world, in which one person may have reached his limit, but others in his circle have not. Nor does it consider the fact that circles of attachment are overlapping. Husband and wife want to end their lives, but they do not want to inflict the suffering of bereavement of their adult children, who in turn do not want to inflict bereavement on their spouses, who in turn do not want to inflict bereavement on their parents and siblings, and so forth. A sufficiently large suicide pact – and one in which coercion were absent – is practically either impossible or at least extremely unlikely. It should thus bring no comfort to those whose practical moral deliberations are rooted in reality.

Professor Smilansky tries some other moves to mitigate the implications of the evidence that self-assessments of well-being are unreliable. He says, for example, that insofar as “life tends to be quite good ... illusion is much less needed”¹⁰⁴. But that is not a way to show that illusions are less operative. We have evidence that the illusion is present. It is not a proper response to this to assume the antecedent – that life tends to be quite good. And if Professor Smilansky responds that he is not *assuming* that life tends to be quite good, but is instead drawing on conclusions for which he has argued elsewhere in his paper, then it becomes clear that the argument of his that I am now considering adds nothing to his other arguments.

He also says that Pollyannaism often “*actually makes life better* for those under its influence”¹⁰⁵. I am sure that that is true, but only to a limited degree. Thinking that things are better than they actually are can actually make things better, but it does not follow that things will actually be as good as one thinks they are. In other words, there may well be a feedback loop, but this is not sufficient to obliterate the distinction between one’s perceptions of the quality of one’s life and one’s actual quality of life¹⁰⁶.

Saul Smilansky also argues that “even where people are not very happy, they can be filled with a sense of the significance of their lives”¹⁰⁷. This is more grasping at straws. All the arguments I provided for why self-assessments of well-being are unreliable, apply equally to self-assessments of significance. Indeed, on some views, significance is part of well-being. And the suggestion that the “potential for existential meaning in one’s life is granted only when one has been brought into existence”¹⁰⁸ invites the response that those who never exist have no need for existential meaning and are not deprived by its absence.

In his concluding remarks, Saul Smilansky says that the reasonableness of reproductive risk is largely neglected in my discussion. His response is to note that people “take upon themselves considerable physical and emotional risk” and thus that “the fact that

104 Ibid, pp. 74-5.

105 Ibid, p. 75.

106 I discuss this further in David Benatar, “Suicide: A Qualified Defense”, in James Stacey Taylor (Ed.), *The Ethics and Metaphysics of Death: New Essays*, New York: Oxford University Press (forthcoming, but pre-printed in David Benatar, *Life, Death and Meaning* (Second Edition), Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010, pp. 307-31).

107 Saul Smilansky, “Life is Good” p. 75..

108 Ibid, p. 76.

life is full of risk ... does not, in itself, prove much"¹⁰⁹. He says that the matter requires further exploration. In exploring this further, it would be worth recalling that the risks people take upon themselves are importantly different from the risks of procreation, for in the latter the person brought into existence does not decide to assume the risks. Instead, the very considerable risks are thrust upon him by his parents.

Anti-Natalism and Pro-Mortalism

The paper by Rafe McGregor and Ema Sullivan-Bissett is not directly concerned with the soundness of my asymmetry and quality-of-life arguments. Instead, these authors seek to show that my arguments imply what they call "pro-mortalism"¹¹⁰, by which they mean the view that suicide is either always or almost always preferable to continued existence¹¹¹.

They begin their argument by suggesting that there is a *prima facie* case for thinking that my asymmetry argument entails pro-mortalism. This, they say, is because when somebody

ceases to exist the result is: an absence of pain, which is good; and an absence of pleasure, which is not bad¹¹².

However, there is a basic error here that I think precludes a *prima facie* case. I had said that the absence of pleasure is not bad *unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation*. Now, obviously once somebody dies there is a sense in which that person no longer exists and thus cannot be deprived. However, there is another, at least equally good sense in which there *is* somebody who is deprived. On this interpretation, the person deprived is the ante-mortem person who would have experienced the pleasures had he not died. All those people who think that death does deprive the deceased of the experiences he would otherwise have had – and there are many people who think this – would not apply the "not bad" evaluation to the absent pleasures of the deceased. This is because the absence of these pleasures in the world in which the person dies is worse than the presence of these pleasures in a world in which the person continued living and could thus experience them.

Of course, it is not the case that everybody thinks that death deprives the deceased. Most famously, Epicureans deny that death deprives or otherwise harms the deceased. Mr McGregor and Ms Sullivan-Bissett seem to think that it is crucial that I refute the Epicurean argument. For example they say that it "is important for Benatar that the Epicurean line is mistaken"¹¹³. They argue at some length that my response to the Epicurean argument fails¹¹⁴, which is one reason why they think that my anti-natal argument implies pro-mortalism. I have many responses to those arguments, but they can all be bypassed. This is because Mr McGregor and Ms Sullivan-Bissett are mistaken in thinking that refuting the Epicurean argument is crucial.

109 Ibid, p. 77.

110 Rafe McGregor & Ema Sullivan-Bissett, "Better No Longer to Be: The Harm of Continued Existence".

111 They begin with the more expansive claim but later consider the slightly restricted claim.

112 Ibid, pp. 56-7.

113 Ibid, p. 59. See also, p. 63.

114 I never set out to provide a refutation of the Epicurean argument. I presented the argument, raised some responses to it and then noted what I take to be an impasse between those who accept and those who reject the argument. (p. 217) While I have my doubts about the Epicurean argument, I am not convinced that there is a decisive refutation of it and am not wedded to its being fallacious.

I made a very limited claim, namely that “the view that coming into existence is always a harm does *not imply* that death is better than continuing to exist, and a fortiori that suicide is (always) desirable”.¹¹⁵ This claim is not undermined if one points out that combining the view that coming into existence is always a harm with some other view yields a pro-mortalist conclusion. To say that view X combined with view Y yields view Z is not to say that X entails or implies Z.

Now this may seem like a mere logical nicety if view Y (the Epicurean view in this case) happens to be true. However, very few people think that the Epicurean view is correct. It is a distinctly minority position. And if the Epicurean view *is* true, anti-natalism is the least of everybody’s problems. This is because everybody, and not just those who accept my argument that coming into existence is always a harm, will have to accept that killing somebody does not harm that person. That view seems even harder to accept than mine. However, if one did come to accept it, there would be nothing in the least alarming about pro-mortalism. The claim that suicide is always or almost always preferable to continued existence is alarming only if one thinks that death is a harm. If one thinks that it is not a harm why would one be against death?

It is not evident from their paper, but our discussions in Johannesburg revealed that one of the authors takes their argument to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of my arguments, while the other author thinks that my arguments are sound and simply wishes to point out the purported implications. Clearly the author who thinks the argument is a *reductio* is mistaken: If the Epicurean view is true, there is nothing absurd about pro-mortalism. The other author is mistaken that my view implies pro-mortalism. Some other view has to be added to mine in order to imply pro-mortalism.

Mr McGregor and Ms Sullivan-Bissett also take issue with my argument that we should apply different standards to determining when a life is worth beginning and when it is worth continuing. I had argued that whereas those who do not yet exist have no interest in coming into existence, those who already exist (in the morally relevant sense) have an interest in continuing to exist. While this interest can be defeated if the quality of life is bad enough, it is not the case that the mere existence of harm in a life will be enough to defeat the interest in continuing to live. One conclusion of this argument is that a life may be one that we should not start but that if started it is not one that should be ended.

Mr McGregor and Ms Sullivan-Bissett reject this argument primarily because they think it is incompatible with other things I say (or that they attribute to me). They say that if “(coming into) existence is not only a harm, but a *serious* harm”¹¹⁶ and if “Pollyannaism is indeed rife amongst human beings ... it seems that many interests in continued existence over suicide lack a rational basis”¹¹⁷. In other words, if existence is as bad as I say it is and Pollyannaism is as deep and widespread as I say it is, the preference or interest that people have in continued existence may be irrational. They conclude that, following my view, “it is (mostly) rational to commit suicide”¹¹⁸.

There are many problems with this argument. The first is that although I was explicit in saying that *coming into* existence is always a serious harm, these authors want to attribute to me the view that existence itself is always a serious harm. That more expan-

115 *Better Never to Have Been*, p. 212.

116 Rafe McGregor & Ema Sullivan-Bissett, “Better No Longer to Be: The Harm of Continued Existence”, p. 64.

117 *Ibid.*

118 *Ibid.* p. 65.

sive claim skews their argument in favour pro-mortalism, because if existence itself is a serious harm then ending existence, far from being a harm, is actually a relief from harm and thus a kind of benefit.

However, the evidence Mr McGregor and Ms Sullivan-Bissett provide for attributing the bolder claim to me is flawed. They point¹¹⁹ to four statements I made:

- (1) 'I deny that *any* lives are worth starting' (Benatar 2006: 121, Benatar's italics).
- (2) '[I]t would be better if humans (and other species) became extinct' (Benatar 2006: 194).
- (3) 'All things being equal, the longer sentient life continues, the more suffering there will be' (Benatar 2006: 209).
- (4) 'I have argued that our lives are very bad. There is no reason why we should not try to make them less so, on condition that we do not spread the suffering (including the *harm of existence*)' (Benatar 2006: 210, our italics).

However, none of these claims support their interpretation:

- (1) refers to lives that are "worth starting" and thus refers to coming into existence rather than to existence itself.
- (2) refers to extinction of the species. Moreover, it is clear from other things I say that it refers to extinction *by non-replacement* of people who die rather than by the killing or death of current people.
- (3) also refers to all life and not to individual lives. That is to say, the longer the species lasts *because the more people are brought into existence* the more suffering there will be.
- (4) actually rules out many cases of suicide because many cases of suicide will increase the suffering to those left behind.

A second problem is that their argument trades on a vagueness about the relevance of Pollyannaism for the rationality of suicide. To say that most people overestimate the quality of their lives is not to say that if they were to accurately assess their lives they would, here and now, have sufficient reason to end their lives. This is partly because it is possible to overestimate the quality of a life that *is* worth continuing. Such a life may not be as good as one thinks it is but it may nonetheless be good enough to be worth continuing.

Now this might be thought to apply to very few lives if, as I have argued, coming into existence is a *serious* harm. However, that is not necessarily the case. First, it is possible that coming into existence is a serious harm because of the terrible things that will happen later in that life (or that happened earlier in it). Yet, once one exists it might be the case that because those terrible things will only occur in one's future (or because they have already occurred) one is entirely rational in not ending one's life now. It might get bad enough later that it would be rationally preferable to end one's life, but that does not mean that one must end it now.

Second, there is a spectrum of possible standards that one could employ to determine how bad a life must be before it is no longer worth continuing. The more suffering that one thinks is consistent with a life worth continuing, or the more one values continued life, or the greater the harm that one thinks death is, the more serious the suffering that will be consistent with a life worth continuing. Thus, it is possible to be

119 Ibid, pp. 58.

experiencing serious harm without it being *serious enough* to make one's life not worth continuing. This is a view many people have about life's suffering. I see no reason why it shouldn't be coupled with the view that coming into existence is always a serious harm.

Moreover, the preference to continue living does not need to be entirely rational in order to have some force in deciding what we should do. If somebody fears death then even if that fear is irrational it may nonetheless be relevant to whether he should take his own life, in just the same way that an irrational fear of heights is relevant to whether one should, for example, take the cableway up Table Mountain.

The kernel of truth in Mr McGregor's and Ms Sullivan-Bissett's paper is that I do think that suicide is both justified and rationally defensible more often than most people think it is¹²⁰. They are wrong, however, in thinking that my anti-natalist arguments commit me to the view that suicide is preferable for most people most of the time.

Other Routes to Anti-Natalism

The remaining three papers in this special issue all defend anti-natalism. Asheel Singh focuses on defending Seana Shiffrin's (substantially anti-natalist) argument against a possible objection to her argument. Although he refers to my arguments he does so approvingly and thus I shall not respond to his arguments. However, I shall comment briefly on Gerald Harrison's and Christopher Belshaw's anti-natalist arguments.

Gerald Harrison:

Gerald Harrison proposes an alternative way to reach the anti-natalist conclusion for those who might have difficulty accepting my arguments. His route does not commit him to the view that coming into existence is always a harm. Indeed, he says that his argument is compatible with (but does not assume) the view that coming into existence is sometimes a benefit.

As is the case with my argument, his also rests on an asymmetry. However, he says that instead of it resting on an asymmetry of pain and pleasure, it rests on an asymmetry of duties. Duties, he says, presuppose victims. More specifically he says that one

can only have a duty to do X, if failing to do X would wrong someone. In other words if one cannot identify someone who would be wronged by one's failure to fulfil the supposed *prima facie* duty, then the duty does not exist¹²¹.

The *asymmetry* is not made explicit here, but it is easy to state it. The asymmetric counterpart to the requirement that there be a victim in the event that the purported duty is breached is the absence of a requirement that there be a beneficiary if the purported duty is fulfilled.

This asymmetry of duties is not enough to generate an anti-natalist conclusion. It is combined with a theory of *prima facie* duties in the tradition of W.D. Ross. A *prima facie* duty not to cause suffering would impose a *prima facie* duty not to procreate be-

120 I have discussed these issues only briefly here. A much more extensive discussion can be found in David Benatar, "Suicide: A Qualified Defense", in James Stacey Taylor (Ed.), *The Ethics and Metaphysics of Death: New Essays*, New York: Oxford University Press (forthcoming, but pre-printed in David Benatar, *Life, Death and Meaning* (Second Edition), Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010, pp. 307-31).

121 Gerald Harrison, "Antinatalism, asymmetry, and an ethic of *prima facie* duties", p. 96.

cause procreating brings about a person who will suffer. If this duty is violated, there will be a victim. The same cannot be said of a *prima facie* duty to promote pleasure in procreational contexts. Although procreation causes not only the pain but also the pleasure of those who are brought into existence, there is no victim if, in procreational decisions, one violates the purported duty to promote pleasure. Since a *prima facie* duty not to do X can only be defeated by other (and stronger) *prima facie* duties that pull in the opposite direction, the *prima facie* duty not to cause suffering and thus not to procreate is not defeated. It follows that we should not create new people.

Although Dr Harrison thinks that his argument is compatible with mine, he thinks that his argument has certain advantages. Instead of focusing on whether the purported advantages really are advantages, I shall mention briefly some challenges to his argument.

First, it presupposes a theory of *prima facie* duties. Thus, his argument will have no force against those who reject such a theory. Among the many people who fall into this category are utilitarians, Kantians and virtue theorists. Because my argument does not assume a particular moral theory, it has the advantage of a broader reach.

Second, even if we assume that there can only be duties if, in the event of non-performance, there is a victim, we might ask why this is the case. What explains this asymmetry? Where the absence of a victim is because no person was created, might the duty asymmetry not be explained by my more basic asymmetry? Consider the following procreative options, where a person exists in 1) and 2) but not in 3) and 4):

	Not performed	Performed
Duty not to cause suffering	1) Victim Presence of pain	3) No beneficiary Absence of pain
Duty to promote pleasure	2) Beneficiary Presence of pleasure	4) No victim Absence of pleasure
	Performed	Not performed

Figure 5

Dr Harrison's duty asymmetry tells us that there can be a duty only if there is a victim in the event that the purported duty is not performed. But why should that be the case? Why should it not be the case that there can be a duty only if there is a *beneficiary* in the event that the purported duty *is* performed? Alternatively, why should it not be the case that there can be a duty only if either (a) there is a victim if the duty is not performed, or (b) there is a beneficiary if the duty is performed? One explanation is that whereas the suffering of the victim in 1) is worse than the absence of that suffering in (3), the pleasure of the beneficiary in 2) is not better than the absence of pleasure in 4).

If my basic asymmetry is what explains the duty asymmetry then Dr Harrison's argument, while indeed an extension of my asymmetry argument (albeit within the limited framework of a theory of *prima facie* duties) could not be an alternative to it. This is because anybody who accepted Dr Harrison's asymmetry argument would also have to accept mine. For this reason, it is a pity that Dr Harrison has not provided an explanation for the duty asymmetry. If there is some explanation other than mine, stating what it is would have shown his argument to be the alternative he says it is.

Christopher Belshaw:

Christopher Belshaw says that "the most troubling aspect" of my position is "the mix of anti-natalism on the one hand, and the rejection of pro-mortalism on the other"¹²². His argument takes the following form:

- 1) If a life is so bad that there is reason not to start it then there is also reason to end the life, as long as "the part of a life that provides us with reason not to start it remains in the future"¹²³.
- 2) David Benatar's argument "doesn't depend on there being any more than a minimal amount of pain"¹²⁴ and "for almost all of us, there is pain to come in the future"¹²⁵.
- 3) Thus, if a life is so bad that it is not worth starting David Benatar should hold that there is also a reason to end it.

Dr Belshaw recognizes that I reject this argument because I deny the first premise. I argue that different standards should be used in determining whether a life is worth starting and in determining whether a life is worth ending. In rejecting this view, Dr Belshaw does not engage my underlying rationale and instead responds to an example I gave. I suggested that while being born without a limb would not make one's life worth ending, it would make one's life not worth starting. Dr Belshaw does not like this example because he says that "it's hard to see that lacking a limb should make life not worth living"¹²⁶.

Notice first that he uses the ambiguous "worth living", which I had explicitly disambiguated by distinguishing between "worth starting" and "worth continuing"¹²⁷. Of course it is very hard to see how a life lacking a limb would not be worth continuing. If one fails to distinguish between "a life worth continuing" and "a life worth starting",

122 Christopher Belshaw, "A new argument for anti-natalism", p. 119.

123 Ibid. p. 120.

124 Ibid. p. 119.

125 Ibid. p. 120.

126 Ibid. p. 119.

127 *Better Never to Have Been*, pp. 22-24.

by lumping them together under “a life worth living”, one will fail to see that such a life may not be worth starting.

Second, there is an obvious response even if we assume that Dr Belshaw thinks that a life with a missing limb is not so bad as to be not worth starting: If life without a limb is nonetheless worth starting, there could still be other conditions that are not worth starting but, once begun, are also worth continuing. In other words, there is nothing in the rejection of the particular example that precludes the possibility that some other condition could do the same work.

Of course, the first premise of Dr Belshaw’s argument, as presented above, suggests that he thinks that there are *no* such conditions – that any life worth starting is a life worth continuing. However, Dr Belshaw has not argued for that conclusion (beyond disputing my example). More importantly, he has not shown why my argument for the opposite conclusion is flawed. I had given an account of *why* we apply and should apply different standards in judging which lives are worth starting and which are worth continuing:

Those who exist ... have interests in existing. These interests, once fully developed, are typically very strong and thus, where there is a conflict, they override interests in not being impaired. However, where there are no ... interests in existing, causing impairments (by bringing people with defects into being) cannot be warranted by the protection of such interests.¹²⁸

Dr Belshaw provides no argument against this account.

Dr Belshaw thinks that his own argument for anti-natalism¹²⁹ fares better than mine. Very little needs to be said to show how implausible that claim is. His argument rests on deeply controversial premises. Some of these are moral claims, such as the claim that pro-mortalism is true for babies¹³⁰. That is to say, his argument requires us to believe that killing human babies never wrongs them. Other claims on which his argument rests are not moral but rather metaphysical. Thus, he thinks that he, and you and I were never babies¹³¹ – that a person and the baby from which he or she grew are metaphysically distinct. These claims are far more controversial than any premise in my argument. Good arguments start from firm premises. Since my premises are much firmer than his, it is very hard to see how his argument for anti-natalism is an improvement over mine.

Conclusion

Many people think that the conclusions of my arguments are counter-intuitive. They think that it must surely be false that coming into existence is always a harm, or that we should desist from creating new people. I (and other anti-natalists) do not find these views in the least bit counter-intuitive. I can see, of course, why my conclusions do run counter to most people’s intuitions. There are, after all, good psychological explanations why people tend to be resistant to anti-natalism. Moreover, procreation is

128 Ibid, p. 25.

129 Dr Belshaw mistakenly suggests that anti-natalism “is the view that it’s better never to have been born” (p. 117). In fact, anti-natalism is the view that procreation – creating new people – is wrong. One way to reach this conclusion is by arguing that it is better never to be born. But there are other routes to this conclusion. For example, one could note, as I did in *Better Never to Have Been*, that one could oppose the creation of new people because of how destructive a species *Homo sapiens* is.

130 Christopher Belshaw, “A new argument for anti-natalism”, p.124.

131 Ibid, p. 123.

abundant. It also comes so naturally to people and brings parents, grandparents and siblings so much joy, that they find it difficult to believe that it could be wrong, at least in the absence of special conditions.

However, we should not put too much store on these intuitions, for they are *unreflective* intuitions formed under the influence of well-demonstrated biases. Once we begin to think about it, there should be nothing counter-intuitive about a view that, if acted upon, would eliminate all (human) suffering. Life contains lots of suffering. Even if one believes that vast portions of life are good, it is hard to deny that any child one creates will thereby become vulnerable to unspeakably horrible fates. Nor are the chances of actually succumbing to these fates remote. If we consider the cumulative risks, the chance of escaping all serious harms is very small. (If we include death as a serious harm, then the chance of escaping is reduced to zero.)

Anti-natalism might run up against unreflective intuitions, but it is not at all inconsistent with a more considered view. If more people saw this, they would feel less need to avoid the basic asymmetry. They would also be less alarmed by the implications of the quality-of-life argument – and more alarmed by procreation itself.

In memory of Asha Barron (5 April 19 9 25 January 2012) who died
on the day this paper was completed.